

Wisdom for the Judgy

James 2:1-13

20 February 2022 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: How should we treat others in the church?

Big Idea: Mercy triumphs over judgment because love isn't earned.

Introduction

They're what you should bring when you're told not to bring a thing.

Or at least, that's what the ads tell us.

I just happen to have a box of Cadbury Favourites with me here.

They're full of some of my favourite chocolates.

Picnic. Very nice. Cherry Ripe. Yum. Definitely one of my favourites.

Why on earth do they even put Turkish Delight in these things?

Let's be honest, is it really ANYONE'S favourite?

What are they even doing in a chocolate box when there's hardly even any chocolate on them?

Turkish Delight's the great compromise chocolate: I know they're 92% fat free, but they're still just as full of sugar.

Some of you are probably feeling a little bit judged about now, if not downright offended.

It's not just a fun for a sermon illustration, it's also a fun dinner party conversation to ask what people think should be excluded from a box of favourites.

Believe me, you drop that little nugget, then sit back and watch the sparks fly.

People seem to have VERY strong opinions.

Yet there's a wide range included because we all have different tastes.

That's the point of having a variety pack – otherwise you'd just go out and just buy the ones you like.

You don't buy a box of chocolates like this because you never know what you're going to get, but because there's something for everyone.

The ones that are left over at the end are different in every situation.

Different varieties aren't included on the basis of whether you personally like them or not, but on the basis that they're chocolates.

Every chocolate and pseudo-chocolate is welcome to the table.

Except of course delights like Twirls and Strawberry Freddos, which is why there's the Party Pack.

And then there's the dark version and I saw this week that there's also a crème egg version, but that doesn't really help to make my point.

Our passage this morning addresses favouritism in the church.

Unlike having favourite chocolates, it's a serious issue because James shows us that favouritism in the church comes from failing to listen to God and do what he says.

Favouritism fails to show the same mercy to others that we've been shown by God.

Outline

We're looking at this letter that was written by James, probably the half-brother of Jesus.

You can find it almost at the back of the Bible.

If you're not familiar with the Bible, it can be a little bit confusing because when you see a title starting a new page, that's the start of a chapter in a regular book.

However, it's a new book in the Bible.

By chapters we mean the big numbers on the page and verses are the sentences that begin with the small, superscript numbers.

Today we're look at James chapter two – that's the big number two – from the small number one through to the small number thirteen.

This letter was probably written not all that many years after Jesus ascended into heaven.

James is writing to people who mostly grew up as Jews and then converted to Christianity.

He's writing to give them wisdom to live out their new faith in a fallen world so that they would grow up and become mature.

That's why we're calling this series "Grow Up!"

Last week, Jono did a great job of leading us through the last part of chapter one where James showed us the importance of DOING the word.

It's important to listen to God intently, but there's actually not much point if you quickly forget his words and don't put them into practice.

Hopefully you remember what those verses say because it would be hugely and sadly ironic if we forgot them!

True religion is God's word coming in, affecting our thoughts and feelings before then flowing out again in what we say and do.

Now we're going to see how this works out in practice in everyday life.

Christians can't have favourites.

That might sound like the principle, but that's actually the doing, the putting into practice part.

Not being partial to some people over others is the outworking out of a deeper principle: **mercy triumphs over judgment because love isn't earned.**

- Judging without mercy flows from evil motives (vv1-4)
- Choosing with mercy flows from divine love (v5)
- Judging without mercy is a great sin (vv6-11)
- Choosing with mercy is a gospel triumph (vv12-13)

Judging without mercy flows from evil motives (vv1-4)

James begins this section with more than just some friendly advice.

He gives us a command that sets the tone for this whole section – you must not have favourites.

Don't be prejudiced. Don't discriminate.

James 2:1 NIV11 ¹ My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism.

Without digging deeper, this favouritism could be based on any number of different things.

It could be nepotism – favouritism towards family members – or favouritism based on how smart they are.

Even though we can't see it, the word James uses here makes it clear that this favouritism is based on what they look like.

The word he uses is made up of two words that mean to receive someone according to their face.

