

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
8 September 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost / Gathering Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***“Playing Favorites”***

*Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD*

### ***James 2:1-10; 14-17***

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

*NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.*

James does not mince words, does he!? This text practically preaches itself: *“My siblings,”* James writes to his church, *“do not claim the faith of Christ while showing partiality...if you show partiality, you sin.”* (James 2:1, 9b).

Now I know what you are thinking, Larry Dávila! *“Surely, James is not talking about football, right? Clearly supporting the Seahawks is a sin...we’re supposed to show partiality for the Broncos and pray for their win today!”* 😊

And others of you are surely thinking: *“James can’t be talking about politics? I mean, it’s Presidential Election Season; our democracy demands that we get out and vote. And inevitably voting is showing partiality to the candidate that reflects our values, right?”*

Well, let’s be clear. No James is not talking about those things. Supporting the Broncos over the Seahawks is a preference, not a partiality—it’s just football, after all! And politics, well that’s a bit more serious, but voting for your Presidential Candidate of Choice is not really, showing partiality, it’s *endorsement*—putting your full support into someone who you trust to act and make decisions in the best interest of our country.

In truth, about those such things, I think James would say, *“Root for whoever you want on the field and definitely put your faith into action and vote for the candidate that reflects your values, BUT...”* he would add, *“Should Coach Sean Payton or Coach Mike Macdonald or Former President Donald Trump or Vice President Kamala Harris walk into our church today, treat them all without partiality. Invite them to sit with us in the*

best seats, and give them a welcome bag, introduce them to others in our community and make them feel at home.

Of course, this is easier to do with those folks we respect and idolize perhaps. It's near impossible to do with those we despise. But, what about those folks about whom we surmise? You know the ones who we don't really know but who make assumptions about based on their appearance? Those who are poor or out of place, those who do not look like us, think like us, act like us?

This is James' thought experiment for us today. To truly think about how we treat people who are vastly different than us. And, I want to present it to you again in a way that perhaps hits closer to home.

Imagine someone you have seen at Calvary recently, who perhaps made you a bit uncomfortable. Someone whose clothes were rumpled and a bit out of order, someone who perhaps had a bit of a body order, someone who was carrying a few bags, someone who was maybe not looking you in the eye or who was functioning at a different social engagement level than you're

used to (maybe because of sheer lack of sleep or hunger—lack of blood sugar!). Where did you see this person? Where they resting or sleeping on our property? Did they wander in worship? Did they come into Fellowship Hall for a cup of coffee during Fellowship Hour?

Do you have such a person in your mind's eye? Now, I want to invite you to tap into how you felt when you saw them. Were you excited to see them? Eager to connect with them? Or were you eager to walk the other way, or walk by quickly, or perhaps avoid them altogether? If you talked with them, what details did you learn about their life? What commonalities did you discover? Or as you spoke with them were you just thinking, I need to find a pastor or staff member or usher and let them know this person needs some help? Did you experience fear or inconvenience? Were you uncomfortable at all? And here's the real modern-day James question for us (perhaps more so than the poor/rich divide he describes with clothing): Did you see this person as someone here for ONE time, perhaps needing help and then they'll move on OR did you view them and see them as a potential long-term

congregant in our community,  
wondering how their  
gifts/skills/life  
experience/personality/spiritual  
journey would enhance our  
congregation?

Like an episode in the reality  
TV show, *Undercover Boss*—  
in which a person in upper-  
management at a major business  
goes undercover as an entry-  
level employee to discover if  
what is really happening at the  
ground level aligns with the  
company's stated values, and  
often finding some faults and  
fractures in that system—James  
is taking us undercover  
today...*in our own church*. He's  
not looking at what our  
beautiful new brochures say, or  
what our sign out front  
proclaims, that we are "*Open to  
All, Closed to None*." No, James  
is examining our *behavior*, not  
our *beliefs*. And as he walks  
around incognito in our midst  
this is what he finds: we play  
favorites.

We play favorites. It's as plain  
as day. We favor those who  
look like us and think like us  
and worship like us and engage  
like us (or already kind of know  
our 'rules'), and we potentially  
ignore and treat differently those  
who are different, those who  
make us uncomfortable, those

who inconvenience us (or who  
we 'think' will be an  
inconvenience to us.)

