

THE COMPASS

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EveryDay Matters, Part 3

Heart Attacks for the Rich and Famous

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When you spend almost half a century in church, as I have, you detect certain patterns. Certain passages of Scripture get preached on over and over again.

This fall we're hop-skip-jumping through the book of James, one of the most practical guidebooks for everyday life in the whole Bible, and this evening we come to James chapter 2 — which is one of those passages that I have heard talked about (I don't want to exaggerate) 20 million times.

When I read or hear this passage of Scripture, I tend to go on auto-pilot — and not only because it's so familiar, but also because the subject seems so basic, so obvious, so simple: I'm like, Duh! What's the big deal? I get it; let's move onto something challenging.

But what I've discovered in my study of this passage is that it's not simple, and it's not something to be casual about: it's urgently important.

So I'm going to read this passage to you — it will about two minutes — and this will give you an opportunity to roll your eyes and look at your watch and yawn.

And then, to demonstrate what's really at stake here, I'm going to show you a heart attack.

Ready?

James 2:

1 My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.

2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in.

3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet,"

4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

5 Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

6 But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?

7 Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," [he's talking about the Golden Rule, found in Leviticus 19:18] you are

doing right.

9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

11 For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” [He’s quoting two of the Ten Commandments, from Exodus 20:13, 14.] If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,

13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

About a week before I began preparing this talk, our friend Warner Lewis had his heart attack.

And then coincidentally, the very morning that I actually began writing this message, former President Bill Clinton was having quadruple-bypass surgery.

So I sort of had NPR doing my research for me! They were explaining all these medical procedures and reporting all these medical details....

So let me show you how a heart attack happens.

Here’s a blood vessel; it’s designed to funnel blood cells to the heart.

This blood vessel was designed by God to last a lifetime.

When I sit down to a healthy meal, I am nourishing my blood vessels.

I’m keeping them strong and flexible and smooth on the inside, so the blood cells can flow right on through.

As I eat well, as I exercise adequately, as I live the life that God designed me to live, this blood vessel stays wide open.

It does its job brilliantly.

But then there’s my thing for McDonald’s hamburgers.

I know it’s not fashionable these days to love McDonald’s hamburgers, but I do.

I have to decide every day, as I drive past McDonald’s, whether to cave in to my craving, or drive on by.

I sense that thousands and thousands of McDonald’s hamburgers are NOT part of God’s design for my life — and sure enough, over time, all those McDonald’s hamburgers leave a deposit on the inner walls of my blood vessels, my arteries.

Or maybe I have a thing for pie. I eat too much pie, and it leaves a deposit on the inner walls of my arteries.

Or let’s say I have a thing for heavy cream.

Or cigarettes. Or salt. Saturated fats.

The skin of fried chicken! Yes!

Each time I indulge in something my body is not designed for, that indulgence leaves a bit of a deposit somewhere in my arteries.

A little cholesterol, like a bit of glue, sticks to the wall of the artery.

A little rough spot. A little build-up. A little place that might trip up a blood cell.

I can't see it. I can't feel it. I don't sense what's happening to me.
 My blood cells are still flowing down the pipe.
 My heart is still getting all the blood it needs.
 No problem.

On the day they announced that Bill Clinton was going to have heart surgery, the cardiologist they interviewed on NPR explained why this gradual build-up process doesn't produce a gradual heart problem — why so many people have sudden heart attacks instead of, say, gradual heart complaints.

He said there's a huge difference between 80% blockage and 85% blockage. As the artery gradually narrows, blood cells have to squeeze through a smaller and smaller space.

Eventually, at some point, one blood cell happens to snag on a bit of cholesterol, left there by a McDonald's quarter-pounder back in February, and another blood cell coming along behind it is momentarily trapped — and before it can roll around the obstacles, another blood cell bumps it from behind, and before you know it, there's a pile-up.

Suddenly, where the blood was flowing pretty freely a few seconds before, now there's a blood clot — little or nothing getting through — and the clot is growing every second, and millions of blood cells crash into it from behind.

In seconds, some portion of my heart — instead of getting more or less enough blood — is getting none.

No blood, no fuel, no capacity to pump.
 Like someone with a plastic bag tied over his head.
 That part of the heart just shuts down.

When James writes to his friends about showing favoritism, he knows that it's not something they're going to be inclined to take seriously.

It doesn't seem all that serious.

It's something people do all the time, we do it so automatically we hardly realize it.

And in fact, let's face it, it actually seems logical in a way.

A guy drives up to The Compass on a Thursday night in a Ferrari, I have a certain automatic impression of him.

I want to get to know the guy.

I want to see if he'd like to stay.

I want to know if there's anything I can do for him.

I want to be sure I introduce him to ... the offering box in the back!

