

On Mercy

¹ My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ² For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³ and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', ⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷ Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸ You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ⁹ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹ For the one who said, 'You shall not commit adultery', also said, 'You shall not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement.

1. The scandal of social inequality (2.1-7)

(1) My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? In Chapter 2, James begins with some sharp words of rebuke. Already in James 1.9-11, he has spoken of the plight of the poor and the vanity of the rich. He now invites his listeners, 'my brothers and sisters', to reflect on the way in which they relate to one another. This is a theme to which he will return in James 5.1-6. In this passage, he takes issue with the 'acts of favouritism', which vitiate the faith 'in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ'. The phrasing in Greek here is ambiguous: does it mean the faith 'of our Lord' or the faith 'in our Lord', in other words, is it faith in God, enlarged and strengthened by the revelation of his Son, or is it faith in his Son? Or is it 'faith in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ'? Scholars argue either/or but it may be more a question of both/and, 'the faith in God which specially arises out of the gospel and rests on him of whom the Gospel speaks'. Another suggestion is that the phrase 'glorious', literally, 'of glory' in the Greek, may be hinting at a high Christology. The two words 'of glory' is used in the LXX to refer to the *Shekinah*, the presence of God. But it is also noteworthy that some of the early Greek manuscripts omit these two words completely. It is evident that the language of this verse caused even early commentators some confusion.

(2) For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, Is this situation hypothetical? Or is James speaking of something that he has observed? What kind of assembly is this? The Greek says not *ekklesia*, a word which suggests assembly or 'church', but *sunagoge*, a word which suggests assembly or 'synagogue': is James describing an experience of Jewish Christians at the synagogue, among other Jews? Or is he describing rich Christians within a Christian assembly? Note that the term 'synagogue' could be used for any place of assembly – a place of worship, a place of study, or even a court of law. Whatever the situation, James chides his listeners for their treatment of the rich and the poor. **(3) and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet',** Note the phrase 'if you take notice' – think of our attentiveness towards others. Who do we notice? And why? How does their status or appearance affect the way in which we treat them? Seating arrangements in churches have often been the source of controversy. Until the nineteenth century, many churches were supported financially by pew rents. **(4) have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?** The idea of 'making distinctions among yourselves' challenges us to reflect on questions of class and status. James sounds surprisingly modern at this point.

(5) Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? Yet if God shows a predilection for ‘the poor’ as opposed to ‘the rich’, does this mean that God is partial? Or is James echoing the teaching of Jesus at this point (cf. Matthew 5.3 and Luke 6.20 and the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16.19f.))? What does James have in view when distinguishing between rich and poor? Some commentators have described James 2.5 as ‘one of the most explicit biblical statements of God’s option for the poor’. What does the gospel have to say about globalisation and the unrestrained nature of capitalism? The crippling burden of debt in the Third World and the consumerism of the West? The growing disparities between rich and poor? **(6) But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?** The Venerable Bede interprets the ‘poor’ here as the ‘humble and those who because of their faith in invisible riches appear contemptible to the world’. Calvin suggests that God sends grace both to the rich and poor. The difference is that the poor are more likely to ascribe all they have to the mercy of God, whereas the rich are more likely to ascribe their situation to their own work and merit. Intriguing to reflect on the effects of Covid on rich and poor? Some have described the virus as a great leveller, while others have realised that social inequalities have become even more marked. When James speaks of the rich ‘dragging the poor’ into court, he is perhaps alerting his listeners to the profound inequalities which exist in his society. **(7) Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?** James exhorts his listeners not to shame the poor, because this dishonours God as well. Remember James 1.27: **Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.**

2. Love your neighbour (2.8)

(8) You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ Again James echoes the teaching of Jesus. In Matthew 22.34-40, Jesus is asked which commandment in the law is the greatest. He combines the love command in Leviticus 19.18 with Deuteronomy 6.4-5. He says, ‘on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets’. In a similar way, James reflects on the partiality which vitiates the work of love. Love is the cardinal virtue but what does ‘loving your neighbour as yourself’ mean. In *On Christian Teaching*, St Augustine comments on ‘loving our neighbours as ourselves’. He suggests that implicit in this statement is the idea of ‘self-love’: ‘when it is said “you shall love your neighbour as yourself,” your own self-love is not neglected’ (*De doctrina Christiana*, 1.26.27). And yet this notion of ‘self-love’ has often been misunderstood. For many Protestant theologians, when Jesus speaks of loving your neighbour as yourself, this means cultivating an attentiveness to our neighbour which delivers us from self-absorption. Paradoxically, for that most self-absorbed of philosophers, Søren Kierkegaard, loving one’s neighbour is ‘genuine love’ for the simple reason that such love involves self-renunciation and self-denial. So, within the Christian tradition, these challenging words about ‘loving our neighbours as ourselves’ have been interpreted in two radically different ways: for one, our loving attentiveness to our neighbours corresponds to our capacity for self-love; for another, loving one’s neighbour speaks of our capacity for renouncing ourselves and embracing a pattern of self-denial. What do you think?

3. On Mercy (2.9-13)

(9) But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.
(10) For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.
(11) For the one who said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’, also said, ‘You shall not murder.’
Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.
(12) So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.
(13) For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement. Again is James echoing Jesus in the Beatitudes, when he says ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy’ (Matthew 5.7). Or even the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us’? Loving your neighbours as yourselves means that you must not show partiality to some ‘neighbours’ because of their wealth or social standing.

- (1) What does James have to say to people who worry about their status? Or make distinctions between different groups of people?
- (2) Does God show partiality? Do we?
- (3) How does this passage help us to reflect on the inequalities in society today?
- (4) What does it mean to 'love your neighbour as yourself'?