

***No Distinction* – James 2:1-13, 14-17**

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The writer Elizabeth Hagan presents a Word of the Week that is distributed via email to her reading audience. I've used some of those words as the basis for some of the lessons and devotions I share online each week.

This past week, her word for the week was nuance, as in a slight difference or variation. I liked the choice, because nuance is very much a part or should be part of our lives. Life in relationships, she says, is not always straightforward or clear. Each of our life experiences is different, which creates varying degrees of how we handle conflicts or other difficult situations. Problems aren't solved the same way for everyone. A clear path forward isn't concrete when we take into account all the factors that go into making a decision.

We should embrace nuance, or the gray areas as they are sometimes referred to as a guide to overcoming and relating to each other. We should embrace it in terms of how we interpret a problem or issue.

When I read these verses this week from James 2, though, in addition to these verses today from Proverbs, I was struck by the lack of nuance the writer uses when crystallizing the subject matter. The subject is those who are poor. And as we read these verses in James and Proverbs, the message is crystal clear: Dishonoring the poor and not tending to the needs of the poor is one of the more shameful things we can do if we claim to be followers of Jesus.

There's no gray area on this as we read this text. No distinction should be made between rich and poor; all are equally loved in God's eyes. And in fact, the poor would seem to be the preferred recipients of God's love and care.

There's really no way we can read these verses and come to any other conclusion. There's really no nuance here: There are poor people all around us and they shouldn't be discriminated against. In fact, we should work to lift them out of poverty.

Matthew Desmond, in his 2023 book *Poverty, By America*, wrote "This is who we are: the richest country on earth, with more poverty than any other advanced democracy. ... Almost one in nine Americans — including one in eight children — live in poverty. There are more than 38 million people living in the United States who cannot afford basic necessities, and more than 108 million getting by on \$55,000 a year or less, many stuck in that place between poverty and security." (Desmond, Matthew. *Poverty, by America* New York, Crown, 2023)

And that's just in America. Poverty is still wide-spread world-wide.

James reminds us that being people of faith requires action. Faith without works is dead, he said. Not that faithful works will make God love us anymore or get us closer to God. It's just that we can't just believe in Jesus and leave it at that. Out of appreciation and devotion, we must act. And James puts the spotlight on lifting up the poor as the prime area in which our action should be directed.

The problem with this text (and really every other text in the Bible where serving the poor is called for) is that there are no sure-fire solutions to the problem of poverty.

In fact, whenever we get into discussions today about the answers to poverty, the conversations often break down. Ideological and political differences lead to disagreement and a fractured strategy as to how we can love and serve the poor with the intended results we all seek.

The reality is that as soon as I mention possible solutions that our society could implement, some of us will immediately identify it as a Republican or conservative solution and be turned off by it. And some of us will claim another idea is a liberal or Democratic plan and, therefore, have no use for it.

And so we get stuck. We become discouraged. And we wonder if there's really a solution that everybody can rally around.

If we're not careful, we let this text intimidate us. We read the call to not make distinctions between the wealthy and the poor. And we read how God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom. And we read how we've dishonored the poor as people of relative wealth. And we read how we will be judged for not showing mercy to the poor. And when we read all these things, we're left disheartened, knowing that a great societal shift to the point where poverty will be eliminated seems impossible.

But, there is a way forward for us. There is a way for all of us that should defy our feelings of defeat and allow us to act in ways that do make a difference.

Shifts in public policy can and should be helpful to address poverty. But most of us won't have a direct role in shaping public policy. Here's what we do have a role in, however: loving our neighbors uniquely—as a community and individually. Bringing

in the kingdom of God as a church community and individually as followers of Jesus.

You know, one could say we are a small church. Or, one could say we're a big church. It depends on who we're being compared to. For a congregation our size, it's very accurate to say that we take seriously our call to help the less fortunate. It's in our DNA to be helpers here. And that's reflected, first, in the checks we write.

