

A Just Love James 1:26-2:13

I've seen my fair share of poverty. Standing at the base of Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio, gazing down on the shantytowns where neediness isn't a strong enough word; standing next to hungry, rejected street children in Nairobi with arresting sorrow; having hands extended in my direction in Mei Zhou, China 23 years ago as I walked the streets, unable to distinguish their words (desperation needs no translator) ; my senses of sight and smell being overwhelmed by the heads that popped out of the homes in the hollers of southeast Kentucky, homes that resembled garbage heaps more than places to live; and from earliest years of my life to the time I moved away there was the coat lady laden with unimaginable filth from head to toe, talking to herself as she walked the streets of my hometown—these memories are affixed in my mind and have, in some ways, served me well.

At this point, we've discovered that James cares very little about our comfort level. He renders one accurate diagnosis after another. We are foolish and need wisdom. We are doubting and need faith. We world-gaze and need an eternal perspective. We play the Genesis 4 blame-ship game and need to own up to our own sin. We hear God's very word and do what is contrary to it. It's one surgical procedure followed by another—not the exploratory kind either. The is heart surgery for our good. James is taking us to a place of spiritual wellness and he's methodically doing it by showing us what Alec Motyer calls the indices of the heart.¹ We speak and do, but never without reference to what is happening inside the chapters of our hearts. Perhaps you've noticed how James has the idea of self-deception on repeat in chapter one.² The LORD knows all our struggles with hypocrisy and duplicity—and He graciously gives us hard things to digest that we might be nourished to live in wholeness by the Spirit's gracious power.

I. More Than Words—an honest life of love

Of course, James 3 will deal extensively with God's concern for how we use words, but here James comes back to the idea of being self-deceived. The person he describes embraces outward conformity to the Christian faith, but somewhere along the way this person fails to understand that life in Christ is much more than this.

A. *A life lived inside-out*

²⁶ ***If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.*** This one believes himself to be on the straight and narrow. He has an awareness of himself—he's religious—but there's little to no awareness that his pattern of speaking betrays his very profession. Through the years I've met some who consider a person courageous and worth emulating who speaks his/her mind without a care for what others might think. I once had a great-aunt who lived her whole life this way. And sure, she was the source of much laughter and to this day the subject of many conversations, but in the end, it only amounted to a fool's legacy. Yet, James' words are starker than this. My aunt never imagined herself to be a believer. But James knew some among the diaspora who knew enough theo-jargon to get by. He knew some who could parrot the gospel and praise Christ with fervor enough to dupe onlookers. He knew some who might give to widow and orphan causes while having the gift for giving others a piece of their mind

¹ J. Alec Motyer, *The Message of James*, 65-66.

² 1:16, 22, 26, and maybe verse 8 is another nod to the theme

with regularity. And James says that that man *deceives his own heart*. How we need to look, “objectively, honestly, humbly, with the goal of addressing” all the ways our hearts can be deceived!³

This word *religious* here in verse 26 is found in only two other places in the New Testament.⁴ It means what one might expect it to mean—outward observance of a particular belief system.⁵ We don’t need to trade the word *religion* for *relationship*, as is the suggestion of some in recent years. There is, James implies, a worthy, outward expression of the Christian faith. When the heart is cleansed and ordered by the Holy Spirit, gripped by the Christ of the gospel, then the outward conformity will align regularly with these inward workings. The only enablement for a bridled tongue is an honest heart.

Yet, this works in other directions, doesn’t it? Choose any historical site, theme park, or social service. Words from a tour guide, or from a roller-coaster operator, or from a DMV worker are rarely heartfelt. They know what they are saying. They know the nuts and bolts of the relics on display, the rides they regulate, and the rules they enforce. They may be saying things accurately and with respect to those in front of them. Yet, it’s not hard to know what they’ve known for some time—their hearts are somewhere else most of the time.

Yet, we’d have to agree that the worst of either of these examples would be the one that thinks they are doing a great job, when in fact, they frequently forget their historical spiel, take too many breaks from operating the roller-coaster, or are consistently abrasive with those seeking a renewed driver’s license. At these points, they’ve lost touch with reality, thinking that are something when they betray what they are seeking to portray. The heart is prone to deception. Have you reached this conclusion about yourself? If you’ve not, then it’s most likely that you’re living your life from the outside-in—performing for God or others for forgiveness or favor. The wisdom from James exposes this default of the heart.

