

Becoming a Community of Mercy

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 February 2026

Preacher: Cory Brock

[0:00] All right, we're going to read together from the letter of James, chapter 2, verses 1 to 13. And Gene Stewart is going to come and read for us.

Let me invite Gene up, and let's read God's Word together. My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

For a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in. And if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, you sit here in a good place, while you say to the poor man, you stand over there or sit down at my feet, have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he had promised to those who love him?

But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you are called?

[1:16] If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scriptures, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. You are doing well.

But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

For he who said, do not commit adultery, also said, do not murder. If you do not commit adultery but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. And I'll just pray briefly for us. Lord, prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your word. Silence in us any voices but your own so that we may hear your word and do it.

[2:22] And we pray this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Back to Martin Luther again this week. Luther, the great reformer, remember he said that the epistle of James is an epistle of straw.

So here's the quote. I didn't quote him last week but I have the quote today. He said, the epistle really is an epistle of straw compared to St. Peter's, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians.

Why? And he said, because it has nothing of the savor of the gospel in it. Now, I learned this week what he meant by that a little more. And what he meant by that was not that it's not useful as a book.

But he said that you don't build on a foundation of straw but on rock. So if you're going to build a house, you build on stone. You build on a good foundation. So he thought that you've got to build on Romans, Galatians, Ephesians.

And then James becomes like straw that you pack the roof with. So he said it's an epistle that teaches you all about the law but not the gospel. Now, that helps a little bit with what Luther said.

[3:28] But we said last week, and I'll say every week, that he was wrong about that. James does build on the rock. It does build on the foundation. It does tell us the gospel over and over again.

And it's assumed, it's hinted at throughout the text most of the time. But it's right here, right here in verse 1 this week. Because when James says, Brothers and sisters, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

He's telling us the rock upon which the command, don't show partiality, is built on. So when he says, as you hold the faith in Jesus, that's a word, a verb really for wearing clothing. So you could say it something like this. As you are wearing the faith of Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, don't show partiality. In other words, he's saying if you are dressed in the righteousness of Christ, the Lord of glory, if you've put on the clothing of the word of truth, the gospel, then that gives you the basis for showing no partiality within the church.

And so he's assuming the gospel. He is even hinting at it and preaching the rock every single week in some way that we are not accepted by our performance, but accepted by mercy.

[4:47] And so here this week, he's telling us that if you have received mercy from God, he's picking up on last week's command to visit the orphan and the widow in their affliction to become a community of mercy, that the church has to be a place of mercy and known for mercy.

And he's really teaching us about that this week, that the gospel that changed you is the gospel that keeps remaking you. The gospel that brought you in is the gospel that keeps changing you from the inside out.

And so we run back to the gospel that we've received mercy in order to grow into a community of mercy. And that's the logic that he gives us right there from verse 1. He's teaching us the gospel and how it can change us from the inside out.

And so the question today is, how can we, St. Columbus, this local church, become a community of mercy? And that's a community of love for the afflicted, as he commanded us last week, to pure religion, what is it?

To love, to pursue those who are afflicted, the orphan and the widow. And so how can we become that? And that's what he's treating this week in these first 13 verses. And to do that, to get to the positive, which is next week, so come back for the positive side, he first has to clear the ground and say, if we're going to become a community of mercy, there is a cancer that actually has to be rooted out of us.

[6:12] So he's saying we cannot be people of mercy until we have dealt with the deep problem that's getting in the way. And so that's this week. That's these 13 verses. And so let's see it.

Let's see the diagnosis he gives us, the gravity, why the cancer that he's talking about matters so much. And then lastly, the cure.

So the diagnosis, the gravity of it, and the cure. So first, the diagnosis. Now it's right here in verse 1. We'll look at the first four verses in this point. Verse 1, he tells it to us, Brothers and sisters, show no partiality.