When it's all said and done, we will have given away in 2024 probably \$80-85,000. All of that money, as determined by our dedicated group of volunteers on our Outreach Committee, helps the less fortunate. Much of it directly supports the poor through agencies like Habitat for Humanity, Morgan Scott Project, Family Promise, Bridge Refugee Services, Living Waters for the World, Volunteer Ministry Center, Shepherd of Hope Food Pantry, Interfaith Health Clinic, Sunset Gap, Mobile Meals, Mission of Hope, and KARM.

That's over twelve percent of our annual budget, in line with our goal of giving away over ten percent each year.

And that generosity doesn't happen without your gifts. Only you make that giving possible.

And then there's the hands-on work you do to serve the poor as part of this family — your volunteering with many of these organizations that we support financially. We can't put a price on that kind of generosity.

And then there's all the work you do to serve the poor away from this church — the neighbors you help, the relatives you love, the organizations you support that have a big place in your own hearts.

And you do all this because you realize how blessed you are and, out of your commitment to a God who calls you to be generous, how obligated you feel to not look away when you see the poor and less fortunate in your midst.

It's part of being a Jesus follower.

*Jesus walked alongside the people he taught and helped. During the course of his earthly ministry, Jesus was always on the move. Most rabbis and their disciples established "schools," centralized locations where others could come to them for information, debate, discourse. The great rabbis taught from a seated position, demonstrating that they were in their place, while their students crowded about them, standing at attention to hear their words.*

*Jesus broke with this tradition. He spent his entire career as an itinerant, wandering from place to place, refusing to set up a permanent place of residence, a "Jesus school." To be a student in the Jesus seminary meant a walk-talk pilgrimage.*

*Jesus went out to the lakefront to talk Simon Peter and Andrew into becoming disciples. He sat kicking his feet in the dust at the edge of a well to meet the Samaritan woman. He made a healing house call to cure Simeon's mother-in-law. He walked right in to Levi's tax booth to invite him to "follow me." He interrupted a funeral to raise up the widow of Nain's son. He crossed the Sea of Galilee to heal the Gerasene demoniac. He entered Jairus' home to restore his daughter to life. Even after his resurrection, Jesus was mobile - walking and talking his way to Emmaus with two chattering men.*

*Jesus not only met people where they were physically. He also met them where they were emotionally as well. He let the weeping woman anoint his feet with ointment and tears rather than engage her in any discourse. He stood before the crowds, and before preaching his great "sermon on the plain," he healed them and soothed those with troubled*

*spirits. When it was simple hunger that stirred the people's spirits, he provided them with loaves and fishes. (Homiletics Online, March 31, 1996)*

Jesus, coming alongside folks, gave of himself. And the disciples he called did the same. And there was no distinction upon whom he was present for and giving toward. He treated everyone the same—the privileged and the poor alike.

We Jesus followers do the same. That's how the poor are lifted up, by individuals and families of Jesus followers refusing to make distinctions when it comes to who eats, who is housed, and who is given a hand up in the face of challenge.

And over the course of time, this strategy has proved to be fruitful. Due to private efforts of individuals and communities, and in addition to some public policy initiatives, poverty is being reduced.

Over the past generation, extreme poverty has declined hugely. This is one of the most important ways our world has changed over this time.

Today there are more than a billion fewer people in the world living below the International Poverty Line of \$2.15 per day today than in 1990. On average, the number declined by 47 million every year, or 130,000 people each day.<sup>5</sup>

(Ourworldindata.org)

Even though the challenge is still immense, that's encouraging. People and governments together recognize that we can't distinguish between wealthy and poor. We are all citizens, we are all God's children. Our work is paying off, and yet great work still remains.

In "Letters to Rulers of People," Francis of Assisi wrote these words: "Keep a clear eye toward life's end. Do not forget your

purpose and destiny as God's creature. What you are in his sight is what you are and nothing more. Remember, that when you leave this earth, you can take nothing that you have received -- fading symbols of honor, trappings of power -- but only what you have given: a full heart enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice and courage."

Speaking of nuance, there's little nuance in that, too. It's clear: the poor should not be neglected. And when we die, we don't take with us what we received but what we gave.