

Live Mercifully Toward Others

by Mark Jarvinen

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old 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 and sisters: 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 dishonored 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 blaspheming 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," 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, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." 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. **(James 2:1-13)***

Vending machines have come a long way since I was a kid when they were all coin operated. Of course, prices have gone up, but now you just slide in a dollar bill or two and you're good to go – unless your dollar bill is rejected. It's a terrible feeling to watch your dollar get sucked into the machine and then have it spit back at you. You check the little picture to make sure George's head is facing in the right direction and try again. If it is rejected again, you rub out any creases on the corners of the bill and then reinsert. If it's still not accepted,

you're ready to take on the machine. What's the deal? A dollar is a dollar after all, whether it's freshly minted or folded, wadded, washed or taped. A clean, fresh bill is of no more value than one that is worn.

As much as we don't like to admit it, we are so much like those dastardly vending machines. We tend to be more accepting of people who have it all together in appearance, than we are of people who have been folded, wadded, crinkled, and taped. People who have been through the ringer, often find themselves spit out by many of us who prefer to accept only those we view as pristine.

In today's text, James writes to Christians and shudders at the fact that followers of Christ could exhibit this "**vending machine**" type of behavior toward others, when Jesus was able to recognize the inherent value of every human being, showing mercy and compassion to those who were bruised, scarred, and flawed. This leads into the first point in our text –

I. VALUE EVERYONE EQUALLY (vv. 1-4).

Verse 1 says, "***My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.***" Notice the tenderness of James shown toward the believers in Jerusalem, calling them "***brothers and sisters.***" He regarded them as family - on the same team. James was in complete agreement with the Apostle Paul who spoke of the Galatian Christians as "***... neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus***" (***Galatians 3:28***). Notice also how James, who as Jesus' half-brother knew him as a boy and grew up sharing family time with him, here in **v.1** calls him "***our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.***" The word

“glorious” is a reference to God’s Shekinah glory, the glory evident as He led the Israelites to the Promised Land. In other words, Jesus is full of God’s glory, and believers are brothers and sisters in His family. Yet, in spite of this lofty status shared with Christ, they’re told not to show favoritism toward others on the basis of outward appearance. That’s because all people are equally loved in the eyes of God and objects of His mercy.

James sets up a pretty obvious contrast in **v. 2**. Let’s contemporize it a bit. Imagine a man walking into our church today wearing this very expensive designer suit (show slide). Imagine also attending our church is this man (show slide). You’d have to pay me to wear that suit! Come to think of it though, I used to have one something like this one, once upon a time. The point is, who’s likely to get the best seat?

Or maybe it’s not even about the clothes someone is wearing as much as their notoriety. Which of these two would find a seat of honor here at CoJ? (Compare pictures of men wearing stocking caps, one being Aaron Rodgers). The text implies what we’d likely do.

In my early teens, I remember judging people’s value by external criteria. My Dad and a few other adults started a Sunday School in the outlying area of our community, for children from poor families that didn’t feel welcome in any of the churches in town. I was expected to attend this alternative afternoon Sunday School in a show of support for my Dad, and as an opportunity to get my feet wet in ministry. However, I remember thinking from my immature and self-centered perspective that these kids were definitely not cool. They dressed funny and acted peculiar. I remember hoping that none of my friends

would find out that I had attended. My focus was definitely not on the glory of Jesus Christ and love for the people He loved. In my own way, I was judging their comparative worth as people and was guilty of favoritism. I was guilty of what v. 4, says, ***“have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”*** By admitting this, I’m doing what my 2nd point from the text is asking all of us to do, which is ...

II. RECOGNIZE OUR OWN INNER CONTRADICTIONS (vv. 5-7).

In vv. 5-7, after giving another affectionate appeal to his readers: ***“Listen, my dear brothers:”*** James asks four questions to get us to see the contradictions that reside within each of us. Each question expects an affirmative answer.

- 1) ***“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?” (v. 5)***

The answer of course is **YES!** At this point I’m reminded of the lyrics written by Don Moen to a worship song composed years ago, named **“Give Thanks”**:

*Give thanks with a grateful heart
Give thanks to the Holy One
Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son.*

*And now let the weak say, "I am strong"
Let the poor say, "I am rich
Because of what the Lord has done for us."*

From a kingdom perspective it’s true that being rich isn’t a matter of what we possess in terms of this world’s goods or treasures. It’s who possesses us that really matters. That Someone, of course, is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. It was Jesus who taught – ***“Blessed***

are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:3). Why then favor the rich?

2) ***“But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?” (v.6).***

The expected answer again is **“YES.”** In other words, James is asking, ***“Why are you being so deferential to the very people who have been making your life so difficult?”*** Apparently, built into the Middle Eastern culture of that time was the understanding that people with money were inherently smarter, more skilled, and more deserving of their wealth than the average person. Most felt that the rich were rich because they carried special favor with God. From a kingdom perspective this is illogical and untrue. Remember **Galatians 3:28 – “... you are all one in Christ Jesus.”** One of the major tenets of the Christian faith is that the ground is level at the foot of the cross, regardless of any external criteria like nationality, ethnicity, social status, or gender. Everyone needs Jesus (all have sinned); and Jesus died for all (God desires all to be saved). Showing favoritism isn’t consistent with God’s heart of mercy for the world.