We don't like to admit that this  
is true, but in order to learn why  
we do it and figure out how we  
can change our behavior, we  
first have to admit that we do  
treat people differently.

And if you do not play favorites,  
well then Thanks be to God! I  
hope you'll continue to teach  
and mentor me, because as a  
pastor, perhaps especially as a  
pastor, I struggle with this.  
Sometimes I look at person that  
might appear poor or homeless  
and I see them for *what they  
might need from me*, or perhaps  
view them as simply someone  
who might be asking me for  
something that I cannot give or  
am not willing to give. OR,  
sometimes I see such persons  
*for what they might do to me*. I  
worry about my safety even  
without probable cause to be  
worried. But instead of  
approaching them in faith, I see  
them through the lens of fear.

I do not like this about my  
behavior because it does not  
reflect my beliefs, but I also  
have to admit that if this is the  
reaction that sometimes wells up  
in me, then I still have some  
work to do on what I truly

believe, and where my conscious or unconscious bias is. And if this is all true for me, I suspect it might be true for you too.

So, what we do?

Well, James says, we remember what church IS. We are a Christ-like community that experiences and shares God's love. To be like Christ is NOT to be around people we like or who make us comfortable or who are even convenient for us to be around. That might occasionally happen. But when we read the gospels and dive into Jesus' ministry, we see that he's always drawing near to those who make society uncomfortable or do not conform to societal norms or political prestige or royal riches. To be Christ-like is to draw near to those to whom the world has cast aside, those who challenge our comfort and convenience. Put simply, in James' words: To be Christ-like is to pull up a chair for the poor, rather than showing partiality to the rich.

Why? Because Jesus cares deeply about the poor.

In his first year in seminary, Jim Wallis and his friends did a thorough study to find every verse in the Bible that deals with the poor and social injustice. They came up with thousands, in the first three Gospels, one out of ten verses spoke about the poor or social justice, and in Luke's Gospel, it was one out of seven! One of them found an old bible and cut out every single biblical text about the poor. Much of the Psalms and the Prophets disappeared. The Bible literally would not hold together without those passages.<sup>1</sup> And we cannot hold ourselves together as a community without the people about whom those passages speak. We are empty of the heart of God without them.

To follow Jesus is to not show partiality, to not play favorites. To follow Jesus is to, in fact, be *partial* to the poor, for they are the ones, James says, that reveal something of God's love and kin-dom to us in ways that others do not (James 2:5).

And then, to top it all off: here's the real gut punch for those of us who prefer our Christianity to

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Wallis, *God's Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005) 212-214 as referenced in Peter Rhea Jones, "James 2:1-10 (11-13), 14-17: Homiletical Perspective," eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor,

*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2009, pg 43.

be comfortable and convenient more-so than Christ-like. James asks: *“What good is it, my siblings, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works?”* (James 2:14)

Whew. Honestly, I couldn't have picked a better scripture passage if I tried. The Spirit is certainly speaking through this assigned text today from Revised Common Lectionary. What a powerful question to kick off our theme for the year—*Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD.*<sup>2</sup>

What *good* is it to have faith without works? That is, what is the point of having a set of beliefs that we claim spiritually or intellectually IF those beliefs do not lay claim on how we actually behave, or how we live our lives?

It's No Good, James says: *“Faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead,”* (James 2:17). Or as the late pastor Eugene Peterson paraphrases it in The Message: *“Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?”* (James 2:17, The Message).

It's not so obvious, actually. Or maybe it IS really obvious, but we prefer to stay oblivious to the poverty and the broken systems we live within and contribute to RATHER than face the obvious: which is the alarming and disheartening facts of poverty, unemployment, and homelessness in our country.

