

Learning To See Others

James 2:1-13

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Let's look at the last stanza of the hymn which we have just sung. And I want to make sure that we are able to not just pass by it in a way that would be quite easy to, but let's look at that again. "O, be ye glad, be ye glad, every death that you have ever had has been paid up in full by the grace of the Lord. Be ye glad, be ye glad, be ye glad."

There is perhaps no better lyric or stanza that could come before this particular passage which we will look at together than this one. It is a reminder that we come to this passage as the church of Jesus Christ which proclaims the work of Christ on our behalf, and He has quite literally paid the debt that we owed to a righteous God because of our sin. And yet, Christ became poor that we might become rich. He gave himself that we might be redeemed. And it is a reminder as we go to this passage this morning in James where James is looking specifically at how we treat one another, and what difference does the gospel make, and how do we and how should we understand what he is calling us to do as a result of the work of the gospel?

Hear now God's word as we learn through James how we are to see others.

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

We now ask you, O Lord, by your Holy Spirit, give us the ability to understand how we see others. What do we see? How do we respond? Lord, these seemingly minute questions that happen often, even outside of our conscience understanding of doing them, we divide even among ourselves. Help us, O Lord, to hear your word. Help us, O Lord, to hear the gospel anew, but that your word might not only confront us, but that it would gently and by your mercy correct us that we might love our neighbor as ourselves because we have been wholly and dearly loved. In Jesus's name. Amen.

As we turn in this passage this morning, I want you to see that we have two points in which this passage in some sense sort of divides itself in two. The first half, verses 1-7, really deals with how the

gospel confronts us. And secondly in verses 8-13, how the gospel corrects us. And I think it comes at perfect time for us as a congregation. And I hope that the Lord can not only use it in your life but use it in our lives collectively as a church as we seek to respond to those around us.

So, in looking at this passage together, first in verses 1-7 we'll see how the gospel confronts us. In other words, how does the gospel confront our partiality or our favoritism, our bias? I want you to see in some ways he addresses three things in these seven verses. First, bias is inherent. And when we participate in bias or partiality, an exchange happens. And then lastly as the gospel confronts us, not only do we recognize the inherent realities of these biases playing out in us and the exchange which we do in the process, how it leads to a disordered kingdom.

In looking at this first point together, how the gospel confronts, I want you to see what James is writing here. And when James is writes to them, he's writing to them, of course, early on in the Christian faith. He would have written prior to Paul. So, the gospel is changing people's lives. They are gathering together as the church as we've looked at before. And he turns to something very practical. And it really comes down to one simple idea or one simple question. How do you see others in our midst? How do you see others that are around you in your neighborhood, in your workplace, in the world?

And he says very quickly not whether partiality is happening in your midst, "My brothers," he says, "show no partiality." In other words, he understands that our partiality, our tendency to show favoritism or bias is inherent because we are sinners and because we struggle with sin. It is a recognition of our fallen condition that permeates how we see people. And what he's addressing here is in this church they had begun to show partiality to some degree. And he confronts it by specifically bringing up this example that if in your midst someone arrives who seems to have wealth. Now, wealth even for that time as it is for us, yes, it is to some degree the outward signs of wealth, but also what wealth enables us to have which is power, power of relationship, power of network, power of choice, power of opportunity.

And so, he tells them if you say to the one who is wealthy, you have the primary place, but you say to the one who is poor, you stand over there or in fact, sit and kneel below me, then what you're doing is you're giving priority of relationship to those who you believe can help you. Underneath the categories of wealth and poverty, it might first be this idea that what he's trying to correct is they're not caring for the poor. But here is the reality, ladies and gentlemen. Inherent within us is the twin truths that we can give generously to the poor but show more honor to the rich. I can singlehandedly, or with both hands, give to those in need, but I can give what is most valuable to me which is my need for status and place to those that I think can open the door.

James gives this picture. And I think to some degree, it's meant to be obvious and perhaps, I might suggest, a little absurd because it's so naked in its practice to prove a point. We must get to the place where we allow the gospel to first shine the light on the realities that showing bias and partiality and favoritism is inherent. The question is not whether we show bias or favoritism. The question is how are we showing it? And the older and wiser we get, the more shrewd we become at cloaking it or rationalizing it. So, James is calling us to be aware. More so, he's confronting this church and the church that has received this letter. How are you showing favoritism to others?

But James grounds this absurdity, because that is precisely what it is, because of what he goes into next which is this exchange. Now, let's look at these first seven verses in not a wordplay, per say, but there's something going on here that's below the surface. Now, watch. He says, "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." This word "partiality" or "favoritism" in some sense is how do you receive somebody else's face? In some sense when we show favoritism, we're showing honor and respect more to one face than we are another. So, that's the first of what's embedded beneath the word that is translated to us as partiality.

