

Introduction

Let's take a moment and consider something - how many different people each of us will meet in our lifetime? By meet, I mean have a face to face exchange of some kind with them. Author William Least Heat Moon estimates that it's 100,000. Now consider how many exchanges we will have with those 100,000 different people, including those with whom we regularly interact. It's obviously hundreds of thousands.

Let me ask you a question in that regard. In how many of those exchanges will we harm others or will others harm us in some way, big or small? It's safe to say it's thousands. The fact is that we recurrently harm others or are harmed by others, which is why all of us desperately need what I'm preaching about today, a pity party. Turn to James 2:8-13 and let's learn what it teaches us about that.

Who Needs Pity

I begin with the word "**mercy**" in verse 13. It means "**pity**" and the first issue I'd like to address is who needs it. The meaning of pity, which I'll explain later, implies who. It's those who harm others - who cause them loss - in some way big or small.

First, it's those who *intentionally* harm others. They do what they do to cause them harm or loss. Or they don't actually do it to cause them harm or loss but know it will. So, I played in a soft ball game just several hours before my wife went into labor with my son Moses, knowing she'd be upset, and rightly so, that I did. I didn't do it to upset her but I did know it would. Thus, I intentionally harmed her.

Those who need pity are also those who *unintentionally* harm others. They inadvertently cause them harm or loss. They act impulsively, carelessly, foolishly, clumsily, hurriedly, forgetfully, or unknowingly. Years ago, before cell phones, a pastor I knew was driving to the Cleveland Clinic to visit a parishioner when it suddenly dawned on him. He had a 1:00 p.m. funeral. But it was already 1:30 p.m. and by the time

he turned around and got to the funeral home, everyone was gone. He unintentionally wronged the dead person's family.

Anyway, whether it's intentional or unintentional, all harmdoers have something in common. They need pity.

What Pity Is

Now that we know who needs pity, let's define what it is. It has two components.

One is a feeling component. The word "**pity**" probably comes from the Latin word "**patior**," which means "**to suffer**." To pity people means to feel sorry for them, which is the suffering to which the word of origin refers. It's the sorrow that's felt for harmdoers that they are what they are and/or that they did what they did.

The second component of pity is behavioral. It isn't just something that feels. It's something that does as well. It refrains from making harmdoers pay for their conduct. For their own good, it may *allow them* to suffer any natural consequences of it, but it doesn't *make them* suffer. It doesn't deal with them on the basis of the harm they did. It acts lovingly, verse 8, not vengefully toward them.

At the Poland Days celebration, a woman told me that her son and daughter-in-law, for reasons her husband and she don't know, have broken off all relationship with them, and won't let them see their three grandchildren. If they had pity on their son and daughter-in-law, they'd feel sorrow for the ruined condition of their minds, hearts, and souls. They'd also not make them pay but love them instead. They'd pray for them, continue to reach out to them as wisdom dictates, and joyously receive them back into their circle of fellowship if they changed.

That illustrates what pity is. It's feeling sorrow for harmdoers and acting lovingly not vengefully toward them.

We Need to Get Pity

That's pity and the fact is that all of us desperately need to get it.

We need to because all of us are pitiable creatures. We may not like hearing that but it's true. We can't live well without routinely getting it.

First, we must get it from God. We see that in verses 10-11.

Many first century Jews viewed God's law as a series of disconnected commandments. To keep a commandment was to gain a credit. To break one was to incur a debit. A person could, therefore, add up the ones he kept and subtract the ones he broke, resulting in a credit or debit balance. If his credits exceeded his debits, he was righteous no matter how many or which commandments he broke.

But James debunks that idea in verses 10-11. Think of Ohio's 300 criminal laws. If we break just one of those only once, that makes us criminals in the eyes of the state. It doesn't matter that we always keep the other 299. That one violation makes us criminals. Similarly, it's said that there are 613 commandments in the Bible. If we break just one of those only once, that makes us sinners or transgressors as verse 11 says it in the eyes of God. It doesn't matter that we always keep the other 612. That one violation makes us sinners.

James' point in verses 10-11 is that we desperately need God's pity. As Dallas Willard said it, His pity is the very atmosphere in which we live. It is so two ways. First, we get into His kingdom when we decide to follow Jesus only because He pities us. He doesn't have to let us in but does. And second, we thrive in that kingdom for the same reason. He could let us flounder but doesn't. Psalm 103:10 captures the essence of this reality: **"He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities."** His pity keeps our sins from consuming us – both when and after we decide to follow Jesus.

But it isn't just from God that we need to get pity. It's from people as well, the ones with whom we live and interact in day-to-day life. Imagine that those people always deal with us on the basis of the harm or loss we cause. Imagine that they always make us pay, in proportion, for that. Our lives would be hell-like if they did and I'm speaking literally not profanely. An utter lack of pity in human relationships is a

chief characteristic of life in hell.

