

The Triumph of Mercy

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[0 : 00] Friends, a number of years ago I was regularly visiting Pakistan and I did so for about three years. And I should tell you, one of the most difficult aspects of Pakistan culture, I found it immensely difficult and the culture of Pakistan is very deeply affected by a thing which is called nepotism.

And so the way that you get things done in Pakistan is to know someone important. And if you know someone in a position of authority, someone of great importance and power, then you can get things done.

Now doors can be opened and favours can be granted and so on. And one of the sad things I think is that Christians within Pakistan have deeply imbibed the same mentality and it's present even within Christian culture.

As a result there's a temptation I think by Christians to work the system. Favour is carried with various people and respect and honour can easily be turned into manipulation.

Now my own view is that we Australian Christians should not be too critical because, well, we have many of the same things. We are deeply affected in our culture as well by similar sorts of things.

[1 : 14] I need to say it's not as obvious in our culture, but nevertheless it is very prevalent. We are people who I think are affected by partiality and favouritism.

And therefore we're a people who have something to learn from this passage today because it strikes at this issue. We have lots to learn from James chapter 2 verses 1 to 13. So let's have a look at it together.

Open your Bibles at James 2. But I wonder if as we do that I might review what we've learnt over the last couple of weeks. You see there have been some very significant things about Christian life and practice.

And I thank those of you who have come and talked to me about them and who have said that these have been very helpful things. I think there are two particular principles from these last two weeks that stand out.

The first thing is that we need to be wise. Do you remember that? In our first Bible talk we looked at James 1, 1 to 18 and we saw that wisdom equals insight into the world based on a knowledge and reverence of God.

[2 : 14] In other words, wisdom is the ability to see life in terms of God rather than in terms of our pressing external circumstances. Wise people are people who are able to see God at work in whatever situation or circumstance they find themselves in, whether it is good or bad.

Wise people therefore see their circumstances as an opportunity for growth in godliness. Wise people are able to see life in terms of God. Now in our second passage, so that's James chapter 1, 19 to 27, which we looked at last week, we saw that the gospel demands a response from us. What James says is that if the gospel God offers gives us a gift of salvation, we are bound to and ought to make a response of a shift in our behaviour.

So God's gift demands a shift for us. We need to be people who hear and do the gospel. We need to be doers as well as hearers of God's implanted word.

Now James is clear. As people who want to be doers of the word, we need to know that there is a right behaviour and a wrong behaviour. That is, there is a behaviour that is compatible with our faith and one that is incompatible with our faith.

[3 : 36] And we're introduced to this in chapter 2, verse 1. So turn with me to it. The behaviour that is incompatible with Christian faith has a name. And the name is favouritism or partiality.

Now in order to understand this chapter, we need to do a little bit of work behind the scenes. And so you'll need your Bible open and you'll need to flip to some certain pages in a moment. We're going

to start in the Old Testament. And in the Old Testament, the word for favouritism literally means to receive the face.

OK, to receive the face. In other words, favouritism is when you act according to what presents itself to you externally from someone or something.

Now, what sort of external criteria might that be? Well, it might mean someone who is obviously, you know, physically handsome or beautiful. It might be someone's social status.

It might be their race. It might be a whole variety of things. But what you do is you see that external criteria and you measure them by what you see. That is, you receive the face.

[4 : 42] And in the Old Testament, we're told over and over again that God doesn't show this sort of favouritism, this partiality, this discrimination. I think the modern word is discrimination. In your Bibles, turn to Deuteronomy chapter 10 and verses 14 to 18.

So Deuteronomy is easy to find. About five books in and chapter 10. Let's look at 14 to 18. We read this.

To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the Lord set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants above all the nations, as it is today.

Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the Lord your God is a God of gods and Lord of lords and a great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.

He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And in the New Testament, the very same thing is said about God.

[5 : 52] In Acts chapter 10, when Peter the Jew is speaking to the first Gentile converts, he says this, I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

So you can see what's being said, can't you? A God looks at a person, refuses to act according to what a person's external circumstance or appearance is.

And the next statement follows. God's people are to imitate their God. That is, God's people are to refuse to be discriminatory.

