

Mercy is Wise

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[0 : 00] So we're working our way through James. Great book, lots of things that we've been thinking through and what it means for the first few weeks.

And we're kind of carrying that on today of what it means to be wise, what it means to live wisely. And this morning, you'll notice there's a word that keeps coming up all the time about favoritism, showing favoritism or partiality or being impartial.

And the truth is that everyone actually, everyone shows favoritism in one way or another. And it's everywhere. It is everywhere showing favoritism.

The first thing to remember as we hear this passage is that favoritism is not just a problem out there in the world. That's what we might be tempted to think, that favoritism is not just a problem out there in the world, but it's a problem in here as well.

It's a problem in our hearts. We know it's a problem in the world. That might be obvious to us. You know, you can see that everywhere. We all know what happens when a celebrity turns up, either at a nightclub or goes shopping.

[1 : 12] You can pick a celebrity, Beyonce, Jay-Z, Mick Jagger, Billy Connolly, Posh and Bex, pick one. If they turn up at a nightclub or a hotel, they normally get special treatment.

That is true, isn't it? And we know why that's the case. We know why that's the case. They get special treatment because having them associated with their brand increases the brand's prestige. This is a place to be. Look. Look who comes here. This is how the world of advertising works, doesn't it? Why is it that we've got footballers advertising razors, skin cream and Pepsi Max?

It's because advertisers know that we will show favoritism towards their brand if it is associated with someone that we have a higher opinion of.

That we sort of see the creams, the razors they use, and the irrationality is that, oh, we might actually become a little bit like that person. We think highly of them, and so we might think highly of their brand.

[2 : 19] There's this association, this favoritism going on. Who we show favoritism to in our mind, they're gifting because of their fame and wealth.

Sometimes, even just because of their popularity, it is appealing. It's appealing. In our passage this morning, it's all about showing favoritism and the danger of doing that.

That it is a danger both in our personal lives but it is also, in the life of the church, it is dangerous as well. We know why we would do that. We know why we are tempted towards favoritism.

It's the same reason that the celebrity getting treated well with the shopping or the nightclub because we believe that you get something back from knowing someone who is well thought of, who is well known.

James uses this showing favoritism to make a really important point. And it's one example that is made of how to live wisely or unwisely, perhaps.

[3 : 28] How to live actually with the... Unwisely is really how to live foolishly by losing this example of favoritism. Last few weeks, as I said, we've looked at this theme of wisdom that comes out in the first few chapters of James.

How we ask for wisdom and God gives it generously. How when we ask, then the first place we look is the word of God and that we listen to it and that we do what it says.

That is what good listening is. We don't use our own wisdom, our own assessments of the way that our lives are, but we use the word of God to tell us how to live. As I mentioned earlier, we are clear of what wise living is and what wise living is not.

And it's drawn out from this principle that we're going to look at. Our first two verses today, they kind of frame, really, from this part on, most of the rest of James.

It's really helpful to think, what is wise living? What does wise living look like on the surface? Just look with me in verses 26 and 27.

[4 : 44] Verse 26. Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves and their religion is worthless.

Verse 27. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

There's three things to observe in these first two verses, to notice in these verses of what true religion is or perhaps is not. Just to make you aware, true religion is the same as saying to live wisely.

Those who live wisely is those who are truly religious, who hear the word and respond to it by doing what it says. The first one, you'll notice, verse 26. Keep a tight rein on their tongues.

Living wisely, people who keep a tight rein on their tongues. Those who don't do that, their religion is worthless. The second one, verse 27. Wise religion, living wisely, to look after orphans and widows in their distress.

[5 : 54] Orphans and widows in that time, the neediest in society, the poorest of the poor. The instruction really, to us today, is to look after the poor. It's about how we treat the needy in society.

And the third one, verse 27. Religion that our God, our Father, accepts as pure and faultless. Third point, and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James outlines, in these two verses, three things that true religion, wise living, from hearing God's word, the Bible, should be seen, it should be seen in how we speak, how we keep a rein on your tongues, how we treat the poor, look after orphans and widows, and how we keep ourselves unstained, from the world, how we reject the world's values that are opposed to the Bible.

How we speak, how we treat the poor, and how we reject the world's values that are opposed to the Bible. As we summarise that, it's great to have that clear, but it can all seem a bit abstract.

What does that look like in day-to-day life? Most of the things that I've mentioned, on the face of it, most people would agree with. Of course, of course we need to watch how we speak, and look after the poor.