On the other hand, if a guy trudges in here smelling like he just walked from the bus stop at 32nd & Greenway, I have a certain automatic impression of him too.

It's not naturally a "want to get to know you" response.

It's not naturally a "see if you'd like to stay" response.

It's not naturally a "what can I do for him" response.

If anything, it might be a "keep this guy away from the offering box" response — so nothing disappears.

James was not just talking theory here; he was dealing with a common, real-life

situation.

In those days, as we've studied before, there were masters and there were slaves. And under Christianity, for the first time, masters and slaves were going to church together. Worshiping together. Equal before God.

You could easily have a wealthy guy walk in — and in the original text, he's probably wearing a BUNCH of flashy jewelry, not just one gold ring — and in many cases, historians believe, slaves and peasants had no choice but to attend church in their work clothes.

You could hardly blame them for having a hostess at the door, asking, "Would you like to be seated in stinking or non-stinking?"

In James's day, there were places of honor in the seating plan.

It was something like in a fancy theatre today, where you look up and you see the box seats.

This is where the governor gets to sit, or some other VIP.

In James's day, they didn't actually have box seats, I don't think; but they may have had preferred seating.

And certainly the preferred guests got to sit down, the less preferred guests got to stand up, or sit on the floor.

We may get a taste of this here at The Compass on Thanksgiving Eve — we'll only have one service that week, and it's going to be a mini-concert by Deb Mitchell, so I think we're going to have a packed house, literally.

We'll see how many of our Compass family are willing to give up their chairs for visitors ... Deb Mitchell groupies, people from other churches who remember her from when she lived here in Arizona, etc., etc.

Maybe we could print up little James 2:3 cards to give people that night, maybe in three different colors, and they say "**Here's a good seat for you**" or "**You stand there**" or "**Sit on the floor by my feet.**"

Just a thought. Anyway...

What James is getting at is our natural inclination to assign value to wealth, and a lack of value to a lack of wealth.

In our culture, it may not be flashy jewelry or designer clothes; it may be what part of town you live in, or the title you hold.

In any case, we focus tremendous energy on acquiring possessions, and obtaining a comfortable lifestyle, and securing social status — and our instinctive response to someone who appears to be ahead of us in this quest is:

If I can kind of attach myself to this person, I can get in the stream with him. Maybe I can get ahead too. Maybe I can gain some of this person's pleasure or status.

Now in James's day, as we can see from his strong language, the rich were typically exploiting people, suing people, and trashing Christian believers.

So James was horrified to see his friends apparently so intent on getting ahead in society that they would suck up to these bad guys.

He's waving his hands and saying, Wait! Stop! What's important in life?

He reminds them in verse 5 that God has **chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him.**

He's saying someone who's poor naturally has to depend more on God.

A poor person has a life situation that leads him to learn to trust God, in a very real and practical way, more than a rich person does.

A rich person has his money, so he has to take something of an intellectual leap to place his faith in God.

And this makes it harder for a rich person to — James uses the term — “inherit the kingdom”: in other words, come to the place of truly making Christ the king of his life, the master of his decision-making process.

James is saying, Don’t devote yourself to trying to be like the rich guys. They have challenges on a spiritual level that you don’t want!

Paul says in **1 Timothy 6:9** **People who want to get rich fall into ... a trap.**

And what’s the outcome if we do this stuff? If I show favoritism, what’s the side-effect? Track with me here, because the phrase James uses to explain this is really difficult to translate:

In verse 4 he says **have you not discriminated among yourselves?**

This just does not communicate the original phrase that James wrote, in Greek.

The word “discriminated” here is *diakrino*. It’s impossible to translate into a single word in our English language.

It shows up over and over in the ancient literature, it’s found all through the New Testament, and it’s almost never translated as the same word twice.

But he’s not talking about discrimination here the way we think of discrimination.

In fact, he’s not talking about wrongdoing itself — showing special attention to the man wearing the rings and the Armani suit.

He’s talking about what happens as a side effect of that wrongdoing.

Diakrino is about dissension, contention. It about creating division.

Making two parts that were the same, different — or taking something that was whole, and leaving it only partial.

It’s a conflicted word — in one place it’s actually translated “stagger.”

Here’s what we don’t realize:

By showing favoritism we cut off part of ourselves.

We separate part of ourselves.

Christ has made us one body — but when I decide who is “worthy” and who’s not, I am dissecting my own flesh.

It’s almost literally cutting off my nose to spite my face.

And the word translated “among” is actually “in.”

So what James is saying is, when you show favoritism, to gain advantage, you are actually hurting yourself — dividing yourself. You’re breaking yourself, diminishing yourself.

You’re flooding your spiritual bloodstream with saturated fats.

You’re crimping your spiritual arteries.

