OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Judgment and Mercy

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"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." As children, many of us were taught some variation of that rhyme in the hope we would develop a defense mechanism against name-calling and put-downs. At some point, we learned the assurance was false, at least in an absolute sense. The pain that results from insults is *different* from that inflicted by a punch in the mouth, but it is nonetheless real. And unlike the pain resulting from a physical altercation, the pain inflicted by hurtful words has a way of staying with us, sometimes revived by a random memory that transports us back to the time of the insult. Words matter and, yes, too often they *are* hurtful.

What James Says

James knew that too and so, as he concluded his censure of his readers' displays of favoritism, he began with a command that links the speech and behavior of believers: "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty" (Jas 2.12). While it is grammatically possible the adverb translated "so" (οὕτως, *houtōs*) could refer to what follows—to mean "*because* you are about to be judged, speak and act accordingly" (McCartney 2009, 149)—the sense conveyed in the ESV is the more natural reading. James's readers were to respond to the command to love their neighbors and the reminder of the importance of keeping the whole law by speaking

and acting in a way that showed esteem for everyone in the assembly; the partiality some were showing, either by word or behavior, was to cease.

Verse 12 introduces closure to the section in two ways. First, the reference to speaking points back to the warnings about hasty speech and the failure to control the tongue in 1.19 and 26. Second, the reference to "the law of liberty" connects the admonition in 2.12 to the same terminology in 1.25, as well as to the synonymous references to the "perfect law" and the "royal law" in 1.25 and 2.8. The point is not that James had three different laws in mind, but rather that the one law of God was at the same time complete, kingly, and liberating (McCartney 2009, 149).

James's connecting of speaking and doing—see the coordinate conjunction "and" (καί, *kai*) and repetition of *houtōs* before both "speak" and "act" in verse 12—"represent the spectrum of human ethical activity" (McCartney 2009, 152). His emphasis on behavior reminds us of the consistent biblical teaching that we will be judged according to what we do and especially how we treat others (cf. Matt 25.31–46; 2 Cor 5.10). And, as revealed in prophetic texts like Zechariah 7.9–10, that judgment will be attentive to whether we demonstrate concern and mercy for the outcasts who are often victims of prejudice: "Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart."

It is important to note that, in line with Jewish understanding that "every sin" will receive "its full punishment" (Davids 1982, 118-119), James affirms the reality of judgment, using a form of the word three times in verses 12–13. But he also says that judgment will be tempered with mercy (ἔλεος, *eleos*), a term he uses to refer to the actions of both the Judge and one being judged: "For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy" (v. 13a). None of us can withstand the scrutiny of perfect justice; when judgment occurs, we will all need—and earnestly want—to be shown mercy. But that will not occur, James says, unless we have shown mercy to others. While that expectation covers a wide range of issues, in the context of James 2, it specifically means that we should seek to be impartial in our attitudes toward and treatment of others—no little thing in a world in constant turmoil over differences of nationality, ethnicity, race, economic standing, education levels, and other demonstrations of partiality.

Can we possibly meet the demands of such a standard? James's reference to judgment reminds us that the expectation and effort to realize it should not be taken lightly. But he also affirms the helpful assurance that "mercy triumphs over judgment" (v. 13b). "Triumphs over" translates κατακαυχάομαι (*katakauchaomai*), which can refer either to the act of boasting at the expense of someone else (cf. Jas 3.14; Rom 11.18) or to having a reason for boasting because of some advantage in power (Bauer 2000, 517) (cf. the cognate καυχάομαι, *kauchaomai*; Rom 2.17, 23; 5.2–3; et. al.). The proverb in James need not mean that God's mercy will prevail over his judgment, though that could be in view (cf. Jas 4.6). Nor is it necessary to affirm that a person who

has a history of showing mercy has a boasting card to play at the time of judgment. The saying "simply considers mercy abstractly as being of greater power and glory than judgment, even as 'love covers a multitude of sins'" (McCartney 2009, 151). F. J. A. Hort well described the image suggested by verse 13: "κρίσις [*krisis*; judgment] comes so to speak as the accuser before the tribunal of God, and ἔλεος [*eleos*; mercy] stands up fearlessly and as it were defiantly to resist the claim" (Moo 1985, 98-99).

Taking James Seriously

In applying James's admonition in verses 12–13, I will emphasize one broad principle and another that is more specific. First, his words underscore the reality of both judgment and mercy. The notion that we will be called to give an account for our actions, which, in biblical terms, include thoughts, motives, and speech as well as behaviors, is a consistent theme throughout both testaments, not least in the teaching of Jesus (cf. Matt 7.21–23; 12.33–37; 25.1–46). So too is the prospect that we will be extended mercy and that its measure will depend to some extent on whether we in turn extend mercy to others (cf. Matt 5.7; 18.33; 23.23; 9.13; 12.7; note the allusion to the OT text of Hos 6.6 in the latter two references).

Second, with regard to both judgment and mercy, how we treat other people matters. As James shows, this includes whether we regard all people as valued beings who, like us, were also created in the image of God. In a *previous discussion*, I noted C. S. Lewis's observation that throughout history Satan's introduction of the idea that we humans could "be like gods" has led to problems including war, class distinctions, and slavery (Lewis 1952, 53-54). Just prior to that conclusion, Lewis presented his premise for it, noting that, "The moment you have a self at all, there is a possibility of putting yourself first—wanting to be the centre—wanting to be God, in fact. That was the sin of Satan: and that was the sin he taught the human race" (Lewis 1952, 53).

James 2.1–13 reminds us that the often-recurring flipside of self-exaltation is the tendency to push others down and play favorites. That tendency is reinforced in a world—and yes, at times in churches—where favoritism based on position, status, educational attainment, wealth, ethnicity, nationality, and race remain prevalent. The problem is so pervasive that we may cease to notice when it occurs or find ways to justify and downplay it, particularly when *we* are the ones making the distinctions.

James allows for no such compromise for those of us who "hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." "Show *no* partiality," he says. Do not "make distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts." Don't "dishonor the poor man"—or the person who has fewer connections, lesser status, different ethnicity, or gives a smaller contribution. To do such things is to "become a transgressor of the law." Instead, learn and do what it really means to "love your

neighbor as yourself" and show mercy to those who are different from you. "Speak and act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty" (Jas 2.1, 4, 6, 8, 11, 12).

"For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (v. 13).

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