[7 : 11] However, because they are, in some ways, abstract, there is a degree of subjectivity to how we might interpret them. It is like that we all understand that differently, what it might look like if we were to just leave it there.

What one person thinks is good speech might be seen as bad by somebody else, similarly with treating the poor and the world's values. Therefore, we need an example, a life example, where these three concepts, these three ideas that we're heading out with are in some way on shore. What does it look to pull those ideas together in day-to-day life? And the real example, the issue, which is what we're looking at for the rest of this morning, is the example that James hones in on as we started, with where we started.

It is that of showing favoritism. And look with me, it's clear where we're going. Chapter 2, verse 1. My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus, must not show favoritism.

Must not. You see, there's no debate here. It's not for discussion. Must not show favoritism. That word for favoritism, more literally, it means to receive someone because of their face.

[8 : 34] To receive someone because of something about them, or something they have, something they can do, or the way they look. That there is something about someone that elevates them above the next someone, over the next person.

There are lots of ways in which we show favoritism, but in the context of James here, it is to do with the rich, the wealthy, and how they're treated in comparison with the poor, and how that might come about.

You look with me from verse 2. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes comes in. Now, before you even read any more at this point, you know what's coming.

How do you treat these two very different people standing in front of you? James outlines, he outlines what showing favoritism could look like. It is verse 3, that showing special attention to perhaps the wealthy man.

Look with me, verse 3. You show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, here's a good seat for you. But say to the poor man, you stand over there, or sit on the floor by my feet.

[9 : 50] If we were to do that, if we were to do that, James doesn't leave you to work this one out. He's clear what's going on. If you do that, if you treat the wealthier looking man with higher regard over the poorer looking man, he says, if you do that, verse 4, have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts.

You look at the two men, what he's saying is when you do that, you become, you're making yourself into a judge and deciding by appearance, receiving someone because of their face, by appearance, which person is of higher value.

We make judgments all the time, treating people like items in a shop. You go shopping to the supermarket, you go to choose a chicken for your Sunday roast, what do you do?

Well, I don't know about you, but when I go to choose a chicken for my Sunday roast, I tend to not choose the very first chicken that I get hold of. You have a look at a few.

You make a choice. You don't look at the first one, maybe the second one. You see the weight difference you check, which one looks like it's, which one looks scrawnier and which one looks a bit plumper, which is going to feed the family.

[11 : 06] Which is the best bird to choose for Sunday roast? And it's right to choose the right chicken, isn't it? It'd be silly if you sort of willy-nilly and just chose the first one that you came up.

Which looks like it's got the most meat on? Which chicken will provide my family with what I need so that everybody has enough chicken? To choose between chickens is not a problem.

You must not do that with people. You can't treat people like chickens in a shop. We really shouldn't be asking the question, which person is going to give me more of what I need?

You remember how we began the three signs of living as a true follower of Jesus. True religion, how to speak, how to treat the poor, and how to reject the world's values, its ideologies and philosophies.

When favoritism is displayed, when favoritism is displayed, all three are failed. All three are failed. And if you work through them in reverse order, we'll start with the world's values.

[12 : 19] When we show favoritism, the world's values have stained you. You've believed the lie that wealthy people are more important, have more value, that they're more significant than poor people.

It shows, it therefore moves on to how you treat them because it shows how we treat them not the same, treated with contempt. And we see that evidenced by failure of the first one, the use of the tongue.

Bringing dishonor to this poor man, unkind to him, telling him to sit over there, to stand or to sit at our feet at a time that a display of saying, you deserve to be on the floor, I have authority over you and so does everybody else.

Everything flows from believing the world's lie and value system. The world's lie is tempting, don't get me wrong. The belief that the rich can give something that the poor can't, like judging between a plump chicken versus a scrawny one.

everyone has the desire to grab rather than give. In the words of verse 15 of chapter 1, that desire gives birth to sin which gives birth to death.

[13 : 42] Now, I don't know how you feel when you hear that, when we think about that as it's been articulated because I have to check myself because, you know, deep down I don't want to admit that I'm like that and I don't want to admit that we're like, that we might have that in us.

I want to say how awful, what an awful way to treat people. People who treat like that, treat others like that, they're the worst. I can't stand people who treat others with that kind of contempt.

I want to say that we would never do that. That we would never treat anybody like that. Never. That everybody gets treated exactly the same that we would be as our description says, that we are for everyone.

