

James 2:1-13
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 28, 2022

Life can bring some embarrassing moments. Today's Gospel and First Lesson each contained one such an experience, presuming for oneself an honor that was not fitting and thus being humiliated by moving to a lower seat in front of all the other guests. Chagrin can fill us in cases of mistaken identity, where we talked to somebody as if we knew them and it was really someone else. Or we spoke without thinking and stuck our foot in our mouth, all the way up to our knee. Then there is the scene of occasional cartoons, one I saw again last week: leaving a restroom with toilet paper trailing along behind.

The epistle of James, what some have termed a course in practical Christianity, seeks more than avoiding a social faux pas. It warns us of inconsistencies between our confession and our life. The previous chapter instructs, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." James helps us avoid turning our life into a betrayal of our faith as it warns

WATCH YOUR STEP

- I. Reach out to all v1-7
- II. Live in love v8-11
- III. Come for mercy v12-13

We need to watch our step and reach out to all, for favoritism is forbidden. James refers to misbehavior in a worship setting. Visitors come into the church. One is wearing fancy clothes, obviously a wealthy individual and one who displays it. The other is dressed shabbily and appears poor. How do we treat them? In the text a place of honor was given to the rich person, probably an elevated seat, while the poor person was avoided. Did he smell as well? Next to nothing was made available, perhaps a place on the floor or in a corner.

Today it might be the opposite. Most people like to sit in the back. It's not the location that matters but the reaction. Who receives the most of our attention, being sure to introduce ourselves to them and following up with a contact? Probably the wealthy or the high and mighty. We hope the poor individual will not darken the door again. James condemns that attitude in no uncertain terms. "Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" It is not right. God's love is for everyone. Jesus came to save the world, which means all classes, races and whatever earthly divisions we note.

Conditions are often reversed in the kingdom of God. "Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him?" Other times we hear of the danger that wealth poses. Jesus said that it is as difficult for a rich person to be saved as it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. That doesn't mean you can't be rich and be a Christian. There are wealthy people who understand that what they have is a blessing from God and they use it for the Lord and for others. We might point to Abraham as an example. But it is easy for money to become the focus of our life, that we love riches most of all or feel self-sufficient because of our possessions and think we have no need for God. Think of the contrast between the rich man and Lazarus in a story Jesus told, and of their eternal outcomes. The rich man lived in luxury and had plenty, while Lazarus was a poor beggar with nothing, yet as a believer when he died he went to Abraham's side, that is, to heaven, while the rich man suffered in the torments of hell.

Sometimes people obtain their wealth by mistreating the poor. James mentioned exploiting them or taking advantage of them in court. Their wealth is ill-gotten.

The Apostle Paul noted in his first letter to the Corinthians that many Christians are not among the elite. We may be viewed as foolish or old-fashioned. What passes for wisdom and power are not ours. "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are." So back to the scene of the text: while we dress nicely out of respect for the Lord when we come to his house, clothes do not make a Christian. Faith in the heart does.

Remember God's grace in seeking you and bringing you into his kingdom. As you rejoice in that gift, reach out to welcome others, regardless of their earthly conditions. Share God's love with everyone you can: rich or poor, educated or simple, powerful or downtrodden. Rejoice when believers stream in from east and west, from north and south as was mentioned in the Gospel last week, from all races and types of people. Jesus came for sinners and that's what every one of us is. We all need him. Reach out to all as you watch your step.

II.

James added that we live in love equal to our love of self. "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right." That's the summary of the Second Table of the Law, the commandments dealing with our relationship with those around us. God, of course, is number for us and our relationship with him is covered in the opening commandments, dealing

with our love for him, use of his name and hearing of his Word. We also show our love for him in our treatment of the people who surround us in life. We spend lots of time and effort caring for ourselves, earning a living and providing comfort. That is expected. We are to take care of the life God has given us. We need to show equal concern for others. Again, we love all, not just some favorites. It is easy to like those who are similar to ourselves in appearance, customs, languages and preferences. We are more comfortable with what is familiar. But our neighbor is not just those close by or like us. When our Savior told of the Good Samaritan he showed that whoever we meet that has a need is our neighbor. Live in love and help those in difficulty. Seek them out rather than try to ignore needs and give help only when you're backed into a corner and can't avoid the situation. Otherwise you are a lawbreaker, James says.

We need to keep the whole law. We may excuse ourselves for some of our misdeeds and think that other good things we do make up for them. Or we may view sins of omission (when we fail to do the good things God wants) as not so bad—we didn't actively cause harm. However, all his commands are his will. "For whoever keeps the whole law yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." That hypothetical is not close to reality as many sins fill our every day, but even if we committed only one sin in our entire lifetime, we would still have disobeyed the Lord and deserve the penalty it demands. We're familiar with what that is: "the wages of sin is death," and that is ultimately eternal death. It is not for us to pick and choose what we want to obey or to omit. On the topic of the law, having love for all is not approving of sin. God has standards and they call for perfect obedience. Jesus spent time with outcasts and public sinners. He reached out to them with transforming love. He didn't minimize or dismiss their guilt. He called them from sin to a life of faith. We must not confuse love with approving evil. Watch your step in both directions, neither avoiding sinners as beneath your interest nor accepting sinful behavior as good.

As we strive to live in love we will be concerned about both body and soul. We will help others with their earthly conditions but we also know that the greatest good is bringing the message of eternal life. Improving or prolonging days here is good but they do not last. Eternity is forever. That is why the mission of the church is proclaiming God's law and gospel. Other matters result from believing, that is, they are fruits of faith that accompany what's in our hearts.

III.

As we look at the warning of the divine writer we realize the shortcomings and wrongs we have committed. That knowledge leads us to come for mercy. It is

needed. We see the truth we confessed earlier in the service, "I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good." We are guilty of favoritism, catering to those we felt could benefit us. We have not loved others equally to our love of self. And there are many more sins that we commit. We deserve only punishment from God. It is more than embarrassing. We quake at the threat, "Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful."

Mercy is supplied. In compassion for us sinners God sent his Son. Jesus lived in perfect love. He kept all of the commands of God. He achieved righteousness and has given it to us. He covered our sins, actually removed them from the record by dying on the cross. He suffered the penalty we deserved. He paid for them all.

So it is also true, "Mercy triumphs over judgment." God's mercy is beyond our wildest dreams when we think about facing God in judgment. We should expect doom but receive blessing. What a relief! What joy fills the Christian heart! We're going to heaven.

Receiving mercy impacts our life. Overwhelmed by God's love, we show love. We want to follow his ways. His forgiveness supplies both the desire and the power to do so. It enables us to overcome temptations. No, not always, because we don't continually utilize that power so sin daily. Our sinful nature clings to us on this earth. Daily then we repent of our sin and God's forgiveness renews us in the struggle against sin.

That's where what James called "the law that gives freedom" comes in. He was not talking about legal demands. They can only strike fear into our hearts; they relate to slavery. Here the term law is speaking of the message of God. Through it we are set free from sin, free to serve the Lord. We produce fruits of faith, acts giving evidence visible to others that we are believers. Thus comes the focus of the text on reaching out and welcoming others regardless of their background or similarities to us. We love them as we love ourselves so seek what is best for them, especially for their souls.

Watch your step as you go through life. Look for others to embrace with God's love in Jesus. Confess your wrongs where noted and be moved to renewed efforts to serve God and to reach out with his saving love.