

**Dave Johnson**

**Sermon: Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment (James 2:13)**

**September 6, 2009**

Back in the mid-90's my family and I lived in Wyoming, where I served in youth ministry. We attended the local high school graduation with a family whom we'd become good friends. The parents were so excited to see their one and only child graduate from high school. They asked me to videotape the graduation for them so they could simply sit back and enjoy the commencement ceremony. I was honored by their request and took the time to set up the camera at a great angle, etc. I videotaped the whole ceremony, sure that I had done a great job.

A couple evenings later we all gathered at their house to watch it. There was just one problem... while the audio was great, the screen was blank—we could hear everything, but we couldn't see a thing. For all my efforts in trying to capture great camera angles and the like I had neglected one thing... to take the lens cap off. Needless to say, I felt so bad about this, but this family was really sweet, and they laughed and hugged me and told me not to worry about it. Then for the next couple hours we watched the blank screen and listened to ceremony, laughing as we took turns trying to help one another visualize what we were “watching,” and ended up having a great evening 😊.

Today's reading from the Letter of James (2:1-17) is a well-known passage about faith and works, and there has been much argument and discussion about the idea that faith without works is dead, the relationship between faith and works, that if we're saved by faith and not by works, what does it mean that faith without works is dead, etc... But in the midst of these arguments and discussions we often miss the main point of the gospel. We make sure our arguments address the faith versus works debate from all the right angles, but we forget to take the cap off the lens and therefore are blind to the main point of the gospel, which is found in this very passage in four words. The main point of the gospel is not about faith versus works, because faith and works has to do with our response to the gospel, and the heart of the gospel is not what we do for God, but what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The heart of the gospel is found in these four words ... “*mercy triumphs over judgment*” (2:13).

Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Our culture is obsessed with judging others. Many of the most popular “reality” television shows are centered on judgment. One show, *Toddlers and Tiaras*, is about beauty pageants for toddlers. Can you imagine that? Little girls three, four, five years old, being judged by their appearance? But it's a booming business. (By the way, for any UVA students who are trying to figure out what to major in, my guess is that along with the fast-growing industry of beauty pageants for toddlers there will be an equally fast growing need for child psychiatrists... for what it's worth...).

The most popular show on television, *American Idol*, is centered on what judges think about the contestants singing ability. The heart of the show is not really the singing of the contestants, but the comments of the judges. Randy may say something like, “Yo, yo, keeping it real, dog—you did your thing—you got pipes—props to you, dog” while Simon may say something like, “That was absolutely awful—I felt like I was watching a poor attempt at karaoke at a cheap hotel bar” and Paula may say something like, “I... I... I just... I just love you... you are a bright and shining star!” Of course, millions of Americans join in the judging of the contestants and phone in their verdicts.

But being judged is not just a mainstay on television; it is an integral part of our culture, an integral part of human nature. Being judged by others is a part of our lives from the cradle to the grave. We’re judged by others by the color of our skin, what neighborhood we live in or don’t live in, where we go to school, how we dress, who we marry, what kind of vehicle we drive, how smart or athletic our kids are, whether we belong to a country club or not (and if so, which one), where our kids go to college, what retirement home we can afford, what cemetery our family plots are in... being judged never stops.

And often people do things they regret in an attempt to win favorable judgment from others. They try things and endure things that no one should ever feel compelled to try or endure in order to belong—hazing, rush week, initiations, buying vehicles and remodeling houses that one can’t afford... it goes on and on and on.

And as Paul preached last week, being judged often happens in churches—and we are faced with feeling judged and found wanting or becoming hypocrites who judge others. When I lived in South Carolina I was a youth minister at large church. As the youth ministry grew many kids from outside the church were showing up. Some of these kids were from other churches, hopping from one youth ministry to another with their friends, but many more were from outside the church altogether, and dressed and acted as such—and they were showing up because they felt welcomed and because God in his grace was doing good things in the ministry. One kid actually wore a bathrobe to the youth group gatherings—no joke—he had clothes on underneath, but instead of a light jacket or sweatshirt he enjoyed wearing a bathrobe—apparently he wanted to be like Christopher Walken ☺. Anyway, one parent in the church took objection to this and asked me to meet him for lunch. He was a wonderful man, a respected physician in the community, always very kind to me and my family, but he had it out for robe boy. After the initial small talk, he tried to convince me to keep kids like robe boy out of the youth ministry because they would corrupt the other kids. (I’m not making this up). Naturally, I respectfully listened, but of course we couldn’t keep kids like robe boy out of the youth ministry.

The church is to be a place where people receive mercy, not judgment, because Scripture tells us that mercy triumphs over judgment.

