

14. Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

Mercy triumphs over judgment!

(James 2:12-13)

Show Mercy to Receive Mercy

Through James, the Lord Jesus warns us against the sin of favoritism. As we saw in the previous chapter, James puts forward the unity of the law to prevent us from thinking that favoritism is only a minor sin. If we stumble at just one point of the law, we are guilty of breaking all of it (2:10). Favoritism is sin.

The passage we will look at now takes everything one step farther, for the Lord places us before the judgment seat of God. The sin of favoritism is exposed in its true character as lack of mercy. If we show favoritism, we do not approach our neighbor as the Lord has approached us, nor do we treat our neighbor as the Lord treats us. To put it bluntly, the sin of favoritism can cost us dearly when we ourselves come to stand before God's throne.

The line of thought is simple: we must be merciful to others or God will not be merciful to us. Those who cannot accept James' letter as being canonical see this text as further proof that salvation is made subject to our meeting of certain conditions. What James writes here, however, is a very consistent line in Scripture: if we show no mercy, we receive no mercy.

Let me quote from the Old Testament, from Hosea 6:6, which the Lord Jesus also quoted in his discussions with the Pharisees: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice." The Jews were so intent on keeping the fourth commandment that even healing on the sabbath was not allowed, and our Savior said to them, "Have you not read that God desires mercy, not sacrifice? Do you not understand what it means?"

I dealt previously with the fact that there is a very close connection between the letter of James and the "Sermon on the Mount". We see the connection also here. In Matthew 5:7, we read, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." In Matthew 6:14-15, we read, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” And in Matthew 7:1-2, we read, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

This is a bit frightening—or it should be—for how harshly and totally do we not sometimes condemn others? We all know the parable of the unmerciful servant who was forgiven much debt, yet would not forgive his fellow-servant a smaller debt (Matt 18:21-35). He was asked, “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?”

We see then how James’ writing in 2:12-13 does not differ in any way from any other writings in Scripture. Rather, it builds on the instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and is therefore all the more emphatic and important. I summarize the text with the words of the text itself: mercy triumphs over judgment. We will examine what these words do not mean and what these words do mean.

Is There No Judgment?

When we read, “Mercy triumphs over judgment,” we must be careful not to come to the wrong conclusion. The wrong conclusion would be that there is no judgment at all, and that we can therefore allow all kinds of sin in our life, and accept it in the life of others. The Heidelberg Catechism deals with the same matter in Lord’s Day 4, where it asks, “But is God not also merciful?” How can God bring his curse over sinners, when he is at the same time a merciful God? The catechism answers, “God is indeed merciful, but he is also just.” And justice requires that sin be punished in the proper measure.

I also have to think of what God said when he passed before Moses and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation” (Ex 34:6-7). These words are later echoed in Psalm 103. We may sing of God’s love and compassion, but note that it is added, “on those who fear him.”

When James writes, “Mercy triumphs over judgment,” he does not imply that there is no judgment. Some take it in that manner, but this is an error. Actually, James refutes that implication when he writes immediately prior, “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.” In all our words and actions we must remember that there is judgment.

There is a day of reckoning, when we will be individually judged on what we have said and done.

James relates this particularly to the sin of favoritism. God will deal with us in the same way we have dealt with others, so we had better be careful in what we say and do. We *are* going to be judged, and with God there is no favoritism. The LORD will not look at our earthly wealth, status, knowledge, talents or anything else for which we were favored here, but he will look at our words and actions, what we said and did.

We even read that we will be judged “by the law.” This means that there will not be different rules for different people, but the same law, the one and only law, will be applied to everyone. On Judgment Day, there will not be one set of rules for Reformed and another set for Baptists, one for Roman Catholics and another for Judaists. The one law will be equally applied to all persons.

Judgment Day

“Mercy triumphs over judgment” does not mean that there is no judgment, for that day is coming with all its truth and force. God will lay open the thoughts of all people and our hidden sins will be made public. All outward shine will be removed, all masks ripped off, and God will say, “Let us see how you really are!” Nowhere does the Bible say that mercy annuls judgment. One day we shall all stand before God and we will have to look at the deep reality of our sins and sinfulness.

Consider 2 Corinthians 5:10: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” Judgment Day is not for others, but for us. Consider what Paul writes in Romans 2:16 about a day when God will “judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ.” Nothing will be overlooked or hidden away. All we can say, “For thy goodness sake, O LORD, think of me in Thy compassion” (Ps 25, *Book of Praise*).

And for those who think that they can say what they want about others with impunity, consider this: “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt 12:36-37). On Judgment Day we will be astonished at our own evil doings. “Did I say that? Did I do that? How could I?”

Note that James does write, “the law that gives freedom.” This means the law that is fulfilled by Christ, which can no longer condemn those who

believe in Christ. It is the law that, in him, is no longer an unbearable yoke, but one that keeps us free from the slavery of sin. We should therefore not see the coming day of judgment as a day of doom and gloom. There is freedom from the curse of the law, a freedom that we have in Christ. We will not stand there alone, but the Lord Jesus will stand with us and all believers, and he will speak words of redemption and deliverance. Our Savior is the Judge. He has fulfilled the requirements of the law and restored it from a law of slavery to a law of freedom.

Then, as believers, we must show in this life the mind of Christ. We know that it is out of grace alone, by God's mercy in Christ, that we have been saved. And one important factor will be taken into account on the Day of Judgment: have we who were redeemed by grace also been gracious to others? Has Christ's love flowed from us to others? Grace and love are not meant for personal or private consumption only. They are meant to be shown and shared.

