

FAITH LOVES

You may have noticed that last week we ended in the middle of a section. The point James is making was not concluded in verse 9, but is continued into verse 13, followed by a transitional illustration in verses 15 & 16 that makes direct application of the Biblical command to love one another. James' application is that genuine Christian love is the evidence and produce of true saving faith. Last week we saw that favoritism to the wealthy and disregard for the poor is decidedly unchristian. As James points out, favoritism makes superficial judgments; it is forgetful of the humility of Christ and the persecution by the rich, and it is a great moral evil. The solution to such wickedness is the application of the royal law: love your neighbor like you love yourself.

In the section we are examining today, James is seeking to convince and convict the church of their guilt before the law. Apparently, some in the church were excusing themselves and their sin because they were obedient to keep other laws. It seems that for many Jews the Old Testament law was treated as many individual elements. Keeping one part of the law was a credit. Breaking another part was a debit. So if one kept more commands than he broke, he would end his life with a spiritual credit to his account and thus be pleasing to God. This is no different from the modern attitude that imagines doing more good than bad, or abstaining from doing particularly evil things, is enough to gain spiritual credit and favor with God. Apparently the Jewish believers had borrowed this same attitude, imagining that they could justify their sinful behavior because of their other righteous deeds.

The law of God is not many different parts. While it contains a number of distinct commands, the law is in fact one. A great picture of this is a chain. A single chain is made up of many different links, yet despite its multiple parts, it is still one chain. Because the law is a single thing, if one keeps all of the commands and breaks only one, he is guilty of breaking the law. A great chain may have many strong links that all hold together, yet if one link breaks, the chain is broken.

Do not imagine that you are alright because you keep more commands than you break. You cannot justify your breaking of the law by your keeping of the law. Let me give you two brief reasons why this is so.

First, the standard set by God is perfect obedience. In Matthew 5:48 Jesus commands, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." The perfect holiness of God demands absolute, unfailing obedience in all things at all times. His standard is not a greater obedience than disobedience. His standard is unchanging obedience.

Consider Adam and Eve. How many commands of God did they break before they were condemned as sinners and all creation condemned under the curse? How many times did they break that command before they were separated from God and cast out of the garden? Only one act of sin was necessary to plunge all of mankind into guilt. Adam and Eve were completely free from sin until this point. They had no prior guilt, but that one act plunged them into guiltiness. God demands absolute perfection.

Besides that, even if one could somehow manage to keep all the law, it is too late to remove our guilt. If one today were to commit a horrible crime, he would not remove his guilt by then keeping perfectly all the rest of the law. We find ourselves in a worse state than that. We are born in guilt, having inherited from our father Adam a sinful being. We are born already under the condemnation of our guilt. Even before we are aware of our choices and their consequences, we begin to act out that sinful nature, expressing our sin and pride before we are even able to express our thoughts in understandable speech. We are violators of the law before we are even aware of the law. We cannot remove that guilt by then keeping the law. Paul says in Galatians 3:11, and several other places as well, "No man is made righteous by the law."

Keeping the law does not make you righteous, nor will keeping one command make acceptable the violation of other laws. You cannot justify disregard for the needs of your neighbor by giving a large offering. You cannot justify favoritism by being a skillful Sunday School teacher. To prove this point, James illustrates with a couple of extreme examples. The law forbids both murder and adultery. Are you justified in the one because you do not do the other? Is a murderer free from responsibility because he is faithful to his wife? Of course not. All would immediately see the foolishness of any who suggested otherwise.

There have been some in the church of Christ who would make just such an argument. I have read the words of well known preachers who have stated that God needs them too much. He is not going to punish them for their sin because they are doing such great things for him. They can be unfaithful to their spouse and abusive to their congregation because they have led many thousands of people to Christ and preached the Word all across the nation. This is not only folly; it is arrogance and blasphemy.

Though many would rightly be horrified by such an attitude, many Christians adopt the same argument with seemingly lesser things. It's okay that I don't live righteously during the week; I go to church on Sunday. It's okay that I don't serve in the church; I give faithfully in the offering. It's okay that I am bitter and don't talk to that person; I have been a church member all my life. This is the same wicked justification, the same folly that James is addressing.

To bring this back to the specific issue James is addressing. You cannot justify your lack of love for one another by any amount of good deeds or religious behavior. Genuine faith produces Christian love. Christian love is that which keeps the commands of God. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus pronounces woe on the Pharisees. They were diligent in keeping certain portions of the law, such as tithing, even with such exactness as to give a tenth of the least of spices and herbs. In their keeping of the law, they neglected the more important matters. They neglected judgment and mercy.

Christ identifies judgment, mercy and faith as more important, weightier matters, than tithing. I think Christ is referring back to Micah 6:8, "He hath shown thee, O man, what is good and what the Lord doth require of thee, but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God?" Let me put this really simply for you. It doesn't matter if you attend church every Sunday, if you read your Bible every day, if you teach a Sunday School class, if you wear the right clothes and don't watch the wrong shows; if you don't have Christian love, you are denying the faith you claim to profess.

