
“Mercy Triumphs”

JAMES 2:8-13

MARCH 27TH, 2022

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Bottom Line Up Front

When we sin, we break the whole Law of God; we are utterly dependent on His mercy every day.

In this passage James rocks the world of anyone who thinks they can keep *most* of the Law. James says you break it at all, you break it all. The Law reflects God’s perfect character and therefore the standard of obedience is perfection. But the sad reality is that no one has ever kept the law perfectly, except Jesus. When we sin, we break the whole Law of God; we are utterly dependent on His mercy every day. Thankfully, mercy triumphs over judgment!

Introduction

When I was a cadet at West Point an upper classman, I believe a junior, or a “Cow” as we call them, took a field trip with his class. During that trip he stayed in a hotel and at checkout the Officer in Charge of the trip checked all the cadets’ receipt for inappropriate charges. Sure enough, he discovered the cadet rented an adult movie in his room and he confronted the cadet. The cadet denied that he had made the purchase, lying about it.

At West Point we have an honor code which says, “A cadet will neither lie, cheat, nor steal, nor tolerate those who do.” When a cadet makes what is called a “pop-off” answer, he or she has 24 hours to confess the deception. This cadet dug in his heels when confronted again. He was charged with an honor violation and subjected to a honor trial. The honor committee ultimately decided this cadet willfully violated the honor code even though he confessed to the purchase days after the trip. He broke the code. It was a comparatively small infraction, but he broke the code nonetheless. He was kicked out of West Point and had to pay back his five-year commitment as a sergeant in the Army.

In today’s passage in James, we’re going to see that when we break the Law, no matter how insignificant it may seem to us, we are convicted under the Law. Break it at all, break it all. Praise the Lord mercy triumphs! Let’s read the passage, then I’ll pray, and we’ll jump into it.

James 2:8-13

8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. 9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. 11 For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

James says in verse 8 **If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well.**

A hint of sarcasm

James begins with a hint of sarcasm when he says, **“If you really.”** I think lots of people imagine they are **fulfilling the royal law according to scripture.** We tend to give ourselves more credit than we’re due, though. James says **if you really fulfill the royal law,** if you actually **“love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well.** This is right and good, and we should earnestly strive for this.

What is the **royal law**? It is the law of a king and it governs kingdom citizens. This is a reminder once again of who we are and whose we are. You and I are not independent, free agents. Our Heavenly Father and King Jesus are not mystical genie’s whose principal concern is fulfilling you. You are a citizen of the heavenly kingdom and there’s a royal law that governs it. Citizens of the kingdom obey the king.

In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus says that the entire Law is summarized in two commands. “And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.’”

It’s pretty simple

Right there from King Jesus’ own mouth, we read if you love the Lord with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself, you fulfill the whole Law. Pretty simple. Just love God perfectly and love your **neighbor** perfectly and you’ll **fulfill the royal law according to scripture.** There’s just one little problem: no one has *ever* done that, except Jesus.

What do we do with this, then? Legalists like the Pharisees take that and create more rules in hopes that somehow, they can achieve perfection; all while ignoring the elements they know they will never overcome. Responding this way will have you running after self-righteousness. The other way is to realize that the Law reveals two realities: it reveals God’s perfect standard, and it reveals your sinful heart. Responding this way will have you asking for forgiveness and the righteousness of Christ. Because, as James continues in **verse 9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.**

When James says, **But if you show partiality,** it is best to understand that he is saying, “since you show partiality” or “when you show partiality.” That word translated **if** has the sense of something that is assumed, or self-evident. There is little doubt “if” they were **showing partiality.**

We might like to imagine that something like showing partiality is really no big deal, but James exposes that lie here in verse 9. At the root of partiality is love of self because we show partiality in order to gain something from the one we favor at the expense of the one we don't.

Most of the Law

James makes it clear that if we sin by showing partiality, we are **convicted by the law as transgressors**. Break one, break it all. Our instinct is to think of the law as individual commands. If I obey *most* of the commands, I should be ok. This is the basis of every works-based religion on the planet. It says that what counts at the end of your life is whether the good deeds outweigh the bad deeds. If you end up with a credit rather than a debt, you're headed to the good place!

