

On Hell's Angels and Golf Shirts

Our passage this morning is about the judgments we make about each other based on clothing. There is the person with ***gold rings and fine clothing*** who comes into the Jerusalem mother church – the First Church of Jerusalem. It is the centre of the movement and there is money there. And there is a ***poor person in dirty clothes*** (James 2:2). The former is ushered respectfully to a good seat in the assembly and the other is motioned to take a seat on a bench in the back.

I suppose that what we wear is still a marker of status in some ways. But it is more like a marker of identity really. This week I needed to buy some new jeans so I went to Mark's Work Warehouse and bought two pair, but sadly I couldn't afford the ones with holes in them. How did that become a thing?!

The title of the message this morning, ***On Hell's Angels and Golf Shirts***, comes from an experience I had a couple of weeks ago.

I was having lunch with a friend at Jack's Pub on Bear Mountain. If you don't know, it is typical golf scene with everybody in golf attire – you know the vibe. As we walked in, in the centre of the dining area there were two men seated. One in a golf shirt and the other was a Hell's Angel. This guy had the jacket, tats, everything pierced, the whole package. A scary looking dude.

So many conflicting thoughts went through my head. The first was 'wow' this is unexpected – the two didn't fit together at all! I wanted to sit down and have lunch with them and see what was up. Maybe it was his son.

And the next thought was, 'Why would anyone surrender their personal identity to an organization like that?... why would you allow your individuality to be subsumed by an alternate identity?' And I'm sure the answer would have a lot of complexity – why any of us become what we become and all the factors at play.

And then I thought, 'Well, the guy in the golf shirt isn't really any different. He had assumed an identity too.' This is something we all do in our own way to *belong* where we feel we want to *belong*; to be *seen* the way we want to be *seen*. It's a pretty human thing and pretty normal. You are well-to-do boomer, you are hipster, you have holes in your jeans and a ratty Grateful Dead t-shirt.

In the Text

The question before us in the book of James today is this, 'What if that guy walked in our church on a Sunday morning?'

Not that I think it likely. And if you see this my friend I invite you to church next Sunday.¹

But 'how we relate to those who are just different' is the question.

¹ And there is an interesting question that we will be discussing in the months to come as we think about vision and direction. To what extent should any church attempt to reach outside its own demographic and socioeconomic profile? There is an argument to be made that in local ministry we tailor our particular church to a homogenous audience. Like reaching like, rather than attempting to change what we do to reach *another* audience to whom we are not currently relevant. ***Who are we trying to reach?***

Let me say a few words about the Book of James. It is one of my favourite books in the NT.²

James is one of the founders of the Jerusalem church, the mother church of all churches. He was possibly the brother of Jesus (*the Lord's brother* Gal 1:19),³ although it doesn't seem that he was a follower while Jesus was alive (there is no doubt an interesting story there). And he and Paul crossed swords throughout the early days of the Christian church generally over Paul's outreach to the Gentiles and specifically over two items. Do you remember from last week what the two main markers of Jewish identity were at the time of the NT? Circumcision and food.⁴

When Paul went to Jerusalem he met with James, Peter and John, there was, what Acts calls, "no small dissention and debate" (15:2). Eventually the mother church agreed that Gentiles wouldn't have to be circumcised but did ask them to abstain from food offered to idols and improperly butchered meat (Acts 15:19-20).

On this matter of showing deference to the rich in church James says:

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (James 2:8-9)

I find it interesting that James calls the Golden Rule, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*", the "royal law" (Lev 19:18). The word "royal" only occurs twice in the NT. Here and in 1 Peter where he says that we all are a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9).⁵

This is God's command to us. It is the *royal* command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The important word in our passage is "partiality." ***But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.***

The word partiality is based on the Greek word for "face" – *prosōpon*. The Greek dictionary tells us that the definition of partiality in this context is deference based on "external things, appearance - the opposite meaning is *kardia*, heart."

The Book of Samuel taught us that God looks on the heart, not on the face, not on the beauty or stature of Saul or the handsomeness of Absalom or Adonijah. God does not show partiality – that is, God does

² Both James and Hebrews are outliers in the NT because they retain quite a Jewish perspective on Christian spirituality and theology. The NT is a collection of writings (gospels, Pauline literature, the others books, Peter, James, Hebrews and Revelation, etc.) that have different voices, different ways of conceiving of Christian faith and practice, but one common, central truth: the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

³ There are three theories about the identity of the James to whom this book is attributed. One is that he was the Lord's younger brother by Mary (Mark 6:3), some say he was an older foster brother and others say James was a cousin. The plain sense of the Gospel of Mark is that James was Jesus' biological brother. But whether that person is the author of the NT book is debated, and perhaps the person who authored it presented it under the auspices of the august pillar of the Jerusalem church, whomever he might have been.