Words matter because they reveal what’s going in our depths. Yet words can sound good but flow from an unsound source. There can be an outward observance that looks clean, but the inward reality is distanced and dirty. Life in the kingdom is an honest agreement between what we say and who we profess to be. Life in the kingdom is the pursuit of a bridled tongue, yet it is more than what the heart produces through the lips. Life in the kingdom is a life lived inside-out, but it’s also...

B. A life lived outside-up

²⁷ ***Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*** Now James turns from exposing false religion to commending true expressions of it. To involve oneself in the lives of others who have experienced such downtrodden-ess, such brokenness, stripped of joy and bereaved because of loss or abandonment—this was a longstanding expectation of God for His people. The Mosaic Law and the prophets bear witness to this divine expectancy.⁶ So we should anticipate the same from the Author of the New Testament as He moved upon the likes of Paul, Peter, James, and John to write down His will and ways.

James’ use of the words *pure* and *undefiled* points in the direction of the sacrificial system, where the offering is to be the very best, and given as an act of worship. Taking care of the helpless reveals that

³ Pastor Matt’s sermon from last week entitled *The Mirror of the Word*, <https://southwoodsbc.org/media/qr5vn6t/the-mirror-of-the-word>

⁴ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, 125.

⁵ John Blanchard, *Truth For Life: James*, 122.

⁶ Exodus 22:22 and Isaiah 1:10-17 to name two.

the helper is not after vain glory. He/she is not chasing attention, keeping a ledger, expecting an equal return, nor using love to others as a bargaining chip with God. One reason is that the one who is loving the down and out knows that their love is *in the sight of our God*. He knows every motive and every maneuver we make. He knows why you gave. He knows why you said that. He knows because He hears, and all our inward thoughts and outward acts are ever in His line of sight.⁷ Yes, the Christian life is lived inside-out but it's also lived outside-up, meaning that it will show through one's life—outside; and those markings of the Christian serving the least will be done with reference to the God of heaven—that's up.

The challenges taking place in the region of southern Turkey and Syria as we speak are beyond comprehension. A radio news outlet reported that over 6,000 buildings, many of them several story apartment high-rises, collapsed when the 7.8 earthquake hit the region last week. It's not hard to imagine that the percentage of orphans and widows in that region rose significantly. Who will care for them? This is why we beg of the Lord to fill His people with His mighty love for those in *distress*. This term *distress* carries the meaning of suffering brought about by the pressure of circumstances.⁸ To relieve this pressure—that's an expression of what God sees as *undefiled*. He is pleased with and receives the service of believers and churches who are expressing some measure of alleviating the pressures of sufferers.

We've made some significant connections this week regarding our 2Per offering for Send Relief this month. Whatever we gather this month, much of it will go to the relief efforts in Turkey and Syria. In fact, one of their prayer points on their website is that roads and bridges will be mended quickly so that the people can get the supplies needed in a timely manner. Further, Kristin Lowry, whom we support in Kenya, has been recently appointed as an Orphan and Vulnerable Children Consultant with Send Relief. So I'm grateful that we're giving and praying for Kristen—we're all involved in relieving some pressures because that's the kind of inside-out, outside-up life that followers of Jesus Christ are called to live. Does this mean that we drop everything and pour all we have into orphan and widow care? Of course not. James is offering a representative list of the kinds of people that the church should seek to care for.

And this care for the abandoned and the heartbroken are far from easy. We live in a world where immediate returns are considered successes, and we'd be wrong to think that this mindset couldn't possibly infiltrate the church. When we see quick results and hear joyful reports, we glory in God's blessing. Yet, helping those in dire need is often a longer road with an incline. It's difficult ground to cultivate, but this is part of the work God has called us to, and He can bring beauty from our dependent efforts.

You may have noticed the link with the previous verses. James presses on the church the primacy of not merely hearing the Word but doing what it says. Then James gives us a few ways to do the Word, which will set the basic agenda for the rest of the letter. The bridled tongue is only touched here but dealt with in depth in chapter 3. The concern of the helpless is only touched here but dealt with in depth in chapters 2 and 5. And lastly, the end of verse 27 will touch the subject dealt with at length in chapter 4, ***Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.***

⁷ All life is lived *Coram Deo*, a Latin phrase meaning “before the face of God.” R.C. Sproul taught me this via the radio years ago.

⁸ Blanchard, 129.