So the cancer is partiality. And what is that? Partiality is just favoritism. It could be translated favoritism. So he's saying that the problem that we have is favoritism based on social status. Hierarchies of performance, hierarchies of race, hierarchies of wealth, economic status that we build. So the command is this. He's saying show no favoritism based on social statuses.

[7:18] And he's pointing us to something deep within that is causing that problem, that there's a cancer deep within. Now, in verse 2 to 4, it's really clear that this is obviously happening in the church that he's speaking to.

And so he says, When the poor man in shabby clothes comes in the door, and then the rich man bathed in gold comes in the door, you can't give the rich man the best seat in the house and tell the poor man to sit at the back.

Now, the word for shabby clothing really is more like rags. It's more, for us, it's the kind of clothing that you think.

That's not nice clothes. But really, what he's talking about is first century poverty. And first century poverty means the man who walks in the door in tatters, in rags, smelling.

That's what the word's conveying there. So you can imagine the great temptation in the first century, that when a person comes in and you can smell their poverty, and they're half naked because nakedness was a real problem for people in the first century, and the man comes in dressed in wealth, who everybody is going to be attracted to, and who the people are going to want to stay away from.

[8:32] So it's a little tricky for us because of a couple reasons. One is there's clearly an issue of giving seats of honor in the local church

here, and we no longer have seats of honor, though in our past we have had seats of honor.

So one of the things we can say is there should never be seats of honor in a church. There should never be special seats. I think it's really tricky for us because when I think about what are the seats of honor in our church, probably the seats that people fight most for are the back seats, not the front seats.

And that means that it's hard for us to understand what's going on in his context. But there were seats of honor in the local church. In fact, Thomas Guthrie, who built this church, planted this church before it was St. Columbus, the original minister who designed this fine pulpit we'll be using soon, he planted from Greyfriars just down the street.

He was the assistant minister there. And one of the main reasons he planted this church was because there were hardly any spaces for the poor in Greyfriars, even though this was a community covered with poverty, the grass market, places like that.

And so back then you had to pay pew rents, and they were very expensive. And so the poor didn't have a seat at Greyfriars, largely. And so he planted this, and he reserved half the seats for the poor. They were free, no pew rents.

[9:51] And that's how this building actually got started. And so we see this has been an issue in the church throughout church history. Now, that's the surface. Let's get to the heart, the diagnosis, because he gives us the diagnosis in verse 4.

And he says, what's going on when we do that is we are, quote, judges with evil thoughts. So there's the answer. Why do human beings express favoritism based on social statuses, which could include wealth or race or anything like that?

And he says there's something going on inside of us. We become judges with evil thoughts. And thoughts, it's not just the normal word for regular thoughts.

The word is deliberations or calculated reasoning. So he's saying there's something that goes on with us when we see people who are not like us, where we, without even knowing it, will calculate and judge them deep down in the soul.

We might not even be aware it's happening. It's so automatic. It's so normal for a human being.

Now, let me make a careful distinction here. And the distinction is this. He's not telling any of us that you can't make judgments in general.

[11:00] So we know we have to. If we see a person on the street who's sleeping on the sidewalk, we make a natural judgment, a good judgment, and say, that person's poor. They're homeless. Without that type of judgment, the judgment of mere, we might call it the judgment of perception, we won't be able to know that we can help them, how to help them.

But he's talking about something different than just perceiving. So we might see the man in shabby clothes and recognize, obviously poor. That's not what he's talking about. No. There's a difference between mere perception and the judgment of verdict.

And the judgment of verdict is when our hearts, in their deep, devising calculations, reason this person is less valuable than the man that walked in with rich, wealthy clothing.

There's a big difference in perception and verdict. And he's talking here about the evil verdict that the human heart naturally creates. And so we know that when he says brothers and sisters is the headline of all this, he's talking to the church.

And he's saying this is happening in the local church. And so Christians, we're not immune, not at all, because we're human. And so this is happening in our cultures as well. Now, I'm thankful to say today, I think St. Columbus is down the road of health on this issue.

