

Faith with Hands and Feet
Loving our Neighbor
James 2.1-9

March 12, 2023

Join me in a thought experiment.

Imagine you are at home and someone approaches your front door.



No, that isn't our house and that isn't our dog.

What sort of a welcome do we extend to those who come to our front door?

That's what the Scripture passage we're studying this morning is about – the sort of welcome we extend when people come to our front door.

The specific context of the passage we're looking at this morning has to do with the way that people are received who come to the front door of the church when the Christian community is gathered for worship.

But this passage applies equally to the sort of welcome we provide when people come to the front door of our own homes in our own neighborhoods.

And more broadly than that, it really speaks to the sort of welcome we extend to others whenever and wherever we encounter them – whether in our home, in our church building, in our neighborhood, or out in the community – wherever God takes us on this wide earth.

What sort of welcome are we called to extend to the person who comes to the front door of our lives?

With that question in our minds, before we come to the passage in James that we'll be exploring this morning, I want to take us to Romans 15.7, where Paul says,

Romans 15.7

Accept one another, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

This is typically translated in one of three ways into English: accept one another, welcome one another, or receive one another. It also has the meaning of extending hospitality to one another.

This word is a fascinating one in Greek, because it joins two words that go in opposite directions. Literally this word says, "move toward others and bring them toward yourself." Reach out and draw them in.

This is the essential posture we are called to as followers of Christ when we come face to face with others. Move toward them and bring them toward us. Reach out and draw them in.

Accept one another just as Christ accepted you.

How did Christ accept you? How has he reached out to you and drawn you in?

I think about my own experience. As it happens, for the last two days I was up at Culver Academy for a Career Day. I attended school there, in keeping with Henderson family tradition, for my last two years in high school.

While I was there, as I had a chance to share with a number of students and alums over the past two days, I was an atheist. All through middle school, high school, and most of college.

An atheist, closed to God, not the least bit interested in spiritual things, putting down people for their faith, living my life very much for myself, using other people for my own ends. I got to spend time over the past two days with Howard Mosley, my awesome roommate, a wonderful African American man from Nebraska, and he told me that's not how I came across, but I knew my own heart. It was all about me.

But in spite of my closed heart toward him, God's heart was not closed toward me. God lovingly pursued me over years and years –through friendships with Christians whose lives stood out to me, through tragedy and loss, through fiction, through dreams, through music, through thought provoking questions put to me by Christians, through atheists-turned-Christians like CS Lewis and Mickey Maudlin, through seeing the impact of the church for good all around the world on my world travels, and eventually through the opening lines of John's gospel. Lovingly and tenaciously and unwaveringly God pursued me.

And when I came to him, no scolding. No lectures. No insisting that I tidy myself up first. Just this holy invitation – “neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.” Just extending the gift of forgiveness and new life and his Holy Spirit who would begin to transform me from the inside out, all gifts given to me when I simply gave him my allegiance.

Jesus moved toward me and drew me toward him.

Accept one another just as Christ accepted you.

In James chapter two verse eight, James lays out the foundational guiding principle of our dealings with those who come to our front door, whether the front door of our lives, our homes, or our Christian community.

James 2.8

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.

James here is quoting Jesus, who is quoting Moses, calling us to a life of love:

The Command to Love

The Ancient Code of Hospitality: Moses

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Leviticus 19.18

The Second Great Commandment: Jesus

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 22.39

The Royal Law of Love: James

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” James 2.8

Every Sunday during this series on the book of James we’ve been walking through a shared reading that captures what the Bible teaches about the place love is meant to have in the life of the believer.

As I’m sure you’ve begun to notice, there are two basic ideas in this reading. We are blessed to be the *recipients* of God’s love, and we are blessed to be the *vessels* of God’s love.

Listen for those two ideas as we read this reading together.

Shared reading

We are the beloved of the Lord.

In love He created us.
 In love He came to us.
 In love He died for us.

In love He makes us His own –
 folding us into His love
 transforming us by His love
 sending us out in His love

By our love this world will know that we are His –
 by our love this world will see Him in us –
 as He lives His life of love in us and through us,
 to the glory of God.

The night before he died on the cross, Jesus gave this charter to the early church.

John 13.34-35

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

What is *the* distinguishing mark of the church? What will make it clear to the world that we belong to Jesus? Our love.

Now James, in chapter two of his letter, brings us back to our charter as a church. He calls it the royal law of love.

James 2.8

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.

But we’ve already spent enough time with James to know that he’s not willing to keep things in the realm of the vague and theoretical. His concern is with how this whole Christian life thing gets lived out in the day to day, with our hands and feet.

So he gets specific and practical about what it means to love.

Think again about what happens when someone comes to our front door, whether of your family home or your church home or out in the community. How will we welcome them?

James 2.8

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.

James 2.9

But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

In these two verses James paints love and favoritism as stark opposites. One pleases God, the other offends him.

So what does James have in mind when he talks about favoritism?

