

How Can I Say that I Love the Lord?

*How can I say that I love the Lord whom I've never, ever seen before;
and forget to say that I love the one whom I walk beside each and every day?
How can I look upon your face and ignore God's love? You I must embrace!
You're my brother; you're my sister; and I love you with the love of my Lord.¹*

This song, #388 in our *Voices Together hymnal*, was written by Michael McKay. It seems to me, though that it could have been written by James, the man given credit for writing today's scripture text.

I wonder what James – and Michael – would say to me if they could have heard my thoughts when I attended a concert at the Stiefel Theatre a few years ago. As I was being escorted to my seat, I caught my first glimpse of the person I would be seated next to, and I thought, “Oh.....!”

No, I didn't know the person. I had never seen him before, so any displeasure I experienced was based solely on his appearance. He looked like he was ill – very thin, sparse hair, wearing plaid flannel pajamas.

My ticket was for seat #3 in the row; he and his companion were sitting in seats 1 & 2. When the usher pointed out my seat to me, the man's companion said, “I'm sorry, we can't stand up, you'll need to get past with us sitting here.” Once again I thought, “Oh.....,” but I pasted on a smile, said the correct words, and squeezed past them to my seat.

As we waited for the concert to begin, I caught a whiff of ... something. I noticed the man check under his shirt, discreetly pull something out of the bag at his feet, whisper something to his companion, and then get up to leave. As he left, I caught an even bigger whiff of something you usually smell only in the bathroom, and I thought “Oh, no! Do I have to sit next to him all evening?”

I experienced a bit of compassion as I noticed how stooped over he was when he walked and how much energy it took for him to go up and down the stairs, but mostly my thoughts were about me and how his presence might ruin my concert experience.

If you're waiting for the “aha” moment in this story when my attitude suddenly shifts, I regret to inform you that you will be greatly disappointed. This story illustrates, just in case you didn't know it before, that even pastors are not perfect Christians – at least this one isn't. I never spoke to the man sitting next to me. I didn't find out his name. I didn't ask him if attending the concert was worth all the effort it obviously took him to leave his home and make his way to the balcony of the theater. I spent the evening with my head averted, my hand on my face, trying to breathe through only one side of my nose. As I left the theater, I thought, “Well, that wasn't as bad as it could have been.”

I can hear the writer of the book of James speaking forcefully to me right now, “My sister, do you with your thoughts and acts of disfavor toward this man really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” How can I say that I love the Lord whom I've never, ever seen before; and forget to think kindly of the person I sat beside at the concert that night?

Prayer: *God of the rich and the poor, God of the healthy and the sick, God of the respected and the disrespected, help us to be aware of our prejudices and judgment. Help us to show mercy to those whose lives are difficult. Help us to treat everyone with respect and kindness. May we love others as we love and care for ourselves. Amen.*

¹ Text and Music: V. Michael McKay, ©2001 Schaff Music Publishing LLC (admin. Capitol CMG Publishing)

The book of James, written by a half-brother of Jesus, is filled with short, challenging wisdom speeches containing an abundance of metaphors and one-liners.² It reminds us of the Old Testament book of Proverbs. It also frequently quotes the Sermon on the Mount found in the New Testament gospel of Matthew. James challenges Christians on how they should live, covering topics such as speech, favoritism, love, wealth, and hardship. When believers listen to and obey God's word, they show their love for God and for other people. Their actions match their words and are consistent with the values and beliefs received from Jesus. Their lives are made whole, complete, and perfect – the shalom I talked about last week.

The first thirteen verses of James 2 are summed up in verse one. *My brothers and sisters, when you show favoritism you deny the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been resurrected in glory.*³ It is incompatible with the Christian faith to discriminate against some while showing favor to others.

James supports this argument against favoritism in the next twelve verses. First,⁴ he describes a situation, one familiar to his readers. Two people arrive at a meeting, one obviously rich who is shown to a place of honor, the other obviously poor who is basically ignored.

He ends the story with a question that alludes to a rule found in Leviticus: *You must not act unjustly in a legal case. Do not show favoritism to the poor or deference to the great; you must judge your fellow Israelites fairly.*⁵ The aim of this particular instruction in Leviticus was to set conditions that would prevent one party from having the advantage over another in a courtroom. James broadens this to a church or community setting.

Next, he reminds them that God has chosen the poor.⁶ This theme is found throughout the entire Bible. It reminds Christians of Jesus' teachings in the Beatitudes.⁷ This doesn't mean that all the poor are good and all the wealthy are bad. However, God continually demonstrates special care and concern for those who are on the margins of society. Anyone who slights the poor, dishonors those whom God has honored. The preferences of God rather than the prejudices of society and culture are to be manifested in the community of God's people.