[12:14] That we, I can look out in my experience and feel like here, you are a community that is very healthy, but not immune. Healthy, but of course we're sinners.

Of course we are struggling with creating cliques, with creating inside groups. And so we're not immune. So C.S. Lewis, 1944, wrote a famous essay called The Inner Ring after a lecture that he had given.

And he defines the inner ring as this, the inner circle. The inner ring is the unofficial, fluid, invisible hierarchy and clique that exists within every institution and social group.

Every workplace has one. Every school has one. Every university, culture, subculture has one. And every church has one too. Because we're human and we're sinners and we're struggling.

And so it's not, it's less the official structure. It's less who are the elders and who are the deacons. It's more something that's felt. Something a little more quiet under the surface. So Lewis warns us of the temptation of this.

[13:16] And he says, of all the passions, the passion for admittance to the inner ring is the most skillful in making a man or a woman who is not yet a very bad man or woman do very bad things to get in.

And the other reason it's so different for us now is we live in an age of social safety nets. And so we don't face the same problems where somebody is going to walk in the church covered in tatters.

That's less probable. Even those who are sleeping rough on our streets have far better clothing than a first century person would have had. And so one of the ways to point out the issue in us is really to say that it could be economic poverty, but poverty of all kinds.

There's so many ways to be poor, so many ways to assess people. So it might be that we're the poor, but we think we devalue the rich. There's so many ways that this can cross-pollinate and we can create inner rings and social hierarchies and value others less.

And really, we rank people by usefulness is probably the primary way to say it. We measure value by what we can get from people. We turn people into instruments of our gain instead of seeing their dignity that's been given by God.

[14:30] You think about how you choose conversation partners. How, and even in something like tea and coffee after the service, how we decide who to move towards. And we have inner judgments, inner judgments, evil thoughts.

What can this person do for me? We don't, we'd never say it out loud, but it's going on in the bottom of our souls. When I was in seminary, we had a number of what you might call celebrity Christians, oxymoronic.

But celebrity Christians come to the seminary I was at and teach. Far bigger of a problem in America than here, but I did train in America, so it was a big problem. And we had a number of celebrity Christians come and teach or give a lecture series or something like that.

And the sociologist would have had a field day because as soon as the person finished talking, you could see everyone in the room vying for positioning, moving closer to the inner ring.

Could I get a, could I get a lunch out of this with this guy? Networking, trying to climb the social ladder of the Christian hierarchy. And I certainly was not immune to that because we're, none of us are.

[15:38] We, different ways, different people, different things we desire, different longs for causes us to instrumentalize people. Now I have to speed up here in Luther, Luther, no, James, not Luther.

James is taking us back to realize that there's something going on in the bottom of our soul. And he's already told us what it is. And that's in James 1, 14 to 15. Remember the epithumia, the deep desires that he told us about.

We have disordered desires in our souls for approval, comfort, security, control, power that are actually driving the way we think, the way we behave, the way we act all the time.

And so he's calling us here to know ourselves, to know ourselves. And so it could work something like this. We see a person, let me ask you, which idol, which idol in your heart is creating tendencies towards partiality, towards favoritism?

So approval might look something like this. If you struggle with needing people's approval all the time, I need to be thought well of by very important people to know I have value. That's the quiet logic at the bottom of my soul.

[16:43] And so when that happens, when we need other people's approval that are important, we become enslaved to the opinions of others. And then we move towards people we think can give us approval, and we flatter them to get something back.

And actually, what's happened is we've devalued them as well, because we've instrumentalized that relationship. We're not actually going to them to recognize their dignity and value, but to get from them, to get the approval we seek.

Or it could be power. You could struggle and say, at the bottom of your heart, there's a logic. I need to be significant. And so when we see the poor, the awkward, the bad networker, the person who has not climbed the social ladder, we do not want to move towards them, because we don't think that they could give us any power in life.