He's saying that Christians shouldn't judge other Christians based on what they look like.

What does this look like in practice?

James is never short of a real-life example.

Even though it might be a made-up example rather than a situation that was actually reported to him, it's still a situation that's realistic.

He says to imagine that two men come in to visit your synagogue meeting.

They look very different.

We'll call the first one Gold Finger – kind of like the Bond villain – because he's got golden fingers.

In the Greco-Roman world, golden rings were a symbol of the equestrian class – the highest level of society.

He's a snappy dresser, clearly wearing this season's designer toga.

He looks spiffy in this shining clothes, still white without a stain on them.

He's someone who's got a lot of cash and a lot of clout. He's OP - overpowered.

The second bloke is poor and not just poor, but destitute.

He's getting very hard to see him from sideways-on.

His clothes are looking loose and shabby.

Actually, it's worse than that, they look filthy and probably smell like he hasn't had a bath in a very long time.

Charles was one of my more memorable customers.

He lived across the road from our service station, although he was spotted at various times all around South-East Queensland.

He wasn't your typical customer in the way that he walked, what he bought and the fact that he never talked, other than to himself.

6'6", big bushy beard and built like a tank, it's also no exaggeration to say that he STANK.

It really isn't unfair to say that you knew when Charles had been in the shop because the smell lingered long after he'd shuffled away.

The great thing is that although sometimes our staff would politely suggest for his own sake that he have a bath or change his clothes, I never heard a single one of them be mean or unkind to him either to his face or behind his back.

When I think of this second man, I think of Charles.

It's neat that these two very different men were visiting, but they probably didn't feel comfortable for long because what happens next isn't cool at all.

What if the two of them are treated very differently based on what they looked like?

What if the red carpet is rolled out for the man with the shiny clothes and not for the dirty man?

What if Golden Fingers is given a really good seat and Mr Filthy is asked to park himself on the floor, for everyone else to use him as a footrest, no less?

You might wonder why they'd do that.

After all, we don't give the best seats in the house to the richest people, do we?

Yeah right. Who do you think gets to sit in the best seats at the footy?

It's the bank executives and the fat cat business owners they're wining and dining, not Peter and Sheila from next-door.

It's the same at the Olympic games where regular people only get access to regular seats, if they can get tickets at all.

Businesses buy up all the best places.

The best seats go to the celebrities who can afford to buy their way there.

So it's possible that the rich man's given the best seats in the house because of what he might be able to do for them.

That's the footy, but what about churches?

We don't see people paying for the best seats in church, do we?

Well, renting out pews was actually quite common in the Church of England in the nineteenth century.

The doors to the pews were kept locked and so the wealthy families could reserve the best seats.

It was mostly phased out in the '60s and '70s, but there's at least one church in the British Isles that did it until the 2000s.

The rich would be able to buy the best seats in the house, but because there aren't that many rich people, they were mostly rented by middle-class business owners.

Those who were poor missed out because they couldn't afford it.

We also know that giving the best seats to some people was a common thing in Jewish culture.

Jesus talks about some guests being honoured by giving them the better seats in Luke 14, without saying that it's the wrong thing to do.

He goes to eat at the house of a prominent Pharisee and as he watches how the guests come in, he tells them a parable.

He warns them not to take the places of honour at the table because someone else might come in who's more important.

Then you'll be embarrassed and humiliated when you're moved to a lower place.

It's much better to start low and be told to move up to a better place.

The problem here isn't honouring people or even judging them.

The problem is with judging someone purely on the basis of their external appearance, in this case on how much money they have.

And perhaps more importantly, dishonouring the poor for how little they have.

We might think, “Why would they do that?” *Of course* that’s the wrong thing to do.

Because it’s so ingrained in us and this’s almost universal across cultures.

If anything, especially in a culture like ours that’s obsessed with beautiful people and saturated with the airbrushed.

We still use phrases like, “Clothes make the man.” which dates back to hundreds of years before the time of Jesus but that’s still how we judge people today.

James is saying something more along the lines of “don’t judge a book by its cover.”

