

Sermon Notes for 13 October 2019, Abide Church, Sarah Corban
Reading James 2:1-13

Some of you will have seen the story that circulated a little while back about a man called Jeremiah Steepok. A typical looking homeless man turned up to a large church. In the 30 minutes before the service, out of the 7,000-10,000 people only 2 or three people responded to his greeting. No one gave him any coins to buy food after he asked them, most people looked at him with poorly disguised disgust, disrespect, or avoided him altogether. He went to sit down in the pews but someone asked him to move and sit at the back instead, so he did.

He sat through the first few songs, and the notices and then watched as the elders stood up to announce the new pastor of the church that was going to be introduced that day. Everyone started clapping and turned around in anticipation. Slowly the homeless man, Jeremiah, stood and walked to the front. He was the new pastor, who had dressed up intentionally as a homeless man, to see how his new congregation would treat him. He took his wig and beard off, told his new congregation they were a gathering of people, not a church of disciples of Jesus Christ. Read them the passage from Matthew about whatever we do for the least of these we do for the Lord and then dismissed them for the week.

I remember it made an impact on me, and it was the first thing that sprung to mind when I read this passage in James. So when I went to find the story in preparation for this week I was gutted to discover it was a fabricated story! But even if it isn't true, it still makes a good point just like any of Jesus's parables which didn't factually happen.

The point that we naturally treat some people better than others. We have an idea of who is important and worthy of our attention, and who isn't.

I found a few stories of pastors of churches who have actually done this since, dressed as homeless people as a sort of litmus test to check where their congregation are at.

There are certainly some rather moving if not cheesy youtube clips where hidden cameras show both congregants walking right past the "homeless" pastor in their rush to get into church, and then there are others who clearly make the person feel welcome, giving them a few coins or some lunch, inviting them into the service.

James too had a concern that his church were showing preferential treatment to some people over others, usually based on clothing and the outward appearance. And this passage highlights his concern in verses 2-11. Then in verse 12 he shifts into an instructive mode, for how they ought to instead be acting.

As I approach any biblical passage, I always find it helpful to look for three things. The biblical point, the theological point, and the pastoral point.

What is the biblical or scriptural point of the passage that is being communicated here?

Then, what is that biblical point saying about God, which is the theological point. Theological comes from Theo - about God, logos - the words, what do the words say about God.

Finally, if we are going to apply it, what then is the pastoral point.

So, the biblical point that stood out to me from this passage is the short sentence, only 4 words, at the end.

"Mercy triumphs over judgment."

I looked and read and dug into this block of 13 verses, the whole of this section of scripture is summed up in these 4 words.

Mercy triumphs over judgment.

So that bit was easy, we can tick the biblical point off, it is better to show mercy than judgment. James tells us this in verses 12 and 13, and that if we show mercy, mercy will be shown to us.

So what's the theological point? What is this passage telling us about God?

Well, we know God has shown us great mercy, tremendous mercy! Didn't he die for us while we were still sinners?

What is the meaning of the word mercy? To show compassion or forgiveness towards someone to whom you have the power over to punish or harm. SLIDE

When we think about us as a broken humanity, with sin at every level...individually, and collectively, God in his great mercy chose compassion and forgiveness towards us, instead of judgment and punishment. He has offered us his tremendous grace, if we chose to accept it. He did this way before we were born, way before we had grown and matured and been thankful or grateful. He does this for those who he knows will never embrace him and accept his grace.

We all know this, we all need to be reminded of it, it's the underlying thread though the whole story of the bible, and something we identify with as Christians.

We know from earlier in this passage that God does not choose the wealthy or the well presented over the poor; that is an entirely human fault. God offers his gracious mercy to everyone, full stop.

So the pastoral point then, the application point, how this scripture sticks to our lives, is that we too must show mercy. If God has shown us mercy, and we are to be imitators of Christ, made in the image of God, we too must show mercy.

Looking back in the first chapter, James tells us how generous God is, giving wisdom to ALL who ask for it, he does not discriminate between different types of people. He is single minded, treats everyone the same, offers everyone grace.

James warns us in both chapter 1 and 2 that we are not to be double minded - which is the opposite to God. We are to be single minded like God - offering the same grace and kindness and mercy to both the rich wealthy and the poor. There is no room for preferential treatment. And we are not to judge, that is the opposite of mercy. It is only God's place to judge.

