

Introduction

Today I'm going to preach about something that every person on earth needs to regularly get and give.

When Chuck Bancroft was a boy, his older brother worked an entire summer collecting a complete set of Major League Baseball trading cards. In those days, you couldn't buy them that way, which made them his pride and joy. But one day, Chuck was getting into the back seat of the family car with a large chocolate milkshake in his hand when he suddenly lost his balance. He lost his balance and the milkshake went flying – onto his brother's cards, ruining them all.

I don't know what happened next (Chuck didn't say) but I do know this. That day, he desperately needed something from his brother that every person on earth needs to regularly get - and give. That something is pity and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

The Objects of Pity

Let's start with the word "**mercy**" in verse 13. The word "**mercy**" there means "**pity**." Verse 13 is about pity and the first issue I want to address in that regard is this. Who are the objects of it? Who needs to get it? It's those who wrong others.

First, it's those who *intentionally* wrong others. They do what they do expressly to cause them harm or loss. Or they do what they do not to cause them harm or loss but knowing it will. So, a husband went to play 18 holes of golf and left his sick wife at home with their three children, all under the age of 6. He didn't play golf expressly to harm his wife but knew it would if he did. Thus, he intentionally wronged her.

Second, the objects of pity are those who *unintentionally* wrong others. They inadvertently cause them harm or loss. They act impulsively without thinking, act out of poor judgment, act clumsily, act forgetfully, or act unknowingly. I, for instance, acted out of poor judgment and lost the wedding ring my wife Jill gave me, in the ocean on

our honeymoon. I unintentionally wronged her.

But whether it's intentionally or unintentionally, wrongdoers are the objects of pity. They need to get it from the ones to whom they've caused harm or loss.

Pity Defined

Now that we know who needs pity, let's examine what it is. It's two things.

First, it's feeling. The word "**pity**" probably comes from the Latin word "**patior,**" which means "**to suffer.**" To pity people means to feel sorry for them. That's the suffering to which the word of origin refers. It's the sorrow that's felt for wrongdoers.

Pity is a second thing – action. It isn't just something that feels. It's something that does as well. People refrain from making wrongdoers pay for their conduct. They make and carry out the decision not to make them suffer in any way for the wrongs they've done. They don't deal with them on the basis of those wrongs. They deal with them on the basis of the royal law of verse 8 instead, the law of love.

I know a professing Christian who incessantly criticizes everyone for everything. Not that many years ago, it made me mad when he criticized others or me. And I'd make him pay when I saw him by not treating him cordially, warmly, as I do others. But I've changed. I've come to have pity on him. First, I feel deeply sorry for him - for the ruinous condition of his heart and soul, and its impact on his temporal and eternal destiny. Second, I'm carrying out the decision not to make him pay. I now treat him cordially, warmly, as I do others. I also pray for him that the Holy Spirit will bless him and show him what he is.

That illustrates what pity is. First, it's feeling. People feel sorry for wrongdoers. Second, it's action. People refrain from making them pay for the wrongs they've done. They show them love instead.

The Need to Get Pity

That's pity and verses 10-13 reveal a profound insight about it. It's pity that makes life possible for us all.

I'm going to say something that may insult you. You're a pitiable creature. But before you get too insulted I'd quickly add, "**And so is everyone else – including me.**" I'm a pitiable creature and I admit it. When I say "**pitiable creatures,**" I mean that you and I can't live well without getting pity on a regular basis.

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

Many first century Jews regarded 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 debt. A person, therefore, could add up the ones he kept and subtract the ones he broke, resulting in a credit or a debit balance. Consequently, no matter how many commandments he broke, he was righteous if his credits exceeded his debits.

But James debunks that idea in verses 10-11. He writes that if I keep all of God's commandments except one, that one makes me "**guilty of all,**" verse 10, and "**a transgressor of the law,**" verse 11.

A legal analogy helps explain this. Sections 2903 to 2925 of the Ohio Revised Code contain approximately 300 criminal laws. Suppose that you've always kept them all. But being hungry one day and not having any money, you use a stick to pry a candy bar from a coin-operated machine. In doing so, you violate section 2911.32 of the Ohio Revised Code and are, therefore, a criminal. It doesn't matter that you've kept the other 299 laws in the Code. That one violation makes you a criminal.

It's the same with God's law. It's said that there are 613 commandments in the Bible. Suppose that you've always kept them all. But one day, you gossip. It doesn't matter that you've kept the other 612 commandments. Just as that one violation of Ohio's law makes you a criminal, so that one violation of God's law makes you a sinner.

James' point is simple and clear. We desperately need God's pity. As Dallas Willard says it, His pity is the very atmosphere in which we live, in two ways. First, we get into His kingdom when we decide to

follow Jesus only because He pities us. And second, we thrive in that kingdom for the same reason. Psalm 103:10 captures the dynamics of this, **“He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.”** Simply put, God’s pity keeps our sins from consuming us - both when and after we’re saved.

