

SHOW ME: IMPARTIALITY
SHOW ME SERIES - Part 3
Dan Burrell

Good morning Life Fellowship. My name is Dan and I am one of the teaching pastors here. As I was driving to church this morning I just enjoyed this beautiful day the Lord gave us. I have been looking forward to this service because this is an unusual day as we are celebrating this major national holiday. The way I grew up in churches many times they turned this whole Sunday into kind of a patriotic fervor. There would be flags and parades and picnics on the ground. Then I moved to South Florida where everyone was from somewhere else and they just all had different ways of celebration.

In our philosophy of ministry here we keep the focus on the Word so we want to just go right on through our passage and our teaching which is what we are going to do this morning. At the same time many of you have plans for this day. This is a day where we do come together and we appreciate our heritage of being Americans. I did a DNA test several years ago and I found out my family had been here about 400 years. Some of my ancestors were here from the time of the Mayflower, so I do love my country.

But do you know what I love more? I love the fact that we are part of a family that transcends national borders. I love the fact that we are part of a family that transcends our moments in time. I love the fact that we have gathered this morning in this one unified service. And as part of our service we are going to spend time around the Word of God, we are going to spend time in prayer, we are going to spend time in reflection, and then we are going to observe the Lord's table together and remember the thing which will give us unity unlike anything else. And that is the unity that was purchased with blood. It is the unity that came at great cost. And when we talk about the cost of our nation we need to remember that far greater that that was the cost of our salvation.

I want us to reflect on that this morning. I know many of you have picnics planned this afternoon and I love that. I am not in any way denouncing that. But I want to celebrate the unity we have in Christ today. And I want us to consider that as we look in James Chapter 2. By the way next Sunday night we are going to come together for prayer. I think the most patriotic thing we can do is pray for our nation. So I would urge you to be here next Sunday night for prayer, and then afterwards we are going to go to the parking lot and have a watermelon feast. I have already been spotting good watermelon stands and I am going to be purchasing a ton of watermelons to have available next Sunday night. We can just sit outside and enjoy the fellowship of believers.

I think there is something in this culture right now that we need to re-emphasize and that is the coming together of the family of God for the purpose of gratitude, for the purpose of accountability, and for the purpose of fellowship. And may I urge you this summer to relish in that. Many of you have been watching online, and as soon as you get the vaccine, or as soon as you are feeling comfortable doing so, let me urge you to get back to the fellowship. I know it has been easy to sit in your pajamas and watch online when you wanted to, but the time is coming soon for most folks to be able to be back

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together. If you have a compromised immunity I am not saying that to you, but I think most of us know that if we are good enough to go to Disney World, or good enough to go to a picnic this afternoon then we are good enough to come to church. Come on home, we miss you and we love you.

For those of you who are here today make the fellowship of believers important. Make it a priority. Strive for the unity that comes with a fellowship that is focused on the right things. Get back into your small groups and your life communities. Get back to communicating with people, like taking someone out for lunch, inviting someone over to your house, and bringing new people into the body. Welcome the people who have moved to our community. We have had a lot of visitors the last month or so. I think we had six families last week and there are a couple here today, so we say welcome to you. We hope you sense that our faith is born from our love of God and our love of His Word. And we want you to feel embraced this morning. We want you to feel joy as you watch us and participate with us around the Word of God, and around the ordinances that He has established.

So we are going to be in James Chapter 2 this morning. Pastor Ben is finishing up his vacation and he is scheduled to be back next week. And I have appreciated this opportunity to kick off our series on the book of James as we look at what he says about ‘Show me.’ Remember James was the half-brother of Jesus, and he probably did not come to the full knowledge of Christ, perhaps did not even accept Him as Savior until after Jesus was crucified and had risen again. But once the Holy Spirit came into James his life and future were transformed and he dug in deep.

Remember that this letter that we have that was written by James was written for us, but it was written to the Jews of that day. These Jews had come to know Christ through the ministry of Jesus as He was there in Jerusalem, through the testimony of the disciples, and through the power of the resurrection, and all of this was transforming Jewish culture as well. So when James was writing this letter he was writing it to the believing Jews, those who saw Christ for who He was, the Messiah.

And then they were dispersed around the world because the Roman Empire came in and they just leveled Jerusalem. They destroyed the temple, and they were trying to stamp out the identity of Judaism. They wanted everyone to be a Roman and the Jews and the Christians were double problems for them. So they scattered them about, and they were literally fleeing for their lives. And yet in Christ they could have a unity, a unity founded in faith, founded in belief, founded in the love that God gave them. And James was telling them things that they needed to remember.