You’re not designed for this.

You’re just asking for a heart attack.

* * *

But then, James knows that his friends are probably reading his letter and saying, “Yeah, right! Nice theory, James, but it’s not the real world — rich people have

more to offer you than poor people do — duh!

And besides, this is not that big a deal. God isn't freaking out if I'm just a little more accommodating of a rich person than I am of a poor person, come on!"

So James starts a new paragraph of his letter, in verse 8.

He says, in effect, You know the old Golden Rule, and sure, if you do that, it's a good thing.

You're designed to treat other people as equals — treat them as if they were you.

But look at the flip side — what happens if you DON'T do the Golden Rule.

What if you DON'T do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

What if you sort of *skip* the Golden Rule for some people? What if you sort of temporarily *forget* the Golden Rule because someone is unpleasant, or unable to be of any use to you?

He says 10 emphatic words: **you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.**

These were shocking words to James's friends, because they thought this favoritism thing was no big deal.

Now he's calling it sin — he's talking about being convicted — he's describing them as lawbreakers.

What's this mean to us?

Well, we want to believe that God's design is kind of elastic, that we can *sort of* live by it, and we'll *sort of* benefit — but where we don't live by it (because frankly we don't think certain aspects of it are that important), it won't really matter. There won't really be any consequences.

But that's not what God's Word tells us.

God's design for YOU won't be the same as God's design for ME. But God's design for me is absolute. It's whatever he calls me to. It's however he directs me to live. It's whatever I find in his Word that I can apply to my own life, my own walk, my own decisions.

Now please understand: As we studied last month, if I don't sense God guiding me specifically, I can relax and do whatever I want. I can trust him to be giving me the desires that I'm feeling in my heart (**Psalm 37:4**). That's one of the privileges I enjoy as a child of God.

But if I know what God is calling me to do, and I don't do it, I've got trouble. I will pay some kind of price, at some point.

It may be an emotional price, a medical price, a financial price, who knows what — but I can rest assured that the reason God called me to that action was for my own benefit, because he loves me; and once I veered away from his calling, I could no longer expect that benefit.

My life will be somehow diminished. There will be some negative consequence for me to face — I'll have to face whatever it was that God was lovingly trying to spare me from facing when he called me to that action.

(James is going to say a bit later in his letter to his friends, in **James 4:17 Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.**

And sin always costs us something.)

James goes on to explain that God's law isn't elastic, and we don't get graded on the curve.

He says in verse 10 that **whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one**

point is guilty of breaking all of it.

James uses the extreme example of the adulterer and the murderer.

You can't be hauled into court for murder and, up on the witness stand, defend yourself by saying, "Well, I didn't cheat with anybody's wife!"

You're still going to be convicted of breaking the law, and you're going to pay the corresponding penalty.

In a work of art, in a piece of sculpture, any crack renders it worthless by comparison to the value it might have had.

God's plan is perfect. Any deviation from it would make it imperfect.

So he can't bless my *small* deviation from his design any more than he can bless my *big* deviation.

The consequences of one sin might be different from the consequences of another sin — I may pay a way bigger price for grand larceny than I do for jaywalking — but there are no big sins or little sins as far as God is concerned.

All he knows is what's best for me. What would be perfect for me.

He knows exactly how I could live the completely wonderful dream that he dreamed for me in that moment when he first dreamed me up.

The only problem is, I can't live that way. I'm too bull-headed, sometimes I'm too dumb, sometimes I'm too rebellious, too selfish, too prideful, too blind, too narrow-minded, whatever.

I'm imperfect — hopelessly imperfect. I have no hope of becoming perfect.

All I can do is throw myself on God's mercy and say, "Do something with me, please!"

And he does. He says Here, I'll send a guy who can help you.

He gives me Jesus.

God says, My law isn't within your reach. You can't do it perfectly. The law just shows you how badly you need me. And even though you fall so far short, I love you. I love it that you need me.

Here's Jesus. He'll make you perfect. He'll trade hearts with you.

James says 12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.

He's saying God has given you a do-over. A fresh start. You have a different law to live by now.

You don't have to cower in the corner, terrified by the wrath of God because you fell short and broke his law.

You have what Jesus called "the new covenant," the new promise — his commitment to stand in for you.

You're free.

You're free from having to cling and claw for position and status and possessions and wealth and power in this world.

You don't have to suck up to a rich guy — and you sure don't have the position to put down the poor guy.

Looking down your nose at someone is unhealthy for your heart.

It will come back to bite you.

As we learned in the Parable of the Tortured Jailer — the story Jesus told in Matthew 18:23-35, that we studied last month — when we hang on to something outside

of God's design, it just hurts us.

Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful,
James says.