Don’t judge the contents of the book based on the artwork that’s on the outside, but the quality of the writing.

James is saying that we mustn’t be prejudiced towards other Christians based on what they look like.

This isn’t a question of whether people are let in or not.

James is talking to believers here – brothers and sisters who are part of God’s family according to verse one.

It’s a question of how Christians are treated by other Christians.

James says that the problem with this is that you’ve discriminated amongst yourselves.

You’re dividing up one group of people into the more and less deserving because you’re judging with evil thoughts.

James is really clear that it’s wrong.

Nah-huh. Not allowed. Nokay.

Make no mistake: James is saying that this judgement based on appearance comes from evil thoughts.

That’s a pretty strong claim and we’ll unpack why he sees this so starkly – it’s because they’re judging others without mercy.

It’s actually possible that this isn’t talking about a church service at all.

Some people think that this’s a meeting trying to decide a legal outcome, rather than a worship service.

He describes them coming into the Hebrew word *synagogue*, even though he uses the Greek word ‘church’ in 5:14 and because of the judging language in verse six.

If that’s the case, perhaps they’re trying to influence the outcome of a trial, which would a miscarriage of justice.

And God clearly says in Leviticus not to do that:

Leviticus 19:15 NIV11 ¹⁵ “ ‘Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly.

However, I think it's probably a worship service.

We mightn't think that we have a problem with poor people.

I'd like to think that I don't, but the more I think about it, the more I think that I do.

Not necessarily in overt ways – I feel very comfortable having a conversation with people from a diverse range of backgrounds.

It's much more subtle than that – it's the attitudes that go with coming from different class backgrounds that can rub us up the wrong way.

It's an error if we fall into thinking that to be Christian is to be middle-class.

I think that exactly the same thing is true of race.

We know that racial profiling is a thing and we all do it to some degree.

We judge people on how they look.

I've got a friend living in Australia, who grew up in another country whose wife is from a different cultural background.

He sometimes says, helpfully, I think, “Everyone's racist.”

And he's not just talking about Aussies, he means everyone including himself.

This isn't a good thing, but it's helpful to start by acknowledging that we all have a tendency to judge others based on external factors.

Judging other's faith on external appearance isn't just poor reasoning – excuse the pun – it's faulty reasoning.

James says that anyone who does that is a poor judge.

It's an epic fail.

Choosing with mercy flows from divine love (v5)

This next verse matters because if you don't get this, then you won't get what James is saying.

Having dealt with how we naturally want to choose people, James says, “Don't.”

The much better model to judge the way that God does.

Choosing with mercy flows from divine love.

We've already seen that their judgment is based on the wrong thing.

They're making a judgement BASED on outside appearances.

Actually, James says that it's based on evil thoughts.

But what's the judgement ABOUT?

At the end of the day we can't be certain because James doesn't tell us, but I don't think this isn't just about how much money they've got.

The judgment they're making is about what they assume the money means.

It's a judgment about their faith in Jesus.

That's what verse one tells us.

They're making a judgment of other Christians' faith based on what they look like.

Probably assuming that the rich must be the godly ones and the poor people must be the ungodly ones.

They are assuming that your godliness is directly related to the number of teeth you have.

Appearance is what matters to them and so they give preferential treatment to the wealthy.

They've decided that rich people are superior to poor people.

James likes to play on words and I reckon that's what he's got in mind here because he uses the same word to describe the filthy man's cloths in verse two as he uses to describe the moral filth in our memory verse, verse 21.

They've come to the conclusion that poor people are less worthy.

It's really no different to saying "you can tell a lot about a man from his shoes" which is saying that someone's external appearance tells something about their character.

That might sound crazy to you, but I think it actually makes sense.

It's a common thought for people to have that riches are a sign of God's blessing.

Being poor, then, is sometimes taken as an absence of his blessing.

Today, this kind of thinking is very much around still and it's known as the prosperity gospel.

God wants to bless you and so if you're not materially blessed, then you mustn't have enough faith.

That's garbage.

It's a teaching that comes from darkness, as James is going to show us.

