

Rev. Kenneth J. Rodrigue
St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
31 August 2025

Sermon on James 2:1-13

Worship Theme:

THOSE WHO EXALT THEMSELVES WILL BE HUMBLLED

We all desire acclaim, recognition, and praise. Jesus' sharp words this week teach us that seeking exaltation in futile and fleeting ways only results in receiving the opposite. Those who attempt to exalt themselves will eventually be humbled by God. In contrast, Jesus promises that those who leave their exaltation to God will receive honor and glory far greater than any that can be awarded in this life. Our exaltation does not need to be our responsibility; Jesus has already made it his.

Sermon Theme: "No Favorites!"

1. We Break the Whole Law
2. Mercy Still Triumphs

If I asked you to tell me about your favorite things, we would probably be here a while. We all have tons of favorite things in life: foods, drinks, restaurants, cars, clothes, hats, sports teams, tv shows, vacation spots, hobbies, books, and on and on. We have favorite things in church too: hymns, Bible books or verses, special days, maybe even a favorite pew to sit in! Obviously having favorite things isn't new or unique – people have done this for as long as there have been things to like! Today, James asks us to consider this: Who is your favorite Christian?

I hope the more you think about that question, the stranger it gets. After all, why would we have a favorite Christian? What are the criteria, and how would we even judge something like that?! And who would you pick – yourself? A pastor or teacher? Another church member? Someone from back in Bible times? If you're struggling with this question, good! But we also have to admit we often don't struggle with it as much as we should. The Holy Spirit through James tells us, "*Believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.*" "**No Favorites!**" But too often we do it anyway.

The early Christian Church had this struggle too. James wrote this at a time when Christianity was quite unpopular. It was more likely to be persecuted than embraced. As a result, many Christians wanted little more than for their church to keep existing, grow a little, and hopefully someday be seen favorably by others.

But how? The solution the Christians came up with was find the right people to be members: important people in the community who would elevate the status of the church just by being there. After all, no one would benefit if only unimportant people kept joining: people the community didn't like, didn't care about, or who wouldn't contribute anything to the church. But if important people came, maybe their presence would cause people to look at the church not as a place to persecute, but maybe even as a place to join themselves!

And of course, wealthy people would always be welcome in the church too. Every church has things to pay for! Property maintenance, paychecks for workers,

support of the work happening both locally and elsewhere. None of that comes cheaply and Christians have still never found the highly desired money tree, so rich people need to join too! Then there would no longer be any worry about how to pay for something. It would just happen! Of course the flip side of that is hoping no poor people come and join. Everyone knows they can't contribute anything and they might even need help FROM the church! How terrible THAT would be!

Certainly some people might be uncomfortable with these thoughts, but hey – as long as it's for the good of the church, it must be okay, right? The Christians were seeking the right kind of wealthy and important people to make God's church thrive, flourish, grow, and endure! Who wouldn't want that?! And of course people will focus most of those things on THEIR congregation so it grows and continues for future generations. We're proud of it – the place, the building, the people, the work accomplished. This particular place must remain and whatever we have to do along the way to make that happen, we'll do it.

Have I made you upset yet? I hope so! Do you feel like someone could hardly even be called a Christian if they speak and act in such a way? If so, begin by looking in the mirror. You might be surprised at what you see. For example, does any of this sound familiar? – “We have big financial needs...it sure would be nice if we had more people in worship each week so we could pay the bills more easily.” or “It's great to see new people coming to church, but I hope they agree with the same things I do. You know, important things like sports teams, political party, and what the community should be doing.” or “It would be great to keep getting more young families in the church. Otherwise, our congregation may not survive!” If we have ever had any of these thoughts, then notice we're saying that we absolutely want the church to grow (a great thing!), but also if we could get only new members who are incredibly agreeable, super wealthy, have a lot of kids, scream Republican, and bleed Green and Gold, then that would be perfect!

Whether you liked some, all, or none of that statement, God help us if that's what this church ever becomes. God forgive us if we ever actually want that. God forgive us for gravitating mostly toward people just like us and for avoiding people who aren't completely like us. God forgive us for not equally loving everybody who walks through our church doors. If we spend all our time and effort looking only for people who are just like us, we love ourselves more than God and others. (And by the way, the members of this church already don't 100% agree on those exterior things, which is good, because they don't actually matter here at all!)

