



## **CHOOSING GOD'S WAY – James 2:1-13; Leviticus 19:11-19**

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We finished up last time with the final verse of James 1:

*Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you. (James 1:27)*

After the positive command to care for those in need, the readers are told to stay free of the world's corrupting influence. It seems a pretty simple command. However, when you are living in this world which has been corrupted through and through by sin, how can you tell when some of that corruption is rubbing off on you? Sometimes it is hard to even see the corruption. It is as if you are swimming in it. It is all you have ever known, and it feels right and natural. An example might be helpful in seeing what this looks like.

After defeat in World War 1, Germany and its people were devastated. The financial reparations crippled the economy and the Germany people had been stripped of their identity. The nation was struggling to find its way forward and leadership was scarce. Into this vacuum rose Hitler and the Nazis. From outside of Germany and this side of World War 2, we can clearly see that the Nazis were bad news, but it wasn't as easy for those struggling to live in Germany at the time. Hitler gave people a sense of pride and hope. He played to their pain, anger, fear and prejudice and their desire to find someone to blame. As Hitler ramped up the rhetoric and headed into war, he pulled people into his toxic world and made it easier to go along with him rather than question him. However, it is hard for us to understand why most of the churches and Christians followed him willingly and even eagerly. To us, from our vantage point, it seems so wrong! How could Christians have been blind to how evil Nazism was?

There are probably a range of answers to that question. Each person had their own motivations, but part of the answer was that the Christians were totally surrounded by Nazi propaganda – that's all they could see. They were swept along by the culture they were living in. They couldn't see what they were a part of. Fortunately, not all German Christians were blinded like this. Christian theologians such as Barth and Bonhoeffer and many ordinary clergy and Christians spoke out against Nazism and stood against what was happening. Some, like Bonhoeffer, were killed for their stand. It is easy for us to condemn the German Christians who supported the Nazis, we can see how very wrong they were, but I wonder if we ever go along with our culture, doing things which those outside can see is clearly wrong?

In the passage we are looking at today, James is going to address one such issue in the life of the new Christian communities to whom he is writing. It is interesting to see how James approaches the issue. He doesn't just tell them to stop what they are doing. He takes this opportunity to show them a process to work through to help them see things as God does and align their actions accordingly. First, He states the problem and gives an example so they know what he is talking about. Secondly, he helps them to see beneath the surface of what is happening and why it is based on wrong assumptions. Then, he looks at what Scripture has to say about the underlying issue. Finally, he impresses on them the seriousness of their wrong behaviour. We're going to look at what James has to say and then think about how we might apply it to our situation today.

## **The Problem**

James feels that their behaviour is not lining up with their beliefs – a major concern for him. They say they have faith in Jesus, but they are doing things He would never have done. James calls Jesus “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ”. The term “glorious” is a way to indicate that Jesus was the visible presence of the glory of God. When we look at Jesus and the way He acts, we see a reflection of God and the way He acts. More than that, Jesus is an example for us to follow if we are to reflect God in our actions. However, instead of following the way Jesus acted while He was on earth, the Christians were acting in a way He never did – they are favouring some people over others. We know this is not how God acts because every other time in the Bible where we find this particular word for “favour” it is talking about how God DOESN'T favour some people over others. So, although these Christians were saying that they want to be God's people, they weren't acting like God.

James then goes on to give an illustration of what they were doing. It isn't possible to tell from what James has written if he is responding to a real situation he has heard about or if he is setting up a hypothetical situation of something which might happen. Either way, the details James gives us paint a vivid picture of what not to do.

One of the first things we can notice is that when the Christians welcome people into the church, they are judging people based on the clothes they are wearing. Then, as now, people's clothes say a lot about them. Poor people were manual labourers and so they and their clothes got dirty. They didn't have easy access to cleaning facilities and so they and their clothes stayed dirty. Wealthy people, who didn't need to do manual labour, often wore white clothes which showed that they had enough money to get things regularly laundered or replaced if they did get dirty. Just by looking at someone, you could tell their social and economic status and therefore judge how to treat them. In the culture of that day, you always showed deference to those of higher status. Sometimes it was just good manners, but sometimes there was an ulterior motive. If you treated the rich person well and made them feel good, then they would be more likely to give you a helping hand – a loan to start a business, a job for your son, a good word with the magistrate if you ended up in the courts. But the poor person – they would be looking to you for help and so you expected them to show favour to you, not the other way around. We might look at the scenario James details and think we would never do something like that, but for them – that was just the way that the culture worked. But James says this is not how things should happen in the church, in fact this behaviour isn't just not nice, it is evil.

