

**April 29, 2018**  
**James: We're All In This together**  
**James 2:1-13**

The neurosurgeon casually put the M.R.I. films up on the lighted board. There were several dozen slices of my brain. *"We don't like to see any bright spots,"* he said. *"You have a couple here, but I'm not too worried about them. Probably from an old injury or something. Things look pretty normal."* It is very odd to look at cross-section pictures of your own brain. I'd seen models of brains and pictures of brains before, but never pictures of **MY** brain. One of the interesting things about brains is that inside, they all kind of look the same. We all look differently, act differently, dress differently, have different personalities, but deep inside we're all pretty much the same ...

That's worth remembering.

One day some **men** bring a woman to Jesus who has been caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11). It takes two to tango – where is the man? With sadistic glee, the outraged Jewish **men** throw her at Jesus' feet and demand what punishment He thinks she deserves. The accusers demand Jesus deal with her outward behaviour. If we were to grade sin on a scale from one to ten, she is probably at least a nine.

Note what Jesus does first. Jesus doesn't deal with her outward act of sin ... (by the end of the story we know He takes it most seriously). First, He exposes the sinful attitude in the hearts of her accusers. Jesus wants to focus on what's going on inside. On attitudes of the heart. Like a spiritual M.R.I., Jesus wants us to see when you look inside, there's not really a lot of difference between us. We all blow it. We all make mistakes. We all, in our own ways, have issues. So the men leave – oldest (and we trust, wisest) first. Jesus exposes their sin. They aren't any better than the woman.

Yes, the woman needs to change. Her heart and attitude to marriage, sex, and holiness need healing. But her accusers must change their heart attitudes towards judgment, justice, sin, and a thirst for punishment. Jesus calls us to humility.

James is making this same point in his letter. Deep down we're all the same. We may look different on the surface, but underneath we all have our issues, too ...

***Case Study: The parable of the usher ... (James 2:1-7)***

James tells a story about three men. The first man is very wealthy. He wears designer clothes and monogram cuff links. The second man is very poor, right off the street. He is literally dressed in "filthy" clothes. He smells bad. The two arrive at church. What does the third man, the usher, do? He marches the wealthy man to the nicest pew, front and centre of the sanctuary. The poor man can sit in the back corner. Or stay in

the foyer. Or just leave. Most of us are probably not too upset by the usher's actions.

James says, "*You know what, if you use a 10-point scale of sin, you just committed a 10!*" Listen ... "*It is good when you truly obey our Lord's royal command found in the Scriptures: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' But if you pay special attention to the rich, you are committing a sin, for you are guilty of breaking that law*" (James 2:8-9).

James' point is that when we assess a person's value based on their bank book, clothing, ethnicity, or appearance, we commit a major sin. Superficial appearances are no way to evaluate anyone. We KNOW that. But in subtle – or not so subtle – ways we can communicate we think some people are worth less than others.

During my university years I worked summers for the Vancouver School Board. At least three summers I worked as a Drainsman's helper. The drainsman, a glorified labourer, and I would tour the catch basins (storm drains) at each school. I had a wheelbarrow and pick. At each catch basin I would pry open the metal grate with the pick, the drainsman would take a "spoon" – a long ladle – and scoop out the leaves and litter that accumulated so the drains wouldn't get plugged. It wasn't a noble job, but in the mid 1980's it paid a whopping \$11.27 an hour – three times minimum wage.

We were cleaning the drains at a secondary school in a wealthy neighbourhood. As we went about our business, one young lady exclaimed (deliberately loud enough for us to hear), "*Ee-ooo! I would never do that! That's disgusting!*" She and her friends twittered with laughter. "*Look at the pigs!*" she snickered. Imagine how we felt? It wasn't so bad for me, this was just a summer job for a few months before going back to university. I did feel like saying, "*I'm an honours student at university, this is just a summer job, and I'm actually really smart ... this job pays super well!*" But then I looked at my partner: this was his life! He just hung his head and trudged on.

A lady began attending our church in Edmonton. She always wore a nice dress ... and army boots. Her story? She wanted to dress nicely, but she had a serious foot problem and only army boots gave her the support she needed. She had also been made to feel unwelcome in several other churches before ours. Thankfully our church didn't care.

How much is a person worth? According to the Mayo Clinic, our total worth is about \$4.50 – \$3.50 for our skin (at the price of cowhide) and \$1 for all our other chemical components.<sup>1</sup> We know each person is worth far more than \$4.50, which is why we value human life so much and have still penalties for those who abuse or kill people. Each of us is incredibly valuable to our family and friends.

