

**“The Problem with Public Approval” based on James 4, Mark 9:30-37, Psalms 1 & 54  
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sept. 22, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

My first vehicle was a 1988 Dodge Caravan. It was only eight years old when I got it, but it had probably 185,000 miles on it. Yes, my first car was a minivan, and I loved that van. I packed my friends in – even after the one sliding door broke – and they had to pile in from the front, like the largest two-door car ever.

I loved it even after the hatch hydraulics went, requiring me to have my father specially cut piece of 2 by 4 that I wedged in so that we could sit under the hatch, when my friends and I went to a drive-in movie. The kids may not know what those were, but they were awesome.

That all changed though in my senior year of college, after I made a trip to the Galleria Mall in Poughkeepsie, NY, which was about 45 minutes from where I grew up and 15 minutes from where I went to college. I believe it was the fall of 1999, because I was getting ready to move up to Albany, NY, the capital of the state for an internship.

I knew when I went up there, I would only know a handful of classmates. These were my co-workers in an internship. I knew them all, but only one of those classmates from my university was actually a friend of mine. I was nervous. I was keyed in on how I would be perceived in this new environment. I had just lost more than 120 pounds – the best I’ve looked in my life and I had unexpected confidence. I was ready to make a splash in a new city.

So in that moment 25 years ago, as I walked out of the Galleria Mall, having just bought some new clothes, I was feeling good. It was one time in my life I bought a large. I was feeling good as I walked out to my car a group of attractive young women were walking in the other direction. I smiled at one, and she smiled back, so I walked quickly to my van and put my stuff in the car.

I turned around wanting to go talk to her, and as it turns out they had already turned around and were mocking me for driving a minivan. They pointed at my van and laughed, probably something about a soccer mom, or about me not having my own car because that must be my mom’s car. I was devastated and ashamed.

So, at that point I decided I needed an actual car, not a van, for my new life. I couldn’t be making first impressions with a van. A car, any car, would be better. I’d been shamed once for being a college kid with a minivan. That was enough. So, I got rid of the van and bought a used white 1990 Nissan Sentra. It wasn’t great, but it was what I could afford at just \$3,000. I made this major change, swapping out a paid for van I loved, for a little compact car which I hoped might not be laughed at or mocked – scoffed at.

Now, I could be wrong, but I don’t think I’m the only person here who has done something like this. For you, it may not have been a car. It might have been something else, that you added or subtracted from your life out of concern for public opinion, or at least, how it might affect the opinion of someone or some group whose attention you wanted, or with whom you wanted to fit in. The truth is that we human beings tend to think we are all unique, but surprisingly, we tend to fit into categories quite well. This is why stereotypes seem to ring true, and why things become extremely popular, even when they are dumb – just look at “pet rock” sales in the 1970s.

The truth is that we human beings do not like to be mocked, scoffed at, or shamed. At some level, it is natural for us to be concerned about other people's opinions of us. The ancient world was almost entirely made up of honor and shame cultures. Yet in the midst of this, worshipers of the one God of Israel, were being told that guilt before God and forgiveness from God, were more important than shame and honor before people.

In Psalm 1, it says, "Happy are those, who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers, but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, they meditate day and night." The synopsis of this basically means: Happy are those who choose right and wrong, and not popularity.

James is picking up on this underlying theme in the Hebrew Scriptures, in which it repeatedly says not to be concerned with the opinions of the nations. It tells God's people not to seek to be like the nations, but instead, to be "holy," which means to be different, or set apart from them.

In Psalm 54, which is the foundation of today's call to worship, the writer asks God to save by God's name – by God's identity. In a polytheistic world, the writer calls on God to stand out, to have God's name and identity be greater – great enough to defeat any enemy the writer might have. The Psalmist wants to be vindicated by God and proven right. The writer is confident, in God's victory and not his own.