3) ***“Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?” (v.6).***

Again, the answer is **“YES.”** Again James is asking them to face the obvious – ***“Why do you show favoritism to the rich?”***

4) ***“Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?”***

In the historical moment in which our text was written, Christians were “the new kids on the block.” By that I mean they had only recently separated themselves from Judaism. Their beliefs weren’t yet well established among the masses. Their identity was not widely recognized. It was easy for the establishment to criticize and slander these “Johnny-come-latelies” to the religious world. That said, again James wonders, **“Why are you favoring the wealthy power brokers of society who disregard you?”** This leads to a final point ...

III. SHOW COMPASSIONATE MERCY TO ALL (vv. 8-13)

The text clearly teaches that we’re called to treat people fairly and value all people equally, however, it doesn’t take long to realize how many contradictions emerge in our own lives. In **vv. 8-13** we’re shown some practical considerations to move us in the direction of compassionate mercy, i.e. the fair and loving treatment of others.

1. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Verse 8 says, **“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right.”** James knows that it is impossible to truly love your neighbor and at the same time show favoritism to them over against another, or to show favoritism to another, over against your neighbor. But this does raise an important question for all of us – **“Can any of us really say that we love others as much as we love ourselves - all the time? How about even most of the time?”** Be honest now.

2. See favoritism as sin.

We tend to trivialize our own trespasses, don’t we? We find it relatively easy to excuse our own judgmental hearts. It’s easy to see

God grading us on the curve. We tell ourselves, *“I keep most of God’s commands, it’s OK to violate one of the smaller ones. After all, I’m only human.”* But look at **vv. 9-11**, which say:

“But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 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, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.”

In other words, any one sin, regardless of what it is, will render a person guilty before God as a law-breaker, and deserving of full punishment.

These verses are actually more far-reaching than we at first realize. For example, how often do we simply ignore people we think are different from us, or perhaps just downright weird? Do we act like snobs to people who don’t have it all together or who struggle with things that come easy for us? Who, outside our own circle of friends, have we included in our lives recently? Favoritism tends to make certain people invisible to us. Who’s invisible to you? Do you see that as sin? Let that sit there on your conscience for a moment.

3. Watch your words and adjust your actions.

Look at **vv. 12-13**:

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.

It is important to be reminded here that James is addressing Christians, who through faith in Christ have been declared righteous and have been granted the gift of eternal life. What then is the law by which Christians will be judged? Certainly not the law of Moses! Our

Savior has kept that law perfectly for us, and has shed His blood in payment for the myriad ways in which we have fallen short of the ten commandments in real life. How blessed we are that through Christ's sacrifice, there is a basis for our forgiveness. Yet, there will be **"a judgment"** for Christians, perhaps an **"evaluation"** or an **"accounting"** of our works here on earth would be a more understandable way to speak of it. This judgment will take place according to the standard of a different law; not the Law of Moses, but **"the law that gives freedom," i.e. the law of love.** As believers we will never experience a greater degree of freedom in this life than when our words and actions toward others are laced with love and mercy, the way Christ deals with us. In the end **"Mercy triumphs over judgment,"** according to **v. 13b.** Because God is compassionate, we who have received His mercy are called to be compassionate and merciful in our dealings with others. Our failure to extend mercy to others means not a loss of our salvation, but a loss of the blessings that accompany freedom in Christ.

CONCLUSION

In today's text, James has given us righteous counsel in calling us to love our neighbors as we would love ourselves. This is consistent with life in Christ. He is also right in not allowing us to merely excuse ourselves from, or take lightly, the serious sin of joining into tight-knit cliques that exclude others from our network of fellowship and care, as if we are somehow better than them. Furthermore, James also correctly admonishes Christians not to judge others without the kind of mercy and compassion God in Christ has shown to us in exchanging His life for ours on Calvary's cross.

Yet, even as those called to freedom from sin by the Gospel of Christ, we sometimes find ourselves falling short of God's glory in this matter of showing favoritism and not treating others mercifully. **What are we to do?** Are we simply to brush aside the admonition of James today? No. Neither are we simply to promise to try harder to do better. **When we hear the Law and are convicted by it, our only hope is to repent and believe the Gospel.**

In our text, James assumes that his readers have a gospel awareness as he makes reference to *"the law that gives freedom"* (v. 12), out of which comes implied references to offering merciful actions of self-sacrifice and love for others, which James knows can only flow from hearts that have been changed by faith in Christ. James is banking on his readers realizing that when we are convicted of our sin, we will flee to Christ in whose forgiveness we are set free.

Be encouraged today, because it is the kindness of God that leads us all to repentance. Believe again the gospel that declares we are among the vast number who are forgiven, cleansed, and yes, rescued from sin's penalty of death, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Also, let us remember and rejoice in the fact all people are eligible for the compassion of Christ, which then, of course, is ours to demonstrate to the world, and in so doing, bear witness to Christ's love for all mankind. **A-men.**