When I treat someone unfairly, unkindly, because I think of them as having less value, I will feel the weight of my own unmercifulness.

It will corrode my spirit.

It will leech cholesterol into me, and gradually block the pathways to my heart.

I may not sense how my system is slowing down, bit by bit.

I may not sense the price I'm paying for the discriminatory way I look at people, and the subtly unkind ways I respond to people.

But James says beware. Day by day, conversation by conversation, you're letting stuff in that's not flowing through ... it's sticking to the walls.

And the day will come when I pay a much more serious price.

Maybe today my arteries are only 80% blocked.

I haven't taken this favoritism thing too seriously, and I don't feel too alarmed about it.

Some people aren't worth my time, let's face it. If there's somebody who can advance my career at the office, for example, it only makes sense to blow off the loser in the next cubicle who wants to talk to me *every single pickin' day*, and focus on the guy who can help me.

For heaven's sake, James, how can you be so picky? What are you, perfect?

So maybe next week I only have 82% blockage.

And there's some kind of local politician living across the street from me, and my next-door neighbor is a — well, he's a joke, really: a redneck truck driver or something, I don't know — a couple of times he's waved at me, but I generally pretend I don't see him.

And when I see my neighbor across the street is out in his front yard, frankly, I try to make a point of going over there, striking up a conversation, because who knows how that could come in handy at some point?

And when he makes some reference to my next-door neighbor, the truck driver, I snort and make a snide comment about him, maybe mention the latest redneck joke I saw on the Internet.

There's a part of me, after all, that wants to make sure the politician doesn't associate me with the redneck, know what I mean?

And sure, maybe there's a little flicker of conviction in my spirit about it. But I put it out of my mind. After all, I'm a Christ-follower, I'm not supposed to be doing that whole guilt trip thing, am I? I mean, who knows if this is actually the Spirit of God nudging me, or just some bogus random guilt impulse — like, society has brainwashed me or something?

So maybe next month I don't realize it, but I'm up to 84% blockage.

And I'm online, sorting the spam out of my inbox, and I find that my junk mail filter wrongly categorized a note from my old friend Nicky, who has a problem — actually, he's asking for my help, and he says he wants to let me know about it in advance, he explains the whole thing; and then he says he's going to call me on Tuesday at 8 to talk about it.

And I think, Oh brother — and I think, I could just let this go right into my email trash bin.

That's where the junk mail filter was going to put it anyway.
 And I could be away from my phone on Tuesday at 8.
 Of course, I could email him back and tell him I don't think I can really help him in this situation — even though, actually, I know it's a situation where I could help him if I wanted to, but truthfully, come on, there's nothing in this for me!
 It's just like a lose-lose situation, to tell you the truth!
 So why even bother emailing him; it's like throwing good money after bad, isn't it?
 Isn't there something in the Bible about not throwing your pearl after swine?
 So — bang — I delete the email.

And unbeknownst to me, I've just added the last little fleck of cholesterol to the lining of my spiritual arteries.
 I've shut out the prompting of God's Spirit just often enough ... I've closed off opportunities to respond with compassion to people in need just often enough ... I've told myself a self-serving story to avoid making a sacrifice just often enough ... that my heart isn't getting anything.
 It's starving. It's dying.
 I don't realize how I got there. I don't realize what's happening.
 So the next Friday, they give me the news: I just got a big promotion, and I know it was because I successfully charmed the guy who could advance my career.
 But you know what? It doesn't taste as good as I thought it would.

And the next day, my cool neighbor across the street happens to say, "Hey, that dope next door to you got picked up on a DUI last night, and his wife threw him out. Hilarious, huh?"
 But it doesn't feel very funny to me.

And on Tuesday at 8, I forget to turn off my phone, and there's Nicky, I see his name and number on my caller ID — and I have this sick, sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.
 But I don't pick up.
 I decide I'll make up some story.
 Some way to get out of it.

I'm having a spiritual heart attack.
 I thought this favoritism thing was nothing. It was stupid. It was a waste of an evening's teaching at The Compass.
 But the gunk built up in my arteries, and now my heart is starving.
 I'm losing touch with how to love. How to be compassionate. How to express Christ's love. How to reflect what God has given me to those around me.

* * *

There is a way to avoid the spiritual heart attack.
 James says it very plainly: **Mercy triumphs over judgment!**
 It's painfully simple: Do things differently.
 When you have that avoidance impulse, check it — and see if God wouldn't smile if you decided to go toward that person instead of slipping away.
 When you have that put-down impulse, check it — and see how God smiles when you

decide to slip an arm around that person and asking how they're doing.
When you have that superiority impulse, check it — and see how God moves through
you, as you become Jesus to that inferior person.
That person who isn't really inferior at all.
That person Jesus died for, just as surely as he died for you.