Imagine what it would be like if you were a Jew who'd become a Christian in Jerusalem.

You used to be part of the in-crowd, but now you're on the receiving end of persecution from other Jews because you follow Jesus.

The pressure starts to mount and it gets to the point where you have to pack up your family, leave Jerusalem and move somewhere else.

You have to leave your land, your family connections and your income behind.

Even though you were a doctor, maybe you have to pick up a cleaning job in the place that you move to, just so that your family can survive.

We have a number of Sri Lankan friends who fled from their native country because their houses were burned down and their lives were threatened.

You've had to start over again from the very bottom.

Can you imagine what it'd be like to be told that you're less spiritually mature just because you don't have much?

How devastating would it be to move to a new place and then be treated as a lesser Christian because you're now poor?

The idea that blessing is the measure of godliness is a myth that needs debunking.

And all we need to do it is to look at what God does.

God doesn't always choose to save the kind of people that we might choose.

The kind of people that most of us are drawn to at a party are the rich people, the beautiful people, the confident people.

The good conversationalists who are interesting, easy to talk with and get along with.

We choose the go-getters and achievers.

God doesn't just choose the people that we'd choose though.

God often chooses those who are poor in the eyes of the world.

That phrase alone should be a warning to us.

There's something wrong if we judge people on exactly the same criteria that everyone else in the world who don't know Christ do.

God also chooses the down-and-outers.

The people who don't bring anything impressive to the table.

God can do that because the thing is that when it comes to salvation, none of us bring anything to the table.

Well, the only thing we bring is the sin that needs to be atoned for.

Yet we can deceive ourselves into thinking that God probably chose us because there was something a little bit better about us.

Being poor isn't much fun and being poor isn't something that the Bible ever says that we should aspire to.

But wealth isn't the criteria that godliness is ever measured by.

Jesus says that you can live the blessed life even if you've never sat on a secluded tropical beach because if you've got Jesus, then you've got something even better.

Often people who have nothing are the ones that realise that they need God most.

So, Jesus says:

Luke 6:20 NIV11 ²⁰ Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

God doesn't choose you because of the car you drive.

You don't deserve to be saved because you've got the nicest house on the street.

One of his criteria for offering you eternal life isn't that you've got blonde hair, blue eyes and fair skin.

Or even because you've got a bubbly personality.

The reason God chooses you is because of his great love.

Even poor people get to inherit the kingdom.

James repeats the phrase that he used earlier, so let's not miss it.

An inheritance is something that you look forward to receiving in the future.

Who has God given the promise of inheriting the kingdom to?

It's not the rich people or the good people.

It's those who love him.

What's the basis of getting into the kingdom?

It's on the basis of Jesus' death on the cross for our sins.

We don't become Christians because of how great we are.

And certainly not because of what we look like.

We're Christians because we trust that Jesus died for us and THAT'S why our sins are forgiven.

The cross is the great leveller, regardless of how much money is in your bank account or the brand of clothes you wear.

God takes people who don't have a brass razoo and he gives them the riches of faith.

We get every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Far more important than your material wealth is your spiritual state.

That's the measure of your soul.

It's recognising that you're not really there on your own merit.

The opposite of being poor in spirit isn't being rich, it's being wicked.

Matthew 5:3 NIV11 ³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

My hunch is that churches today are tending towards being middle class.

We know that rich people are very hard to reach – it's easier for a camel to walk through the eye of a needle.

Historically though, churches have done really well in the outer suburbs where houses are much more affordable.

Unfortunately, it's also been a good place for cults to operate.

Who wants to plant a church in tough places where you've got to step on rubbish and used needles when you get out of your car, as one church planter I read described his reality?

Yet in the ancient world, a significant part of the church was probably poor.

Not necessarily absolutely desperate, but certainly poor.

They realise that turning to God is their only hope.

This should be a great encouragement to those who are struggling financially.

Just because someone's poor, they're definitely not excluded from God's kingdom.

There aren't different classes of heir because God's impartial to these external things.

And so they shouldn't be treated any differently IN God's kingdom.