As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:1-2, what does it matter if you have massive faith, amazing spiritual gifts and insane self sacrifice; if you don't have Christlike love, it is all nothing. You can be a spiritual superhero, but if you don't have Christlike love for your fellow believers, it ain't worth nothing. Zip. We are going to see this next week more fully, but what James is saying is this. Don't tell me how spiritual you are and all the religious duties you have performed. Show me, by your selfless care for your fellow believers. Show me, by keeping the royal law of God and love your neighbor like yourself.

Love obeys God's law and love shows mercy. The next few verses in James 2 identify the need for mercy, mercy in our speech and mercy in our deeds. There must be mercy in both. It is not sufficient to speak kindly while doing nothing. It is not Godly to give generously and turn around and speak critically of the ones you just helped. Because you gave someone a bag of food does not justify your spewing forth your criticism and disdain for them. Mercy must be verbal and active. James says, "so speak ye and so do as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty." Speak and act as one that will be held accountable by the Word of God.

Turn to Hebrews 10:24. I want you to see what the apostle tells us. He warns of the judgment that came upon those who violated the Law of Moses. Under the Mosaic Law, one could be put to death for certain violations. If there were two or three witnesses of the infraction, the violator could be executed. How much more severe will be the judgment of those who disregard the Son of God and by their actions show they despise the Holy Spirit? Christians, you profess to know Christ, to love Him, His Spirit and His Word. You have announced to all that you are a follower of Jesus. Live like

you are going to stand before Jesus and give account to Him for how you have lived as His child. Why should you live like judgment is coming? Because it is! You are going to give account to Jesus for how you have lived as His child.

Certainly your sin is forgiven, yet you are still accountable for your service and stewardship as His child. If you have selfishly refused to minister to others out of the resources and gifts God has given you, you will be held accountable for that. If you have been without mercy and kindness in your judgment of your fellow believers, you have no reason to expect mercy when you stand before Christ in His judgment of you. Jesus Himself declares this in Matthew 7:2, "For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure you mete (or measure out), it shall be measured to you again." What is the standard by which you will be judged? It is the law of liberty. We are not going to be held accountable for keeping the Mosaic Law. We are going to be held accountable for how we have lived under the commands given in this age of grace.

All the law has been fulfilled. You are not under any bondage to the Law of Moses. Its condemnation has been taken away and has been replaced by a liberty of life in Christ. You are perfected by the work of Christ and Christ has given you His Holy Spirit to enable you to do that which is pleasing to Him. You have greater freedom and greater ability than any had before Christ. You have the completed revelation of God, giving you all the instruction you need. You are going to be judged based upon that full revelation, complete empowering and finished perfecting in Christ. As Christ said in Luke 12:48, "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much more be required."

In all you say and do, remember that you will give account of yourself. So speak and serve with mercy. What is mercy? Mercy is patience, gentleness and pity for those in need. Mercy is that which withholds judgment or condemnation. Mercy is that which endures being wronged. Mercy is that which does not demand others meet up to my own standards. Mercy is that which labors long to benefit others, without complaint and without condemnation. Now, mercy does not exclude correction. In fact, mercy must at times correct. Mercy corrects without frustration, bitterness and sinful anger. Mercy corrects to show, teach and guide into the right way. Mercy does not assume the worst. Mercy is patient and enduring. Mercy holds back judgment so that growth can occur. Mercy rejoices to delay judgment. To understand how we should show mercy one only needs consider the mercy of God.

We find a host of examples of this mercy. We find the mercy of God in the garden, preserving the physical life of Adam and Eve that they might be brought to repentance and salvation. We find the mercy of God in the days of Noah, delaying His judgment for 120 years that the world would have opportunity to hear the truth and repent. We find

the mercy of God in the days of the judges and kings of Israel, bringing deliverance over and over again that the Israelites might be brought to repentance. We find the mercy of God still active today, delaying His coming and His judgment that more might be brought to repentance. Mercy is delayed judgment for the transformation and growth of an individual. We are all recipients of God's infinite mercy. We are all recipients of mercy from friends, family and fellow church members. We must all be ministers of mercy to one another, delaying wrath and condemnation that others may have time to grow and change. Show mercy that you might be shown mercy.

Lastly, and we are going to explore more fully next week that love works. Love is not a mere sentiment. Love is not a chemical reaction in your body that increases heart rate, respiration and adrenal flows. Love is an active commitment. Love is not just something you proclaim, it is something you perform. Biblical faith produces a working love. James uses an illustration to transition between a Biblical faith that loves to a Biblical faith that works. He ties these concepts together with this single story. If you see a fellow believer, one of this flock, who does not have enough food or proper clothing, and you say to that person, "Be at peace. Be warm. Be fed." what good is it? Your words are worse than fruitless. They are insulting.

Biblical love does not say, "I love you" while neglecting the person. Biblical love says and shows its love. Biblical love is an active love, one that works aggressively to meet the needs of others. That is why I have so carefully defined love as a commitment to do what is best for another, no matter the cost. Biblical love exerts itself to meet the needs of others. This royal law that the New Testament so clearly declares is a law that demands we perform it in our daily lives. You must go out and show your love by your service to others. As Ephesians 2:10, Titus 3:8 & 14 all declare, we have been saved to good works. We have been saved to a life of active ministry. Your love is non-existent if it doesn't do anything. It's worthless. Real Biblical faith produces a love that works, a love that is merciful and a love that keeps the commands of God. How's your love?