So to all of us, James gives this necessary reminder: *My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. If you show special attention to [anyone], have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*

That hits pretty hard, doesn't it. It hit the Jewish Christians to whom James originally wrote, and it hits you and me just as hard today. This is such a hard truth

because it happens to us so easily. We may not even be actively thinking about it, yet we look at people and place them into categories of acceptance, as if our personal standards and convictions are the way to decide which people should belong here. How arrogant and prideful we are! How we boast, exalt, honor, and glorify ourselves and our opinions! Do we actually truly think that just because we decide something, it is therefore automatically the best thing?

God is very serious about the sin of pride. The most natural way we think and act is to exalt the already exalted, that is, to embrace and welcome influential and important people, and to humble the already humbled, that is, to ignore and put down people we think are below us. And we don't just do this to people outside the church; we do it to each other too. God calls it what it is: *lawbreaking*. Even if we commit only one sin and break just one law, it doesn't matter how many others we keep; **we've already broken the whole law of God**. And lawbreakers have no right to be in God's presence. Lawbreakers deserve *judgment without mercy*.

But God has another message for us too. He doesn't pretend we haven't sinned and broken his law, nor does he accept excuses we make about why we thought what we thought or did what we did, and he absolutely calls us to actively live the new and holy life he gave us. But first, God does what God does best.

He begins by having **no favorites**. If you ask a parent with more than one child which one is their favorite, they'll tell you they don't have a favorite. This is the most true for God. God does not have favorites or people he wants more than others. God simply loves. Freely. Eagerly. Perfectly. Because he does, God gives faith to people who will never deserve it (which is a huge relief because no one ever can!). Through that faith, he gives so many blessings: complete forgiveness of all our sins, everlasting perfect love, the benefits of Jesus' perfect life and death and resurrection, and eternal life in heaven.

Unworthy and undeserving though we are, God still preserves us as his people. He does not judge us as our sins deserve. Rather, he judges by a law that sets us free. **God's mercy triumphs over judgment.** When we sinfully exalt ourselves instead of humbling ourselves as we should, God's law humbles us by pointing out our sin. Then his gospel exalts and lifts us up again through the beautiful message of forgiveness and life in Jesus' name.

We confess these amazing truths every time we say the Apostles' Creed. The Second Article lays out for us all the reasons why **God's mercy triumphs over judgment**. "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended to heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead."

Maybe you haven't thought much before about how important those words are. But we say them so often in church for a reason! This part of the creed talks about Jesus' Humiliation and Exaltation – key words in our service today! Jesus, who is the holy God himself, willingly humbled himself by taking on human flesh, becoming like us in order to save us. For God to take on frail human flesh was an

incomparable step of humility. Jesus “was conceived, born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried.” He became human, suffered for humans, and shed his blood and died to pay for the sins of all humans. Jesus, the God who cannot die, humbled himself even to the point of death and burial.

Then with his descent into hell, Jesus began to rise up once again. With his shout from the cross “IT IS FINISHED” still echoing loudly for the world to hear, Jesus descended into hell to personally proclaim his victory over Satan. Jesus rose from the dead, coming out of the grave, not just claiming victory but proving it beyond all doubt. For if Jesus died to pay for sin, his return to life proves the payment is complete. With his mission as Savior of the world accomplished, he returned again to God the Father’s side where he actively rules over all things and watches over his dear children until, one by one, he brings us home.

We know Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead, and the good news is that we have nothing to fear from this. If we rely on ourselves and our deeds to exalt and save us, then we will be humbled and we have great reason to fear. We can never do enough! But **Mercy Triumphs**, so on the Last Day when Jesus returns, God will not treat us as our sins deserve, but instead will gather us up in his arms, and safely bring us home to heaven forever.

So the best news we’ll hear all day today is this: In the arms of Jesus, there are **no favorites**. God simply fills his children with unending mercy and love, the same mercy and love which even now change our thoughts and perspectives in life. We do not look at people based on what they prefer, how much money they have, how important they are, or any other outward thing – none of those things matter. Rather, we see every person as an eternal soul that needs Jesus. My soul, your soul, and every other soul – we all need the same Savior. When that is our top focus, there will be **no favorites among us either**. We simply see people and want them all to know Jesus the Savior so that they too will be in heaven with us someday.

In other words, we think, speak, and act toward everyone with the same mercy and love God has for both them and us, not caring at all if their outward favorite things match ours or not. The love of God stands, and mercy always triumphs over judgment. For these priceless gifts of mercy and love, freely given by grace without a hint of favoritism, thank you, Jesus. Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.