In our gospel reading, we see a glimpse of this confidence in the apostles. Except that Jesus has just predicted that he would be betrayed and killed. They don't understand. They lack the confidence or curiosity to ask Jesus what he means. So, instead, they fall back into their own self-indulgence – arguing over who among them is the greatest. They're arguing about who will be most honored, most revered, and most in control, when Jesus, the Messiah, overthrows Roman rule. They have confidence like the Psalmist in the victory of Jesus over their enemies. They expect a salvation and vindication, by God's own might.

James, however, is writing after the revelation of God in the cross of Jesus Christ. He has seen firsthand that the mighty power of God is best seen in human weakness. The goal is not to be vindicated and saved in order to mock or scoff those who mocked or scoffed at them. Instead, it is to find God by being singularly focused on God alone, and namely what God thinks of you, how God sees you, and how your actions reflect your relationship with God.

The honor of this world does not matter to James, so if you want something – ask God for it. Self-indulgence, or passions, or in the Greek, "*hedonay*" from which we get hedonism, is the desire to seek pleasure – personal happiness in this world – without limits. This is the root of war and controversy, James says – the root of conflict and disputes.

After all, one person's hedonism, their pursuit of happiness, or one nation's hedonism is always going to come into conflict with other people and other nations. How we navigate this conflict is important to James. As I've argued throughout this month, I believe James is written in anticipation of a revolt. He is warning Jewish Christians in the diaspora not to come to Judea and take up arms against Rome. See that here James warns against murder and zealotry. Most translations have kill or murder, but take the word "*zealos*" with a z, and translate it as jealous, or covet, or desire which it can be. But given James's context, I think he means "zealous" or an overarching passion for trying to enact God's will.

I believe scholars argue convincingly that James is indeed focused on zealotry among Christian. This is why James is so focused on murder and killing. If we only had the letter of James to show us the early church, we might be led to conclude that early Christians had a real problem with murder, killing people all over the place. He just keeps mentioning it as if they needed to be restrained. Instead, that problem only came after Christianity rose to power, coming out of obscurity and into the halls of power in Europe, when kings, reformers, and popes claimed the faith, but pursued violence and conquest in God's name.

This is exactly what James is warning his readers against. He is telling them not to seek power by any means necessary. The temptation for Jewish Christians might have been to come to town and join a revolt for Judean independence and do what they thought the Messiah was supposed to do, but didn't. James says instead that God is not granting their prayers, either because they don't ask, or because they are self-indulgent, hedonist.

James reminds them that the ultimate adultery is not simply unchecked promiscuity or cheating, but is actually idolatry, cheating on God. This happens by running around with false gods or seeking the love of the world. This is usually translated "friendship" but the word here is "philia," which is a love that builds from association; hence it is "brotherly love" or "friendship." This is the love James calls adulterous.

He says the spirit of the world which has been made to dwell in us wants spite, or envy. It wants others to be destroyed in order that we might be lifted up by comparison. So, James reminds his readers of the Proverb and asks them if they even believe in the words of Scripture, because it says, *"God opposes the arrogant, the proud, the haughty, and gives grace – unearned favor – to the humble."*

The devil, which means divider, seeks to put a wedge between us and God, by making us think that we have to put a wedge between us and one another, through constant comparisons that put others down or lift us up. We do this as we seek honor following public opinion to do what's popular, or in the seeking of the public approval of others. But James says if we draw near to God, God is faithful to draw near to us. In fact, the whole of scripture shows this – God is always moving toward humanity, even after humanity turns away from God.

James is not rejecting all laughter and joy. No, he is rejecting them as public performance. If we humble ourselves before the Lord, then the Lord is faithful to raise us up. This is why we shouldn't speak ill of one another, gossiping or judging others whether with our mouths or through our social media. If we are constantly judging the law, then we are not following the law. That's what James says.

Remember, the zealots constantly judged who was righteous enough. They judged who was a true believer in one God of Israel. Likewise, many a Christian in history and today has spent lots of time, debating who is really a Christian, and in doing so, they always seem to have their judgement land on them being actual Christians, and someone else not being Christian. Yet James says that in judging the law, you're not doing anything good. Only God is the judge, so only God saves and only God has the right to destroy.