But then at the end of the verse he says this, "faith in our Lord Jesus Christ," and then he tacks on this phrase, "the Lord of glory." The phrase "Lord of glory" is a specific way of phrasing and understanding this word glory. Glory is not one particularly, if you will, of place, although it is not less

than that, but it is more than that. It is one of a shining regal glory of place, of accomplishment, of power. And he's saying this Lord of glory, he's borrowing what other writers in the New Testament would use, to describe and point to Jesus Christ in His resurrected state. Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, victorious over sin and death. Although He was made poor in our midst, He would become rich because of His death and His victory over sin and death.

And so, James is now saying you are exchanging the glory of the risen Lord in whom you have been redeemed, who is the only one who is worthy of glory and honor and praise. And you have exchanged that glory for the absurd glory of taking a wealthy person's face or someone who can do you benefit and showing them favoritism over others. It is an exchange of glory not dissimilar from what Paul says when the church reads it in Romans 1 as speaking of the world, that the world in its practices seemed to be exchanging the glory of the creator for the created. And I can't tell you how many times I've heard the church of Jesus Christ rail at the world and how bad it is. But here's the reality. The reality is James is saying well before Paul wrote Romans that guess what? The problem isn't out there. The problem is in here. We exchange glory, too, the glory of the risen one for the glory of the one that might enable us to rise.

So, James says in verse 5,

Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

It's almost as if he's going back and saying, you're showing glory to the ones who actually show dishonor to the Lord of glory, His very name, because are not the rich the ones you've complained about who've lorded it over you and have tried to oppress you because of your proclamation of this very glorified one? Do you not see the exchange that you've been willing to give?

But it also blends into this third subpoint which is this idea of disordered kingdom, that in exchanging the glory of the Lord for the glory of someone who you think will do you good, and you're dishonoring the poor in your midst, you've just taken all that Christ has taught from the Sermon on the Mount forward and you've turned it upside down into a disordered kingdom. When we ignore the clear teaching of Jesus, it is if we believe in the full glory of the gospel, then what this church has attempted to practice is that Jesus said those who were willing to acknowledge themselves as poor and in need will be the first, and those who believe they are rich and have enough will be last.

And James reminds us as Jesus teaches that God has chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. He has chosen the poor dishonorable things to show the power of God. Is that not what the cross is? He has taken a dishonorable thing and turned it into a vehicle for redemption. He's taken shame and turned it upside down. And He's turned it into a method and a process and a way to give glory and honor and redemption. Now, James is saying when you show honor to the one who you think can do you good, and you do not show care and love for your neighbor who is poor, you've just taken the kingdom of the gospel and of Christ and turned it upside down. And in fact, when we begin to show the honor to the one who we think has and can help us and dishonor to the one who we don't think can help us, we've just denied why we're in the condition of our fallen nature to begin with.

Ladies and gentlemen, friends, family, all too painfully over these last eight weeks have I seen many of you suffer because of the loss of our loved ones. And when you, as I was yesterday with a family burying their child, realize that life in and of itself is fundamentally, absolutely, irrevocably unpredictable. And we come from the earth and to the earth we will return until the Lord returns in glory. Hallelujah. But here's the reality. All of us are born with nothing. And we are sinners. And our broken natures fundamentally tell us that not only have our natures been broken, but the world is broken. So, therefore,

we as sinners are born into a hostile environment. All of us are poor, and not one of us has anything were it not for the gracious provision of God. And the disordered kingdom is we're showing favoritism on a human perspective by those we think have pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps, and we want them to help us do the same. When we show dishonor to the poor, what we are fundamentally saying is, I guess you didn't do so well in this hostile environment. Why don't you stand over there?

We are fallen in our natures. We are fallen in the creation. And we are all poor and in need. And when we form ourselves as judges as to who can sit where and who can do what and who can say when and what, then we are fundamentally putting ourselves in the place that only the Lord of glory belongs. And He says, for our sakes He became poor that we might become rich, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

But something more fundamental I want to share with you, two things, and then we'll move to the second point. Many eons ago, Scottish pastor Robert Murray M'Cheyne said the following. As he was preaching on Matthew 25, he said,

"I fear there are some Christians among you to whom Christ can say no such thing. Come thou blest, inherit the kingdom. Your haughty dwelling rises in the midst of thousands who have scarce a fire to warm themselves, have but little clothing to keep out the biting frost. And yet, you never darken their door. You heave a sigh and perhaps at a distance, but you do not visit them. Ah, my dear friend, I am concerned for the poor but more for you. I know not what Christ will say to you in that great day. I fear there are many who are hearing me who may know well that they are not Christians because they do not love to give. To give largely and liberally, not grudgingly at all, requires a new heart. An old heart would rather part with its life blood than with its money. Oh, my friends, enjoy your money. Make the most of it. Give none away. Enjoy it quickly. For I can tell you, you will be beggars throughout eternity."