That congregation who shunned the homeless man who was actually their new pastor clearly did not know the book of James or if they did, they hadn't let it sink deep into their hearts to transform them. They judged the man on his outward appearance, showing special attention to those who fit into their comfortable boxes of who was socially acceptable and who wasn't.

Now I know that homeless people and those who are dressed like they have nothing can be difficult to love, sometimes even slightly repulsive. I lived in Vancouver for several years and came across many of them. Vancouver is the only city where homeless people can actually live because the rest of Canada is so cold and they would die from hypothermia. So they live there, often in the downtown area where they have formed large communities, often sleeping around the subway vents which shoot up relatively warm air. They often were high on drugs, or drunk, or comatose in the streets. Many of them would collect recycling rubbish in a supermarket trolley, because they could get a few coins from collecting it around the city and taking it to a depot. They would get onto the buses or the trains - I think they were allowed on for free. So as I travelled to study each day I would invariably be on the bus with one or two of them. They often stank - either from body odour or from the rubbish they were carrying. Everything in me wanted to recoil and stay away from them. But see I was doing exactly what this congregation was doing. I was judging them, treating them differently to anyone else who was on the bus. It's so easy to judge. Easy to think 'I wonder what choices they have made to get to this point.' 'I wonder what issues and brokenness they have in their lives.' 'I wonder why they don't go and get help, I wonder why they keep using needles... drugs, alcohol...'

It was something that I have felt the Lord teaching me about over a long period since. And James is not just talking about the poor and homeless, but anyone who we might feel is not socially acceptable to us or who fits into our neat comfortable box of what we value. I was in Henry Bennett centre recently visiting someone I know who was in there. The ward is full of people who are mentally unwell to varying degrees, socially unacceptable to the point that many of them need to be in there, many of them lacking in personal care and hygiene because of their unwell state. If I was the same person back in Vancouver, I probably would have tried to give them a wide berth as I walked through the ward to see my friend. But God in his grace has shown me (and James says) that we are not to treat these people any differently. They are made in his image just as we are, and anyone who we might class as socially acceptable. We are to show them mercy, not judgment - even if it's just within our own hearts. But lets face it, its hard! Its hard because we are born with sinful hearts, hearts which are quick to judge, quick to preferentially treat some over others. Quick to warm to those who will benefit ourselves in one way or another, quick to warm to others who are like us.

The only way we can show mercy, or do any of what is required of us in James' letter is through a supernaturally changed heart.

All of James can only be enacted through Gods word implanted and alive in us. James 1:18 talks about the rebirth into the new people of God, his first fruits.

The book of James is often nicknamed the epistle of works, with many disregarding it as a moral code of ethics, a good way to live that could have been written by any greco-roman philosopher. because there is no overt mention of Jesus and his gracious love, many including Luther claim it has no theology. Because it doesn't read like Paul it has no theological depth, it cant tell us anything about God. But this is absolutely not true. Mariam Kamell, one of my lecturers from Regent Bible college spent 10 years studying and doing her PhD in James, and explains that when we consider the genre of the text, the type of writing that it is and therefore how it is to be read, we can begin to unpack James' theology from his themes, emphases and statements. I'll talk more on the genre of this book in a moment. But much of James' theology can be witnessed in chapter 1, and then unpacked through the rest of the book. It is evident he

has a very high view of Christ, and James sees all of the christian life originating from and through God's grace. His confidence in God as the divinely generous giver of all we need underlines all his ethics and instructions for how to live as Gods people. Just as with Abraham in Genesis, and the nation of Israel in Deuteronomy, to be chosen by God to be in covenantal relationship, now through the new covenant of grace through Jesus, that is us...! there are requirements placed upon ones life for obedience and holiness. These are divided into three types of ethics in James - speech, moral purity, and social justice, and they are not optional. Those of us, who have been reborn by the word of truth, chosen to accept the word which is Jesus, implanted into our hearts by Gods grace - must live according to that word, must live as he requires us to do.

But the best bit is that God doesn't just expect us to do it on our own strength. You can certainly try on your own strength but we all know how that turns out. Usually an epic flop within a few hours. And if you do manage to do it to some degree, you seem fake.