It's a fact of our existence. We live with people daily on the basis of their pity for us. We couldn't live or at least couldn't live well without it. I know we don't like hearing that because it's a blow to our pride. But it's true. We live well only because we're routinely receiving pity from the people around us.

So, I got mad at my college roommate in a pickup basketball game and told him to "**hit the bricks**" as we said it in those days. Or I missed my nephew's high school graduation because of my son's makeup little league game. Or I read my calendar wrong and missed a pre-marital counseling appointment with a couple. Or I didn't take my wedding ring off like my wife told me to on our honeymoon and lost it in the ocean. Those are just a sampling of the hundreds of people I've harmed in my life and the various ways I harmed them. But they were gracious. They didn't make me pay. They had pity on me instead. My life would have been hell-like if they hadn't.

Now, pulling what I've said together, the message is clear. You and I desperately and routinely need to get pity from God and people. We can live well only if we do.

We Need to Give Pity

But we just as desperately need to give it. Let's face it. The people around us are just as pitiable as we are. They harm us as much if not more than we do them. Yes, it's true. We need their pity to live well. But it's just as true that they need ours to live well. So, we give it to them for their sake.

But it isn't just for their sake. According to verse 13, it's for ours as well. This verse speaks of God's "**judgment**," which refers to Him assessing us and then rewarding or punishing us – in this life or the life to come.

Verse 13 reveals two basic principles of that judgment. First, it "**will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy.**" That means if

we show no pity in dealing with others, God will show none in dealing with us. Second, **“mercy triumphs over judgment.”** That means if we show pity in dealing with others, God will show the same in dealing with us. We showing pity, in other words, tempers God’s judgment of us.

The bottom line is that pity is a two-way street in the kingdom of God. The pity we give is the pity we get. God gives to us the same measure of pity that we give to others.

Many years ago, a person told a vicious lie about me that would have ruined my professional career and my reputation if people had believed it. But I had pity on her and what I just explained was one of the reasons I was able to. I immediately recognized that God would give the very same measure of pity to me that I gave to her. Clearly understanding that and firmly believing it supported my ability to feel sorrow for her and to act lovingly toward her.

The moral is that we need to pity those who harm us – for their sake and ours. We need to, and we can. Here’s how.

Notice that James mentions two **“laws”** in our text.

One is what he calls **“the royal law”** in verse 8. Quoting Leviticus 19:18, he identifies what that law is. It’s the commandment to **“love your neighbor as yourself.”** Paul explains why it’s **“royal”** in Romans 13:8-10. It’s because **“love is the fulfillment of the law.”** Those who keep the royal commandment and love, in other words, just naturally keep all the other commandments as well.

James mentions a second law in verse 12. It’s **“the law of liberty.”** There’s an interpretive issue here. To what does **“the law of liberty”** refer? I think it refers to Jeremiah 31:33. God prophesies in that verse, **“I will put my law within them and on their heart I will write it.”** Let me explain that.

In our natural state apart from Jesus, our inner dimensions are incompatible with the royal law. Our thoughts, feelings, will, and habits routinely direct us to break it. We love others in thought, feeling, will, and habit far less than we love ourselves. Consequently, the royal law

and all the commandments it fulfills are burdensome to us. They're difficult for us to keep.

But when we decide to follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit inhabits our inner dimensions. He then begins the process of transforming them as we act upon and interact with Jesus. He proceeds to make them compatible with the royal law. He slowly but surely changes our thoughts, feelings, will, and habits so that they increasingly direct us to keep it. We eventually come to love others in thought, feeling, will, and habit as much or even more than we do ourselves. At that point, the royal law and all the commandments it fulfills aren't burdensome but easy for us to keep. The Holy Spirit has *liberated* or *freed* us to keep them.

You can quickly see how pity fits in here. It's one of the natural expressions of love. We're actually able to give it.

So we purposefully do just that. Please grasp something in that regard. It's up to us to do it. No one else, including the Holy Spirit, can do it for us. He will transform and empower us but he won't override our wills and do it for us. So, we firmly make and devotedly carry out the decision to have pity on people when they harm us. That is in fact the ultimate basis of the judgment of verse 13. God gives to us the same measure of pity that we *intend* and try to give to others.

Conclusion

So there you have it – what our text teaches about pity. I'd sum it up this way. What all of us need is a pity party. I don't mean that in the usual sense of the idiom, people feeling sorry for themselves. I mean it in a different sense – people feeling sorry for harmdoers, and loving them. In that sense, what all of us need is to give and get pity from the 100,000 people we meet in our lifetime. What all of us need, in other words, is one big pity party! Our living well depends on it!