Sixty-two times James gives clear directives in his letter. And in thirty-two of those directives he says they are for all of us to do as a body. And that includes the one we are going to look at right now in James Chapter 2. Please follow along as I read beginning in verse 1.

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“My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. for if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “sit down at my feet,” have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which He has promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

Now this is a really powerful Scripture, and if you just kind of take your time and read it conversationally it can make a lot of sense instead of just buzzing through it too quickly. So that is kind of what I want to do. This sermon is a mess, I am just telling you this up front, and I have changed this sermon so many times. I was talking to Pastor Brad Milks this week and he likes to take our sermons each week and then use them in his Life Group to go a little deeper. So about four times this week Brad asked me what I was going to emphasize this week, and every time he asked me, I gave him a different answer. Even last night I winched it up again a little bit.

The fact is this is like going to the Golden Corral; it is all good. No, that’s not right because not much is good at Golden Corral, particularly for a man in my shape. But let’s say you are at a great buffet, and this looks good and that looks good and that over there looks really good, and before long your plate is full and there are more things you really wanted to experience. Well, that is the way it is with the book of James. Every passage in James that I have preached on I have walked away frustrated because I would like to take a month of Sundays to be able to just teach on this one section. Again, let me just implore you to please go home and read this again. And please don’t have an expectation of me that I am going to be able to get into all the nitty gritty here because there is just no way to do that in the thirty or so minutes that I have to do it. But I implore you to continue to study it because the Holy Spirit, the same one that lives in me, and any other preacher, also lives in you and He will teach you things that will knock

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your socks off in this passage. So you need to get in it and study it because it is a great, rich, deep, multifaceted, multilayered passage.

So we start off at the beginning and let's just meander through it. Remember again James is using broad terms of affection like, '*my family*,' and '*my brothers*.' In fact the word here again is not statistically gendered just for the men, but it like '*y'all*.' '*Y'all come here and talk to me. Y'all, listen to me. Let me give you a little word of counsel.*' Remember the first thing he said was that we can have joy. In Chapter 1 he said we can have joy in all the tribulations and trials that come with life. And by the way we can also have joy even in the midst of temptation, and when we are struggling trying to find our way.

And then James goes on and says what we do with truth is important and how we engage with truth is important. So we have already gone through Chapter 1 and now James is kind of getting down into their business even further. He is saying he wants to talk to us as our loved one or as our brother. Remember he never pulls the Jesus card here. He never says, '*Well, let me just tell you that when I was growing up I learned this from Jesus.*' We never hear that; he is always appealing to them as one of them. And this is particularly important in this topic.

Now let's understand something about Jewish culture. Jewish culture was a higher hierarchy. If you think we in America today have problems with divisions based on class, ethnicity, race, breeding, and how long we have been in this country – remember I bragged about that right off the bat today, didn't I? We just do that without even thinking about it. And make no mistake, whether you just took the patriotic pledge through a naturalization service this year, or your family was here 400 years ago, you are still an American today, and you have reason to celebrate. And if your family came over on the Mayflower like mine did, you are absolutely no better in this country than the person who just got their citizenship papers yesterday.

And now here is something really, really important – if you just walked into this church this morning for the very first time and you are a follower of Christ, but this is all new to you because last week you were a total mess, you were addicted, you had something bad going on in your life, let me say to you that in Christ you are every bit as valuable, important, loved, delighted by the congregation as the guy who grew up in a Christian home, was homeschooled, who never cusses, never drinks, never did any of the big sins and has been here every Sunday. You are just as welcome, just as important, just as valued in the eyes of God. That is what James is saying. (*Applause.*)

James wants us to know that so he starts off by saying, "***Show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.***" By the way, just as James describes Jesus here is so powerful. Again, I don't have time to go through all of it this morning but he says, '*Understand that this is a faith that is born in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*' And that word 'glory' there is the word that is used for

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Shekinah Glory. It is the very essence of God. We need to understand that what Jesus did for us is indicative of the love, grace and mercy from the God who created us. There is no difference, they are the same, it is the Shekinah Glory of the creator that gives us hope and gives us redemption this morning.

So James is saying he just wants to kind of level it out by giving us an illustration. By all accounts this is hypothetical; it probably didn't really happen, but James is saying something like this. Let's just suppose that we are all gathered in our local community, and we are having a church service, and in walks a guy and he is maxed out. He has gold rings, he has the best clothing possible, he has a robe that was tailored just for him. He arrived in the finest carriage, perhaps even has attendants that come with him. Perhaps this man walks into the church service and right behind him is the guy that apparently spent the night in the street. He has holes in his clothes, he has blown out flip flops, he has clothes that he got down at the Good Will and I mean he is a mess.

