We all have that friend in our life who delivers their message to us without pulling any punches. Sometimes this type of powerful communication isn't easy to receive, however, often this is exactly what we need to hear. There is no way to misunderstand the message being delivered and we therefore have a choice to receive it, reflect, and understand, or to reject it completely. To me, this is why the letter of James is so powerful. There is no misunderstanding James (Jesus' half-brother) and what he is saying to us.

After Jesus died for us, James was a leader in the Messianic Church in Jerusalem for two decades before he was murdered. James drew deeply from his experience of living with Jesus, specifically the Sermon on the Mount and the book of Proverbs. James didn't write his letter to a specific church or group, but to everyone who was choosing to follow God. This makes his letter unique in that it is meant for us just as much as the people who lived then, with very similar context. In other words, his words should hit us between the eyes today with the same impact they did 2000 years ago!

The theme of James' letter is spiritual maturity. As a Christian, our deeds and fruits change when we choose a life of faith in God. James helps us to put our faith into practice by giving us specific warnings of things not to do, each followed up with an invitation of what to do. James wants nothing to get in our way of spiritual maturity and for us to live fully as a follower of Jesus.

In James 2, we are warned against favoritism and judging, but are invited into a life of love for our neighbor and mercy. Favoritism and judging are two of the easiest ways we can be corrupted by the world. It's so easy to treat someone differently based on external factors that we see. It's so easy to play God and judge someone, rather than focus on our own opportunities for growth. It's impossible to love fully when we are showing favoritism, it's impossible to bless the people we are judging. James writes that love is withheld when we are filled with favoritism and judgement for others. The problem is that these two corruptions often don't feel like that big of a deal. However, as Bill said, "they are the mortar in the dividing wall of hostility and a perpetuation of the injustice of this world."

When God created us in His image, he wove equality into us from the beginning (Gen 1:27.) God wants us to see people from his perspective and to love them and to have mercy for them. The antidote for favoritism is a genuine faith that changes the way we think and act in the world. Remembering that judging is reserved for God alone and that we are called to love our neighbor as ourself.

I often think about the breath of life God gave us. Breathing is a two step process, we exhale and we inhale. So many things in our world follow this concept. Love and mercy are all given to us, when we give those things freely to others. This is why James is so powerful. He is teaching us what to do in order to have a fullness in our life that is not obtainable otherwise. We must show love and mercy fully to receive a full portion of love and mercy ourselves! We cannot be filled with favoritism and judging which take the place of love and mercy.

When James wrote his letter, Rome had an "Honor and Shame" culture. Status, wealth, and privilege was extremely important. It was a culture we honestly cannot fully imagine, which made James' words then so powerful for those people. We don't share this same culture, however, we do have many injustices and inequalities in our lives today. What are some of the most common injustices that you see, both small and large?
It's only after we property name something that we then begin to have authority and power over it. Now that you have named an injustice or inequality in your life, how will you change it? How will you stop yourself from showing favoritism and judging others - even when those thoughts are small and "not a big deal?" - Joe Pattee