In God's eyes each of us is infinite worth. God's loves each of us so much He was willing to come among us, become one like us, live, love and teach us, and die for us.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://liblog.mayo.edu/2010/01/14/whats-the-body-worth/>

### ***The reality: We're all in this together***

We like the 10-point scale of sin because we think that if we mess around in the one-, two-, or three-point level, we're OK. It's no big deal. We're not as bad as the next guy. But listen to James: *"The person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as the person who has broken all of God's laws. For the same God who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' So if you murder someone, you have broken the entire law, even if you do not commit adultery"* (James 2:10-11).

The problem is God doesn't use a ten-point scale. It's Pass or Fail. 100% perfect and you pass. Anything less – even 99.999% - and you fail.

Think of it this way. If you were hand-delivered a special invitation to the Royal Wedding on May 19, what would you wear? You pick a white shirt (or blouse). Probably you'll buy a new one. You will want to make sure it was spotless. You'll have it perfectly pressed. But imagine you look at it a few hours before the big event and you notice a small ink stain on the sleeve. It's a small stain. But it's a stain. What will you do? The devil's advocates among us will say, "I'd wear it anyway." But I bet you wouldn't. Even a little stain would be too much. You might as well drop the shirt in a mud puddle. The same is true of God. God is pure holiness, pure white. And His desire for us is that we be pure holiness, pure white. So whether the spot is a little bit of favoritism here – or a "bigger" splotch of something there – it's all serious business.

One of my heroes, Red Green, had a monologue in each show in which he reflected on the challenges, mistakes, and blunders of life. He concludes, *"I'm pulling for ya. We're all in this together."* He's right. We're all in this together. None of us is without sin.

Red Green also leads his guys in *"The Man's Prayer: I'm a man, but I can change, If I have to, I guess."* The good news is that God can wash any sin – big or little – away. His love and grace are so amazing that no sin is unpardonable. No stain is unwashable. We have bring the stains in our lives to Him, and allow His Spirit to do His work.

### ***The result: Free to live***

*"So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember you will be judged by the law that sets you free. There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you."* (James 2:12-13). Spare yourself the trouble of having to judging others – just don't do it.

These words are eerily familiar. Jesus (James' half-brother), said, *"Stop judging others, and you will not be judged. For others will treat you as you treat them. Whatever measure you use in judging others, it will be used to measure how you are judged"* (Matthew 7:1-2).

This is hard for some of us to hear. Some of us like to think we have the **spiritual gift of judging people**. We have a supernatural ability to see issues in other people's lives. God has given us this spirit of ... of ... of ... "discerning other people's sin." If you think you have this gift, read the Bible from cover-to-cover (OK, I'll make it easy, just the New Testament), and see what the Bible says about this gift. A word to the wise – save your energy. It isn't there. It's one of those "apocryphal gifts" (things we think are in the Bible but aren't) like the **gift of criticism** or the **gift of discouragement**. God has given no one the gift of judging other people (judges have a legal role, of course, but only as arbiters of an established legal system).

Later James will say, "*Don't speak evil against each other, my dear brothers and sisters. If you criticize each other and condemn each other, then you are criticizing and condemning God's law (Love your neighbour as yourself). But you are not a judge who can decide whether the law is right or wrong. Your job is to obey it. God alone, who made the law, can rightly judge among us. He alone has the power to save or to destroy. So what right do you have to condemn your neighbour?*" (James 4:11-12). Our "job" is to obey God's royal law ... "*Love your neighbour as yourself.*"

In the movie, *The Blues Brothers*, Dan Ackroyd and John Belushi are ex-cons who set out to save a Catholic orphanage. When asked what they're doing, their straight-faced response is always, "*We're on a mission from God.*" The joke of the whole movie is that these guys break every law in the book on their alleged mission from God. But if someone were to ask you: What are you doing with your life? We should be able to say: "*I'm on a mission from God!*" Our job is to obey God's law to love our neighbour.

**God loves you!** You are not an accident. You're not unimportant. You are a key part of God's creation (His work). Your mission is love and worship God, AND to love His creation, to love your neighbour as yourself. In practical terms, your mission is to use the gifts, talents, and abilities with which God has blessed you, to serve God and serve others. Don't know your talents or gifts? Try out different things. Ask godly people what they see in you. Pray. And then, "*Just do it!*"

**We're all in this together.** Our spiritual M.R.I.s are all the same. We all have sinned. We all need forgiveness. We all need love from other people. We all need God's love. We are all loved – infinitely – by God. "*I can change, If I have to, I guess.*"

**We are all on a mission from God.** We have different gifts. Different talents. Different abilities. Different callings. But we're all in this together. How can we help one another get through? How can we love one another? What can you do, today?