And there are many, many scriptures that show this. I'll give you just one or two. Leviticus chapter 19 verse 15 says this, Do not pervert justice. Do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly.

Can you see what's being said? It's clear, isn't it? You're speaking to those who are judges over the people of God and you're telling them this, that when they judge law cases, they are not to make judgment based on external considerations, such as the poverty or wealth of the people in front of them.

[7 : 11] Justice is perverted when you act according to externals. To judge according to externals is to become judges with evil or wrong motives.

So let's see if we can draw all of this together. There's a clear principle you see flowing from scripture, and that is God doesn't act towards people on the basis of external factors. Therefore, to act according to external factors is to become judges with evil rather than godly motives.

Now, let's have a look at James and let's see what he has to say. So James chapter 2, 1 to 4. So there's the background. Now to James. My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism.

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring, fine clothes, and then a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, here is a good seat for you, but say to the poor man, you stand there or sit on the floor by my feet, have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Now, let me tell you, friends, it is very easy to look at James chapter 2 and to be very judgmental. But let's face it, we in the modern church often fall into the same trap.

[8 : 32] We discriminate in so many ways. Our churches are full of discrimination. Rich over poor, socially adept over socially dysfunctional, English speaking over Chinese speaking, or the reverse Chinese speaking over English speaking, a person with a white face over those who don't, or a person with an Asian face over those who don't.

And, you know, it's just so easy for us. What are some of the other things that happen in our church? A Chinese speaking over English speaking, person with white face over those who doesn't,

as I've said, gifted over not so gifted, intellectually able over those who are not so intellectually able, those who occupy status in our church over against those who don't, the young over the elderly, the elderly over the young, depending on which congregation you're from.

And how can you tell that we discriminate? Well, it's easy. You can tell by the people we spend time and energy, time with and spend energy over.

You can tell by the people that we invite into our houses. Those we try to avoid having in our small groups. And it happens at every level of Christian society.

For example, it is astounding amongst clergy how many have a strong sense of calling to a large and well-to-do church and how few have callings to struggling churches in low socioeconomic areas.

[10:05] It's a Christian problem, isn't it? And what does God say about it here in James? He says, such behaviour contradicts our faith in Christ.

How can we say we believe in Christ and discriminate in that sort of way? James is clear. This is no good. This is not right. We must not be like the world.

We must be like God. Let's now move on to verses five to seven. Again, I want to do some background with you. And the place I want to begin is Exodus 34.

And I'll just read it to you rather than have you look it up. It's one verse where God is speaking about his character and he passes in front of Moses and he proclaims his character in this way. The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness.

You see, the Old Testament is very clear about God's character. God is a God of grace and mercy and love. Grace, mercy, love are the basis for all that he does.

[11:10] And that's our first point of background. Now, that gives us our second point. Our second point is because God is gracious, he is always inclined toward those who need his grace.

Does that make sense? Because his great disposition, the thing that flows out from him internally is love, mercy and grace. Then he's always going to be interested in the poor, isn't he?

Because they need his help. And whether their poverty is spiritual or material, that is going to be correct. And so I don't know if you've still got your fingers in Deuteronomy chapter 10.

If not, you can find it again. Deuteronomy 10, verses 14 to 22. We've read 14 through to 20. I'll just read from verse 20 on.

I'll read from 19 on. So Deuteronomy chapter 10. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. Fear the Lord your God and serve him.

[12:11] Hold fast to him. Take your oaths in his name, for he is the one you praise. He is your God who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. Your ancestors went down into Egypt, were 70 in all, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky.

And if you go back to the beginning of that passage, it tells you why. It is because God is the God of love who loves people. Our God is a God whose nature is always provoked by the poor and the needy.

He always reaches out to them. And therefore, in the Old Testament, the poor person is a symbol of all that we should be. You read the Psalms and they talk about the poor person and what are they? They are dependent and helpless. And God is for such people. He loves such people. He rescues such people. The dependent and the helpless are the ones that he saves.

So let's see if we can put this into a principle before we go to James. God is a God of grace and mercy and love. Love of the poor, the downtrodden, the helpless is written into God's nature.