Isn't there even the temptation to pray? like the parable of the Republican and the sinner. Lord, I thank you that I'm not like that.

Lord, I thank you that our church is not like that. If we're tempted to pray like that then we've missed the point because the question we ask ourselves is not, do I do this but where do I do it?

[15 : 02] Because there are different ways of being rich. In the example that we have is those who are financially better off. We know that because the first man has a gold ring and fine clothes and the poor man has filthy clothes.

But there are different ways to be rich and therefore there are different ways to show favoritism. What about those who are rich with friends? The charismatic members of the local community in our village who have lots of friends everybody likes who are popular.

What about those who are rich in talents who can play musical instruments or are great at cooking? What about those who are famous for doing something you admire? What even about the great preachers in the church?

Maybe you heard them at a conference and when they said something it really meant to you and you've always wanted to tell them. Consider how you might respond if those who are rich in friends popular rich in talents if they walked into church one morning at the same time as the local known drug dealer who'd walked in who'd just come out of prison or they walked in at the same time as that family that you noticed in the village who you wouldn't dream of ever wanting your kids to be friends with and they walk in.

You've heard how that family speak to another how the parents speak to another and when you hear them you're quite appalled. and you're just quite glad you don't actually live on the same street.

[16:39] Wouldn't the temptation to be to make a beeline given we use icing for the skilled musician to stick around to want the popular family man who is like a magnet for the rest of the village you've seen him you know him he's got all the friends he'd be able to bring loads people in the church wouldn't wouldn't wouldn't that be the temptation to treat them differently but what we realise is that favouritism this kind of favouritism is sin and actually it's irrational it's irrational because the rich who are given special attention the people who are rich in whatever it is they're rich in they're sinners just like everyone else they're just like the sinful nature of humanity everyone has it people who have money people who are popular everyone messes up you see what

James says in verse 6 is it not the rich who are exploiting you are not they the ones who are dragging you a court are not they the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of to him who you belong even those who you would want to admire more they're still sinning showing favouritism is irrational it is totally foolish because they're sinners and they'll sin against you like everybody does their wealth whatever they're wealthy in is not a protective sinless cloak the rich are accused of and what are the rich accused of here they're accused of failing the three things that we began with misusing their tongues with blasphemy treating the poor with contempt exploitation and being polluted by the world's values dragging them into court the three standards of true religion the rich fail as we all do the ground at the foot of the cross is level the ground at the foot of the cross is level it is irrational to treat some people better than others including celebrities

Beyonce Jay-Z the Beckhams whoever they are they're sinners too when God looks down on humankind everyone has fallen short they understand that everyone is in the same the understanding that everyone is in the same sinful boat is actually freeing because it means there's nobody better than you and it's also humbling because it means there's nobody lower than you even the most outwardly moral person is still in the same sinful boat and the worst of sinners is still in the same sinful boat there's not a separate boat it is the great leveler and the consequences of favoritism are damning verse 9 if you show favoritism you've sinned and are convicted by the law as a law breaker the reason you're a law breaker is because you're not loving your neighbor giving or blessing and actually when you really think about it it's not loving the rich person either because it views and treats them not because of who they are but because of what you can get from them it's manipulative and transactional

I'll do this I'm going to treat you divinely because I believe I can benefit from you because of what you have they're sinners too we're all in the same boat the ground is level at the foot of the cross so then we come back to being impartial to not showing favoritism what does it mean to live without favoritism the key to living wisely is to treat everyone the same is to remember the mercy you've received look with me from verse 12 speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful mercy triumphs over judgment we talked earlier about making judgments on people how we judge them by our own set of criteria based on what they can or cannot do for us and what we've done is that we've made laws in our minds of how to judge people we've become the judge and we're basing that we're looking at people based on our laws the living

God judges his people his people the people who belong to him he judges them not by a law that condemns but by a law that forgives you know God's own law compels him to forgive you he's

compelled to forgive you and set you free by his own law he doesn't have a choice that's the law of liberty of freedom the reason this law sets you free is because God himself under the law of freedom is compelled to forgive you God has to forgive he has to forgive all who turn to him under this arrangement because the arrangement the terms of the contract the law is that the blood of his son covers your sin there's still payment for sin of all the mess we've made in our life but it doesn't fall on you Jesus is punished this is the mercy the punishment and wrath anger of God has been withheld from you and instead of receiving that a reservoir of mercy has been poured out for each one of us over our heads it never runs dry like a waterfall a river of mercy forever and ever each one of us drenched and flooded every second of your life with the mercy grace love and forgiveness of almighty