Third, James suggests that in life as we know it, the rich and powerful are the source of most oppression.⁸ The people in the church may be catering to the rich in the hope of receiving financial support or some kind of honor from them, when in fact, it's more likely these upper crust people would cause them more pain.

James ends his discourse against favoritism with his most compelling argument.⁹ Showing partiality would be a violation of the "royal law," the greatest commandment, rooted in Jewish tradition and championed by Jesus. *Love your neighbor as yourself.* James points out that showing partiality isn't just an unfortunate habit. It's an evil equivalent to breaking one of the Ten Commandments.

James also refers to the "royal law" as the "law of liberty."¹⁰ It doesn't operate by outward enforcement, but by an inner attitude and spontaneous love. True faith in Christ isn't compatible with

² The sermon draws from Week 2 of "Seeking Justice Together" from *Current*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](https://www.mennomedia.org/learn/james/); Robert Bowman, "Bible insight for the teacher," *Gather 'Round Multiage Teacher's Guide*, Summer 2012, MennoMedia, p. 88; Joanna Harader, *Leader*, Summer 2012, MennoMedia, p. 35; and The Bible Project, <https://bibleproject.com/learn/james/>.

³ James 2:1, *Common English Bible*

⁴ James 2:2-4

⁵ Leviticus 19:15, *Common English Bible*

⁶ James 2:5

⁷ Matthew 5:1-11

⁸ James 2:6-7

⁹ James 2:8-13

¹⁰ James 1:25, 2:12

partiality or favoritism. Rather, true faith is embodied in acts of compassion that spring directly from love, faith, and commitment.

Followers of Christ may want to reduce faith to a series of statements that they profess to believe, but for James, faith always results in actions consistent with the teachings of Jesus. Actions betray what you say you believe. So if a person says one thing but does something else, their actual faith is the faith that underlies their actions. The question is whether the faith that actually shapes their lives is faith in Jesus Christ or something else.

The teaching we receive in this text from James is timeless. It reminds us that faith and action are two sides of the same coin. But it also challenges us to reflect deeply on the favoritism, discrimination, and inequality that exist in our community and in our congregation. How might you or I fall into the trap of favoritism? How might our congregation fall into this trap? Who would cause you to think “Oh...” or “Oh, no!” if you had to sit beside them on Sunday morning?

Over the years, I’ve witnessed people warmly welcome everyone who has entered our building. I’ve tried to do the same. But I wonder how consistent our inner thoughts and attitudes are with our outward actions. It’s unlikely we would recreate the scenario described by James, ignoring or welcoming someone based on how they are dressed. When I was a child, some people would stay away from church because they didn’t have the proper clothes – suit and tie, creased pants, pretty dresses, and patent leather shoes. I imagine the person who would be the most uncomfortable in our sanctuary would be someone who is dressed too elegantly or formally.

But do we show favoritism in other ways? Are we as happy to see a homeless person as we are a young couple with a child or two? It’s a human tendency to show favor to people who can benefit us and neglect people who can’t, especially if we think they might be too needy. When someone new comes to church, do we anticipate what they could bring to our group rather than simply being glad they are here? James challenges us to receive everyone for the whole of who they are, not judged based on our limited vision and our limiting stereotypes.

Let’s face it, most of us are the “in-between” people – not the richest, not the poorest, not the most beautiful, not the ugliest. It might be helpful to realize that as we size up someone, they are sizing us up as well. As you or I discriminate, there are others who are discriminating against us. Perhaps if my goal is to discover the beauty in someone, that person will discover the beauty in me as well. This leads to mutual respect which is a key component in pursuing peace and seeking justice together.

A pastoral friend of mine related a visit to a parishioner in the hospital. The woman expressed delight that the nursing assistant caring for her was a former neighbor, a young woman who was a child when she last saw her. During the visit, the nursing assistant entered the room. My friend was surprised to see someone with green hair, multiple piercings, and tattoos peeking out from under her uniform. If they had encountered each other under different circumstances, it’s possible my friend would have tried to avoid meeting her. The parishioner introduced the two of them to each other. After the caregiver left the room, the woman continued to express her joy in seeing this neighborhood child, now a young adult, never mentioning the unique aspects of her appearance. She saw, loved, and accepted the person created in God’s image.

James challenges to refrain from choosing between rich and poor, young and old, first world and third world, free and imprisoned, sick and healthy, naked and clothed, hungry and fed. In the end, these are all false distinctions. What’s important is that we are all children of God. James reminds us that it’s incompatible with the Christian faith to discriminate against some while showing favor to others. We cannot say we love Jesus without loving the ones we walk beside every day. May God’s spirit give us what we need in order to live out this love.