

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“Second Thoughts”

James 2: 1-7

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At the beginning of the second chapter, our writer for this month, James, invites his readers to imagine a typical Sunday morning at First Church Anywhere.

Deacons are at the door handing out bulletins...

Ministers are taking care of last minute details.

Kids moving here and there faster than they should be
while their parents visit a bit.

The musicians are about to start the prelude when a visitor walks in who causes heads to turn. It's the mayor and he and his wife are doing a little church shopping... You can imagine them decked out. They're the wealthiest, most prominent and powerful couple in town.

The chair of the Outreach Committee bustles over and introduces herself to the couple and escorts them down to the front row to sit right next to the pastor who is grinning from ear to ear.

About that time, someone else walks in who's not really noticed... But when one of the greeters does see her and notices how she's dressed, an extra folding chair is brought in and she's asked to sit in the corner as the organist begins to play, *“In Christ there is no East or West.”*

That's the caricatured scene James invites them to imagine and then he goes onto say, **“Folks, if it's more than my imagination... if it's really happening, are you not discriminating among yourselves and are you not judges with evil thoughts?”**

The Church Fathers and Mothers would say, **“Yes, you are... you are judging and you are sinning and you are doing that because you have these thoughts within you that are controlling you...”**

Thoughts that are unheard...

unseen...

unchecked...

Thoughts you are unconscious of... and so you've done something sinful by honoring the wrong thing.”

The problem isn't just being unjust, though that's the result. And for sure... James' readers, and everyone of us, can and should hear this story, condemn the behavior, and make sure that we never act that way.

As we said last week... we should just be obedient and Jesus said to take care of the poor. And he invited us to break down and tear down social bearers, and we should... and we should simply because he said so.

But... even as we are obedient... we ought to wonder... **“Why would anyone act in such a way? Why might we... prefer this person to that one... make room for one in our lives but not another? Why would we “light up” when certain people walk in the room?”**

And that's the translation of the word James uses. It gets translated “favoritism” in most of your bibles but the better translation is “lit up.” James says, **“What in the world? The rich mayor walks up and you're all aglow... what's that about?”**

Well... it wasn't a calculation. It's not like they thought about it and said, **“Look, it's the mayor. He's special... he's rich... we should treat him better than everyone else.”**

No... he just walked in the room and unconsciously they all lit up... He “*floated their boats*” ... “*got their engines running*”... “*tickled their fancy*”... and they were unaware that it happened. ... Unaware that they had become judges...

Judging... comparing ... critiquing... Why? And why might you? Why do you... or am I the only one who struggles with this? I hope I am... but I doubt that I am.

Do you not label as you go? Rich... poor.

He’s conservative... she’s a liberal.

Not so smart... really smart.

Which labels appeal to you... what lights you up? Why? Who do you put on the back row of your life? Why? Are you even aware? Why not?

Those who have written about the spiritual path have all answered in the same way. **“Because more or less we are unconscious... we aren’t really awake. And we have these thoughts in our heads going constantly only we really aren’t all that mindful of them, so they’re really in charge of us. And we do dumb things like put the mayor on the front row for worship while the organist is playing, ‘In Christ there is no East or West.’”**

The spiritual teachers of the Church said that after we start dealing with some of the externals, with right and wrong, after we start working the moral path as we talked about last week... then we begin to deal with the inner life...

It’s sort of “Stage Two,” where you start watching yourself... your behavior and listening to your thoughts, especially thoughts about people.

“Wow, look at her, isn’t she great...”

“I don’t like that guy, he’s so pushy.”

“That waiter’s lazy.”

“That neighbor’s a clown.”

“My teacher scares me.”

When we start paying attention, hard as it is, what we come to see is that we’ve been living in a bit of a trance. And... we think the things we think and... value what we value and... feel what we feel because of this self-trance we’re in... because of the ego that is ours.

So, you might imagine again, James’ make-believe congregation... and all the “egos” in it... all the personalities... the small selves with all the hidden, unconscious agendas... There’s a room full of them.

Let’s start with the pastor... He has a deep need for power, lets imagine (we’re just pretending here). He has a great need for power, but he doesn’t know it... so when the mayor walks in he lights up because on most days he feels so powerless in a society where Christians are second rate.

And the chair of the outreach committee has a deep need for esteem... but she doesn’t really know it... So... when the mayor walks in she lights up because she just needs to feel validated and important and walking with the mayor is a real shot in the arm.