Literally this expression says, “receiving the face.” What the word means is giving weight to *appearances*, to the surface things that make one person different from another person in a way that leads us to treat them differently.

Have you ever heard the expression, “God is no respecter of persons”? This is where that phrase comes from.

The King James translation of verse nine says,

If ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin.

What? Unfortunately, the words mean almost the opposite of what they meant when they were first put into English 400 years ago.

God *is* a respecter of persons! What He is not is a respecter of *appearances*. Man looks at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart.

James is contrasting showing love with showing preferential treatment.

Both the word *favoritism* and the term *preferential* get at an important dimension of what James is condemning. When I show favoritism or partiality, I am picking *favorites* out of the group, I am identifying those who for some reason I *prefer*, those I like or am drawn to for some reason or who satisfy some need in me, and I am treating them differently.

This propensity to treat differently those we like gets further complicated by some of our innate tendencies as fallen human beings to like those who are *like* us.

In his wonderful book *How Do We Understand Ourselves*, in which he sums up some of the key findings in the field of psychology over the past four decades, David Myers writes this:

One of social psychology’s oldest and most firmly established principles is that *similarity attracts*. . . . People are drawn to those with whom they share attitudes,

beliefs, interests, age, religion, education, intelligence, economic status . . . the list goes on. . . . Likeness leads to liking. 92

T[wo] additional group psychology principles further [complicate matters].

1. No matter our similarities with others, our attention focuses on differences.
2. We naturally divide our worlds into “us” and “them,” in-group and out-group. 103

So this propensity in us to treat people differently because of their surface differences James calls sin. It is an affront to God when I divide up humanity between those I prefer and those I don't, and I treat those I don't prefer differently. He contrasts that with the love we are called to show to our neighbor.

I shared with you last year about the amazing two and a half hour conversation I had on a plane with a sharp young woman named Anna who was wrestling through her Christian faith, in part because she saw so few people living lives that were really consistent with the faith they professed. During that conversation she mentioned a book that she said more than any other book held out for her the ideal of a Christian life defined by love.

The book is called *Works of Love*, by Søren Kierkegaard. It's a collection of essays on each of the major New Testament passages on love. I picked it up and read it this summer and fall. It's one of the most challenging books I've ever read – not because it couldn't understand it but because I could.

Essentially Kierkegaard argues that when Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves, he was holding before us a way of relating to our fellow human beings that left *any* consideration of our liking or preferring them or even getting along with them out of the picture when it came to how we treated them.

Preferences are a normal part of the human experience, but preferences don't have any place in determining how we treat the person who shows up at our front door.

Listen for a few minutes to some of his penetrating insights: (being aware that, as one writing in the 1800s, he used “man” collectively to refer to both men and women). He writes:

Who, then, is my neighbor? 37

Neighbor means all men. . . . If there are only two people, the other person is the neighbor. If there are millions, every one of these is one's neighbor. 37-38

There is . . . great debate going on in the world about what should be called the highest good. . . . Christianity, however, teaches a man immediately the shortest way to find the highest good: shut your door and pray to God. . . . When you

open the door which you shut in order to pray to God, the first person you meet as you go out is your neighbor whom you *shall* love. 64

There is in the whole world not a single person who can be recognized with such ease and certainty as one's neighbor. You can never confuse him with anyone else, for indeed all men are your neighbor. 64-65

Love to one's neighbor is . . . eternal equality in loving. This eternal equality is the opposite of exclusive love or preference. 70

He is your neighbor on the basis of equality with you before God; [and] this equality absolutely every man has. 72

Go, then, and do this – take away the distinctions of preference so that you can love your neighbor. 73

[Love]'s equality appears in love's humbly turning itself outward, embracing all, . . . loving everyone in particular but no one in partiality. 78

Enemies, too, have this equality. Men think that it is impossible for a human being to love his enemies, for enemies are hardly able to endure the sight of one another. Well, then, shut your eyes – and your enemy looks just like your neighbor. 79

Christianity will not take differences away, neither the distinction of poverty not that of social position. But on the other hand, Christianity will not in partiality side with any temporal distinction, either the lowliest or the most acceptable in the eyes of the world. 81

Love to one's neighbor makes a man blind in the deepest and noblest and holiest sense, so that he blindly loves every man. 80

Kierkegaard establishes again and again the point that James is making in James 2.8-9: that Christian love and the human propensity to show favoritism or give preferential treatment are completely incompatible. One pleases God and the other offends him.

When we look at verses 8 and 9 in context, we discover these are the concluding statements at the end of a passage in which James deals with a really specific sort of favoritism that was seeping its way into the early church – favoritism based on wealth.

Let's go back and read the whole passage through: James 2.1-9.

James 2.1

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

James 2.2-4

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

James 2.5-7

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

James 2.8

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.

James 2.9

But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

James calls us to a faith-based, not a face-based, way of seeing others.

How do you think we do on this score, Covenant family?