## **Understanding the Situation**

To help his readers to understand why he feels that their behaviour is motivated by evil motives, he wants them to see things through God's eyes. Just like nice clothes can cover up the truth about our imperfect bodies, their cultural understanding of the relative value of people covered up the truth about those people. The poor “in the world” or “in the eyes of the world” had been dishonoured but James wants them to see that God had chosen and highly honoured them. The truth is that the poor often have a greater faith in God because they don't have anything or anyone else to rely on. They

know they need God and they are not too proud to reach out to Him. This is not true of all the poor, but it is certainly true around the world that those with the least often are the readiest to turn to God. And God rewards those poor who love Him and turn to Him by giving them the Kingdom. This echoes Jesus' words: "*God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*" (Matthew 5:3) The poor in the world eyes are actually rich in God's eyes.

But those who are rich in the eyes of the world are often very poor in the eyes of God. Even though the Christians choose to honour the rich with the best places in their meetings, James reminds them that it is the rich who often then turn around and use their power to oppress them and persecute them. And in doing so, they slander or blaspheme the name of Christ and by extension, His people – the Christians. The fine clothes of the rich covered up their sinful hearts. James wants the Christians to realise that what they see on the surface – the trappings of status or the lack thereof – is not the whole truth. In God's upside-down kingdom, the poor are rich and the rich are poor.

James is calling the Christians to use wisdom in evaluating the cultural expectations and attitudes of the society around them - to see their culture through God's eyes. This is not easy! If you haven't spent any time living outside your own culture, you are often blind to its particular forms of sin. We can often see them in other cultures, but not in our own. It is a bit like accents. You cannot hear the accent of yourself or those around you. But you can pick up the accents of others and make a guess at where they come from. When I am here in Australia, people call the way I talk an American accent. When I am in the US, they comment on my cute Aussie accent! I don't know what anyone is talking about because I can't hear my accent at all! What you are surround with becomes what is "normal". It is only when we step outside our "normal" that we can see – or hear – things from another perspective. So how can we hope to see the sins of our own culture?

### **Understanding the Scripture**

James says we need to look at things in the light of what God has said in His Word. Instead of following the culture around us, we need to "*obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures*" (v. 8). What is the "royal law"? I believe this is how God wants us to live as members of His Kingdom. It is not specifically the Old Testament law but rather Jesus' re-statement of it. Jesus took the Old Testament law and both expanded it and simplified it for His followers. He expanded it in places such as the Sermon on the Mount as he taught that it isn't just the things we do, but the attitude of the heart which matters. He simplified it as he summed it all up in the call to love God and others. This was nothing new. Jesus and James are both quoting from the Leviticus passage we read this morning. This sums up a list of commands dealing with how to treat all people justly and compassionately. Over the years, this core truth had become obscured with many complicated requirements. Jesus and James are calling people back to the core of the ethics of the Kingdom which is love.

Showing honour to some people more than others might be what was expected in their culture, but it went against the basic requirement to "*Love your neighbour as yourself.*" Therefore, showing favour went against the law and was evil. Each culture is different and each has their unique blind spots. But if James says that if we use this command to shine a light on our culture it should show us how we need to change our behaviour so that we reflect the ethics of the Kingdom instead of the ethics of our culture.

### **Understanding the Seriousness**

James goes on to look at why this is so important. His words in this section are very strong – he doesn't pull any punches. He does start off again by calling his readers "*my dear brothers and sisters*" but then he goes on to admonish them with a "*Listen up!*" He wants them to know that he is writing to them out of love and concern, but that doesn't mean that what they are doing is a minor offense. If they show favour, they will be judged as sinners and lawbreakers.

The New Living Translation says *“But if you favour some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law.”* (v. 9) This has been softened a bit from the Greek. A more literal translation would be something like: *“But if you show partiality, you are a doer of sin and the law convicts you as a deliberate lawbreaker”*. Instead of being a *“doer of the word”* (1:25) you are a *“doer of sin”* and you are guilty of deliberately choosing to live in violation of God’s will. It isn’t a casual mistake which doesn’t matter too much. Instead, it is turning your back on God and choosing to live your own way – something for which you will be held accountable.