You see the rich guy come in, and then you see the poor guy come in, so you run over to the rich guy and you say, *'Oh, we are so glad you're here. Welcome, welcome, welcome. Here is our most comfortable seat, where it is not too hot or not too cold and you have good lighting here. Why don't you sit here? We are just so blessed to have you. You are going to enjoy this service.'* And then you notice the poor guy who is looking around awkwardly not knowing where to go, and you say, *'Hey dude, why don't you just stand over there against the wall. If you need something, just give me a holler. I have a lot of responsibilities this morning so I am going to be sitting up front, but if you could just kind of sit right down here on the floor.'*

And James is saying if we treat those two people differently based on what they look like then he wants us to give some thought to that. In verse 4 he asks the question, ***"have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"*** That word 'distinction' is a word that can actually be translated as 'discrimination.' That is a word we hear a lot in our country today, so James is basically asking the question, *'Have you not discriminated among yourselves and placed yourself then as a judge with evil thoughts?'* We have put ourselves in a position of judgment over them. It may be in a position of authority, a position of power, a position of influence, but in some way standing above them is significant, or so we think.

In verse 5 I want you to notice what James does again, because he is not hammering them, he is not beating them over the head with their Bibles, saying, *'You wicked sinners.'* He is not doing that. He is saying, Listen my beloved brothers, I want to remind you of a few things. I want you to kind of pause and take a breath because I know that is the way we have been taught. I know that is our culture. I know that it is almost an impulse because in our Jewish culture, like if you are a member of the Sanhedrin, or if you are educated, or if you or a member of this tribe, or if you were a successful business person, you were always taught to be like them. *'Stay in school boys*

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and girls. Work hard so you can be like them.' This is kind of woven into the way they viewed the world.

But then he tells them to change their thinking based on this new paradigm in which we live called liberty, called grace, called mercy. And James then asks a few questions to kind of poke us in the brain a little bit. He said, '*Do you remember how Jesus acted? Didn't God in the flesh choose the poor to become rich in faith? Do you remember the blind guy, remember the guy whose daughter was dead. Do you remember the crippled dude down by the pool? Do you remember the hooker and the fisherman and the tax collector and the farmer? Do you remember who it was that Jesus gathered to Himself, the first fruits, those who would be the very foundation of His ministry here on earth? Remember those? And do you remember that He loved them in a special way?*'

And then James said to ask themselves how they would have treated the poor guy. And they would have dishonored him; they would have looked down on him. And keep this in mind, whenever you owe someone money who is the guy who drags you to court? Who is the guy that threatens to sue you? Is it the poor guy? No, it is not him. It is the rich guy. It is the powerful guy. It is the guy with all the degrees behind his name. It is the guy who wears the fancy gold rings, and it is like he never gets enough. If you owe him do you think you are going to get mercy from him? And yet when he walks in the room you are ready to bow to him. There is something wrong with that. And James wants them to think about that.

And remember that poor people don't have influence. It wasn't the poor people that nailed Jesus to the cross. It was the people of influence. It was the movers and shakers. It was the religious mucky mucks. It was the people who had standing with the Romans. It was the people who gathered on the steps of the synagogue. It was the guys who held court in Solomon's Porch. Those were the guys who said, '*Crucify Him. Let's go ahead and get this little problem solved.*' It wasn't the poor people; it was the people that they were showing incredible honor to.

Then there is a transition in the passage beginning in verse 8: "***If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture.***" And we need to understand that term 'royal law' is interesting. We should not overdo it because as Americans when we think of royalty we usually think of Britain, and Prince Charles, Queen Elizabeth and all the other royal pests that are over there doing whatever they do in England. As Americans we still kind of have this infatuation with royalty.

But this is not talking about that kind of royalty. It is just talking about kingdom, it is talking about why Jesus came, talking about God's plan here. So if we really fulfill the kingdom of God's law according to the Scripture, James was saying we need to have a little review here. By the way when we talk about royal law or kingdom law, James is not talking just New Testament; he is talking both Old Testament and New Testament.

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He talks about the diaspora, he talks about the commandments, and he also talks about the words and actions of Jesus, and that is important.