No, the kind of living that James describes can only be enacted through Gods word implanted and made alive within us.

We have to be in a posture of humility to admit that we cant do this in our own strength, otherwise this book really is just like a book of rules that are actually impossible to keep.

I said that the genre of this book is like a wisdom text, which is not a historical account like the gospels, or a theological exposition like Pauls letters. Wisdom texts like the Psalms, book of Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes give instruction how to live as Gods people. It is Gods gift to us, instruction so that we can live a wise life as his people, growing in character and living as he intended us to live.

And he knows that we need his wisdom and strength to do it. James 1:5 says he gives wisdom to all, generously, to whoever asks. And elsewhere in Scripture we read about the new heart that Jesus gives us, a new heart of flesh and not of stone. A heart that is oriented toward God, one which desires to obey. The more we allow God to minister to us every day, the more in step we grow with him. The more like him we become.

Naturally we are like this group in James, placing high value on wealth and power, and we show favour those who have wealth and power. We are naturally double minded - we treat some with dignity and respect, while we brush off those who we don't have a natural affinity to. But when Gods word is placed within us and we clear the ground for it to grow and flourish, we are transformed from the inside out, and the Holy Spirit nudges us ...it might sound a little like.... *"this person who you are about to walk past is made in my image, treat them with kind mercy. That person over there who you are about to talk to, they are dearly loved and offered grace by me, so you do the same."*

And as he works within us, we have transformed vision, we begin to see people like he does, we start to value the poor and marginalised. This is the work of the people of God, James says it himself in the end of chapter one... "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress...."

In a society where widows and orphans represented those who were helpless, God told his people to give them grace, kindness and help. The poor, the sick, those who are in mental institutions, those who don't look like us, those who act differently to us, every single person is made in the image of God.

Every single person should be shown grace, mercy and kindness.

OK so what does showing mercy and not judgment actually practically look like? How is this pastoral point applied to our lives?

How did Jesus do it?

I found it helpful to look at the message translation for more clarity here. Eugene Peterson has translated the greek of James 2:12-13 like this:

SLIDE

"Talk and act like a person expecting to be judged by the Rule that sets us free. For if you refuse to act kindly, you can hardly expect to be treated kindly. Kind mercy wins over harsh judgment every time."The Message

Kind mercy. Kindness.

Well we know that mercy is not giving someone what they deserve. In the worlds eyes, the homeless drunks and poor who have made decisions that may have gotten them where they are, those people deserve to be avoided, repulsed. But not in the Lord's kingdom. We are to be kind to them as we show them mercy.

Kindness? Oh thats easy right. Its easy to be kind. We all know that forgiveness can be hard, patience can be hard, many things are hard...but kindness? thats easy!... who ever saw a book "how to be kind 101" how to improve your kindness. Most people would not identify themselves as unkind.

We assume its easy to be kind.

But here are two types of kindness.

The first is a type of kindness and niceness that seems easy but can be forced, false and unreal, because its possible for a type of kindness to come from a restrained heart rather than a supernaturally changed heart. This type of kindness is expressed that might look nice but is really a way of getting power over others and esteem for others. A kind of kindness that is actually all about you. A type of kindness that makes you look good or feel needed. The type of kindness that disappears when you realise you are going to get nothing out of it.

CS Lewis identifies this in his book 'The four loves':

"If you do someone a kindness to show him or others or yourself, what a fine chap you are, or to put them in your debt, and then you sit down and you wait for gratitude, you are going to be in for a lot of disappointment in life. All natural affection is idolatrous and needs to be purified."

The first type of kindness is what comes most naturally to us as unredeemed people.

But the second type, the real type comes from a supernatural heart. Real kindness is the opposite of selfishness, and it can only come from a place where God has taught us deep down about the kindness he has shown us and therefore what we can extend to others.

Among other things, true spiritual kindness sees the person not as they currently are, but as who God has created them to be. The future flourishing being that God is calling them into. He's calling us all into it! All into his idea of a flourishing life. But talking about others... they may not see it, but God helps us to see it in them, and from there we can be kind, offering kind mercy instead of judgment. Offering kindness towards an end.

What do I mean by this?

Let me use the example Tim Keller used with an acorn. SLIDE

This small acorn is a nut, not particularly remarkable, and if sat on a shelf for 100 years, it would stay looking like this gathering dust.