[13:20] Because of that, he'll always be close and always choose to honour the needy, the poor and the oppressed. He'll come to their aid. Now that principle, when you think about it, is at the very core of the gospel itself, isn't it?

Paul will spell it out in Romans 5, verse 6. While we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Can you see that? Because God loves to help those in powerless situations.

Now, with that said, go to James 2 again. Verses 5 to 7. 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 promised he promised those who love him?

But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of

him to whom you belong?

James is making the very point that so often it is the poor of this world who can do nothing but depend on others that are the ones who realise their need of God and depend on him for salvation. [14:34] You see, in this topsy-turvy world, God operates, in which God operates. He chooses the weak and the helpless of this world. They are the ones who believe, aren't they?

Are they the poor, the children, the single parent, the widow, the orphan? They often have nowhere else to go but God. So they go to God and they believe in him.

And they are often, as scripture notes, rich in faith. And if they believe, then they become heirs of the promises of God and inheritors of the kingdom of God. And that's exactly what Jesus says in Luke and in Matthew.

Listen to him. In Luke he says, Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. In Matthew Jesus says, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

You see, often the poor materially are also the poor in spirit because they are driven to depend upon God. Experience demonstrates it is often the poor whom God chooses to be rich in faith.

[15:42] Some of the largest Christian populations in the world today are in the most impoverished parts of the world. Why? Because when you've got nowhere else to go, there is God.

Therefore, friends, can you see what James goes on to say? He says, Therefore, to dishonor the poor person in our congregation is to dishonor and oppose God. Worse than that, it is to oppose what God has done in Christ because the gospel tells us that we were poor and when we were weak and poor, Christ died for us.

Beyond that, as James goes on to point out, to favor the strong and the rich is not that wise as a behavior. Why?

Is it not the case, he says, that the powerful, the strong and the rich are among those who set themselves most against God? So, how do we live this out today in our world? James is telling us how to oppose God and the glorious gospel of his Son.

And he's telling us that we do so any time we act out of any other motive other than grace, mercy and love.

[16:59] Grace, mercy and love will drive us to others. Those who have not heard the gospel, that is the spiritually poor, and those who cry out to help because they are materially poor.

To give to the poor and the disadvantaged in our own congregation and outside our own congregation is to grant them honor and to be like God. Let's now turn to verses 8 to 11 and again, we need to do some work behind the scenes.

I wonder if you've noticed that there is an apparent contradiction between 1 to 4 and 5 to 7. I know at 8 o'clock there are people who spotted this. Perhaps you spotted it as well. Can you see where the contradiction is?

Verses 1 to 4. Favoritism contradicts faith in Christ. 5 to 7. God seems to be partial, doesn't he, to the poor. He positively discriminates toward the poor.

So how do we sort this out? Well, let me suggest a way ahead. First, remember what favoritism or partiality is. Do you remember what it is? It is to respect the face.

[18:05] That is, it is to see what is external and act in accord with what you see externally. God does not do this. He is not partial to the rich or to the poor.

Rather, God acts not because of what he sees so much as what is in his heart, in the core of his being.

God reaches out to the needy not so much because of their situation but because of his nature which loves to help people in need. Acting on the base of someone's external circumstances is incompatible with acting purely out of love.

Look at Deuteronomy 7. Deuteronomy 7 verses 6 to 8. And it would be helpful if you could look up this with me. Deuteronomy 7, 6 to 8.

God says to his people, For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

[19:14] The Lord did not set his affection on you because you are more numerous than other peoples for you were the fewest of all people. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the hand of slavery from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Can you see it was something within God that drove him to act according to in the way that he did. It is things within God that causes him to respond. God's act on behalf of Israel is not prompted out of their misery but out of his love.

So in his actions we find out what he's like. In his actions in the cross we find his character revealed most clearly. We find he's a God who's gracious and loving who rescues the needy and the oppressed.

So let's do what we've done in the previous two sections. Let's see if we can draw out a principle and the principle is this that when you obey God's kingly law to love you are like him.

You cannot be loving and show partiality. Partiality is incompatible with love. With that background in mind look at James 2, 8 to 11.