There are some today even in evangelical circles that say we need to disconnect from the Old Testament. But oh no, we can't disconnect from the Old Testament because the Old Testament is part of God's story, it is part of God's plan to us. We see Jesus all throughout the Old Testament. We see the promise of the coming Messiah and we see God's divine handiwork through His nation Israel to bring about the Messiah. And we need to watch out for a pastor, and I don't care what his last name is, watch out for a pastor who tells you that we really don't need the Old Testament today because we do. We will never fully understand the New Testament if we don't fully understand the Old Testament. That is why we go back and forth between the two.

So if we fulfill the royal law according to Scripture, here is what you will do - you will love your neighbor as yourself. And if you do that you are doing well. That is a good thing. But if you show partiality, you are ignoring that, you are committing sin and you are convicted by the law of transgressors. Because remember when it comes to the law and you break it in one point you become guilty of all of them.

You know we like to get this sense of superiority because we like to cherry pick our favorite commandments and say, '*Yeah, I am good with those.*' But before the grand judge of the universe, God, when we break the law in one area we might as well have broken it all of the areas, because at that moment we become guilty. And the one transgression is enough to send any of us to hell. That is why all of us are hopelessly depraved, hopelessly damned, hopelessly unable to save ourselves because if we violate even in one area, we stand judged by our sin before a holy and righteous God who tolerates zero sin.

But then there is that other part of the story. There is that story of grace. There is that story of mercy. There is that story of He who is without sin. There is that story of He who will take all our sins upon Himself because He paid the penalty for us. James gives us another illustration. God said, "***Do not commit adultery.***" And He also said, "***Do not murder.***" But if you don't commit adultery but you do murder, do you think you are really better off in the end? You are not because you become a transgressor of the law.

So here is what we need to do. Remember the purpose of Christ, remember the presence of the Holy Spirit, and remember the power of the new covenant. James said: "***So speak and so act as those***" (not who are to be judged under the law that does not flex but those) "***who are to be judged under the law of liberty.*** The law of liberty is where our penalty has been paid. But remember this: "***For judgment is without mercy to one who shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.***"

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This is not to say that anyone who sins is going to be automatically forgiven; what it is saying is that Jesus is mercy embodied. And because of what He did in forgiving our sins and taking the penalty on Himself as the sinless Son of God, He has the power to allow us the privilege of the law of liberty. And the law of liberty says the law cannot damn you, because if the law is what damns you, then you will never be good enough to overcome the law. It is grace that saves you above the law. It is mercy that saves you above the law.

We can't be perfect so the law meant that every single time we fail it fails to save us. Our sin can be one time, ten times, twenty times, or a billion times, but one time is all it takes. The law was never intended to help us be good enough to go to heaven. The law was intended to show us we need a Savior and His name is Jesus. And that righteousness that comes with salvation is not one that you and I have earned or performed, but it is one that was gifted to us in God's mercy when He said, *'I will become sin for you. Father, forgive them.'* He became damned for us and yet rose victoriously the third day.

So that is where James is at in this passage. Maybe you are thinking, *'Okay, Dan, what is the deal here?'* There are several things I just want to breeze through as we look through the verses one last time and then I will give you some points to consider. The first thing we need to remember is that in Christ and before God we are all equal. In other words we are sinners. One sin is all it takes.

By the way I want to correct something because I just had it kind of click in my brain. When I say the law cannot damn you, what I am saying is this – the law shows us that we need a Savior. The law is that standard, that perfect standard, but it is God's intervention over the law that saves us. Many of the Jews were thinking if they could just keep the law they would go to heaven. No, no, no, the law was that mirror that they could look at themselves in and see they were messed up. And if they messed up in one part they messed up in all the parts and that sin is what damned them. And the law was never part of our salvation; it was part of the exposure of our need for salvation. And so in Christ, whether you are a rich man that sinned or a poor man that sinned, whether you lived every day in sin, or you just sinned one time it didn't matter, because we are all equal, and we are all sinners in need of a Savior.

And then in verses 2 and 3 James says we have a tendency even if we know Christ, and he is talking to believers here, our tendency is to look how to one up someone, how we can be a little better, or how we can sit in a little more prestigious place. Now by the way the Bible teaches we should have honor for certain things. There are certain things the Bible says we should honor. The Bible tells us we should honor those in authority over us. That is Scripture and we can't argue with that. There are times and places in which we should show honor. The Bible says to honor those who teach the Word. And again I am not saying this because I teach the Word, but it is Scripture. In fact it says to give double honor because they have a sacred task and a sacred calling. What we do is not inconsequential; it is very consequential.