This is totally unbiblical. You see, it only takes one murder to make you a murderer. It only takes one theft to make you a thief. It only takes one lustful thought, according to Jesus, to make you an adulterer.

Rather than thinking of the Law as a set of individual commands, we should think of the Law as a whole – like a pane of glass. Imagine if you will a pane of glass with circles in each corner and one in the middle. The circles represent specific commands. Do not murder. Do not steal. Do not commit adultery. Do not worship idols. Do not show partiality. You look at that pane of glass and you say, no way I'd ever murder, or steal, or commit adultery, or worship an idol. But, partiality, since it's not such a big deal, I'm pretty much ok with that. When you show partiality, which would be like taking a hammer and breaking that part of the glass, what happens? You break the whole pane, right? This is what James means when he says **you are convicted by the law as transgressors**.

100% Lawbreaker

The Law requires perfection because it is a unified whole. If you keep 99% of the Law, your 1% failure makes you a 100% lawbreaker. **For, James continues in verse 10, whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. 11 For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.**

Does it seem harsh to you to bring up **murder** and **adultery** in a message about **partiality**? Are those even on the same plane? What is James saying? Is showing partiality the same as murder and adultery? James is talking about an attitude of the heart in relation to the Holy, Creator God. He is perfect and His Law is perfect. Selective disobedience betrays a heart attitude not just toward the Law but toward the *Law-giver*. **He who said...also said**. We need to realize that disobedience comes from an attitude of rebellion against **He who said**. It's all about relationship with God. When we break His law, we do so because we have a rebellious heart against Him. This is why the standard has to be more than close, it has to be perfection.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:48, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Perfect? Who can be perfect?! Exactly! God's standard is beyond what you can achieve yourself. But God has graciously, mercifully, wonderfully provided the means by which you can be *made perfect*. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:21, For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

We all stumble in many ways

To be clear, James was under no delusion about the human condition. In 3:2 he said, "For we all stumble in many ways." James knew no one could keep every commandment of the Law perfectly. As we'll see in a moment, James says God's mercy toward us is necessary for a right relationship with

our perfect God. Right here, though, we have to deal with the principle that it's foolish to imagine God is satisfied with partial obedience to His Law.

To pick and choose which commands we obey and which we ignore is in essence to continue to operate on the basis of the lie that Adam and Eve believed; that selective obedience is ok. They wanted to be the ones who determine what is right and wrong. Just as that act of disobedience in the Garden of Eden was a rejection of God, so our selective obedience is rejection of God.

If we only follow the laws we like, the ones we approve of, the ones we feel capable of following, we place ourselves in the position of final arbiter of good and evil. What a wicked thing to do. Do you see why James went there with murder and adultery in the context of partiality? Do you still think that the sin of partiality is just a little sin?

I think Daniel Doriani brings the *fire* when he comments on this verse, saying about our selective obedience, "In effect, we consult with God and possibly gain valuable pointers from Him. But we are still masters of our lives."

Not a cafeteria, but a royal meal

People think of the law like a cafeteria buffet. They walk along and pick and choose what they want. I love to eat at Pizza Ranch. Is it the best pizza I've ever eaten, probably not. But I *love* their desert pizza. Now you'd have to be a complete barbarian to go to Pizza Ranch and only hit the dessert bar; so of course, I get a salad and a few slices of pizza to justify loading up on dessert.

But here's the deal, I never get the fried chicken and mashed potatoes. I just don't even understand it! It's PIZZA Ranch. Not CHICKEN Ranch. To each his own I suppose. Therein is the problematic attitude when it comes to the law. "To each his own." I'll focus on this, I'll give a little effort on that, but don't even talk to me about this other thing. It's like fried chicken at a pizza place.