On the one hand, we could look at this passage and think that the action step is I need to call you and we need to encourage one another to give to the poor. But do you know that's not first and foremost what this passage is about? James is not critiquing their lack of giving to the poor. It's actually something far deeper and far more fundamental.

And here, I want to quote author Brian Fikkert who serves in the PCA. He says, "Economists think that human flourishing comes from greater consumption. But studies now show that our happiness is not increasing. Happiness is an actuality now in decline. Our incomes are going up. Our happiness is going down. And that is not unique to America." To which he and his co-author Kelly Kapic wrote the following. "What is the goal of poverty alleviation?" Please hear this. They say, "The goal of God's story of change is for people to experience human flourishing in their mind, affections, will, and body, and enjoy loving relationships with God, the self, others, and the rest of creation."

His critique of the church, his confronting the church as James does with the gospel is not first and foremost that they need to go out and give to the poor. No. It's a fundamental issue that we've dishonored them in our relating to others, our lack of love, our lack of care, our lack of recognition that each of us are human in different places, all of us in a hostile environment. And when we show favoritism to the one over the other, then we are missing the gospel completely.

Now, this happened to be one of the ways and the primary way that James confronts the church. But our showing favoritism to the rich and not to the poor, or whatever the case may be, comes in a lot of different flavors. It comes in the form of partiality with regard to race. It comes in the form of what we believe or what we practice or how we vote or don't vote.

And ladies and gentlemen, as I look at this congregation this morning, I'm beginning to see the future, maybe, I hope, not a long future. But we have reduced attendance this morning I believe largely because concerns over the coronavirus. How are we going to respond to those in need? Are we primarily going to be concerned about ourselves collectively or individually? Are we going to show favoritism to those who can help us, but we will be locked in fear because we might be called to help others? To show favoritism towards those who can give us advice and strength and comfort but ignoring the needs of the widow or the elderly or the immunocompromised or the young? May the Lord give us wisdom and understanding empowered by the gospel that might prevent us from practicing bias towards the healthy and uninfected and stay as far away as we can from those who might be infected. What will that look like for us?

This is where I think this text also helps us, not just in confronting us, but it's also in helping us to correct, giving us a path forward. And in this second portion of the passage, he turns to the following when he says, "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors." But then in verse 12 he says, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty." I think for James, the law of liberty and the royal law are the same thing. Yes, James was speaking to primarily a Jewish congregation, a Jewish population. And yes, he would have been thinking most certainly of the law of Moses. But more than that, he would be reflecting on how Jesus interpreted the law of Moses in bringing about the kingdom of the gospel.

And so, in so doing, what we find out is that James first and foremost is in some sense calling us and teaching us how the gospel gives us freedom to love and care for others without partiality. Why is that the case? It is the case because he grounds it in our union with Christ. We are free to move into and love and relate to those who have need and do so without partiality. Why? Because we are in the law of liberty.

Fundamental for James isn't first and foremost to go and do. It's to remember who you are through Jesus Christ. We have been given mercy upon mercy. It is Christ who has given to us while we were yet His enemies. It is Christ who has given to us. In fact, preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards said the following. "Christ loved us and was kind to us and was willing to relieve us, though we were very hateful persons and of an evil disposition not deserving any good so that we should be willing to be kind to those who are very 'undeserving.'"

For James, it is the same. The law of liberty, the union with Christ, the Lord of glory and our union with Him and what He has done for us becomes the ground and the freedom to which to move into each other's lives without favoritism or partiality. But the gospel also gives us the ability not only to see that we have freedom to do this. We also can, by the same gospel, begin to ask the questions of ourselves, is there evidence that the gospel is at work?

What do I mean? James says in verse 10, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it." And so, he gives us the ability to look back on what Jesus taught on the Sermon on the Mount and begins saying, are we trying to defend ourselves before God and say, well, I've done really well here, so I'm good. But he's saying, no. If you've broken one of these beautiful laws, that is the law of liberty, because of what Christ has done, we get to do these things. But if you've failed at this point, you've failed them all. James is giving us a diagnostic of asking the question, where is bias showing itself? And when you see it, come in confession acknowledging it.