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The Bible talks about honoring our elders. The Bible talks about honoring faithfulness. There are some things in Scripture that are honor worthy, but having a bunch of bucks is not worthy of honor. Being beautiful, driving a nice car, living in a nice house, having a lot of education, being born with the right last name, none of those are qualities that God says are worthy of honor. And that is because before Him we are all simply sinners in need of a Savior.

Another thing is man's way of assigning values is different from God's way of assigning values, and we need to recognize that. If we are supposed to be looking at the world the way God looks at the world, we need to stop and ask ourselves how we are constantly making evaluations of others around us. And let's be honest, we, and particularly those in this generation, are constantly assessing and evaluating others, and our role to them. Whether or not they are worthy of our time, whether or not they are worthy of our attention, whether or not we are going to give them honor or respect, we are constantly doing that. It is like we have a tracking beam all the time making evaluations and sometimes we don't even realize it, or are aware of it.

'Hey look at her, man, she is a heifer.' *'Oh look at him, man, he is a dork.'* *'Oh look at him, he is a nerd.'* *'Oh look at him, man, he is a jock.'* *'Oh look at her, man, I wonder where she bought that.'* *'Oh look at her, she has beautiful hair, I would like to know her stylist.'* *'Oh look at him, man, do you think he even looked in the mirror when he got up this morning?'* *'Oh look at him, man, he can't put two words together to make sense.'* And we do this all the time in our head without even knowing it. *'Oh, I wish I had that car.'* *'Oh, I wish I lived over there.'* *'Oh, I wish I got that promotion. Man, he got a better office than I did.'* *'Oh I wish I had gone to that school.'*

We make all these value assessments constantly, and we don't even hear ourselves. Whether it is wealth, or appearance, or position, or nationality, or education, or background, or success, or accomplishment, or race, or any of the other things that the world tells us are important, we as believers need to remove ourselves from that and see us as what we are, sinners in need of a Savior. And anything we have today that is good or glorious is because God is good and glorious. That is it, end of story.

And in verses 8 through 11 James is saying we need to quit being a judge, quit being a critic, quit being an evaluator, quit assessing people all the time. And instead evaluate others as you would want to be evaluated. He said to quit withholding mercy from those who need mercy, quit withholding grace from those who need grace, because we needed mercy and we needed grace, so make sure we are not evaluating others.

Now let me kind of pause here, I am going to be getting to the point and I don't want to leave any children by the road this morning. We are going to get all these points through. Satan is the author of division and distraction. He wants us to prioritize anything and everything above God. He wants us to separate ourselves from God. And he wants us to separate ourselves from each other. So you and I in the church need to be

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constantly aware that there are facets of Satan's agenda that involve division and discrimination and distinction that are not right, that are not godly, and that are not biblical. And we need to be on guard so that we don't enable his efforts to divide us because we have one enemy and his name is Satan. And we need to make sure we stay focused, laser like, on what he is attempting to do which is to separate us from God forever.

And as James segues into this new part in Chapter 2 of his exhortation he heads for a major issue and a major challenge. He is saying we need to be unified in the body, be unified in our testimony and our outreach, be unified with each other, be unified in our spirit, be unified in our purpose, and be unified in regards to socio-economic status, race, background and all of the other things that will divide us. Be unified, don't show partiality.

Jewish tradition and Jewish religion and culture were very externally focused. Remember they hated the Samaritans; do you know why they hated them? It was because they were half breeds; half Jews and half Gentiles. They absolutely hated them and a good Jew would not even walk through the land of Samaria where they lived. They would go around it. That is why we have the story of the Good Samaritan. The shocker of that story was that he was kind to the people who would never have been kind to him. And Jesus used that illustration to kind of remind us to avoid that kind of thinking.

The Jewish culture focused on race, identity, accomplishment, status, wealth, influence and bloodlines. Tribalism was the name of the game in civilization during this time. But you know that is kind of still true today. We are constantly looking for ways to distinguish ourselves into social subsets even today, and yes, way too often in the church. Whether it is race or nationality, or geography, or socio-economic status, or education or accomplishments, or vocation, or recently we have tribalism for influence down to behavior, characteristics and in things that don't even exist. Things like sexual orientation, skin tones, genders that are no longer divine whether it is one or the other but a plethora of them.