[20 : 29] James reminds us that God is clear. We are to love our neighbour as ourselves. But then he points out that if we show partiality and favouritism then we commit sin and we're condemned by God's law.

And that puts us in the same category he says as adulterers and murderers. Now James has effectively snuck up on his hearers hasn't he? You see they were sitting there I'm sure thinking that they're not adulterers.

But James shows them if they show partiality they are sinners and therefore they've broken God's law. Friends can we deny the charge of being partial?

By the way I should tell you one little story about partiality. I'll tell you a story back when I was around about 20 I was a student in theological college and I used to go home to my mum's on the weekend and this one particular weekend I went home and my mum had a prescription for some drugs that needed to be collected that the doctor had prescribed for her.

I said I'll go down the street and collect them for you. So I went down the street and I need to tell you how I was dressed on this occasion. I didn't have any shoes on because I grew up in Papua New Guinea where you don't wear shoes I just don't like shoes.

[21 : 55] I had the very scrappiest T-shirt I had in my wardrobe it had holes all the way through the back of it and so on and I walked into this chemist and I presented the prescription and as I presented it they looked at me they looked me up and down and then they disappeared to I presumed get it sorted out and it took for ages and then they came out and after about I think it probably was about 20 minutes they came out and they said to me who is the person on the prescription I said it's my mother they said who are you I said well I'm her son they said can you give us some ID so I gave them ID and then they disappeared for another five minutes and then they came out and they gave me the prescription and I paid up and I walked out and I walked across the street and I walked down the road a little bit and then I turned around and looked back at the chemist and there is a police car pulling up and the police walked straight into the chemist and I knew who they were going in there to get but by this stage the chemist had seen that you know

I wasn't the person they thought that I was but what had they done they had acted according to the face hadn't they that is they had seen someone's external appearance made a judgment and acted accordingly that is what it means to show partiality and I think we do it all the time and friends if you are now imagining places where you do it and then you put adulterers in a different category you have a problem because we are all law breakers and when we show partiality we break the law as well friends I don't think we escape easily do we we show partiality and we show it in Christian congregations so again just thinking about verses 12 and 13 we need to look at the larger picture when we look at the Bible what do we see the Bible has a double edge to it doesn't it on the one side it is the law of God and that law looks at us outwardly yes it's just done and it looks at our actions and it condemns us doesn't it we're far to live according to

God's standards we are sinners and then what happens is as we look at scripture it shows us something else doesn't it it shows us the gospel now the gospel comes from God's nature to be gracious and loving it shows us the character of God it looks at the actions of God in the cross mind you the law shows us the character of God as well but the gospel shows us his forgiveness though we have broken his law and it promises forgiveness and it offers us hope so God's word has a double sidedness to us a law which gives a law but a law which gives freedom that frees us a law which judges us according to God's standard but a law which promises the freedom of the gospel as well in Christ God's mercy has triumphed over judgment and that's what James means I think in verses 12 to 13 we are to act as those who have been judged by the law of liberty and if we understand that double sidedness to scripture we will act in this way we will not live as though we

had not received mercy that is we will not show favouritism we will act according not according to outward appearances but according to what we see
God do which flows from his heart and what we see God do in the gospel God does not treat us friends according to external appearances we should live as those dependent upon God's mercy not act according to what we outwardly see but according to how God has acted toward us we should act out of grace mercy and love friends I wonder if James and God have caught us out today I wonder if you have become aware of your sinfulness as I have become aware of mine if you have then let me remind you that God acts according to his character and God's character is mercy grace justice forgiveness so flee to God yet again and go to the foot of the cross and there you'll find God to be merciful yet again and when you've experienced his mercy then act like him be merciful be kind be just be a doer of the gospel not just a hearer be a doer of the gospel not just a receiver of it and let it flow down into everything including how you treat people at morning tea this morning let's pray father please help us to be not just hearers but doers and particularly father as we hear your great kindness enacted out to us on the cross and particularly as we remember it in the Lord's Supper this morning please father help us to be people who take this on board and act accordingly we pray this in Jesus name Amen