

“God’s Measuring Stick”

James 2:1-18, Proper 18-B, Sept. 6, 2015

This morning I want to begin my message by telling you the true story of a man named Brian Warner who is now 46 years old. Brian unfortunately was not born into a Christian home, but fortunately when he was in the ninth grade, one of his friends invited him to attend church services at his church and also to go to the Youth Group meetings there.

Looking back upon his life, however, Brian was one of those students in high school who always seemed to be the “odd man” out; the proverbial round peg that could never fit securely into a square hole.

One of his former classmates recalls that he was a “skinny, pizza-faced, nerdy kid whom no one seemed to like!”

Well the day came when the youth group planned one of those all day outings together in an amusement park; not unlike “Carowinds” in Charlotte or “Six Flags over Georgia” in Atlanta. But wouldn’t you know it?! No sooner had the bus pulled into that place where the students were about to get exit it when the youth pastor announced: “I want everyone to partner up with someone else, and to stay close with that other person all day, so that hopefully no one will get lost, or be left behind at the end of the day!”

Too bad that this inexperienced youth pastor had not taken time to discover that there was an odd number of teenagers on that bus that day! Everyone had a partner except Brian, who was forced to spend the whole day wandering that amusement park completely alone.

For a month or two after this, Brian continued to attend church services at that congregation, and a few more youth group meetings too; but with far less frequency than he had before. He eventually stopped going to church and youth group meetings altogether. And when he did, the youth pastor never tried to contact him to find out where he had been. Neither had any of the others students in the youth group inquired about his whereabouts.

Ten years later, one of the boys who was in that group became a successful businessman in his late 20s. He called the youth pastor one day and asked him if he ever heard about what happened to Brian Warner? The youth pastor didn’t even remember who Brian Warner was, so the caller reminded him, “You remember he was that skinny, nerdy kid that no one ever liked?”

Having jogged the youth pastor’s memory, he replied: “Oh, yes, now I remember him!”

The caller went on to explain that this young man had changed his named. He took the name of Marilyn as his first name, after Marilyn Monroe who committed suicide and Manson, after Charles Manson who was a serial killer. He became a renowned “Rock Star” and has written and produced some of the most satanic and anti-Christian music that has ever been written or published and performed by anyone! One of his most successful CDs in the 1990s was entitled: “Anti-Christ, Superstar” and shortly after this he announced that one of his foremost goals was to do everything he could to wipe out Christianity altogether!

Many people wonder if things might have turned out different for Brian Warner, alias Marilyn Monroe, if he had been welcomed far more different into the Christian congregation he was invited to attend and if the youth pastor had taken greater interest in him. What if the other teenagers in

that group could have looked past the obvious fact that he was not nearly as cool as they were, or at least believed themselves to be, and had tried somehow to connect with him on a deeper level. Who's to know for sure!

But hopefully you can see how this story fits into the opening words of our epistle lesson today:

1. Show no partiality! “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory!”

There are many different criteria of course that any of us can use to discriminate against other people. In this particular incident, James is pointing out that the people in this particular community of faith seemed to cotton up to the rich, while they were at the same time despising the poor.

How could they tell if someone entering their worship assembly on a Sunday morning was wealthy or not! James says that they could distinguish this based on the type of clothing they were wearing along with their accessories. The ladies may have walked into those church services dressed into day wearing the first century equivalent of designer clothing fashioned by Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein or Versace. The men might have worn designer clothing that would have been the first century equivalent to Tommy Hilfiger or Nautica.

Commentators tell us that the “gold ring” that is spoken about here was probably more than one gold ring, but a series of five or six different gold rings that a wealthy man could wear all up and down his forefinger that tended to make him stick out in a crowd. Perhaps someone might notice is a well-dressed man is wearing a Rolex or a wristwatch made by Tag Heuer today!

The wealthy people, James said, would be treated most courteously indeed! They were given the best seats in the house, while the poor dressed in shabby clothing were often shunned.

To show such discrimination is an action that James openly labels as a “sin” because it is not reflecting God’s unconditional love for human kind! “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself,”* you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors!”

2. Has God not chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he promised to those who love him? (v. 5)

And it isn't true that God had chosen the poor people of this world to become his people to the exclusion of the rich, because the Gospel, the Risen Lord said, was to be presented to all ethnicities of people everywhere; to all nations: *“Go forth and make disciples of all...”*

But there is something about being poor that allowed poor people to be more receptive to the good news of the kingdom of God than others. This is the antithesis of that statement of Jesus made to his disciples, after a rich young ruler, turned away from Christ with a downcast face in Christ’s call to him to discipleship. Jesus said: *“How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!”*

Jesus says in his Sermon on the Plain, ***“Blessed are the poor for yours is the kingdom of God!” (Luke 6:20)***

And doesn't **Mary the Mother of our Lord** express her complete astonishment when the angel Gabriel comes to her one day announcing that she will be the one to give birth to the world's

Promised Messiah. *“My soul magnifies the LORD, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant! He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the might from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away!”* (Luke 1:46, 51-53)

To show partiality is to fail to love others the way that God loves us. He doesn't love us because of some superior qualities that he might see in us; making us superior in his eyes to other people.