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 have contact everyday. Imagine that those people always deal with us on the basis of our wrongdoings. Imagine that they always make us pay, in proportion, for all the harm and loss we cause them. Our lives would be hell-like if they did.

The fact is that we live with people on the basis of their pity for us. We couldn’t live or at least couldn’t live well if they weren’t constantly having pity on us. I know we don’t like hearing that because it’s a blow to our pride. But it’s true. We live well only when we’re getting the pity of the people around us on a regular basis.

Take marriage, for instance. I mentioned losing the wedding ring Jill gave me on our honeymoon. The next week, I was late for the very first and special dinner she cooked for me as my wife, because I went out running. But those were only the beginning of wrongs. I’ve done a whole lot more since. Bought her thoughtless special occasion gifts at the last minute. Only half listened when she was talking to me. Criticized her right back when she criticized me. Forgot important things she asked me to do. And on it goes. I can tell you that Jill almost always had pity on me when I did those things. But suppose she hadn’t. Suppose she had always made me pay, in proportion, instead. We would have divorced long ago, or at least wish we had.

My point is this. It’s pity, on a regular basis, that makes life possible for us all. We desperately need to get it from God and people.

The Need to Give Pity

But we just as desperately need to give it. Let’s face it. The people around us are as pitiable as we are. They wrong us as much if not more

than we wrong them. Yes, it's true. We need their pity to live well. But it's as true that they need our pity to live well. We should pity them, in other words, for their sake.

But it isn't only for their sake that we should pity them. It's for ours as well. We see that in verse 13. This penetrating verse speaks of God's "**judgment.**" "**Judgment**" there refers to how He *assesses us* and *deals with us*, in this life and in the life to come.

Verse 13 teaches us two things about that judgment. First, it "**will be pitiless to one who has shown no pity.**" That means if we show no pity in dealing with others, God will show none in dealing with us. Second, "**pity triumphs over judgment.**" That means if we show pity in dealing with others, God will show the same in dealing with us. Showing pity, in other words, tempers God's judgment of us.

Verse 13 reveals a non-negotiable fact of our existence. Pity is a two way street in the kingdom of God. He gives to us the same measure of pity we give to others. A Christian's co-worker harms her reputation by telling people she's lazy and doesn't work hard. The Christian in turn retaliates by giving her the cold shoulder and trashing her to anyone who'll listen. According to verse 13, judgment will be pitiless to her. And judgment will triumph over pity. Why? It's because God gives to us the same measure of pity we to give to others.

We see then that pitying others is vital to them. They can't live well if we don't. But we also see it's just as vital to us. It tempers God's judgment of us. We get the same measure of pity that we give.

So, habitually give pity to people. That's our call and there are two things we need to know in order to answer it.

The first is that it's up to us to give pity. No one else can do it for us. Consequently, we must intend to give it. We firmly make and committedly carry out the decision to pity wrongdoers. We train our minds, hearts, and bodies as best as we can to do just that. 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* to give to others.

There's a second thing we need to know. The first is that it's up to us to give pity. The second is that we cannot do so without help.

That's what verse 12 teaches. There's an interpretive issue here. To what does "**the law of liberty**" refer? There are several possibilities. I think it refers to Jeremiah 31:33. God prophesies, "**I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it.**"

Here's what that means. In our natural state, God's commandments are burdensome. That's because our inner dimensions are incompatible with them. Our thoughts, feelings, and desires direct us to break not keep them. They direct us, for instance, to resent and retaliate, not pity, when wronged. But when we decide to follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit enters our inner dimensions and begins a process of transforming them. He proceeds to make them compatible with God's commandments. He slowly but surely changes our thoughts, feelings, and desires so that they direct us more and more to keeping them. They direct us, for instance, to pity, not resent and retaliate, when wronged. Eventually, what Jeremiah 31:33 describes is achieved. God has put His law in us – has written it on our hearts. And because He has, keeping it is the easy thing to do, which makes it what verse 12 calls the "**law of liberty.**"

You and I though have a part to play in this process. Our part is to place ourselves before the Holy Spirit in such a way that He can transform us. We do that by devotedly practicing certain activities: solitude, silence, study, fasting, prayer, worship, submission, service, and more. Learn how to practice those activities. Then devotedly practice them. The Holy Spirit will eventually free you to pity wrongdoers if you do.

Conclusion

I close with a line from the Lord's prayer, "**Our Father which art in heaven . . . have pity on me for my wrongdoings just as I have pity on others for theirs.**" Intend to give pity and engage the Holy Spirit. You'll be able to pray that prayer with confidence if you do.