I spent all of last week with my sister in northeast Ohio. It's Amish country with a capital A. Every time we drove somewhere, without fail, we encountered multiple horse and buggy situations. And I'll leave it to your own imagination as to what littered those roads with regularity. So you could probably envision the look on my face when my sister, with zero regard, would drive right over said litter. I'm sure it wasn't like that when she moved there 20 years ago, but for various reasons she gives it little thought now, as I probably would if I lived among horses like her. When James writes about the world, he's speaking of the godless world system that is defined by pride, materialism, power, sex, and self-rule. The world is littered with these realities, and if we're not careful to recognize them and draw strength from above to guard our hearts from them, then we'll find ourselves living comfortably alongside them. Or yet, living inside of us. The temptations for them all linger in us and live about us, as James 4 will teach us.

Thomas Manton sums up this point of obedience with clarity, "The lusts of the world...deface the excellencies of your [new] nature...While we live here, let us keep ourselves...unspotted...In a place of snares, we should [all the more] walk with care."⁹ How careful is your daily walk? Are you giving attention to your soul? James will qualify such careful attention with words like, "*Submit to God...resist the devil...purify your hearts...draw near to God...cleanse your hands...turn your joy to gloom...humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you.*"

Though words matter, life in the Lord Jesus is more than words. It is an honest life that faces the truth of even the most difficult things about us. It's a loving life, whelmed by the gospel, that chooses not to run away from all that is difficult. But this love certainly does instruct us to run away from some things.

II. More Than Wealth—an honorable life of love

A. Avoid Distinctions

¹ My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. ² For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes,³ and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," Jesus stated the motive for favoritism in John 12:43, "...For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God." In John, some in local government were expressing interest in Christ, but they were kept from making it public because they wanted the commendation of the religious establishment. Again, the Bible makes no secret about the array of motivations that corrupt the heart. In John, it was a religious reason undergirded by a thirst for human approval and status. In James, it was much of the same. The rich were often esteemed in the public eye. Everyone wanted their attention, or worse, those showing favoritism were gold-digging by brownnosing.

Part of sin's picture in disdainfuling the poor and flattering the rich is that the one judging has failed one of love's greatest principles—*look deeper than what the eye sees*. This is part of the problem in James' estimation. And the problem was further aggravated by where James places the setting of this discrimination—in a local worship gathering. They may have walked dishonorably during the week, but they were being granted seats of honor on the Lord's Day.

⁹ Thomas Manton, *James*, 178.

And notice how James addresses this lack of just love among God’s people. ***My beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?*** He shoots a gospel dart across the page! Who cares what the poor person is wearing? He is an heir of the kingdom of God based on the gospel promise God has made to those who love Him! What does the poor man lack on the most fundamental level of existence? Not one thing. He has grace and forgiveness. He is ***rich in faith***. He is a child of the universe’s King! With the highest dignity, he will inherit the ***kingdom*** with all its rights and benefits and privileges. He will reign with Christ, judge angels, shine like the sun in the kingdom of heaven!¹⁰

He not only drives the gospel home, but James brings another facet to the surface—***you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court?*** Most of James’ readers probably belonged to the class of poor agricultural laborers.¹¹ He’s reminding them of something that should have been obvious—the rich were presently oppressing them. Those with money had some in the justice system in their proverbial pockets, and some in the church were so wide-eyed with money-love that they couldn’t perceive anything else.

And these weren’t simply matters between the rich and the poor. The honor of God is at stake in what goes on in the local church. This is why James makes the point, ***Do they [the rich] not blaspheme the fair name by which you [the poor] have been called?*** James could be alluding to believers who were called *Christians*, or those who are naming the name of Christ.¹² Or, it could be a matter of abusing believers and making light of their confession and the Christ they confess. Either way, those who find their glory and worth in what is passing away are often found deriding those who value the eternal, and in this way, they ***blaspheme*** God’s name.

Backing up, the command in verse 1 speaks to an underlying attitude with corresponding action. ***My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.*** This is where we find real glory. It’s not found around fingers laden with gold or upon shoulders from Oak Hall’s finest, but all the glory we’ll ever need is found in ***our glorious Lord Jesus Christ***. John Calvin brings home the point, “So great is the brightness of Christ, that it easily extinguishes all the glories of this world...it follows that Christ is little esteemed by us when the admiration of worldly glory lays hold...when the value of riches dazzles our eyes, the truth of [a glorious Christ] is suppressed, which ought alone to prevail.”¹³ Again, it is double-minded to express favoritism and hold to Christ by faith. Why? One, Christ shows no partiality with His grace.¹⁴ We have no permission to operate contrary to Him. Two, believers are united in Christ and can’t be divided into superficial groupings rooted in sinful motives.¹⁵ The work of Christ and His glory inform our works for Christ’s glory. If we draw shallow distinctions based on something as transient as wealth and poverty, then James pulls no punches—we have, verse 4, ***become judges with evil motives.***

In fact, James isn’t finished being blunt. He writes that if we live in ***partiality, we are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*** By the ***law*** James certainly means all the many times in the Mosaic Law where God made a provision for the weak and needy, often talking in terms of verse 27 of chapter 1—orphans and widows. So, James is doubling down on the seriousness of the

¹⁰ 2 Tim. 2:12 “reign with Him,” 1 Cor. 6:3 “judge angels,” Matthew 13:43 “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father”

¹¹ Moo, 139.