In a world that has now become focused on critical race theory many are seeking to be empowered and to be influencers by claiming oppression at the hands of others and it is all about division. It is all about division and this has impacted the church. It is a distraction and it causes disharmony. Now make no mistake, is there discrimination? Oh yeah, there is. Is there racism? Without a question there is. Do people treat rich people better than they do poor people? Yeah they do. Do people think if you have a bunch of degrees behind your name you are somehow more special or brainier? Yeah they do. That is human nature because we are broken and messed up.

But that does not give us permission to languish in that state. And James is saying to the church that we need to be better than that. We need to get beyond that. And whatever we do don't bring it to the assembly. If a poor man comes in, give him the

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place of honor. If someone comes in and they are confused, provide them clarity. Don't you dare look down your nose at them. Don't you dare prefer someone else. Because remember that the same standard by which you are judging you also will be judged. Do you have mercy? Do you have grace? Do you have compassion? Do you love your neighbor as yourself? These are the characteristics of the believer because they are the characteristics of the Savior. And if that is the case we need to evaluate ourselves.

Are you ready for a rough patch here? I am going to make an application and I have tossed it around back and forth on this. Part of our problem is we have bought into the American mentality of entitlement and cockiness where we think we have all the answers. And if things were the way we liked them, they would be good. And we have done that in the church to the harm of the church. Churches all over this country are splitting over stupidity. People are leaving churches over superficial nonsense. And many of us have more loyalty to our favorite restaurant than we do to the assembly of believers. And that is ungodly.

When we make decisions based on our roles as Yelp assessors, we have a problem with the church. You would be shocked at how many times that our social media department will bring something to me where someone has filled out a Yelp review on our church services. And they say the stupidest things like, *'Well, I just feel like the band was a little too loud and it was so crowded. And he said something about politics one time and I just think that is wrong.'* They must sit there with this little card or whatever filling it out.

Let me promise you that if you listen to me preach long enough I will tick you off. (*Laughter.*) That is guaranteed because I even tick myself off sometimes. (*Laughter.*) And do you know why? It is because I am a mess. I don't ever want to preach in the flesh, but every once in a while I do. I don't ever want to mess up something; I don't ever want to say something that is a colloquialism out of my childhood that is not appropriate. I don't ever want to do that, but let me ask you this – would you please see me as a sinner that wants to be the saint that God has created me to be. I am going to mess up and so is everyone else in this room. So let's get rid of the judge stuff. Let's get rid of it.

When we elevate our personal preferences and styles over unity - that is a problem. When we expect sermons and programs to revolve around us - that is a problem. When we choose churches based on consumer comforts rather than theological orthodoxy - that is a problem. When we assume a mono-mentality that expects and even demands that everyone around us must line up exactly with every personal view that we have, and every political view that we have, no matter how trivial they might be - that is a problem. When we are quite willing to savage our brothers and sisters in Christ when they don't meet our expectations or demands or conclusions rather than to extend grace and mercy, or simply the benefit of the doubt - that is a problem. When we hold others to standards we do not seek to reach ourselves - that is a problem.

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We have exchanged the spirit of grace and mercy and compassion for an expectation of endorsement or excellence in alignment and in doing so we have sown the seeds of division in churches all over this nation and it is wrong and we need to repent. We need to repent. (*Applause.*) When we walk in that door, who is the audience? It is not us. Sometimes I think we ought to just completely reconfigure how we design auditoriums. In fact the Jewish culture was different and everyone sat on the same level. And many times the audiences even stood. How would you like to stand through one of my sermons? If I am sitting I am going even longer I am telling you that right now.

All the lights are shining on me right now because they have to be able to see me on the camera. Sometimes I just want to pull my hair out and sometimes it is pragmatic and we can adjust our attitudes, but I want to say this. We need to be thoughtful when we walk up. I have to tell you that I am a critic. When I was younger I used to get free meals going to restaurants and filling out surveys because I was too poor and I could get one of those mystery diner things. I loved that. But the bad thing is now everywhere I go I am a critic. I go to Walmart and wonder why some shelves are empty, and why don't they have a dress code, and seriously, please open more lines. I do that everywhere I go. I critique people's landscaping, I re-hang pictures on the wall in my mind, and I am obnoxious. And that is partly because of the way I am wired, but it is not an excuse.

What I need to do is remember grace and mercy every day and every moment of my life. You may not be that way, and I love you folks that everything is good to you. I can absolutely lay an egg on Sunday morning and you will say, *'Oh that was one of the best sermons you have ever preached.'* And I am thinking, *'I hope you enjoyed your nap, because no one else thinks that except you.'* And that is the reality. There are times that we need to just say, *'Why am I here again? Why did I get out of bed on July 4th and come to a church service? What was the reason for that?'*

And if we are coming into a public assembly as judges, assessing those in attendance, evaluating the performance of the litigates or the jury or the audience, assigning motivation to the actions of others, making judgments about appearance and decorum, prescribing value as to the worthiness of participants, then we are revealing some things and they are not real good. And we need to be careful.