Clearly, they've displayed already that they have not performed well enough, so they're not going to give me anything that can raise my social ladder. So we become social climbers, and we instrumentalize every engagement.

Or it could be comfort. You could be a person that's addicted to comfort and entertainment in the bottom of your heart. And you look out, and you think, I know what that person's going through, and their life is messy.

[17:54] And so it would be a great disturber of my peace and my Netflix time if I move towards them and have to get into their mess and help them and walk through them with the pain they're going through.

Comfort then curates avoidance of anybody that might be hard. Boy, the problem runs deep. How can we grow? How can we change?

So that's the first point. It's our long point, and now we have two short ones to see how James addresses it. Secondly, the gravity. Here's how we begin to address this. He teaches us here why partiality, favoritism, is such a cancer.

There's three brief reasons, and they're the starting point to change. Okay, and the first is this. The first is general, and it's that the Bible teaches us that every single person is made in God's image, full of dignity, full of value, so we can never be partial, value people less.

So in verse 1, you can see that because he calls Jesus Christ the Lord of glory. Why does he do that? He's pointing the man, the incarnate man who was dressed in shabby clothes, poor his whole life.

[19:01] He's pointing out he is the Lord of glory. That's a word for connecting us to creation, and he's saying that he is also the creator. He's reminding us there that when we looked at Jesus Christ and we saw shabbiness, we saw poverty, we saw a man, Isaiah tells us, who was not much to look at.

That that was the Lord of glory. And he's pointing us back to, he is the creator, and he's reminding us that every single person possesses something of that glory. That in our city, and that's why it's wonderful to be in a city, because when you walk down the Royal Mile, and there's so many people, boy, in August, you've got to say this to yourself, there's so many people, but there is so much image of God per square inch here.

Everybody's so full of dignity and value. If you were at Open Forum a couple weeks ago, I'm sorry I'm using this illustration again, but we just had Valentine's Day yesterday, and when somebody in your life says, do you love me?

And you say, yes, I love you. And they say, why do you love me? You've got to be very careful about what you say after that. Why do you love me? Now, we tend to say some good things.

We say, because I think you're beautiful, because you're intelligent, because you're compassionate. And those are good answers, but they are also answers that are instrumental. In other words, they're instrumentalizing.

[20:21] That person's going to lose their beauty. They're probably going to lose their intelligence. They might, on a Monday, lose their compassion. And you see, the difference, when you know you're created in the image of God, you don't have instrumental value.

You have intrinsic value. Dignity that can never be taken away from you. And we've got to see everybody like that. That's the first reason. Second reason, the gospel creates a fresh reason here, a reason that is not normal in any other community.

And that's what he teaches us in verse 5. So in verse 5, you can see it. He says, listen, beloved brothers and sisters, has God not chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith, heirs of the kingdom, heirs of the promise to those that he loves?

Verse 6, you've dishonored them. And they're deserving of honor. You see what the logic is here? Oh boy. Something that only the Christian community, based on the gospel, can say. And here it is. He's saying, when the economically poor person walks in the room in shabby clothing, he's saying, do you not know that that is an heir of the kingdom of God? That that person is an heir of the promise of the covenant of Abraham?

[21:28] That person is an inheritor of the kingdom, co-heir with Jesus Christ, brother and sister of the great elder brother. Do you not know that that is an eschatological king or queen that's going to rule the angels?

You know, you see them in their poverty, but God has blessed them with wealth. And that wealth is that that person is going to rule the world alongside the older brother, Jesus Christ, in the new heavens and the new earth.

Do you not see how rich they actually are in the blessing that God has given them through union with Jesus Christ? C.S. Lewis, in *The Weight of Glory*, at the very end of that wonderful little essay, he says, there are no ordinary people.

We've never talked to a mere mortal. He argues that the dullest, most uninteresting person you can think of in your life may one day be a creature by which if you saw them now, you would be tempted to worship them.