To write people off spiritually because of a lack of material wealth is inconsistent with what God does.

He converts the hearts of poor people.

How then could you fail to treat them like a brother or sister with exactly the same benefits as you have?

Favouritism contradicts God's own attitude.

Judging without mercy is a great sin (vv6-11)

Humiliating someone is significant.

It's an especially terrible charge in a shame-honour culture.

James now address Christians who've already fallen into that trap, perhaps without even realising it.

Even if it was a hypothetical example he gave before, he's now talking to people who've do this kind of wrong judging.

He wants them to see that judging without mercy is a great sin.

One of the reasons that we're worried about the poor is that we're worried that we're going to get exploited by them.

We're worried about what they might take from us.

After all, we worked hard for what we've got an it's potentially true that they didn't.

I'm talking this way because I know that I'm rich.

I live in the fourth wealthiest country in the world.

Unfortunately, I'm not above having these thoughts from time-to-time.

The great irony is, that we often get the threat around the wrong way.

James points out how the rich treat them.

It's as often, if not more often, the rich people who exploit you.

The rich are the ones dragging you into court – seems to be the reason for the previous location in court setting.

You don't want to follow in their footsteps.

It doesn't bother them to take you to court because they can afford the legal fees and can pay the bill without even thinking about it.

Unlike most of us who are somewhere in the middle and need to count the potential cost of losing, even if we're in the right.

It's generally not poor people who rigorously go after others legally.

Clive Palmer will just about sue anyone who looks in his direction.

He doesn't really care because he's got so much money that it doesn't really matter whether he wins or loses.

It's the rich who blaspheme.

We usually think of blasphemy as being words directed towards God.

It's any action that works against the power and majesty of God.

But it can also be used to mean the abuse that comes due to faith.

The poor are much more likely to desperately reach out to God.

The thing that will keep you on the straight and narrow is following what James calls 'the royal law'.

What is the royal law?

Is it a law that only the king has to follow?

At her coronation, a representative of the Church of Scotland presented a Bible to Queen Liz and called it the royal law.

It think it's royal because it's Jesus' law.

It's a bit more clunky, but it's legit to call it kingdom law.

This is the law that should actually rule the way that people relate in the kingdom.

The law, the principle that rules Jesus' kingdom is different.

In Matthew 22, Jesus calls it the second greatest commandment.

It comes from Leviticus and is affirmed by Jesus.

Love your neighbour as yourself.

Keeping that law is doing right.

What does it mean to love your neighbour?

Well, naturally, it means to love the people that you live with.

It also means to love people who live in the houses around you.

But Jesus makes clear that it means to even love your enemies.

We need to say what loving means.

Loving doesn't mean – like we've heard the last few weeks – just accepting someone for exactly who they are.

This isn't saying that we accept sin and affirm sinful actions under the guise of love.

That wouldn't actually be loving at all.

But we do accept anyone and everyone that God has shown mercy to because they've repented of their sin.

If you're fulfilling this whole, perfect law, that's how you'll stop judging others wrongly.

'Perfect' is the word that was used in 1:25 to mean mature.

It's this word for maturing or completing.

You're being mature if you live out the second commandment.

James really couldn't be clearer in verse nine and it's like getting hit with a cricket bat.

I find myself wanting to say that favouritism is bad, well, at least it isn't that great.

But surely it's not THAT bad.

James doesn't leave any room for doubt: favouritism = sin.

Verse nine:

James 2:9 NIV11 ⁹ But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

Favouritism is sin because it fails to love your neighbour.

Treating people differently based on their external appearance makes you a lawbreaker.

That has serious consequences.

Most of us think that we're okay with God because we do most things that he asks of us.

The Pharisees in particular thought that they were right with God because of all the good they did and all their efforts that they took to do the right thing.

Jesus set them straight and he sets us straight as well.

James reminds us in verse ten that you have to keep the whole law.

If you break even just one part of it, then you're as guilty as if you'd broken the whole lot.

That's really different from what most of people assume.

We think that there should be a little bit of tolerance for making a mistake.

It's not 50% or 70% or 90% that's a passing grade for God.

