

Last week's message was all about "mercy". God has been merciful to us, therefore we must be merciful to others. And James came out with one of the most amazing statements of grace, that we'll find anywhere in the Bible – **Mercy triumphs over judgment.**

And the thing is, James isn't only talking about the way God's mercy triumphs over the judgment **we** deserve – that's where it begins. But he's also talking about how, in the lives of the disciples of Jesus, mercy can triumph, over our judgment of others.

Let's read James 2:1-13....

Alright, so I want you to imagine: We've all come together for church. There is no church building. There is no hall. Our practice is, to gather together in one of our lounge room's. Let's pick somebody. How about X? Let's meet in X's lounge room today. Do you have enough seats for all of us in your lounge room X? NO? That's alright. We're coming to your place anyway.

And we all start arriving. And while we're all arriving, 2 visitors arrive. Now we know, by the time that everyone crams into X's lounge room, there's going to be a whole bunch of us sitting on the floor. But at this stage, there's one seat left. And 2 visitors walk through the door.

One is a lady in a very expensive looking, semi-formal dress. A fine necklace and diamond-encrusted jewellery on her fingers. The other? Well, she looks like she's been wearing the same simple dress for 3 weeks, and it looks like it might be an old domestic uniform that she's picked up from lifeline a number of years ago.

You've seen them both around town before. The lady with the nice clothes, is married to a respected local businessman, and she's quite visible in the social scene – you know, amongst the more well-to-do people.

And the lady in the dirty dress – well that's the only dress you've ever seen her in – she seems to wear it every day, as she walks her equally grubby kids to and from the local primary school.

And so, you go straight up to the lady with the nice dress, "Look, here's a nice seat for you", and you show her to the seat.

And then you go up to the lady who looks like she's just come straight from the dump, and you say, "I'm sorry, but we've run out of chairs, but you can stand there at the back, or you can sit on the floor here in front of us. It's up to you.

What have you just done? You've welcomed them both. You've guided them both to a position in the lounge room... But you've made a distinction, haven't you?... You've treated them differently. You've made a judgment call.... You have judged, between the rich woman, and the poor woman.

And it may seem like a reasonable judgment – we wouldn't want that lady to ruin her nice, expensive dress, by sitting down on the floor.... But then again, she can probably afford to replace it, and what happens if the other lady tears her dress while she's getting down on the floor? It's probably the only one she has...

But it does seem more fitting, doesn't it... Imagine what that wealthy lady would think, if we made her stand for the whole service, or sit on the floor... She'd probably never come back again...

But, what about the poor lady? Well, she's probably used to living on 2nd best (or 3rd best) (or getting the dregs....) It's not going to offend her that much, really, is it??

And the distinctions that we make, may seem very fitting by the standards of the world... But they don't fit with the Kingdom of God... James says,^{2:1} **My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.**

And so today's message, is about extending mercy, through impartiality.

James is using the example of the rich and the poor, to make his point: To favour the rich over the poor, is judging the poor.... And we can be either judgmental, or merciful. And in this case, all that it takes, to be merciful, is impartiality – to treat all of our brothers and sisters in Christ, the same.

You see, what James is getting at here, is “To make this distinction – to make this judgment call, dishonours somebody. It dishonours the poor. And that **may be** the normal course-of-events in the world, but not in the church.

In Christ, we are all **equal** before God. We are **all** forgiven sinners. The state of our balance sheet makes **none** of us any greater than the other. We have all been given a privileged position that we do not deserve – a position of honour, as the forgiven children of God.

And to help make his point, James really canes the rich. He tells us:

- They exploit the poor.
- They drag people to court.
- They slander the name of Jesus.

And we still see this happening today, don't we?

- Sweatshop labour;
- no interest is paid on low balance bank accounts;
- higher interest margins are charged on loans to the poor.
- Poor countries are exploited, by wealthy countries.
- Litigation seems to be a favourite past time among the rich, and the poor can't ever afford the \$1000 an hour it takes to hire a Queen's Council, or the \$600/hr for a Barristerⁱ. And so the rich inevitably come out on top
- The rich feel they have their own sense of security, and so they don't need Jesus, and they ridicule those who do follow Him...

I'm talking generalities here, and **generally**, things don't change all that much.

But the **real** lesson here, is not so much about the poor and the wealthy – we will be talking about that more next week, because James uses this example, to launch in to teach us about being merciful to the needy. So that's next week, but for now:

- The **real** lesson, is about making distinctions.
- It's about making judgments about people.
- It's about dishonouring your brother or sister in Christ.
- It's about who we notice and who we **don't** notice

In V3, where it says **if you pay attention to the one who wears the** fancy clothes, and not to the poor....., well the Greek word used there for “pay attention to” – it really means “notice”... If you **notice** the ones who are well-to-do, and don't notice the others – that dishonours, the ones you haven't noticed.