Do you not know that the poor person who is a believer in Jesus Christ is destined to be an inheritor of the kingdom of God, rich in union with Christ?

[22:31] And he said, you got to, in other words, you got to put on kingdom glasses. And he says this, verse two, he says, this is happening in the assembly of faith. And what is that? He's saying that when the church gathers on a Sunday morning, it is to be a signpost of what the new heavens and the new earth are going to be.

A place where there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, rich nor poor, slave nor free. It's a signpost of the kingdom. We're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper tonight. The Lord's Supper is a foreshadowing in the local church on a Sunday of what the new heavens and the new earth will be.

A place where you will feast at the table with God. In the same way, when you come in here and you say every single person in here is deserving of every seat of honor that we could ever create, you're saying, we're giving a foretaste as an assembly of what the kingdom is going to be.

The world says, climb the ladder to find value. The kingdom says, the first shall be last. He said, take up the ethic of the kingdom. It flips everything on its head. Lastly, here in verse eight to 11, he gives us a warning.

And this is the final reason that he says that we've got to step towards seeing why never showing favoritism is so important. And it's all about, verse eight to 11, this idea of the royal law.

[23:48] If you really fulfill the royal law, according to the scriptures, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. You're doing well. But if you show partiality, you break the whole law. You're a transgressor of the whole law.

Now, I think what he's doing here is he's saying, listen, in the local church, we could be showing partiality, creating cliques, favoritism, and it doesn't relatively feel like that big of a deal.

So he mentions committing adultery. And he says, boy, you can say, I've never committed adultery. And yeah, I do create cliques sometimes, and I do show favoritism. And he's saying, but don't you see that when you break one aspect of the law, you've broken the whole law?

That it's all the law of God. And he says, instead, live by the law of liberty. And the law of liberty is this, not to stop with the bare minimum, to say, well, look, I've never committed adultery. I've never murdered anybody.

I don't steal things. He's saying, no, that's just the starting point. But the law of love, the law of liberty, the royal law, is to say, am I fully loving every person that walks into this room as much as I can in the way that Jesus Christ loved me?

[24:55] You see, the old law says just keep the bare minimum. That's mere religion, but pure religion says, I want to obey the law of liberty by loving, by stretching my neck up to the heavens, not just standing on the bare minimum of the ground.

I want to learn to love everyone fully and completely. Now, these are the three reasons he gives us, the three arguments of change. And then he points us, boy, again, you think about the approval, the comfort, the security, the power at the bottom of the soul that's driving partiality.

You say, I don't always think through a kingdom lens. Can we say that today? You say, I know that this has not been a big deal to me, but James says it is.

And we look and say, where can we really find hope and solution in this? And so the last thing he gives us is the cure. The cure. It's that beautiful language at the end, mercy triumphs over judgment.

But it starts in verse 12 and 13. So he says, here's the conclusion. So go forward, go from this place today, go now and speak and act in such a way as those who are to be judged according to the law of liberty.

[26:00] In other words, he's saying, we need to know that when we are people who are not growing towards showing mercy, or we are entrenched in favoritism, that God is going to judge that.

That if we are not people growing into a community of mercy, into a community that's learning the law of liberty, to love like Jesus loved, he's saying that is showing over time that we may be deserving of judgment because maybe we haven't yet received mercy.

And he's pointing us back in the last line to mercy and saying you've got to revisit something and you've got to revisit the claim. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Now, as we finish, I think there in that line, he is pointing us to something very important. I think he's trying to get us to see that mercy triumphs in our lives over judging people.

Mercy triumphs in our lives over judging people with calculating evil thoughts about their value, their instrumental worth. How? Only when we see that mercy has already triumphed over judgment.

[27:10] So mercy is only going to triumph over judgment in our lives when we see that mercy already has triumphed over judgment for us in our life. And that's why I think in verse 1, he calls us to think about Jesus in a particular way in this passage as the Lord of glory.