[22 : 49] God he withholds his punishment from you because it rests on the shoulder of his son that is mercy Jesus Christ in dying for you stood under a reservoir of God's wrath the wrath Jesus received the wrath Jesus received God's anger was equal to the amount of mercy and grace that the whole church receives forever that term the law of freedom it is mercy it is grace it is the implanted word it is the gospel that has freed you from all your sin and so the point here to live wisely if we've received that kind of mercy the never ending waterfall reservoir of mercy poured over your head every second of life for the whole church forever and ever if we've received that level of mercy if we've been set free from that kind of freedom from sin which we have if we've been free to live as people who know that we don't depend who can't depend on anything else but

Jesus or we can't grab anything it's all given as a free gift if we've received that kind of mercy would we not surely show that mercy to everyone that mercy triumphs over the judgment that we have for other people which leads to favoritism the mercy and love of God is enough we stand forgiven set on a new footing free to reject sin that old way of life that judges people and show mercy that verse 12 we speak and act as people who've been loved who've been shown mercy who know that they're loved who meditate on the mercy they've received if we do that how could we possibly not show mercy to others mercy triumphs over judgment it triumphs over favoritism it triumphs over partiality and it really it really all comes down to verse 8 if you really keep the royal law found in scripture love your neighbor as yourself you're doing right you see wisdom the ability to show mercy really comes down to loving your neighbor

Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians that the cross is the wisdom of God that as you look at the cross you see it's the wisest thing that has ever happened why?

because it is the chief prime example of love of humble love for neighbor for us of humble loving sacrifice for neighbor that Jesus humble loving sacrifice that is able to save all and lift up all that will come to him that exalts all who humble themselves and receive his grace that is the wisdom of God at the cross there's no impartiality there is no favoritism the ground at the foot of the cross is level Jesus never sinned with his mouth and if you look at his life you look at how he loved he perfectly gets those three right with his mouth he loves the poor and he is not stained by the world's values you think of the people he met Zacchaeus the lowest of the low a turncoat and a thief Jesus goes to his house everybody everybody at the time thought he was crazy why are you going to his house for Mary Magdalene the prostitute the blind beggar at the side of the road always looking out for the poor living by the values of the kingdom of God because he knew what it meant to love sets you free as you live wise with true religion hearing and doing speaking and acting liberated from sin God's mercy triumphs over judgment you think of this how different this is to the world we started talking about those celebrities who were allowed in to night clubs they skip right to the front of the queue if they're queued up can you imagine if the reverse if the way that Jesus lived happened in our world that the beggar at the side of the road who's a little bit smelly is allowed to go in the VIP section whilst Posh and Bex are not allowed in can you imagine you go up to the homeless man and he's the one who starts advertising night trainers it's ridiculous and we say that as we realise it we realise that the cross to people as they look at it it's a scandal the cross it comes across as a total scandal are you trying to tell me that the guy who works hard all his life who's morally upright who's put in hard labour and effort his life to provide for his family to work and earn money and is an upright member of society are you trying to tell me that before the cross before the living God everything he does in his life doesn't give him anything and yet you've got somebody who's done nothing but yet turns to

[28 : 16] Jesus gets everything that's exactly what I'm telling you that's exactly that is a total scandal it is a total scandal but it is beautiful because Jesus Christ does not value people according

to what they've done but to what he has done for them and whether you will receive his grace let's pray almighty god as we hear this passage we we want to mourn in our own hearts where we have done this we recognise that it is not exclusively something that is out in the world but it is in our own hearts where we treat people by what we can grab and get rather than what we can give and how we can bless and we're sorry for whether we've done that forgive us lord we pray we pray we pray we pray that you would give us the eyes that you have for every person whatever they've done however they're rich that we would see people as you see them that you would make us like you looked at the crowds and you had compassion that gut wrenching compassion would you give us that gut wrenching compassion for every person lord jesus we thank you that that you have rescued us we thank you that when you looked on us there was nothing in us none of us were rich in ways that deserved blessing none of us were even in a human way but you lord you chose to pour out your grace on us and to show us to redeem us so that we would meet the standards that we would be accepted and stand before the throne of god as with a right standing before the living god and so we thank you and we praise you we thank you for the goodness of the cross and so we pray that you bless us and change us and help us to live truly as a people as a church that is for everyone show us in our hearts where we're tempted and change us to make us more like jesus we ask for this in jesus name amen