The poor woman is sitting in the back, in the corner, because the greeter has needs for security that control him. He’s afraid a lot but not all that aware of it. So, when someone different comes along he keeps them at arms length.

And there are others. There are folks driven some by their needs for affection... and when they aren’t treated just so they get their feelings hurt.

And others who need to be in control of things and seem often to be fussing with someone.

And others who are worried about survival primarily and they light up when they see the mayor knowing how his income will impact the budget.

Are you getting the picture? Everyone in the room... that one and this one... has an ego... a personality... a small self... And to the degree we are unaware of this part of ourselves we will be controlled by it... and we'll be stuck in our judgments and opinions and likes and dislikes.

We will live lives of critique and comparison.

... attraction and repulsion... better and worse...

Like and dislike

We'll live in a trance and someone will be relegated to the back row.

So, there's work we must do. If we want to grow and live lives faithful to the gospel... there's work we must do so that we don't stay in this self-trance, unaware of being totally identified with these unconscious agendas we have.

We want to be a somebody...

We want to be wealthy...

We want to be loved...

So when the rich mayor walks in we light up. And when the poor walk in, or someone who's different, more conservative, more liberal... Someone who rubs us wrong, we avoid them... So, there is work to do, and remember, we're focusing on that this fall.

And I want to offer you just a few ideas...

First of all, turn off the autopilot. Pay attention to what is lighting you up or turning you off. If the mayor walks in notice your reaction. If you feel afraid of someone or bored by someone or irritated or jealous or angry... let an alarm go off in your heart.

You can train yourself to do this...

To see your thoughts...

And as Evagrius said, **"Interview them at the door of your heart."** If hurt feelings show up at your hearts door... maybe you ought not let them in. If peacock feathers are pluming on your back because the mayor sat next to you, don't identify with those feelings... Instead cut them off.

And that's the second thing. Chop off the thoughts as they come. Understand, just because you decide to grow spiritually, doesn't mean the old self, that small self, goes away. In fact, it will probably fight back with a vengeance. And when the thoughts comes...

When you feel that familiar anger...

That familiar desire...

Or familiar repulsion...

Cut it off. Or as Barney Fife would say, **"Nip it."** **"Nip it, Andy... Nip it in the bud. All your desert fathers were in favor of bud nippin'."**

See it... and nip it.

And know as you see and as you nip, that this is vital to your spiritual growth. This is the work we must do. What lights you up? Nip it. What turns you off? Nip it. And as you do, these thoughts will begin to lose their power.

One other idea... and this is one of the basic spiritual principles of the universe. Last week's principle was, **"If you want to be free, you must be submissive to the right things."**

This week's principle is that, **"the person you need most to show up in your life in order for you to grow up, will show up."** And it's going to be work. The kind of person that is

hardest for you to love is going to find you. That personality that intimidates you... the one that offends you... drives you crazy.

Trust me... what will prompt the work of your life, will find you... or you'll find it. And probably, by the way, in church. That's one reason why being committed to a community is important. Because the mayor shows up and you're all lit up and now you have to deal with your stuff.

You've got to figure out how to love and it'll mean working and changing. And once you're committed to this work, you will start to see opportunities... situations that will present themselves to you. There you are on a committee together and you've got to learn mercy.

People will become your path to holiness. That's what the Spiritual Mothers and Fathers understood... Father Anthony said, **"Life and death depend on our neighbor. If we gain our neighbor, we gain God."**

Being merciful changes us... as we live in the world and live in it without judgment. ... noticing our own failings and seeing goodness in others... grace gets in us and grace transforms us.

That was the new agenda. Grace that changes us and leads us to love. Because, you can't truly love and size someone up at the same time. **"What's in it for me???"** cancels agape.

Jesus had introduced a new way of being... a new way of walking in the world. Remember how he was. He moved here and there, with this group and that, and seemed never to be controlled by all the agendas of the world.

Who's in and who's out...

Good or bad...

Right or wrong...

He was just there, lovingly there... and invites us to be that way, too. That's where this work we do is taking us.

Where on Sunday morning, it doesn't matter who walks into our church... and on any day, it doesn't matter who walks into our lives...

We respond from the mercy that has touched us and is flowing through us and to all those that come our way. This is the work that we must do. Amen.

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