I want you to understand something, when we come as critics we rob ourselves of the blessings that God is prepared to give us. Don't let Satan sow the division. You know some mornings you are going to come into this service and you are going to say, *'Look at that, all they have are teenagers up there. Why do they have so many teenagers? It's probably because the adults are lazy. But we have to be cool and we have to be hip.'* And we start assigning ourselves negative values. Do you know why we have teenagers up there? It is because they are the future of this church, and this is every bit as much their church as it is anyone else's church, and I am so grateful for them.

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And by the way I would urge you to find these young people that are up here, find Andrew Shumate, find Zane, find Mr. Barker, find these young men that come up here, like Daniel and others. I know I shouldn't start naming them because I am going to miss some of them. And find some of the young ladies who stand up there and tell them you are thrilled that they are serving the Lord. Maybe you heard someone's voice crack and you don't think they are very professional yet, or you think adults should be doing that. But we are not about a performance; we are about training and expressing and giving victory, giving testimony to the Lord and letting the focus be on Him.

At the same time I get this criticism all the time. *'Well, this church is so slick. I mean look at the lights, there is amplification, and if you are not like a Type A classic singer you will never be able to sing in this church.'* That is not true, but that is the impression that some people think it is. Doing things with excellence is not doing things for the wrong motivation. So what should we do, be really casual? I grew up in a church, and someone is going to see this and write me a letter, but I grew up in a church and the Lord is my witness where people would get up and say something like, *'Well, I just found out this morning I was supposed to be singing today, and I have had kind of a cold this week so you all pray for me as I try to sing my song.'* And they would get out a hymnal and they would put their head in that and try to sing. How many of you grew up in a church like that? I see some of you did, so you know it is true.

Maybe you are thinking I am being critical of them right now. No, because I will tell you that I got blessed by those people at times, but in our culture right here we can give excellence to the Lord with the right motivation. And the bottom line is this, who cares? It is because He is the audience, so listen with an expectation that the words are going to remind you of some great truth. And if this song wasn't designed for you, or this sermon wasn't up your alley that is okay, because is it not all about you or me. There may have been just one person in this room who needed the words of that song. There may have been just one person in this room who needed one of the points in this sermon. There may have been just one person, and for that moment the Holy Spirit and God were aligning everything in the universe to tell them He loved them.

And you know what we ought to be doing when that happens? Not critiquing it, we ought to be applauding it. Thank you, Jesus, for loving the lost sheep, for loving the one out of the ninety-nine. Thank you, Jesus, for aligning this entire service so that one person might feel welcome and warm. And if you get to have a part in that praise the Lord. So when that person comes in that door and they have tattoos all over their neck or they come in with a new color of hair every week, or if they come in a beat up old Chevy - sorry all you Chevy owners, I just couldn't think of a crummy car right now. *(Laughter.)* If they come in a 2001 Acura - because that was my last car - okay, open their door as fast as you would if they were driving a Lamborghini. And we have some Lamborghinis out there by the way. And we have Mercedes and other fancy cars.

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I don't care, what I care about is when you walk in here you love Jesus, you want to hear from Him and you want to praise Him. Let us be that church. Let us be that church that James said when you walk in rich or poor, black or white, male or female, Jew or Gentile, educated or illiterate that we say '*Welcome, we are glad you are here.*'

So here is a correct approach to gathering: Number I – know your role in the assembly, God is the judge, not us; when you sit down open your heart to Him.

Second – focus on the right things – God, not others. And by the way Satan will test you on this. He tests me. I am going to let you in on a secret, sometimes things go wrong in a service and it ticks me off. And I may be sitting right over there trying not to show it. Sometimes words will disappear off of the screen, sometimes something will happen like there aren't enough greeters out front or someone misses a cue, or I don't like a song. Satan likes to get in me and work me up over that. May I encourage you to do what I need to do during those moments, and that is this, ask yourself '*why am I here?*' There are people all over this world that would love to be in a building for church. They would love to have their own copy of the Bible. They would love to have a simple song sung that is in their language. And I am going to sit here and be Mr. Critic or Mr. Yelp Reviewer. '*Oh no, Holy Spirit thump me when I do that.*'

Third – introduce unity and not division. May I challenge each of us individually that when there is someone in the church, someone visiting, someone who is hurting, someone who is broken for a moment, someone who is succumbing to sin, someone who is struggling whether it is the result of their own stupid decisions or not, that we rush to their side in love and support and encouragement. May we be that kind of church.