But the goal for this acorn is not to sit on a shelf gathering dust, the goal of that acorn is to be planted, so that life can explode out of it into a beautiful magnificent oak tree.

That is the vision for this acorn. When we interact with that acorn, plant it and water it, place a shelter around it if needed from grazing cattle, we are encouraging it towards its end goal.

Or we can ignore it, look at it briefly from time to time but leave it to gather dust, and it will never reach its full potential.

People are like this acorn. Full of potential. God has a vision for each and every person, and his Holy Spirit is working within every single life to move it towards that end goal. And he enlists our help, the people of God are invited to participate in his work, helping to move people towards that glorious end goal.

A person will always stay an acorn until they are planted in the love and power of God. He is the one who can bring the life, but we can help prepare the soil, plant it, water it, help provide shelter.

As we come across a person, we can either move them towards that goal through our interactions with them... with words of encouragement, dignity, kindness, seeing them not as they currently are, but looking past the outward appearance or where they currently are at spiritually, and seeing what God sees, the potential for a truly flourishing life, like an oak tree. Kindness is visionary, it looks past the homeless appearance, looks past the clothes, looks past the drug addiction, looks past the crass language, looks past whatever body image they are projecting, looks past the brokenness and wherever they are at... and sees the magnificent oak tree within them, sees the glorious human being God has created them to be. Sees a fellow image bearer of God.

I love how CS Lewis nails it here again: SLIDE

"There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisation, these are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat.

It's a serious thing to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which if you saw it now you would be strongly tempted to worship. Or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet if at all only in a nightmare.

All day long we are in some degree helping each other towards one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics."

We all have our little stories of the way the world works, and as we meet people we subconsciously wonder how we can fit each person into our story so that we can continue the direction we want to go in. But we need to lift up our eyes and see the big story of God, and remember that we all fit into that big story TOGETHER, and every encounter we have with every person we have the opportunity to either move towards the end goal that God has in mind, a truly flourishing humanity, or in the opposite direction, which would be a nightmare as CS Lewis described it.

Are we going to see that potential in the person in front of us...as God sees, and through our interaction speak a little bit more life into them and in doing so move them towards more hope and joy in God, so that they grow and flourish into that oak tree? Or are we going to encounter people with our own needs paramount wondering subconsciously how we can use these people to make ourselves feel better? It might still look like kindness...but deep down its not.

Kind mercy does not treat the person as they expect to be treated, or as the world expects you to treat them. The world says they have made choices to get themselves in this place, so judge them and treat them accordingly.

God says no, they have been born into brokenness, they have had people break them, they may well have made decisions that have made things worse for themselves, but you are not to be the judge. You are to love them as I have loved you, you are to wash their feet as I have washed yours, you are to show them kind mercy as I have shown YOU, extravagantly kind mercy. You are to speak life into them and move them towards the end goal of a flourishing life, in me, you my child are to do this. Jesus came to serve, you are to do the same.

Remember Christ died for us *while we were still sinners*. Christ saw the potential in us while we were still living in sin, while we were still oblivious to his kindness, to his kind mercy. But his arms were nailed open for you, in kind mercy.

What will help us be kind? the knowledge of what God has done for us, and the kindness of Jesus. The kindness of Jesus will humble us and affirm us.

As Tim Keller says the kindness of Christ will humble us because we realise we were so bad and broken that he had to die for us, but it will affirm us too because we are so valuable he wanted to die for us.

You are so valuable he wanted to die for you.

When we put those two things together, then and only then will we be able to live a life of love that offers kind mercy to all, not just those who its easy to.

I went to Henry Bennett again with this sermon in mind. I noticed a lady who was in there, she looked lonely. I plucked up my courage and had a short conversation with her. She has been in there for 3 months, she has no family who come and visit her.

I didn't do anything heroic, it felt like nothing, but instead of leaving her as an acorn, with the Lord's help I managed to give her a little encouragement, a little dignity, a little of the fragrance of Christ. Its possible the most significance was not what I said to her but the changed orientation of my heart towards her.

Let's take the truth of Gods mercy in our own lives this week, ask God to make it deeply rooted in our lives this week like that acorn, so we can erupt into that person God desires us

to be and enable us to offer kind mercy to everyone we meet, all the other acorns we come across in our path.