Speaking and Acting

This must determine our speech and deeds. I find it noteworthy that James mentions both speaking and acting in the same verse as judgment. Remember how the rich man in the preceding verses received kind and inviting words, whereas the poor man heard insulting words of rejection. We find here again a special emphasis of James: our speaking (and that is not just what we say, but also how we say it) is under the scrutiny of the Most High, who hears even our whispers. We will deal later with James' teachings about the deadly poison of the tongue.

Favoritism is first apparent in words, in language, in how we address others, and in the nicknames we may use. Speaking is not only a matter of the exact words we use, but also the way in which something is said, as well as the tone of voice and the body language that accompanies the spoken word. Sometimes, we may not issue a single word and yet convey a strong message by our attitude alone. Silence sometimes speaks very loudly.

Here we are in the transition from speaking to acting. What do we do? Must we show love and respect to all, and honor those who are set above us in whatever capacity, or show disdain and have no regard for those who need our help most? The phrase, "Mercy triumphs over judgment," tells us that in all our dealings with others, no matter who it may be, we must show kindness, gentleness, and mercy.

What is here the meaning of the word "mercy"? The original word comes from a root that has something to do with a kitchen and food. Mercy is show-

ing pity, giving the needy what they require. It means being moved over the needs of others, and helping in that need. Here, contrasted with the word “judgment”, the word “mercy” goes more in the direction of a forgiving kindness. We can be very precise and lay down the law, so to speak, but does the mercy and loving-kindness of the Lord then shine through? The word “mercy” accentuates that the one who is shown mercy does not deserve it. If something is deserved, it is called merit. If it is undeserved, it is called mercy.

“Speak” and “act” are words in the imperative present. This means that we must always speak and act as people who will themselves be judged one day. This may sometimes be difficult in our view or experience, but we must continue to show mercy, for if we stop doing so, we forfeit the mercy that Christ has shown to us by his suffering and death. I once heard it said in this way: “Only you can stop the flow of mercy your way, by withholding it from others around you.”

Judgment With Mercy

May we never make any judgments? When people fall into sin or lead a sinful life, or when we are convinced that things are going in the wrong direction, may we not make any judgments? James writes that it must then be judgment with mercy. We must be careful, making sure that our judgment is well-founded in facts, provisional in conclusions, and tempered with mercy. It must not be personalistic and malicious judgment that leads to estrangement. The real and only Day of Judgment is still coming, and Christ alone has the full view and the final say.

If we have not been merciful, we will receive an unmerciful judgment ourselves. Or, better put, we forfeit whatever claim we may have had as covenant children to God’s mercy. Yet if we have been merciful, we will discover that love covers a multitude of sins, also our own sins.

Again, we must be careful with our conclusions. Being merciful is not something that we do in order to escape God’s judgment. We do not walk around thinking, “I better be nice to people or God will not be nice to me.” When we read the parable about the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-45, we may find it remarkable that the righteous did not know that, by showing mercy to the hungry, thirsty, strangers, poor, sick, or imprisoned, they were actually serving Christ. And those who showed no mercy were not aware of the fact that they were rejecting Christ. Christ was not consciously on their

mind, but the Lord Jesus says, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

Now we know that by helping people in their needs, especially fellow Christians, we are serving Christ. We could perhaps condemn someone and refuse to help him until change is evident, but is that still judgment with mercy? Do we look down on others from a lofty height and agree that they are miserable sinners, or do we encourage them to look up with us to Christ who is in heaven? Are we aware that we are as much, if not more, in need of forgiveness and mercy as they are?

Mercy Triumphs

James writes, “Mercy triumphs over judgment!” While judgment should be pronounced, mercy is extended. This is translated in the KJV as, “Mercy rejoices against judgment.” “Rejoices” means loud words of praise and thanks. “Mercy rejoices” is in fact a proper translation of the original. We should not be happy when someone gets finally punished, but we should rejoice when someone is forgiven and blessed!

I also like the translation, “Mercy triumphs...” A triumph is only gained after a long and difficult battle. And a triumph is also a complete victory. When mercy triumphs, there is nothing left of judgment. Mercy has overcome and conquered all judgment forever.

This does not come easy, for the judgment had to be fulfilled. The justice of God needed to be satisfied. This is what our Lord Jesus Christ did when he came into our world in our flesh and bore God’s wrath, especially on the cross and in the agony of hell. There, judgment seemed to triumph, for Jesus was dead and buried. But he arose from the dead, and now rules supreme. Now he grants to us the mercy he has obtained for us by his death on the cross. Mercy triumphs — completely.

In the previous chapter, I wrote that we cannot be “little sinners”. We are complete sinners, totally depraved. But the same goes for mercy and forgiveness. We do not receive just a little bit of mercy. We are indeed complete sinners, but we are also completely forgiven. It is all or nothing.

Do we understand this? We must completely forgive our neighbor from the heart. We must show forth in *all* our words and deeds the triumph of God’s grace. We must not come halfway now, but all the way, for when we stand before the throne, we will be asked, “Did mercy triumph over judgment? Were you careful in your conclusions, kind in your words, compassionate in your

actions, and forgiving because you have been forgiven even more? Did Jesus Christ take form in your life in all these things?”

It is remarkable that Jesus Christ testified of himself, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). Whom shall we condemn? Whom shall we judge? Remember, mercy triumphs over judgment. It is our only hope. And it is the only hope for this world.