But instead of thinking of the law as a cafeteria or a buffet, we should think of it as a fine meal served by a master chef. Imagine you receive the personal invitation to join the Queen of England at the Royal Palace to dine on a twelve-course meal. Did you know there are twelve-course meals? I looked it up, here's the order of a twelve-course meal: hors d'oeuvre, amuse-bouche, soup, appetizer, salad, fish, first main course, palate cleanser, second main course, cheese course, dessert, and mignardise. Now, I've had etiquette classes at West Point, but I had to look up amuse-bouche. It's chosen by the chef, not the patron, as a sort of preparation for the main course and a taste of the chef's style.

Ok, so there you are in the dining room of the royal palace and the royal chef personally presents to you her royal highness' favorite meal. One by one, dish after dish, you taste the finest delicacies money can buy. Now imagine you taste an amuse-bouche and it evokes a little gag reflex. Your eyes get huge as you think about what you're going to do. This is an important decision. You might think it's only one part of the meal, and a little one at that, so what harm could there be in spitting it out with an, "Ewww," and wiping your tongue on your napkin? What are you doing when you reject the amuse-bouche? You're rejecting not only that part of the meal, but in effect you're rejecting the chef who made it and more importantly, the Queen, who's taste it reflects.

God's Law is not to be sifted through our preferences the way we walk around a cafeteria, picking and choosing what we like and ignoring what we do not. To reject any part of the Law is in effect to reject the Lawgiver whose character the Law reflects.

Keenly aware of my inability

Once again, I am keenly aware of my inability to do this, which is exactly where I think James wants us to be right now. He continues, in **verse 12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.**

Because any violation of the law is a violation of the whole law, and because we are convicted by the law as transgressors, James tells us to make a habit of speaking and acting as one who is going to be **judged under the law of liberty.**

The **law of liberty** is the fulfilled law. Jesus fulfilled the Law perfectly and because He fulfilled it, it now brings life rather than death. Dan Macartney says, “[The Law of liberty] brings ethical freedom, not bondage to guilt, even though stumbling at one point makes one guilty of the whole.” After all, Paul said in Romans 8:1-2, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” We ought to **so speak and so act** as ones who have been set free in Christ and who know that there remains for us now no condemnation! Yet we are not to use our freedom as an excuse to engage in sin.

How will we be judged?

What, then, did James mean when he said we’ll be **judged under the law of liberty**? Doesn’t Paul say there in Romans 8 that there is no condemnation? Doesn’t that mean we no longer need to think about judgment? No, Paul also said in 2 Corinthians 5:10, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” Jesus said in Matthew 12:36, “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak.”

And again, Paul said Romans 14, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ So, then each of us will give an account of himself to God.”

While there is no *condemnation* for those who are in Christ, there will be *evaluation* of our work here on earth. Paul speaks of the type of judgment believers should anticipate in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15, “Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”

Ceremonial Law vs. Moral Law

Remember that the Law of God reflects His perfect character and rejection of it is a rejection of Him as the lawgiver. Thus, to be graciously accepted by Him does not mean we are released from obeying the Law. Let me make a quick distinction here. There was ceremonial law and moral law in the Old Testament. Jesus and the other New Testament authors affirmed the moral law, but we have been released from the ceremonial law because that was fulfilled in Christ on the cross. We are no longer bound by the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament – laws pertaining to cleanness, food, ceremony, and clothing blends, things that some people use to object to God’s moral law today.

God showed this to Peter in Acts 10 in the vision of the sheet being lowered containing all sorts of ceremonially unclean animals and then telling Peter to take and eat. “Do not call unclean what I call clean,” He said. The point was not just about unclean animals, but about Gentiles, it was about

people. Later in Acts 15 James himself would deliver the church's position regarding ceremonial law regarding the circumcision of Gentiles who came to faith in Christ, declaring that they are not bound to keep it. So, James says the ceremonial law is no longer binding because it's been fulfilled in Christ. But here James affirms the moral law as captured in Leviticus 19:8, **you shall love your neighbor as yourself.**

The Law that brings Freedom

James calls the Law by which we will be judged the **Law of Liberty**. It is a Law that brings freedom. What does it mean that we have been set free? It means we have been granted freedom *from* sin, not freedom *to* sin. God has not changed. His standard has not changed. We're still called to be perfect as He is perfect. What changes when a person is saved and set free from the power and penalty of sin, is that he or she has for the first time the capacity to say no to the flesh, no to disobedience, no to sin, and yes to the Holy Spirit who dwells within them.