God made this already clear to the people of Israel, as to why he chose them, back in Deuteronomy 7:7, *“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the LORD loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt!”*

St. Paul says in Romans 5, *“It was while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us! Why one would hardly die for a righteous man, though perhaps for a good man one might dare to die, but God shows his love for us in this that while we yet sinners, Christ died for us!”*

It is amazing though, isn't it, how we ourselves choose to see some sins that other people may commit as somehow far more damnable than the ones we commit ourselves. But to this misnomer James now presents us with another corrective: *“For whoever keeps the law but has failed in one point has become accountable for it all!”*

It's like the story of those 2 ladies who were sitting in church one day about four pews from the front of the church. The pastor was really railing the congregation about the evils of drinking and gambling and loose living; being promiscuous and the like. There they sat saying to themselves: *“That's right preacher! You tell it like it is! Preach on, brother!”*

But when the pastor turned to the sin of gossiping, they became quite perturbed, and said to themselves: *“Now hold on there a minute pastor! Now you are meddling!”*

How many pinpricks does it take to pop a balloon? Only one; the same thing is true in committing sins with respect to God's law.

Someone once said: **“ALMOST ONLY COUNTS IN HORSESHOES AND HAND-GRENADES!”**

There is no such thing as being “almost” righteous, you either are 100% righteous, with your sins washed away and forgiven, or you are 100% unrighteous, with your sins still hanging around your neck like unrelenting albatross, around the neck of that sailor in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

Martin Luther saw that the law of God as having a threefold purpose in this world. Yes, it does serve as a curb to protect us in life. The reason the guardrails are around those turns on the Blue Ridge Parkway is harm us but to protect us; the same with God's commandments given to us to curb our behavior. But the primary purpose God gave us his law was a mirror, to show us our sin. As Paul says in Romans 3: *“Apart from the law I should not have known sin!”* The third use of the law was that after our conversion the law becomes our guide.

Therefore James says to us: *“Speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. (The law of Liberty is the Gospel!) For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy! Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (Vv. 8-13)*

Here James is reminding us that God’s number one measuring stick to use upon us in our lives is not his law but the Gospel. It is that old rugged cross, where the “dearest and best for a world of lost sinners was slain!”

Every Sunday we are called to rejoice in the words of the hymn writer:

**Salvation unto us has come, by God’s free grace and favor.
Good works cannot avert our doom; they help and save us never!
Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone, who did for all the world atone;
He is our one Redeemer.**

**It was a false misleading dream that God his Law had given;
That sinners could themselves redeem and by their works gain heaven!
The Law is but a mirror bright to bring the inbred sin to light
That lurks within our nature!**

**Since Christ full atonement made and brought to us salvation;
Each Christian therefore may be glad and build on this foundation!
Your grace alone, dear Lord, I plead; your death is now my life indeed,
For you have paid my ransom!**

Friends, have you stopped to think of all the ridiculous measuring sticks that we may use upon ourselves and other people, however, that can unnecessarily and thoroughly rob us of all the joy and elation in this life that our God longs for us to have as those who believe that Jesus is our Savior?

I came across a most interesting article this past week written by a woman in her 60s who says that started riding Schwinn bicycle again that hung very stationary on some hooks her husband had fastened to the inside roof of her garage. She asked her husband to get the bicycle down for her, which he did. And then she decided that to her bicycle-riding adventure a little more comfortable to get rid of that tiny little seat that had been a part of it for years. She decided to go to Wal-Mart and buy one of those large, padded bicycle seats that looks like it would be more appropriately made for a tractor than a bicycle. And to make certain that she didn’t stop riding that bicycle prematurely she also bought and affixed to her bicycle an odometer so that she could see how fast and how far she was going. The woman writes: “I was happy as a lark in my less-than-fashionable gym clothes, riding down the bike trail, basking in the thoughts of how good I am to be exercising when suddenly, a whole group of much younger bikers whizzed past her, who were all decked out in their “proper attire” for the sport, on those bikes with the very skinny tires, who came up behind her rather quickly, ringing their bells to alert her, and to shout out: “Passing on your left!”

She said, “There I was riding at some 10 to 12 mph, having a great time, until these guys passed her going what must have been 20 to 25 miles per hour, having also overheard one say to the other that he had ridden 50 miles the day before. She wrote: “There I was trying to make it my 10 miles today and suddenly I felt like I am not really a bike rider at all because it is such a struggle for me even to go that distance!”

When she got home this prompted her to think about all the various numbers about things she had been using most of her life as a measuring stick upon herself in life. “Many times,” she wrote, “I have looked at the numbers on the bathroom scales, or the measuring tape around my waist to determine who I am. In American, if those numbers are small, we deduce that the person is strong, self-disciplined, and valuable. Many may measure how tall they are or the circumference of their biceps. Some of us have looked at the balance in our check books, the zip code of our residence, or the price of the car we drive to measure who we are. Others may have looked at their SAT scores or the bottom line on their investment portfolio to determine their own sense of self-worth. For some, it is the price of the clothes they wear, the numbers the grades that their children bring home on their report cards, or how many home-cooked meals that they have served to their families in the past month, or projects they have successfully concluded as a vital part of their professional lives.

So how does he measure what I am worth? Is it what I do or why I do it? When God measure me, he doesn't use scales, a tape measure, a yardstick, a checkbook, an odometer or any other kind of human instrument. He uses the cross on which his Son gave his life. If he measured us by how well we keep the law, or even the commands of Christ, we would all get a zero. But if he measures us because of Christ as the Lamb of God who has taken away the sins of the world, including our own, because of Christ's perfect record we will all receive a score of 10.

I like what Max Lucado said one day: “God does not love us because of our goodness, our kindness and our faithfulness, but because of his goodness, his kindness and his faithfulness!”

Will you allow the cross of Christ to become God's measuring stick over your life again today? If you do, don't be surprised if you leave here with more joy in your heart than when you first entered this worship assembly again today! On the night before our Savior's death he proclaimed: ***“These things have I spoken while I am still with you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full!”***