Fourth – worship is the purpose of our gathering, our assemblies, not judging, not assessing, not evaluating. And you know what, we do assess and evaluate. We want a program that is not distracting. If someone is repeatedly forgetting their words or not preparing properly, it is going to be dealt with, it is going to be addressed. If we are going to prepare for Monday morning we certainly want to prepare for Sunday morning. But we need to understand that sometimes things go wrong on Monday morning and they do on Sunday morning as well. Sometimes broken and hurting people who are angry and lashing out sit in these chairs, so what are we going to do to be Jesus in their lives during their moment of pain, during their moment of fear, during their moment of wickedness, during their moment when they need grace and mercy not judgment and condemnation?

Number II – use the standard of love and liberty when applying the law. Over and over and over again the Scripture says that by the tools you use to judge others, you also will be judged. So we want to use a big old scoop of love, liberty, grace, mercy and compassion. So how do we apply that? We need to be aware of our human tendency to judge by appearances. Be aware. It may not be what it looks to be, it may not be.

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By the way do you like my shirt this morning? It is a Ralph Lauren. I picked it because it is red but it has this little Ralph Lauren thing on it. I had a hard time choosing between this one and the Brooks Brothers shirt when I was buying it. And I almost went for a Saint Laurent that I had been looking at. But you know I was going through the rack looking at all these high priced shirts and I thought, you know at Good Will they are all four ninety-five. By the way I am not lying, because I did get this from Good Will because it was red. But you didn't know that until I just confessed it, did you? *'We are praying that preacher too much if he can wear Ralph Lauren every Sunday.'* See our tendency? We think it gives us value to wear Ralph Lauren; otherwise I would have said I got my shirt from Kohl's where if you pay full price you are an idiot. *(Laughter.)*

It doesn't matter what you wear; just get in church. Wear a t-shirt and shorts, I don't care. Wear a five thousand dollar suit, I don't care. Get your hair done at the fanciest salon in Cornelius, I don't care. Roll out of bed with your curlers still in, I don't care. I just want to see your face lifted up to the Lord worshipping Him. But be aware of our tendency to judge.

We need to look beyond personal impressions for the real needs and conditions to identify opportunities to speak and live truth to everyone. By the way I want to say this as well, rich people need Jesus too. Rich people are broken too. I am from a blue collar family. And I was the first white collar guy in my entire family's lineage probably for two hundred years. And there is a tendency sometimes when you are on that side of the railroad tracks to look down on the rich people. You know what – rich people need Jesus too. We happened to be in a rich area here, but by the way everyone here is rich by the world's standards. If you slept with a roof over your head last night you are rich. If you had a car to drive to church this morning you are rich.

And the reality is that all of us tend to draw these impressions that turn us into judges, and in doing so we are blinded from the opportunity that we could use to speak and live truth in other people's lives. And sometimes you don't need money to do that, you just need kindness, or patience, or tolerance.

Number III – the focus of our public and private assemblies need to be on God and His Word. So when you walked in here this morning everything is equal because we are here to hear the Word.

Number IV – proactively we put down the habit of critiquing and condemning and even commenting, and replace it with courtesy, compassion and consistently loving people where they are and helping them get to where they need to be. I am a critic, I will tell you that, and I have to fight this because if I don't I will let Satan use me as an agent of division between people that God has assigned for me to reach. And if I don't keep a cognizant sense of that I will slip into a critic's mode and not even be aware of it.

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The last thing is this – intentionally use the assembly of believers to create unity and exercise grace. Use the assembly of believers to create unity and exercise grace. When we gather from all over the county, when we gather let's come with a sense of expectation that we are here to worship the Lord and bless the family. Worship the Lord and bless the family. We bless the family by serving, we bless the family by giving, we bless the family by singing, we bless the family by greeting with a holy handshake or fist bump. Let us come that we might glorify God and bless the family.

You can do this at home, but it is not the same. You can skip church and still go to heaven, but it is not the same. God has called us to be community, to be an assembly, to be unified in love.

The preceding transcript was completed using raw audio recordings. As much as possible, it includes the actual words of the message with minor grammatical changes and editorial clarifications to provide context. Hebrew and Greek words are spelled using Google Translator and the actual spelling may be different in some cases.