It is foolish and naïve to think that salvation by grace through faith in Christ means we are released from the obligation to obey our King Jesus while we wait for our eternal inheritance in Heaven. Listen to Peter's exhortation, "And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot." (1 Peter 1:17-19)

Of all people, Christians who have been ransomed by the precious blood of Christ should desire and strive to live righteously, knowing that while we are no longer condemned by our sin, we will stand before our Savior and King and give account of our lives. Oh that we would not trample on the precious blood of Jesus.

Mercy triumphs over judgment

Let's get to mercy because it's been heavy, hasn't it? James says in **verse 13 For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.** I think James is a genius in how he dealt with this sin of partiality. I think he, inspired by the Holy Spirit, crafted this section beautifully and skillfully to bring the reader to an end of themselves so that they are finally ready for the knock-out punch – if you realize how much you rely on the mercy of God, why aren't you full of mercy to other people? Why don't you, who have first-hand experience that mercy triumphs over judgment, allow mercy to triumph over judgment?

In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus told of a servant who had been forgiven a debt, the modern equivalent of about \$20 million. It was a debt he could never repay. He then went away and seeing a fellow servant who owed him like \$2000, he demanded to be paid back! That servant begged and pleaded for mercy, asking for patience yet the forgiven servant had him thrown in prison! Other servants saw this and reported back to the king.

Listen to the concluding words of Jesus speaking as the king, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:32-35) Now, contrast those words with these words of Jesus in Matthew 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

Blessed are the merciful

Blessed are the merciful, but woe to the merciless. Partiality is an act of merciless favoritism. The merciful do not ignore the plight of the poor and the outcast while lending favor and special treatment to the rich. Let the listener hear. The merciless are in for a rude awakening. Those who habitually show partiality, James is telling you something important here: you will face judgment from God who will show you no mercy because you have shown no mercy.

It's not that God will withhold mercy from His children because they refused to show mercy. Rather James is telling us those who do not show mercy are not God's children at all. Those who have been born of God will love like God loves.

Remember James is showing us what true religion looks like. He said in 1:26-27 that true religion is marked by control of the tongue, care for the poor, and purity from worldliness. I think I could argue from James and from Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant that mercy is perhaps the surest evidence of our genuine faith, of true religion. It's the work that proves our faith, which we'll explore more next week.

How do we know we truly believe the Gospel?

How do we know we truly believe the Gospel? We know we truly believe the Gospel when our deepest, darkest sins get blotted out, and our debt that we could never repay gets completely cancelled, and we respond to that by showing others the same mercy God has shown us.

Praise the Lord, **Mercy triumphs over judgment!** Why does mercy triumph over judgment? Because God has chosen to show us His mercy. God has chosen to make a way for sinners to be forgiven. The law of liberty, fulfilled by Christ's death, burial, and resurrection is that way. It is because God is a merciful God and because He sent His own Son to die for your sin and mine that we read in Hebrews 4:6, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Psalm 51

In case you thought God's mercy was limited to the New Testament, allow me to read from Psalm 51. This is David's prayer of repentance after committing adultery with Bathsheba and then having her husband murdered in battle.

¹Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

⁹Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

- ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right[Ⓜ] spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.
- ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

We deserve God's judgment, we receive God's mercy

Given James' statement about being **convicted by the law as transgressors** whenever we commit sin, believers will always *deserve* God's judgment. And yet because of His grace, we will always *receive* His mercy. All of this will be on the basis of our union with the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. It will never be on the basis of keeping *most* of the law. It will not even be on the basis of showing mercy to others. However, our experience of His daily mercy will enliven and inspire us to desire and strive for obedience and to show mercy to others.

Believers need the mercy of God every single day because we are convicted by the law as transgressors every single day. We fail to be perfect as the Lord our God is perfect every single day. Thankfully, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:22-23)

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