The United States is the richest country in the world. We have means, money, and smarts. And yet, even still, 11.5% of Americans (at a minimum) are living in poverty. That's more than 1 in 10. (Some estimates are much higher, but it equals about 37.9 million people—and that's an improvement from recent years!) Among 26 developed nations, the U.S. has “far and away the highest overall poverty rate, and this is true for child poverty as well.”<sup>3</sup>

Those are our statistics and reality today, and it simply amplifies the gospel truth of what James was saying way back then: Praying for the poor means nothing if we are not also putting food on tables, clothes on bodies, roofs over heads, education and employment within reach, and making

<sup>2</sup> Theme introduction was given earlier in the service, and is copied at the end of the sermon.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics accessed at <https://confrontingpoverty.org/poverty-facts-and->

[myths/americas-poor-are-worse-off-than-elsewhere/](https://myths.americas-poor-are-worse-off-than-elsewhere/) on September 8, 2024.

healthcare affordable and accessible. We often read scriptures like this and nod our heads in agreement and point to all the ways that we do seek to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and house the unhoused, —and this is not to discount those efforts, but even with those—how often do we reflect and ask if what we are doing is enough—if what we are doing is helping people THRIVE, not just survive—if what we are doing is even what the people we think we are helping *want us to be doing*—or if what we are doing is something that might be best done with a partner non-profit who specializes in helping people out of poverty in lasting ways?

And don't get me wrong. James is not saying do not pray. In fact, according to church traditions, James had the nickname “Old Camel Knees” because of thick calluses built up on his knees from many years of determined prayer.<sup>4</sup> Prayer and reflection, so often they are the practices that lead us to know what we value and believe. Prayer is foundational to James' faith. And so is practice.

To use our spiritual practice touchstones for this month as an example: James saw his people taking time “**to center**” a lot in worship and in prayer but they were not taking the same amount of time or intention “**to connect**” with the poor in their midst and to honor their inherit worth and goodness.

This is why, James says—in no uncertain terms—that Playing Favorites is Fatal to Faith. He literally says if we do not treat all people the same way, whether it's treating the poor as well as the rich, OR for some people, they're growth point is to treat and value the rich as well as the poor...if we play favorites, we kill faith, he says. Faith cannot survive favoritism. Faith dies in the grip of our false assumptions about one another. Faith collapses under class systems that creates “castes” of ‘haves’ and ‘have nots.’ Faith is extinguished when we distinguish who is worthy and who is not. Faith cannot survive our judgments about one another; Faith withers when we focus on fear. Faith needs more than “I believe” to survive; it needs “We act.” Like a

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson, “The Introduction to James” in *The Message* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress) 2002, pg 1669.

marriage, Faith needs a real commitment with actions that back it up; it's not just a thought experiment or a touchy-feely feeling.

This makes a lot of sense in light of our theme. When we do not love our neighbor as ourself or when we do not love our neighbor as God loves them, we feel the flimsiness of our faith. We don't feel good inside. When you have that feeling of uneasiness when you see someone who is poor or perhaps experiencing homeless or who is different than you...that feeling is a signal! It's a signal that that person is not Thriving in Goodness, and neither are you because you don't know how to connect with them, something is missing in that relationality from created good human to created good human. And when we are not *Thriving in Goodness*, we certainly aren't helping others thrive in goodness either.

And when we feel that uneasy or uncomfortable feeling and don't know what to do: perhaps we start with our Touchstones. Like many things in life...in the moments where we feel most uncomfortable, those are the moments we need to lean in. Take a deep breath and **Center**

—name this person as a Beloved Child of God; realize what we are feeling is Our Stuff not Their Stuff, and then exhale through our fear and **Connect**. Lean in. Talk. Converse. Like you would with anyone. People are people. Sure, there might be a rare occasion where someone makes a threat or perhaps puts you in danger, and you know when you must walk away. But those are rare. The exception. Do not let the news shape your faith into something that is only recognizable as Fear. When we consume fear on the news, we get consumed by it in real life. What if we spent that amount of time consuming all the Scriptures that Jim Wallis and his friends revealed were about loving the poor and helping the marginalized? What would that diet do our fear, and, more importantly, our faith?

For example, we've normalized driving past the person on the corner, avoiding eye contact. Eye contact and a smile through a closed, locked window is the safest way you can give dignity to someone. Rolling down a window and saying hello is even better. Giving someone the gift of your attention and care is valuable. Sure, sometimes it's helpful to give money. All times, it's meaningful to give

dignity and acknowledgement. If that person on the street with the sign was your son or daughter or brother or uncle or mom, you'd think differently about them. You would know their backstory and the choices they've made, and even if frustrated by their choices or in disagreement with their life path, you would know they are a human, just like you. They are not Untouchable. They are the very image of God in your midst.

