

Mercy, Faith, and Action

a sermon

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James 2:1-17

I have to tell you. There are some scripture passages that, when I read them just before I preach them, I think “I should just stop. That says it all.”

This felt like one of those passages: the kind that *I* think says it all, and anything I might say would be unnecessary extra noise.

“So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.”

What more can I say?

“Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

Really, what more can I say?

But maybe saying a little would be helpful to some.



James was calling out the behavior of Christians who were dismissive of the poor and who favored the rich. They treated rich people gently, carefully. But the poor they treated harshly, unjustly. Respect was given readily to some, either grudgingly or not at all to others. And the different treatment of the some and the others was based entirely on how wealthy they appeared to be.

This is so wrong, says James. It just isn't right. And the reason why it's not right, for James, is because of the gospel. Jesus reigns in glory, *he* does,

not the powerful of this world,
not the wealthy,
not the successful,
not the smart.

And he first blessed and caused faith to arise in the hearts of the poor, the powerless, the outcasts, the “losers.”

“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? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?”

This is so wrong, says James. It just isn't right, this merciless treatment of some and this fawning treatment of others based simply on their random life circumstances. You cannot, James tells his friends, really believe in Jesus who has shown you great mercy, and have no mercy toward others. You cannot, James tells his friends, really possess Christian faith if you

have little inclination to be merciful toward those who don't rise to your socioeconomic standards.

This is so wrong, says James. It just isn't right, this servility toward the powerful and this harshness toward the poor. It is rooted, says James, in a poor understanding of faith. True Christian faith isn't just believing the right things about Jesus. It's not just having the right theological ideas. There's got to be action as well, action inspired and compelled by a *heart* that believes in Christ's mercy.

"If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?"

Or, as is often asked today, what good are "thoughts and prayers" when there is no action to relieve the suffering for which thoughts and prayers are needed?

James seems to be telling his friends, those Christians from long ago, those who first read his letter, that these three must be joined together — mercy, faith, and action.

Do you think he might be telling us the same thing?



When it comes to scripture, including and maybe especially this scripture passage, I know that there's no one single way that we'll all hear these words.

Some may hear these words and be encouraged.

Some may be convicted.

Some may be angered.

Some may be confused.

Some may not hear them at all.

To some, the meaning of this Bible passage may be obvious. And to others, it may be far from obvious. And even for all those for whom it is obvious, the obviousness may not be one thing but many, depending on the person.

It's not that the way *I* hear these words and respond to them, my interpretation, what I hear in it, see in it, get out of it, is *the* "right way," the only way.

Yet, as strange and difficult and troubling as this strange and difficult and troubled thing we call "preaching" surely is, I want to hope (I *need* to hope) that it is still right for me to reflect on scripture from a pulpit, to share with you

how we might understand scripture,
how we might respond to it,
how God may be speaking to us in this very moment,
how God's love for us in Jesus Christ might be
apprehended,
embraced,
lived,
here and now.

And it *is* love that fills these verses, the love of Jesus Christ for us forgiven sinners. It is love, even as much of what we find in them is direct and challenging.

The good news of Jesus Christ is the very reason *why* this passage is, in spots, so harsh. Because it calls us to accept that believing in Jesus Christ is a deep thing, an active thing, something that demands us to be on the outside what we are on the inside, that warns us against dividing

body from soul,
believing from doing,
right faith from good works,
evangelism from social justice,
worship from mission,
theology from ethics,
Sunday morning from the rest of the week.

“So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.”

“Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

This is what James calls *us*, not just his friends 2000 years ago, calls us to accept.

And we love that!

Well, actually, I think we hate that.

We don't like being told that we must be on the outside what we are on the inside, as if we are not.

We don't like being told that our actions must match our beliefs, as if they do not.

We don't like being the ones being told that. This, we think, is for *other* people, not us good people, us nice people, us *Christian* people.

We hate feeling the discomfort of having it pointed out that we often do not live with such integrity, do not live as those whose actions match their professed beliefs, are just “Christians” in name only.

“So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.”

“Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

I find a plea for integrity in these words. I hear a call for us to live our Christian lives as an integral whole, and to believe in Jesus with integrity, an integrity that aims for the unity of mercy, faith, and action.



But having such integrity is not easy. Living out a unity of mercy, faith, and action is really, really hard.

And many people don't even bother.

As G. K. Chesterton famously said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.”

I am wanting all of us to try. I want us to try to live the unity of mercy, faith, and action that honors the Lord Jesus.

But it is difficult.

Why is it difficult?

Because you have to look at yourself, deep inside yourself:

at your motives,
your desires,
your fears.

And that is often so ugly. Many people cannot bring themselves to look, so painful it is for them. It shocks them. It repulses them. They'd rather look anywhere else but inside themselves.

I am grateful to my friend Chuck DeGroat for letting me and others know about this statement by John Flavel, a 17th century pastor: "There are some men and women who have lived 40 or 50 years in the world and have had scarcely one hour's discourse with their hearts all the while."

Why is it difficult? Why is it hard to achieve a lived unity of mercy, faith, and action that honors the Lord Jesus?

It's because you have to pray. And prayer is paradoxically among the most natural things for us and also the most difficult. We are easily distracted from prayer. We feel awkward in prayer. We have a thousand and one excuses for not praying. When we do pray, we find a thousand and one unwanted thoughts coming to mind.

And yet without simply spending time intentionally in the presence of God,

seeking God's face,
desiring God's will,
listening for God,
being open to God,
acknowledging God's mercy
and your need for it

it is unlikely that you can be whole, unlikely that your heart will be made more merciful, more faithful, more active.

Why is it difficult? Why is it hard to have this Christ-honoring integrity of mercy, faith, and action?

Well, it's hard because you have to take action. You have to *do* things that are merciful. And that can be scary. That can be risky. That can be unpleasant.

You might be rejected. You might be hurt.

It could cost you, or even wound you.

But to put your faith in action and to do something out of mercy for someone else because your faith in Christ's own mercy toward you, well, it brings honor to Christ and it carries within it great joy.

This is all hard. But not so hard that it's impossible. Because Christ is merciful. Christ is faithful. Christ is active:

in our hearts,
in our lives,
in our days,
in our nights,
in our world.

May Christ Jesus make us strong in mercy, tender in faith, and humble in action.