And for some of us, well there may be people who we just don't notice. We mightn't **feel** that we're excluding anyone – we just haven't noticed them....

And **there's** the lesson: The merciful notice everybody. The merciful make **no** distinctions. The only distinction the merciful make, is they put themselves last, and everybody else, on an equal-footing first.

And there may be somebody sitting here right now, who feels that nobody ever notices **them**. It's like they come to church, and during worship it's fine, but afterwards, no-one seems to notice them. We all gravitate into our little cliques – our

groups of friends... and inevitably, some people are just left out...

And we mightn't do it on purpose (we're not vindictive about it) – we just don't notice them.

And that's the point that James is making. The merciful, notice those who go un-noticed by just about everybody else... To simply 'not notice' someone, is to judge them. It dishonours them. It cuts them out. It tells them "Hey, you're not welcome in this fellowship – you don't fit.".

I'm going to move away from the rich vs. poor example, because, in Australia, that's probably **not** the biggest distinction.

Let me give you a different example – the difference between the somebodies and the nobodies:

If Michael Clarke; or Bernard Tomic; or Cate Blanchett came to church, you'd notice them, hey... Or even someone like John Anderson, or maybe Wayne Bennett – if they arrived at church this morning, you'd notice them, wouldn't you???

I reckon I could just about guarantee, that they would have quite a gathering of people around them – that they'd be brought into a circle and many of us would want to make them feel welcome, and just to have the privilege of talking with them... And, I'd be **very** surprised if **nobody** invited them home for lunch.

Now, what if a local nobody, turned up at church on the same day? Would you notice them? Well, of course, in a gathering

this small, you'd notice there was somebody new at church,,, but would you take the time to speak to them? Would you consider it a privilege to get to **know them**, and who they are and what they do? Would you invite them into your home for lunch, and be excited, if they were to ever return the hospitality, and invite **you** to **their** place on another day?

Some people we notice. Others we don't.

Impartiality is tough. Sometimes we just don't know how to relate to someone, and so we distance ourselves – we are so unalike. They're not **like** us. They're not **like** our friends. They're not like our neighbours. They're not like anyone we've ever dealt with.... And so we distinguish between them, and those who **are** like us...

There's been a few times I can remember, in various churches, when someone new comes to church, and somebody's made the comment "They fitted in so well. They're just like one of us" ... And I've seen the way that they instantly get brought into the group – into the fellowship – into the inner circle... Invited to people's homes for lunch; They get invited to all the parties – they become one of the church family, just like that.

*But in the meantime, there's been people the Lord has brought to church (sometimes regularly) – And they have **desperately** wanted to be included – they want to be loved... But they're not 'out of the same mould' as most in the church... And if somebody 'does their duty' to talk to them, it's only for a couple of minutes, and then they make their excuses, to move on to their mates... And they've never been made to feel welcome. They've been excluded...*

To the extent that we welcome one more than the other, we become judges, with evil thoughts.

And what about who we invite to church in the first place? Do we just invite people who are like us? Or, do we make an effort to get to know those who may be very different to us, and then invite them to church?

- In a church full of young families, a single or divorced person may get excluded.
- A church full of white people, might never invite an aborigine into their homes, or along to church.
- In a church full of successful business people, the hired worker on a minimum wage, may be left out.
- In a church of the fit and sporty, the fat; and ugly; the disabled; the un-coordinated, may feel left out, and excluded
- In a church full of young people, the elderly may be excluded.
- In a church of ‘somewhat sane’ people, the mentally ill, and the depressed, may seem like “Just too much hard work.”, and so they’re excluded too.
- And if most of us are reasonably well adjusted, the addict; the alcoholic; the ADHD; the autistic; the socially inept, can easily be excluded too.

And at this stage, you might say to me, but Michael, you just don’t understand. Some people are so unlike me. We come from such very different backgrounds. I don’t find it easy to relate to these sorts of people.

And my answer will be, “Look to Jesus?” He spent his time with tax collectors and prostitutes. With the lowest of the low. With thieves and swindlers – and women who would sell their own bodies, to make a buck. Did He share their background?

His only experience, was the experience of the holiness of the glory of God. And yet He was impartial.

There was only one thing stronger, than Jesus' repulsion of sin: Love. The love for His neighbour, that He demonstrated in mercy.

And that's where the answer is, to this: We receive God's love – God's mercy, poured out in His love. And we love others with that same love. We extend mercy, with that same mercy.

We can be bigoted or big-hearted. We can be big on judgment or big in mercy.

The merciful notice everybody. The merciful make **no** distinctions. The merciful, are impartial, as they welcome, in the name of Christ.

Questions.

ⁱ <http://www.legallawyers.com.au/legal-topics/law-firm-sydney/solicitor-prices/>