James then goes on to place the sin of favouritism in the same league as adultery and murder. His argument is that the same God has given us each of these laws. Therefore, it doesn’t matter which law you break or how many of them you break, you have chosen to turn you back on God and therefore you are guilty. This doesn’t mean that all the laws are equally heinous, but it does mean that all of the laws are equally important, and we must not “allow” ourselves to break what we might consider a minor law because it is culturally expected or convenient. Whether it is favouritism, adultery or murder – all fall short of the basic command to *“Love your neighbour as yourself.”* Therefore, James says that we must be aware, in whatever we say or do, that we will be evaluated *“by the law which sets you free”* which refers back to *“the royal law”* or the law of the Kingdom by which we are free from sin and enabled to reflect the goodness and love of God.

James sums up his argument for the seriousness of their choices in the final verse of this section:

*There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you. (v. 13)*

This is one of those verses in James which some people don’t like because it seems to make God’s forgiveness and mercy dependent on our actions. But we can’t reject it so easily because it says the same thing that Jesus said in the Beatitudes: *“God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”* (Matthew 5: 7) I’m not sure I have all the answers here, but I think it is helpful to think of this verse in the context of all James has said up until this point. I think he has painted both a positive and a negative picture of our response to God and His desires for us.

Let’s start with the positive. Earlier, James has written:

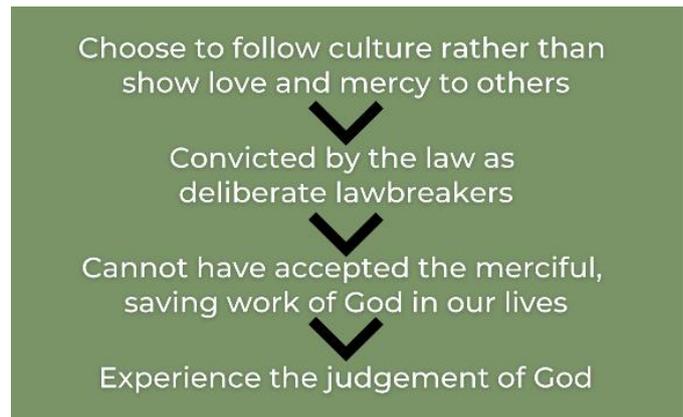
*So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. But don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. (v. 21,22)*

This is James’ way of saying that we need to turn away from evil and humbly accept God’s work in our lives, the Gospel which saves us. But this is just the beginning – we need to then go on and allow God to change us so that we can begin to reflect God’s goodness and love in what we do. In the verses we have been looking at today, this is focused on how we show love to others. Mercy is the active side of love – seeking out ways to show love to others.

Our behaviour is the visible results of the internal change. Yes, we will at times do the wrong thing, but because we are now God’s children, we will experience God’s mercy instead of His judgement. He will forgive us and restore us and give us the necessary wisdom and power to change our behaviour. I love the Greek which actually says, *“Mercy triumphs over judgement!”*



But what if we persist in doing the wrong thing? What if we choose to follow the world around us rather than showing love and mercy to others? Then we will be convicted by the “*royal law*” as being deliberate lawbreakers. But if we persist in not showing love to others, then one has to wonder if we really have known the mercy of God in our lives. Once we have accepted God’s salvation, then we will change – His Spirit within us will show us our sin and teach us God’s will and enable us to walk accordingly. If we have no desire to change, then we cannot have turned from our sin and become a part of His Kingdom and therefore we are still under the judgement of God.



### **The Application**

In conclusion, we must ask ourselves how we can take what James has said and apply it to our lives today. We are not in the same culture as James’ readers and don’t face the same challenges as they did so it can seem a little distant for us. However, I think there are two lessons we need to take away from this.

Firstly, I think we need to ask ourselves if we are accepting the world’s corrupt evaluation of people. Do we judge people based on their outward appearance and base our attitudes and behaviours towards them on that? Our culture is often extremely judgemental and harsh, favouring the young and the beautiful, the strong and the accomplished, the famous and the successful. But God sees the heart and He knows that a polished exterior can hide a sinful heart.

On the other hand, are we willing to show love and mercy to everyone, even those the world looks down on? Do we seek out the poor and the old, the weak and the marginalised, the ordinary and even the failures. Do we actively look for ways to show mercy to them? Do we take the time to really get to know them and discover how God is working in their lives? James indicates that we may be surprised at what we find!

Secondly, I think this passage prompts us to be thinking more carefully about our own culture. We might be unthinkingly accepting our culture’s corrupted values and behaviours. We look back on the Christians who supported the Nazis and judge them. How will future generations – or those from outside our culture - judge us? Let’s be diligent to ask God to open our eyes and give us wisdom so that we can understand the situation, understand what Scripture says about it and take seriously the call of Christ to better reflect Him in all we do.