And that is just it, Calvary. That's the key for *how* to play favorites if we're gonna. It's not that we have to stop playing favorites, it's that we just have to play favorites like God does. And God favors everyone. No exceptions.

Today James give us 3 Steps to Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD. To see as God sees—that is our invitation; every person is beloved and created in Goodness. To love as Jesus loves—that is our action. To love in tangible ways that meet needs and center the poor in our politics. And finally, to use our gifts as the Spirit has given them to us to use—that is

our empowerment. To know we CAN make a difference and effect change.

And it all starts by viewing people as a reflection of God's image, by seeing their Goodness as we see our own.

As New Testament scholar Stephen Patterson says, "*History reminds us again and again that it has always been easier to believe in miracles, in virgin births and atoning death, in resurrected bodies and heavenly journeys home, than something so simple and basic as human solidarity. Here, then, is an episode of our history from a time long past, when foreigners were slaughtered, captives sold as slave, and women kept in their place, when a few imaginative, inspired people dared to declare solidarity between natives and foreigners, free born and slaves, men and women, through a ceremony and a creed....that first, unbelievable creed...*"<sup>5</sup> that apostles like Paul and James staked their lives on: that ALL people are Beloved by God, and ALL people need our favor.

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed*, p. 7 as referenced in Diana Butler Bass' substack, "Sunday Musings: Is it not the rich who oppress you?" *The*

*Cottage* (8 Sept. 2024), accessed on Sept. 8, 2024 via email.

Diana Butler Bass says their gospel message was “Inescapably, completely political. Miraculous, too. Because if you think about it — what could be *more* miraculous than a community that doesn’t worship the rich, privilege the elite, and ignore the poor?...Jesus’ best miracles were the political ones. Like inspiring a group of poor, marginal Jews and outcasts to resist Rome by challenging Caesar and the empire. Like the miracle of the first Christians in the story of Acts [sharing all they had in common]. Like the miracle recited in the baptismal creed by the earliest converts [that we are ONE in Christ].

....

And [like] the miracles that James says we [can] accomplish with our works.”<sup>6</sup>

You see, Playing Favorites, doesn’t have to be fatal for faith, it can be *fruitful* IF we favor who God favors. And when we do, WILL Thrive in Goodness for Good and for GOOD.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Butler bass, *ibid.*

Today I'm excited to take a moment to explain our theme for the year: **Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD.**

Jesus says, *“The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they might have abundant life—indeed, so that they might live life to the fullest,”* (John 10:10, CEB).

We can all think of the systemic forces in our world that steal, kill, and destroy. They are plentiful and fill our 24/7 news cycles. There are also smaller habits and decisions we make every day that steal our time, kill our joy, and destroy our ability to cultivate inner peace. Yet, Jesus calls us to a fuller life, and a more abundant way of sharing our lives with others. And his invitation to have abundant life is rooted in our original goodness.

In the first creation story in Genesis, God repeatedly calls creation “good” (*tov* in Hebrew). *Tov* or goodness, encompasses beauty, life-giving qualities, and moral goodness...and in Hebrew, *Tov* is not about the perfection of a person. It is about the thriving wellness of the relationship *between* things or people.

So when humanity is created, God calls us *tov meod* (in Hebrew), which means “very good” or, “forcefully, abundantly, overflowing good.” This unique designation, given only to humans, is a powerful blessing.

While we can't change the fact that our goodness is part of who we are...we can cover it up or allow it to wither away by anxiety, stress, negative self-talk, selfish actions, making poor choices, and more...and certainly there are forces in the world that will try to steal and destroy our goodness...**BUT**...we can also cultivate our *tov meod* (our goodness), until we thrive with abundance...we do this by how we see beauty in the world, how we respect the life-giving qualities of all people and creatures, and by how we make ethical and just choices—loving God and loving others as we love ourselves. When we do these sorts of things, we are tethering ourselves to our *tov meod*, that is—our forcefully good nature—and we begin to heal and thrive within ourselves and within and among all of creation.