Who is this Lord of glory? Why is he highlighting this? The Lord of glory, the one who hung the stars, the God of all galaxies, he, Jesus Christ, is the one who came in the incarnation veiled in poverty, veiled in shabby clothing.

Veiled in flesh, yes. The Godhead, see, yes. And veiled in the shabbiest of clothing in this life. And we looked at the Lord of glory and he became the man we rejected.

You see, James is saying, some of you in the church, you're seeing the man in shabby clothes walk in and you're rejecting him. But you've got to see, Jesus Christ is the Lord of glory dressed in shabby clothing that you rejected.

He's the poor man that you put upon the cross. He's the one that you said crucify him. He's the one who came to make you rich in faith. But you wouldn't recognize that you're poor in spirit.

[28:31] And so you rejected him. You sent him to the cross. In other words, it's like saying this, I should be under God's righteous calculation because of all the ways I've put other people under my evil calculation.

But when Jesus Christ went to the cross, the Lord of glory, boy, he passed by every calculation that I deserved and he gave me his righteousness so that I could realize mercy has triumphed over judgment.

I can look in other people's lives and give them that very same mercy. He's asking us to wake up. Back to the Valentine's Day illustration. If you were to ask God today, Lord, why do you love me? What would God say? Why? And you could ask, is it my instrumental value that I bring? Is it the performances I've had? Is it how well I've done climbing up the social ladder of my corporation? Is it the distinction that I made in uni? Is it the way that my parents are proud of me? And the answer would be none of those things. God does not love you for your instrumental value because we all know that there is such a lack.

[29:43] What would God say if you asked him why do you love me, Lord? He would say, I love you because I love you. He would say, I love you because I love you. I love you because you're mine. I love you. The cross says that the Lord of glory loves you because he loves you.

He would give his life away for you so that mercy would triumph over all calculation, over all judgment, the calculation we deserve, the judgment that we deserve. So he says here in verse 12 and 13, now therefore go and love people in the same way, in the same logic, according to the law of liberty.

And I'll finish with this. Here's how you can. If you believe the gospel today and if you received the mercy of Jesus Christ, every single idol that is driving your favoritism, driving your partiality, it's been answered.

It's been cleansed. So if you're a person today who is really seeking approval, you can say, in Christ, I'm already approved. I don't need to treat people in a way and use them to get approval from them.

In Christ, I've already been approved. If you are a person who desperately wants power and significance in this life, you can look out and say, in Christ, I'm an inheritor of the new creation. What better power can I be gifted than that?

[30:59] I don't need to use people to gain power in this life or significance. If you are a person who desperately wants comfort and security and entertainment in this life, you can say, in Christ, I am secure forever.

I do have an eternal rest. Therefore, I can get into the lives of people who have messiness. I can get stuck in. I'm not supposed to be comfortable right now. Christ has given me an eternal rest. It can never be taken away. In Christ, I'm free. The gospel gives me everything I need. So the next time you walk into a room, let me give you an exercise. The next time you walk into a room and you quietly think, I don't want to interact with that person.

I don't want to move towards that person. I don't want to talk to them. Ask yourself, what functional savior has got a grip on my heart right now that's causing me to think that?

And then you can say to yourself, because Jesus Christ is my Lord of glory, every single person I look at is either a poor beggar in need of Jesus or was a poor beggar that has become rich in Christ.

[32:09] Let us pray. Father, we ask that you would create in us hearts that reject favoritism and embrace mercy, that we would know that the mercy we've received is the mercy we can now give.

And so, Lord, teach us this. Show us this in your gospel as we read it. Train our hearts anew.

Forgive us for our favoritism and partialities.

Forgive us for our social hierarchy buildings where we really do in our evil judgments believe people are worth less. And reshape us, remake us, Lord.

And then on the light of that, Lord, we pray that you would grow us into a community of unity that values people deeply. And we pray that in Christ's name. Amen. Amen.