

Sermon Discussion Questions & Follow-up Notes
June 23, 2024
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Sermon Text: James 2:1-13

Title: “How to Express Mercy” / Series: “Words that Heal”

Observations & Discussions Questions

The Command & Imaginative Scenarios (v1-4): Don’t show favoritism!

James opens this passage with a strong command: “Don’t show favoritism!” The word “favoritism” in the Greek language is a combination word of ‘treating according’ + ‘face’. The general idea is that we inherit and are raised in ways of judging people that are shallow, in the sense that they don’t see the depths of how God relates to people. James gives two imaginative scenarios in these verses, and the sermon riffed on this imaginative scene and asked us to imagine our emotions if we sat down next to a wealthy person (such as Steve Forbes) versus a poor person (such as a homeless person).

Discussion question: The example of economic labels is used by James, but what are other labels we bring to church with us that lead us to treat people according to appearances rather than according to the way God sees and relates to them?

To align our judgments more closely with God’s treatment of people and to experience the full spiritual renewal of the visitors God brings to our church, we need to deepen in three areas of perception:

First, a deeper perception of others (v5-7): Notice that James considers this level of transformation to be very difficult and to require the utmost attentiveness (“listen!”). James invites us to survey the entire sweep of salvation history and to notice that God very often chose the poor to be rich in faith. What examples might James have in mind in verse 5? We can imagine four examples. 1) Moses: He was a convicted murderer who lived in the desert and took the lowliest job in his family (shepherd) – yet this overlooked outcast is chosen by God to save the Jews from slavery. 2) David: He was the underdog of his family, the 8th son (symbolizing that the family was already complete, 7, without him), who was sent away from the house at a young age by his father who thought this boy was good-for-nothing. Yet, God chose this young man to establish Jerusalem as the Israelite capital city. 3) Elijah: When God needed a prophet to call the arrogant kings of Israel back to God’s true word, He selected a foreign-born, uneducated, unknown young man who was in hiding. 4) Mary: Perhaps James is also thinking of his own mother, whom God selected as a teenager peasant from a backwater town to be the mother of the Messiah. What we see from these examples (to which dozens more could be added) is that God has tended to choose forgotten underdogs who are overlooked by society to be rich in faith and mighty deeds on His behalf. Surely we should not judge the poor so quickly, since their poverty makes them more a likely candidate to be used by God!

Discussion question: It was mentioned in the sermon that James is not glorifying poverty, nor denigrating the rich in this passage. Why would it be a mistake to read James 2:5-7 as a call to look down on those with significant material resources? (Hint: Didn’t Job & Abraham have prosperity?)

Second, a deeper perception of self (v8-11): James cites Leviticus 19, and the command to love others as we love self. James calls this the “royal law” and “the law of liberty” - because it is this lifestyle of self-giving love that marks us out as God’s sons/daughters, and it is this law that frees us from the constraints of worldly ways of seeing and treating people. In Leviticus 19:13-18, Moses mentions four categories of people whom we need to be especially caring and loving towards – your employee, the disabled, the poor, the socially disgraced. We are called to ask, “how would I want to be treated, if I were in their situation?”

Discussion question: Which of these four ‘case studies’ from Moses is relevant to you right now?

Third, a deeper perception of God (v12-13): James wants us to be aware of how dependent we are on God’s mercy as we enter church every week. If we need mercy from God, shouldn’t we give out the same?

Discussion Q: How does “mercy triumphs over judgment” differ from “mercy replaces judgment?”