James advises us not to speak so confidently in our own achievements, but to instead couch our ambitions as only being possible if God wills them to be. This is not meant to be a show of our piety, to proclaim, "If the Lord wills it." Nor is it meant as a colloquialism, "the Lord willing and the creek

don't rise." No, this is meant to be something that puts us in our place, helping us not to be proud and arrogant about our own performance and our own importance. This is because holding your head up high in this manner, that is evil.

Remember, at the start of the letter, he says to hold your head up high when you're suffering trials, not when you think you are rich or high in status. James says in is not just immorality or doing the wrong thing. If we know what is good, we should do it, and if we don't do what is good, then that is a sin just the same.

Once again, a common thread of zealotry in James's time, and zealotry in our time today is the belief that a certain set of sins are deemed most egregious, the worst of all. Therefore, if you avoid those sins – at least publicly – then you are one of the "good guys."

Now, before you start thinking in your head about who the zealots are in this world, look into your own heart first – that is James's warning. That's the hard part. If we submit to God, we submit everything to God – all sins. This is anything that takes our attention from God and draw us into worship of something else. If we judge others to lift ourselves up, then we are not doers of the law, which is to love God, and love our neighbors, all of our neighbors. We don't do this if we judge.

This is a challenge – we all want to feel like we belong, like we fit in. But remember that Jesus says to seek God first and all things will be added. This is the same message here from James, who again parallel's Matthew's gospel. If we seek God by drawing near, then God draws near, and when we ask, we are answered. Humility is essential to living out the Christian life.

This is because humility is the example set forth by God for us all. Humility is what we see in Jesus – God humbly sharing in our flesh to live as we live and to die for us, rise for us, ascend for us, and send the Holy Spirit to us, to empower us to do what's right in this world.

God did not do this for God's own sake – God does not need humanity in order to be God. No, creation is not something God needed but comes from an overflow of God's love in the Trinity. God does not need us, nor did God need to save us by any means. God did so because God loves us. Yes, God loves you. God wants us. Yes, God wants you. You are known by God and given faith to love others as God loves you. We do this trusting with confidence that we can share that love.

Beloved, the problem with public opinion, public acclaim, and public approval, is that it is always fleeting – and it changes. It always requires us to earn it. You may have had your pet rock yesterday, but are you still up with the trends? There's always more to do, and I'm not. I can't keep up. The irony of getting my car was that once I was in Albany, that group of co-workers was about seven and it would have been really convenient to have a van to go places together. Someone said just that, so, I took my father's van to Albany and left him my Nissan in Saugerties where I grew up.

James is reminding us that we need not seek the honors of this world, or the approval of others. Nor should we fear the shame of this world, the rejection of others. Certainly, we should not tear down others whether as religious zealots ourselves or accusing others of the same, seeking purity, or as jealous individuals seeking the esteem others have.

It should seem obvious that in a faith grounded in the cross, where the rightful king gave his life to defeat sin and death, our role as Christians is not to kill for our faith but emulate Christ in sacrificially love. Yet, even in the early church, James had to write this letter.

Beloved, God wants you to trust that you are loved, you are known as who you are, and you belong in God's family. God wants you to be so secure in this that you are free to do what is right, not in search of becoming great in the world's eyes, but knowing God loves you. That is the freedom we have as Christians – to not care about shame or honor. You are loved by God for who you are right now, and you are called to love God, and love your neighbor as yourself.

When Jesus's disciples wanted to know who the top dog would be, Jesus said that if anyone desires to be first, that one must be last – a servant to all. He picked up the child and said anyone who welcomes the children like these in my name, welcomes me. The children here are not just our beautiful children but represent those who have no status. Children had no status in the ancient world. When we engage in humility and love those around us regardless of our own gain, the honor or shame we might receive. That is when we walk the road of Christ in self-giving and sacrificial love. It's not always easy, but it's important to remember, especially in tumultuous times. Amen.