Let’s start just by thinking of how we respond when we see people who are different from us in the way they cut or color their hair, or use their body as a canvas for art, or dress much more formally or informally than we do, or those who are noticeably older or younger than us. How warm is our welcome of those whose appearance is different from our own?

What about when it comes to deeper areas of social division. We’re not a church that defines itself by our wealth or education or social status, but many of us in the Covenant family are fairly well off or fairly high up in positions of influence of our community. Are we as warmly welcoming of those whose appearance or speech suggests they may not have the resources we do, or the education we have, or the positions we hold? What would it look like for us to extend a genuine welcome and to make an equal place in our family for those who are unlike us in those ways?

What about when it comes to differing political opinions? How warmly do we receive those whose views differ from ours on the thorny political issues of our day?

What about in the area of ethnicity? There is not any sense in which we define ourselves as a white church – we want to reflect the wonderful ethnic diversity described in the Book of Revelation which speaks of people from every tribe and people and tongue and nation – but it happens that eight or nine out of ten of us in the Covenant family are white. Do we go out of our way to extend a welcome to those whose skin color or accent or dress is different from ours, and to include and involve them?

Let me take this one step further, and ask about two more challenging areas. How do we respond when someone who has hurt us or wronged us comes to our front door? When we encounter them out in the community, or here in our church home? Based on what Jesus teaches, which make unforgiveness as much of a sin as the wrong that requires our forgiveness, I think forgiveness should be one of the things that most radically defines the church. How well do we practice the deep work of forgiveness and release, of not holding against others the way they have failed us or hurt us – of joining Jesus in saying: Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing?

And what about those whose morality is different from ours? Gender and sexual preference are huge issues in our culture today. How about in this area? As Travis likes to say, "Don't hear what I'm not saying." I use this as an example not because this is the worst sort of moral wrong but only because it's a moral area that might be more obvious on the surface.

Imagine two men walked up to our front door holding hands. Would we be as warmly welcoming of them as we would of a man and woman who walked up holding hands? Would we walk up and introduce ourselves, or invite them to come sit with us?

Let me be really clear. As a church we heartily affirm God's biblical design for human relationships. I'm not calling into question our conviction that homosexuality is inconsistent with what the Bible teaches.

But if two gay men walked into our church, wouldn't we want them here, worshipping with us – I'm not talking here about membership, I'm just talking about worshipping with us – wouldn't we want them here worshipping with us so they could be alongside us as we all together place ourselves under the convicting word of God and allow the Spirit of God lovingly to bring to light those parts of our lives that aren't consistent with his desire for us, so that we can turn from those areas and grow in holiness?

I have a rock from Lake Superior that sits on my Bible at home where I have my devotional time. It was once a rough and craggy piece of basalt that is now perfectly smooth and rounded, polished by the tumbling of water and rocks on the shoreline over a long, long period of time.

That's how God shapes us all – materialistic, proud, lustful, angry, unfaithful, unforgiving us – as we together place ourselves under the transforming word of God, letting the

water of the word wash over us together as fellow human beings being drawn to God and deeper into God's gracious redemptive work.

You may remember from my sermon a couple of weeks ago this probing line from Scott Saul's book *A Gentle Answer*:

"Why is the world's experience of Christians so different from Christian's experience of Christ?" (36)

Accept one another just as God in Christ accepted us.

Here's a closing thought. This isn't just about following the rules. It's about living out the heart of God.

The more time I spend in James, the more I see of his incredible artistry as a writer and teacher.

In these verses, James isn't just approaching this as a law-focused Jewish moralist. He isn't just saying, "Do this, this is right. Don't do that, that's wrong."

Look at verse one again.

James 2.1

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

All of us as human beings are prone to draw a line through the middle of humanity, between those we favor and prefer, or who favor and prefer us, and those we don't. And that determines who receives our attention and our affection, and who doesn't.

James presses us to draw the line in a radically different place. He calls Jesus the glorious Lord Jesus. Other translations say, Jesus, the Lord of glory. The word glory in James is associated with what makes God God. By calling Jesus the Lord of glory, James is urging us to draw the line between the One who alone deserves our full allegiance, affection, and attention, and all the rest of humanity, all of whom are equally deserving recipients of our love. When we love Jesus first and best, all of our other loves will fall in line.

Then in 5 through 7 James uses two expressions to describe the relationship between Jesus and those who are his followers.

James 2.5-7

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised

those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

In verse 5 he speaks of *the kingdom he promised those who love him*. Then in verse 7 he talks about *the noble name of him to whom you belong*.

Jesus, the Lord of glory, is the one we love and to whom we belong.

The more we love the Lord of glory, the more we let his noble name define us, the more naturally it will come to follow the royal law of love – royal not only because it comes from the King, but also because it leads to the King.

Which brings us to this closing thought from Kierkegaard:

It is really only in his company that one discovers his neighbor. . . . When you walk with God, hold only to him and understand God within everything you understand . . . then you will discover your neighbor. 87-88

What sort of a welcome will we extend to those who come to our front door?

James 2.8

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.

Romans 15.7

Accept one another, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.