So, as we follow Jesus and dwell within our created goodness we not only make good choices, we see the good in others and we actually do real, tangible “good” for the world.

AND... when we are able to thrive in our goodness it is for the Good of the world “here and now,” AND it creates the kin-dom of God which eradicates all pain, injustice, evil, and sin for *GOOD* (forever). That is the eternal reality for which we work, beginning with the “here and now” reality in which we live. For Good for GOOD.

That’s our theological and scriptural basis for our theme. But what does this look like in the real world? Well, *Thriving in Goodness* is not about saying “life is good all the time.” It’s about remaining tethered to our original created goodness so that, even in difficult moments, we are strongly anchored to our Creator and our created purpose in the world. We’re grounded. And in order to stay grounded or in touch with our goodness, we need help. We need touchstones or tethers because, quite frankly, there is just so much other “stuff” in life – other forces and voices that are spewing anything but ‘goodness’ into the world and into our lives. If we’re not intentional, it’s easy to get pulled in every direction BUT the direction of God’s goodness and love.

The main overarching practice we’re focusing on all year is telling and re-telling ourselves the story of our goodness and looking for it on our story, the story of our church, the stories of others, and yes the stories of scripture. For worship texts this year, we’re returning to the Revised Common Lectionary, and we’ll use these assigned scripture texts each week to answer the question: **Where do we see thriving in goodness in this passage?** Or a lack of thriving, which might serve as a challenge or an invitation for our lives?

In addition, we’re going to focus on 9 pairs of spiritual practices which we’re calling “touchstones” to help us stay connected to our goodness so that we can thrive.

The 18 touchstones are pictured on the cover of your order of worship, they are displayed in the narthex cabinets...and each pair of words is in the same color family to remind us they are somehow connected to each other:



First half of Gathering: **Center & Connect**

Second half of Gathering: **Release & Receive**  
 Stewardship Season: **Remember & Dream**  
 Advent: **Wait & Cultivate**  
 Epiphany/New Year: **Hold Fast & Reorient**  
 Epiphany, Second part: **Reflect & Respond**  
 Lent: **Acknowledge & Absolve**  
 End of Lent into Easter: **Lament & Rejoice**  
 Eastertide up to Pentecost: **Bless & Challenge**

These 18 touchstones are not the end all be all of spiritual practices...they are simply 9 pairs of practices that we identified as things we already do in our Sunday worship services. And as we spend a month on each focus pair, you'll see symbols in your order of worship that indicate that is a time when we are engaging with that touchstone. It's just a suggestion, you might engage with them in other ways.

We think these are not just practices that can be experienced in formal worship services; we think they are essential in our everyday normal lives if we want to really stay connected to our goodness and thrive. Because of that, you'll hear from different people in worship each week as they speak to what that season's pairing of words means to them, and you'll also receive focus cards for the touchstones, so that by the end of the year you'll have a set of 18 cards that speak to these 18 practices.

And today...you're receiving prayer beads with these 18 colors (as well as some grey/white spacers in between)...so that you can utilize the prayer beads a means of becoming familiar with the words and colors. The prayer beads come with instructions of how you might use them. And if you don't live locally just email [cbc@calvarydenver.org](mailto:cbc@calvarydenver.org) and we'll send you a set!

Our hope is that not just at Calvary on Sundays, but whenever you need to be reminded of your goodness, you'll be learning throughout the year how to ask yourself what you need in that given moment. For example, if we start to feel down on ourselves, we might say, what do I need in this moment? To sit and focus and CENTER myself in God? OR, do I need to pick up the phone or text a friend and CONNECT with someone else?

Each new moment is an opportunity to begin again, to become grounded, to remain tethered to goodness, to find a new way to thrive.

So in summary: When we thrive in the midst of our goodness, we 1) create Good within ourselves and in the world *in the here and now*, **and** 2) we co-create the kin-dom of God for GOOD (the ultimate reality when all is finally and forever well with the world—when justice, mercy, and peace flow and exist for all....for GOOD.

Calvary, may we be a community *Thriving in Goodness* for Good and for GOOD. To that end, we begin with our first *Thriving in Goodness* moment of the year, by hearing from David Farwig on how he understands the words CENTER and CONNECT as practices in his life.