You have to have 100% obedience.

You might think that you're doing the right thing even as you are showing favouritism.

You're loving the rich people, aren't you?

But, you're also not loving the poor.

That's the thing about the maximum application of this.

Judging without mercy is a sin.

James backs this up with the specific example of adultery and murder.

I think he uses these examples because they're so significant.

No one could seriously argue that you can just do one and think that's enough.

Committing adultery and murder are serious.

You have become a lawbreaker, even if you do one and not the other because a holy God can't just let them slide.

God is the one who spoke and made these laws.

He's the one who needs to set these rules for us to live by.

And when he speaks, we need to listen.

This ties us back to what we were looking at last week.

You don't get to talk over the top of God and pick and choose the things that you are going to follow.

If God has said it, then you have to keep it.

You can't just not commit adultery and be okay.

If you murder, then you're a lawbreaker because God calls for both.

If you judge others without mercy, then you're guilty of sin.

Choosing with mercy is a gospel triumph (vv12-13)

Finally, we wrap up by seeing that choosing with mercy is a gospel triumph.

This hasn't just been an academic exercise.

James expects that this will change the way anyone listening to this – including you and I – act.

He tells us how to speak and act.

Again, we see this is an outworking of how God speaks to us.

James mightn't explicitly state the gospel in this letter, but it's the gospel that he draws us back to here.

He reminds us of the effect that gospel has had in our life.

The reality that God has shown mercy to undeserving sinners is the truth that he highlights here.

This's a gospel-fuelled response.

Christians don't speak and act as those who will be judged by the law.

There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.

We speak and act as people who've been freed from the tyranny of sin.

People who no longer have to be slaves to rebelling against God.

Instead, as people of the New Covenant, our hearts and minds have been renewed so that we are freed to obey.

Willingly and because we want to.

We've been given the freedom to love others with mercy instead of judging others and therefore judging ourselves.

This change is the triumph of the gospel in our lives.

It's possible because God has shown us mercy.

God was willing to show us mercy and let us off from the penalty our sin deserved.

It wasn't anything special or impressive in us that caused God to do this.

It was simply because of his great love that God is going to judge us but also show us mercy.

That means that we're freed to live without needing to live with petty one-upmanship.

We live out the gospel as we show mercy to others.

In fact, how can we not treat other people in the same way that we've been treated?

The Bible is full of instructions for Christians to be caring, generous, and merciful people, so not showing mercy is failing to do the law.

And there is a sober warning for anyone who treats others with partiality.

Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who's not merciful.

That's an important warning in verse 13.

If you judge others without mercy, you will be judged without mercy.

We're not talking about playing for cattle stations here, but for life.

Jesus puts it more positively:

Matthew 5:7 NIV11 ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

This doesn't come naturally to someone without Christ.

For Christians, it's only possible when we dwell on what God has done for us.

When we love others with mercy rather than judging them, it's a triumph.

But it's not our triumph, it's a gospel triumph.

Conclusion

Mercy triumphs over judgment.

And that should affect the way that we think about others.

Faith + Favouritism = Judgment.

They're like oil and water, they don't mix.

But God shows us that Mercy > Judgment.

So, let's not fall into the sin of showing favouritism amongst ourselves.

Instead, it's a gospel triumph when we love others without playing favourites, showing mercy just as God himself has.

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Big Question: How should we treat others in the church?

Big Idea: Mercy triumphs over judgment because love isn't earned.

Discussion Questions

1. In your own words, how would you summarise the main thrust of this passage?
2. Get inside their head. Why might someone respond like this to the two men in James' example?
3. In what ways do you think we express our partiality between rich and poor people in the church today?
4. How does God treat people who are poor in the eyes of the world?
5. How does the royal law give us a different playbook?
6. How do you feel about what James says in verse nine?
7. What makes someone a "lawbreaker"?
8. What is the warning James gives in verse thirteen? Do you find it surprising?
9. Do you think partiality is a major, minor or non-existent problem in i. the wider church and ii. our church?
10. What other differences (beyond rich/poor), do you think the principles of this passage speak to?