And in verse 12, this phrase, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty," is a packed phrase. It's an ongoing action. He says so keep on speaking and so keep on acting "as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty." What is he pointing to? That is, if we are trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ and His mercy, then we believe are union is with all that He has done. And in so doing, as that, we begin to recognize that we can ask, Lord, where is the law of liberty? Where is your mercy not operating in me? Because we are all going to fall, we are all some time this week going to show

favoritism and partiality. But when we see it operating, as those who have received the great gift of salvation, we act and so do as those who live under the law of liberty. We go to Him and acknowledge our sin and say, Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

And in the beauty and the logic of the law of liberty, as we recognize our lack of mercy, we then go acknowledging it. We receive mercy. And His compassions and mercy are made new every morning. And the law of liberty, we now are empowered and renewed out of our confession because of Christ to go and to do according to that law of liberty. It is a freedom to because of our union with Christ. It is evidence of our union with Him because of His work for us.

But thanks be to God, it ends with this. James says, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy." Now, that doesn't sound like it's ending so well, right? He's telling us a hard truth. Lord, have mercy because we recognize that if we on that day where Christ returns and we sit before Him, and yet we have fundamentally denied the law of liberty in regard to showing mercy, then we are evidencing the fact that we never really knew Him. If it is not operating in us, again according to James, it is very legitimate to ask, have we ever understood the gospel? We lead with mercy, and mercy follows us.

Please understand I'm not saying that we have to be perfect. That is not what he's saying. But if we fail to see where this is happening, we are evidencing that we never knew the gospel. And that is my concern and my fear which took place in the American south, even up to barely a generation ago. How could the church of Jesus Christ say to one race, you can't come here. You can't sit here. If we do not come to terms with how bias and favoritism is so a part of our history, we fail to understand our need for mercy. And if we fail to understand our need for mercy, do we understand the gospel at all? Lord, have mercy.

We desire to be a church that is intergenerational and intercultural which means that while I find "OK Boomer" sometimes funny, it also can be a form of favoritism and ageism. If as men we feel like we always need to explain everything to women because we really feel like we need it explained, we're just mansplaining. And what we're doing is we're evidencing, well, I'm so sorry you don't understand the world as a man. Let me explain it to you. If we look down our noses at our young people and say, man, why are you so interested in TikTok, instead of maybe entering into it with them. We all form all different kinds of judgments. And what we secretly want is everybody to have everything in order before we actually will allow them to hear the gospel. We want this to be a place as a hospital for sinners. Really? How do we show favoritism and bias against those who are so clearly sinners and might even hate the gospel?

It calls us to ask hard questions because the mercy which redeems us is also the same mercy which James ends with. "Mercy triumphs over judgment." A heart that has been transformed and infected with the mercy of the gospel is one who seeks to show mercy first. And when we fail, as inevitably we will, we go to the Father of mercy asking Him forgiveness to be renewed in it. The question is not whether partiality or favoritism is amongst us. The question is how is it among us? And can the Lord free us through the law of liberty to show impartiality and mercy and love that we all might flourish, men and women, young and old, regardless of race, regardless of socioeconomic status.

We don't want to be a rich church. We don't want to be a poor church. We don't want to be a white church. We don't want to be a black church. We don't want to be an Asian church. We want to be the church of Jesus Christ for the Lord has shown no partiality but has given us mercy. And by that mercy, we triumph with Christ over judgment and are free to love one another. Lord, have mercy. May we reflect more and more of it. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we ask that you would forgive us for the ways in which we show partiality and favoritism, where we have failed to love our neighbor as ourselves. Lord, we also recognize the twin realities that we can give to those in need but at the same time show favoritism to those who can help us in our need. Lord, forgive us. Forgive us for our self-deception. Forgive us for our failure to practice the

beautiful law of liberty because we have been freed through the wonderful powers of your grace and mercy. So, Lord, as people who are works in progress, we need you to work in us that we might seek the flourishing of the other. And Lord, in the midst of our nation and our world that is often gripped with fears over a spreading epidemic that may become a pandemic, we don't know. We ask you, O Lord, that it would not become a pandemic. We pray, O Lord, that there would not be the loss of life. We pray, Lord, for healing for those who have been infected. But Lord, we ask as the church of Jesus Christ that our first question might be, by your mercy, how might we show mercy to those in our community? Lord, help us to reach that place because you have shown us mercy and you have healed us of the worst disease of all, the power of sin and death. So, in that, O Lord, free us up and empower us to love others. In Jesus's name. Amen.