This idea is not just found in the New Testament, but throughout the Old Testament as well. When Moses encountered God on Mt. Sinai, God revealed himself with these words, “The Lord, the Lord, a God *merciful* and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). In Psalm 136 the phrase “*His mercy endures forever*” is found twenty-six times (BCP 789-791). In the midst of the devastation following the razing of Jerusalem by the Babylonians Jeremiah wrote, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, *his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning*” (Lamentations 3:22). The latter Old Testament prophet, Micah spoke these words: “(God) has told you... what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but... *to love mercy* and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8, KJV and NIV).

At the Sermon of the Mount Jesus preached, “*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy*” (Matthew 5:7). Regarding how to treat other people Jesus preached, “*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*” (Luke 6:36), and He told the parable of the *unmerciful servant* (Matthew 18:23-35) to illustrate this.

Mercy triumphs over judgment.

The good news of the gospel is that God gives us mercy in Jesus Christ, because God in Christ took upon himself the judgment due us. The Greek word “mercy” in the New Testament, *eleos*, is proactive and focuses on meeting the needs of the recipient whether or not the recipient has a claim on the giver. In other words, when it comes to the mercy of God, God is the one who proactively takes the initiative and gives us mercy in spite of the fact that we have no claim for it whatsoever. God gives us his mercy out of His grace.

This summer I read *Black Hawk Down*, Mark Bowden’s gripping account of American Black Hawk helicopters being shot down in Mogadishu, Somalia in October 1993. One of the Army Rangers who was shot down was Mike Durant. After the crash he found himself alone with a broken leg, out of ammunition, out of options. At that point an angry mob discovered him. Bowden writes:

“Durant kept his eyes on the sky as the mob closed over him. They were screaming things he couldn’t understand. When a man struck him in the face with a rifle butt it broke his nose and shattered the bone around his eye. People pulled at his arms and legs, and then others began tearing at his clothes... *He gave himself over to them...* His boots were yanked off, his survival vest, and his shirt. .. All the while he was being kicked and hit... Then someone threw a handful of dirt in his face, which went into his mouth. They tied a rag or towel over the top of his head and eyes, and the mob *hoisted him up in the air*, partly carrying and partly dragging him... He was buffeted from all sides, kicked, hit with fists and rifle butts. He could not see where they were taking him. He was engulfed in a great wave of hate and anger” (197-197).

Durant's captors considered him worth more alive than dead, and so he eventually survived.

In the same way Durant was "engulfed in a great wave of hate and anger," Jesus was engulfed by hateful and angry religious leaders and Roman soldiers. In the same way Durant "gave himself over" to his captors, Jesus gave himself over to receive the judgment for our sins. In the same way Durant was "hoisted up in the air" Jesus was hoisted up on a cross. Jesus, because of the mercy of God, took the judgment in our place.

Mercy triumphs over judgment.

I recently read Michael Lewis' bestselling book, *The Blind Side*, which recounts the incredible story of Michael Oher, a poor kid from the projects of Memphis who was cared for by a well to do Christian family and given a second chance at life. He ended up going to play football at Ole Miss and this year was drafted in the first round by the Baltimore Ravens, where he plays left tackle and protects "the blind side" of the Ravens' quarterbacks. In this book Michael is very to the point when speaking of the family who cared for him: "I wasn't anything when I first got to them, and they loved me anyway... Nothing was in it for them" (p. 314).

In spite of our sin, God loves us anyway. Scripture tells us, "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God did this because, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, God is "rich in mercy" (2:4).

Mercy triumphs over judgment.

*7:45, 11:00, and 5:00 services...*

In our liturgy we are reminded of the mercy of God each week in the prayer of humble access, which we pray before receiving Holy Communion, as we acknowledge that we do not trust our own righteousness, but rather trust in God's "*manifold and great mercies*," and we remember that God's "*property is always to have mercy*" (BCP 337).

*9:00 service...*

In our liturgy we are reminded of the mercy of God each week in the opening sentence of the Eucharistic prayer as we pray: "when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, *in your mercy*, sent Jesus Christ" (BCP 362)

The heart of the gospel is not about faith and works, not about what we do. The heart of the gospel is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, who died for the sins of the world, who took the judgment due us upon Himself, who had *mercy* on us.

And why does God have mercy on us? Because he loves us.

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I once visited a lady who was on her deathbed, surrounded by her husband and grown children, one of whom read a card that her granddaughter had made for her: Written in big words in crayon were these words: “Dear Grandma, Soon you will be going up, up, up, up, up. I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you. I love you because I love you.”

God has mercy on us because he loves us.

From the cradle to the grave we receive judgment from the world, but from the cradle to the grave we receive mercy from God. Perhaps today the Holy Spirit will take the lens cap off our hearts so that we can see the heart of the Gospel—mercy triumphs over judgment.

Let us pray...

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