⁴ It seems that James didn't get the memo about Jesus declaring "all foods clean" as we learned last week in Mark 7. Or, he just understood what Jesus was saying about food in a different way than the author of Mark. In Acts this difference of opinion really is laid out. See Gal 2:1-10 about the Jerusalem Conference where Paul and James had their difference of opinion.

⁵ Recall that the Two Tables of the Law as quoted by Jesus are combining of two OT passages: Deut 6:4 and Lev 19:18. They are a reference to the first commandment – no other gods before me (Ex 20:2), stated positively in Deut 6:4 (the *Shema* in Jewish tradition) and the last six commandments, which deal with human relations.

not see us based on appearance.⁶ Just think what this teaches you about positive body image. I may be 20 pounds overweight from covid, but fortunately it doesn't change God's love for me.

That is why the Bible goes to the trouble to always tell us that these flawed rulers in Samuel were handsome. Because its meaningless, God saw right through the value we place on physical appearance to the true value of the soul.

This fact that God does not show partiality is found not just in the OT but also in the gospels, in Acts, in Paul and now here in James. The Bible says it over and over again in different settings and centuries. This is expressive of a ***biblical theme***.

So Acts 10:34, in Peter's response when the Holy Spirit fell upon the family of Cornelius, the first gentiles to receive Christ: ***I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.***

Romans 2:10-11 speaking of Greeks and Jews in the age to come, ***everyone who does right will have glory and honor and peace... For God shows no partiality.***

When it comes to the rich entering the assemble it is a simple and true lesson to absorb, don't show favoritism based on appearances.

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? (James 2:1)

But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors (James 2:9).

From the Text

Where do we locate our value as persons? Is it in traditional values of a society where everyone believed in God and we could agree on what was right and wrong – in the days of my parents or grandparents? That has now passed away.



⁶ See for example Luke 20:21; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; Galatians 2:6; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25; 1 Timothy 5:21 and James 2:1.

Do you locate your value in the degree of self-fulfilment you have achieved (which is more of a boomer thing)? Or maybe you are young and base your value on being true to your identity. 'It isn't what anyone else believes but what I consider true within myself.'

Today we have all of these **external appearances** that place us in a category. I'm a boomer, a hipster, I'm a Hell's Angel, I'm Gen Z, a millennial, I'm artsy, I'm a doctor, I'm a teacher, I'm rich, I'm poor.

There is only one true value on which we can base our soul – that we are children of a loving God.

If you base your understanding of your value on *that* you are freed from the performance anxiety that arises with placing our value in externals. The shared values of yesteryear have disappeared from society and you grieve the changes that are in play in society. You never got the sailboat and you are wondering how you will ever retire. You finally found your "true identity" and found that your life was emptier than ever. More on this in the months to come.

Our status as a child of God is not a performative status – it is not earned. It is founded on the grace of a loving God. I'm loved by God today as perfectly as I will be in a thousand, nay, ten thousand years.

Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes [lit. the beauty of its face] (James 1:9-11).

Those who understand their value in terms of external appearances are like that flower in chapter 1 of James... like that beauty ***they will wither away.***

So back to my Hell's Angel and golfer. If 20 golf shirts show up in church next week are we going to show partiality? What if 20 choppers roll into the church parking lot next week? Or someone of a different political orientation, or non-traditional gender identity, of different vaccination status comes into our church next week - will we show partiality? A challenging question.

It may not be easy, but the royal command is that we shall not judge, we won't show ***partiality***. We will not, as James 2:9 puts it so severely, ***show partiality and so commit sin and be convicted by the law as transgressors.***

We will strive to welcome ***all*** as God's children.⁷

Because God sees all these folks as His children. But all these people will have to wear a mask. :) Who is going to handle the bikers on that?

Our faith in God and our understanding of our true identity in God must guide us, and may the power of the Holy Spirit empower us to do so. Thanks be to God.

⁷ Our community is a place of many different kinds of people and backgrounds. But what we share is the journey. I loved that part of Jimmy's text two weeks about the dedication of the temple where Solomon prayed... foreigners. ***Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, come for a distant land... then hear in heaven... so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel...*** (1 Kings 8:41-43)