¹² 2 Timothy 2:19, “...*Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.*”

¹³ John Calvin, *James*, 301.

¹⁴ Acts 10:34, “*So Peter opened his mouth and said: ‘Truly I understand that God shows no partiality...’*” Romans 2:11, “*For God shows no partiality.*” Galatians 2:6, “...*God shows no partiality...*”

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:13

sin he's highlighting, but he's only echoing what he learned all his life being a Jew, and he's expressing what the Holy Spirit led other biblical writers to express. Leviticus 19—don't reap the edges of the field but leave it for the poor and the foreigner. Psalm 82—rescue the weak and the needy. Proverbs 14—oppressing the poor is showing contempt for your Maker. Matthew 25—serving the hungry, sick, imprisoned is considered service to Christ the King Himself.

It's been one of the joys of my life to witness the kindness by you to those that fall within the confines of James message. You give—like you're doing now with Send Relief. You go—like I've seen many of you do as you've visited the street boys at Shelter Yetu in Kenya, or helped repair sanctuary chairs in Nashville, or care for missionary children as their parents are refreshed with fellowship and worship. You pray—I've heard hundreds of prayers from you for those under the weight of sufferings. You serve each other—the Take-Them-A-Meal list we send out for those in great need, we've seen that sign up fill up in less than an hour. We've collected items for Afghans, groceries for our community, coats for the school next door, and so much more.

You've taken instructions from James 2 seriously. But I affirm you with caution. We all need to take verse 10 seriously and with reflection. ***“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.”*** None of us are immune to the discrimination described here by James. And if we're truthful, we've all stumbled in this area of loving our neighbors well and sitting on our hands by not doing good to those right in front of us who are in need. And James says that if that is us, we have ***become guilty*** of breaking the ***whole*** of God's law. And for this, the city of refuge called repentance is a kind provision for being cleansed and for starting anew. We can't look into the mirror of the word here without seeing some defects. I'm grateful that the Lord is gracious and merciful, as we will see in the next set of verses.

So, what's the alternative? James has shown us what not to do—avoid trivial distinctions. Now he turns to tell us what the life of an effectual doer, who is blessed in what he does, looks like.

B. Apply Love

⁸ ***If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,” you are doing well.*** James pivots with this word ***however***. Here is the new ethic established by Christ the King. Hence, the ***royal law***. James simply extracts a partial quote from His half-brother and Sovereign, ***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. [38] This is the great and first commandment. [39] And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. [40] On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”***¹⁶ James directs the diaspora back to the Head and Exemplar of the church. Watch His ways and hear His words and do His will—love one another.

James says it another way with a stark reminder, ¹² ***So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.*** Again, to echo Matt from last week, this law of liberty is the Word of God that liberates its adherents. The Spirit takes the gospel and frees us to live according the His Word. Absorbing the Word and living in its light is the opposite of oppression. There is a spiritual freedom living under the authority of God's Word. And if God relates to us by such liberating grace, why then would we relate to others in oppressive ways?

¹⁶ Matthew 22:37–40

James ends with the healthy tension that never leaves the Christian. ¹³ ***For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.*** What a way to end a passage that has a substantial bite to it! Mercy must be our business, church. But when we stumble, mercy is faithfully and wonderfully and thankfully His unerring and steadfast business. That Christ came to give Himself up as a ransom for our sin reveals that mercy is the bent of His heart. Without lowering standards for holiness—mercy is the call...He makes perfect provision for our unholiness—mercy is our cry!

Conclusion

Do you love others justly? And if you've failed at doing that, do you know the love that justifies sinners? We come to the table today to not only consider with our minds the glorious facets of such a gracious Savior, but we come to love Him from the heart for His finished work for us on the cross. Without Him, we're all impoverished. With Him, we're heirs of a promised kingdom and will stand on that great Day of judgment where mercy will win the day for all who believe in the gospel of Christ.