

Who's the Judge?  
James 2:1-13

For James, as in the Old Testament, truly hearing God's Word means also doing God's Word. As we saw at the very conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (Matthew 7: 24). Hearing and putting into practice are inseparable. They together are wisdom. In 2: 1-13, James continues his first major theme of being "quick to hear" in this very active sense. In particular, he wants his readers to hear and therefore act in ways that don't show bias or prejudice to others based on human, worldly standards. That's not the way God operates, and neither should we.

Thought for prayer:

*God, we ask therefore, that you will make us like you, that we might show compassion and give aid to those who are in need or in debt or who have no claim to favorable treatment. We ask this so that your mercy will shine through us to the whole world, in order that all might praise you.*

**Part 1. Investigate**

James 2:1-13

1. Why should believing in "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (v 1) keep us from showing favoritism?
2. How would you react if someone came into your church who wore sloppy clothes, was dirty or had body odor (vv 2-4)?
3. Why do many people give preferential treatment to those who have money?
4. Is it easier to have faith when you are poor than when you are rich? Explain.

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**Part 2. Connect**

Scripture to scripture

Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment

Mercy is a word that we may have run across so many times in the Bible that we lose a sense of its meaning. It's time to revisit Exodus 34:5-7 and to also look at Zechariah 7:8-10. Check all the items below that are found in these two passages and that apply as descriptions of mercy.

- Not tipping justice in favor of the rich
- Forgiving those who wrong you
- Not punishing people as they deserve
- Showing compassion to others
- Being patient with others
- Not being quick to judge the sins of others
- Not doing things that harms or holds down the poor or powerless
- Acting like others didn't do bad things
- Being generous to others
- Not devising ways to harm others

What should our priorities be as Christian communities?

What more do we learn about mercy in the Sermon on the Mount, especially in Matthew 5:7 and 6:14-15?

For all of James's stern words, we should not mistake his priority as mere moralism, which can degenerate into legalism. The foundation of mercy is God's grace. The power of love is God's grace. We respond, listening to and obeying God's Word, not out of mere duty but with a heart of gratitude and love for the God who saved us in mercy.

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### 3. Reflect

Desperate for work, a single parent of three with no marketplace skills, Erin Brockovich took a low-paying job as a legal assistant in a California law firm. While going through some files for a real-estate deal, she couldn't figure out why they included medical records.

She soon discovered that the link between the real estate and the medical records was Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E), the world's largest public utility. PG&E had contaminated the water supply of Hinkley, a town of about two thousand people in the high desert of southern California. The company had detected chrome 6 (a cancer-causing chemical) from its nearby compressor station as far back as 1965. And people had been getting sick. Over a period of decades PG&E had dumped 370 million gallons of chemicals into unlined ponds close by. Now the company was buying up land and destroying the buildings on them.

When Brockovich examined local water records and interviewed people who had become ill, her suspicions were confirmed. But how could a small law firm representing a small town possibly succeed in bringing legal action against the multi-billion-dollar behemoth? Brockovich persisted. Against his own instincts, her boss agreed to take on the case. In 1993 the firm filed suit against PG&E on behalf of 77 plaintiffs; the number eventually grew to 648. After years of providing misinformation to the town, the company now fought back. But the lawyers for the town compelled the company to produce relevant documents. As one of the plaintiffs told a reporter, "They thought they were dealing with a bunch of dumb hicks, that's what I think."

Financially, however, the law firm was stretched beyond its limits. Personally, Erin spent so much time on the case that she began to lose touch with her kids. After uncertainty and setbacks, the judge finally found in favor of the town and awarded the residents a settlement of \$ 333 million.

The story was made into one of Hollywood's most inspirational movies, Erin Brockovich. When a passionate single mom with no legal training and a small town without resources triumph over a huge, powerful corporation that has taken advantage of them for years, we can't help but cheer.

Unfortunately, the flip side—the story of the powerful overwhelming the weak—is all too common. It may be a dictator who enriches himself at the cost of impoverishing his own people. Or it may be a family whose house is foreclosed by a bank who won't renegotiate a reasonable mortgage payment.

The rich and the poor do not operate on a level playing field. The rich have the power to influence lawmaking in their favor, to apply financial pressure where needed to get their way, and to hint at potential benefits for those who support them. The poor have none of this. And so it has been through the centuries, as it was when James wrote his letter to fellow believers in Jesus Christ.

James offers several reasons why favoring the rich makes no sense. On the practical side, they are the ones taking advantage of most of his readers. On the theological side, God is the source of compassion, graciousness, patience, love,

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faithfulness and forgiveness. As people who are called by his name, who have his very being stamped in our hearts, so should we also be. This is especially the case when we deal with those who have few resources or little influence in society— whether they be orphans, those among us from other countries, the homeless or the unemployed.

God instructed ancient Israel to institute a society-wide system for ensuring that whole groups of people were not permanently impoverished. This was the Year of Jubilee, to be held once every fifty years. Leviticus 25 prescribes that all land sold since the previous Year of Jubilee was to be returned to the previous owners. In the economics of the day, those without land had no means of independent income; so returning land to the original families was essential to maintain widespread economic well being. With this model in mind, it is not inappropriate today for us to consider and support society-wide options for keeping large groups of people out of poor and oppressed conditions

The early church took James's message seriously. As Rodney Stark points out in *The Rise of Christianity*, when plagues hit the Roman Empire in a.d. 165 and 251, instead of fleeing the towns as the (mostly rich) pagans did, Christians (rich and poor) stayed to help both fellow Christians and pagans who were unable to leave. Their lived message of love and self-sacrifice for the weak of society had a profound impact on the Empire. So much so that within three hundred years after the death of Jesus, approximately half the population of the Empire had become Christians.

For these early Christians, there was no division between “acts of mercy” and the “good news of Jesus.” They were one in the same. After all, as Jesus taught and James repeated, loving God and loving others must go together.

There are, of course, many possible options for how we might do this. Here's just one example— a way our church has sought to live out our love for God and others. Because the suburbs we're in have a large Hispanic population nearby, we have occasionally, in conjunction with a Hispanic congregation that meets in our building Sunday afternoons, offered free medical clinics staffed largely by doctors and nurses and others from our church. Our aim is to meet the physical needs of a large group of people who do not have other safety nets to fall back on while also seeking to draw them into a community that can meet their spiritual needs.

James's negative exhortation is clear: do not favor the rich. But there is also a positive challenge for us as believers today: find ways to honor the poor as those made in God's image. In this way we show for all to see how the mercy of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ triumphs over judgment.

What is one thing you can act on based on this reading?

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**Works Cited**

Peau, A. T. (2013). *A Deeper Look at James*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.