

James 2:1-13

Mercy Triumphs Over Tribes

Humans are naturally tribal. In ancient cultures, human tribalism was demonstrated theologically, racially, culturally, linguistically, and nationally. Humans have been divided by political lines which can extend or retract; language barriers, or ethnicity. Unity is a genuine struggle for humanity. We naturally find comfort and safety in others who look, act, think, and match us.

Modern culture is no different. Boundaries separate nations often over minor historic differences. Even within a nation, sides can be drawn for a variety of reasons – Sunni vs. Shiite, “fly over country” vs. coastal cities, etc. We are just as divided today as ever before. Within our own nation, we place our identity among tribes of class, communities, faith, education, politics, and race. Studies consistently show, Americans spend most of their days hardly encountering someone who thinks different than they.

The church is called to be different. Where some cultures promote strict unity (like many Arab nations) and others promote wild diversity (like Western cultures), Christianity promotes a unified diversity. We are not strong because we are different (the dream of multiculturalism), rather, our differences are drawn in unison under the banner of Christ.

Ever since Pentecost (Acts 2), Christians have worked to promote a unity that transcends culture, language, ethnicity, and class. In James 2:1-13, the writer is wrestling with the many challenges of unity. The Jerusalem church, who were the first recipients of this letter, were divided by class. Both the rich, “wearing ... gold ring[s] and fine clothing” worshiped alongside the poor “in shabby clothing” (vs. 2). Although this should be celebrated, the church segregated them. This cultural division has no place in the church.

The beauty of the Kingdom of God is demonstrated when rich and poor, black and white, male and female, rural and urban, Democrat and Republican, can come together in unity for something greater than manmade boundaries. The Kingdom of God is of greater worth than class, gender, race, influence, and education.

This diverse unity is demonstrated in the Trinity whereby three distinct persons are unified. For us, the simple command of unity is evident in the command to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Love unifies. Love transcends boundaries. Love overpowers all that divides us.

Love is greater than judgment. When we choose tribes, we choose judgment. We claim that “my tribe” (whatever it might be) is somehow better than the next. The gospel, rooted in the love of a Father who sent his son to die for all tribes and sinners demonstrates mercy. And “Mercy triumphs over judgment” (vs. 13).