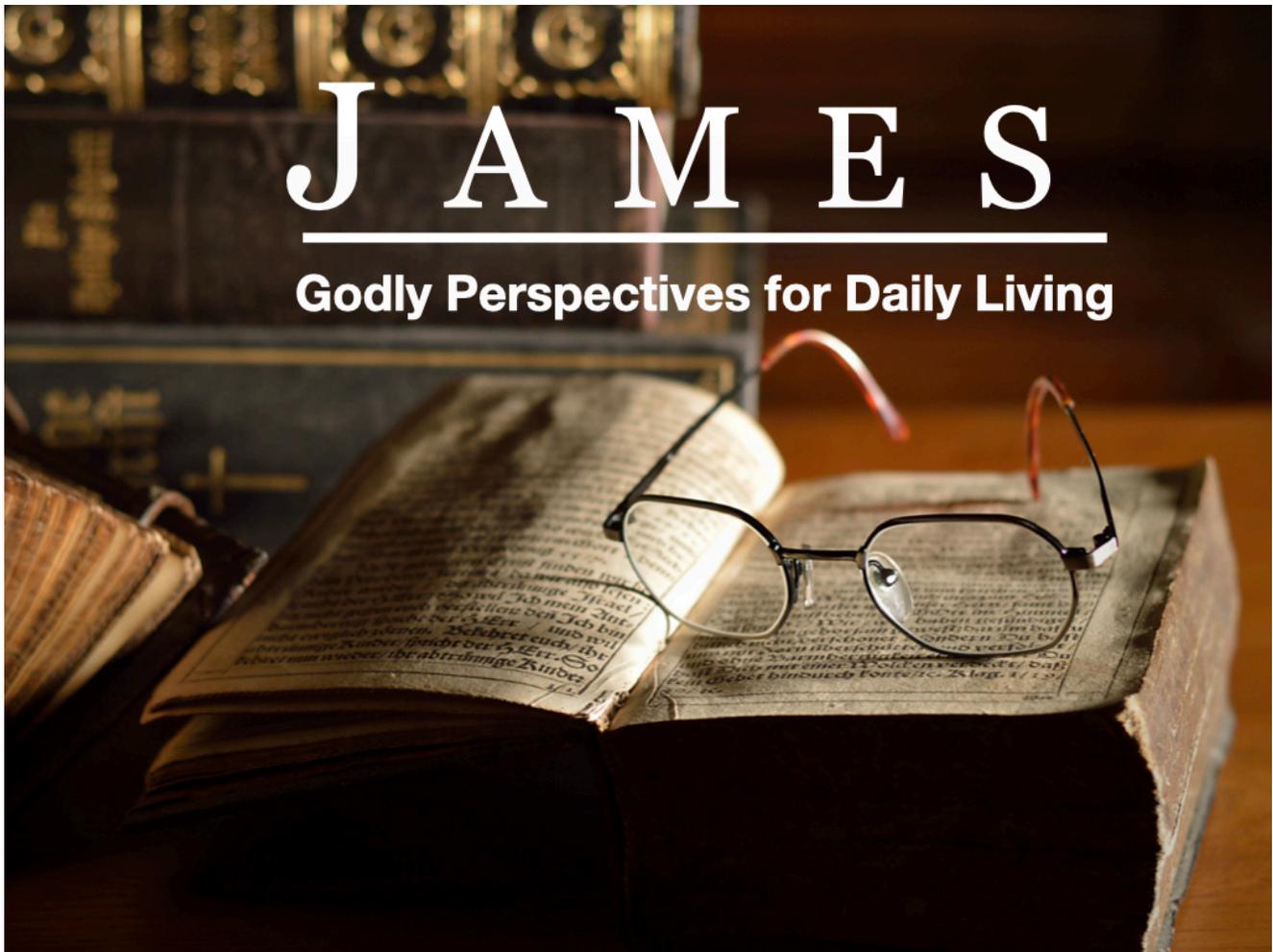

The Letter of James

Godly Perspectives for Daily Living

Robert G. Taylor - May 23, 2021



Introduction

In the first 7 verses of James 2, James levies an accusation with devastating consequences.

The Christians were creating distinctions between the poor and the rich. The rich received preferential treatment, while the poor were demeaned.

When people do such things, they never assume they are doing something wrong. They are acting human. The situation dictated the action, and they were only doing what “everyone else” does.

How do you handle this kind of thing?

How would you correct someone doing something wrong when they don't think it is wrong?

Do you scold someone? Usually, wagging fingers change nothing. Attitudes harden, and more division takes place.

Do you cajole? Do you say, “you are such good people that surely you don't want to do this kind of thing?” But if they are such good people, why are you accusing them of something so ugly?

Do you demand? You can slam your fist on a table, bellow about your position and authority, and threaten consequences if not obeyed. Would that help?

In this lesson, James employs another, much more effective tactic.

When it comes to their partiality and making distinctions, he simply holds up a mirror and asks, “Is this who you are?”

Mirrors do one thing. They only reveal what is there. It never paints a face better than it is. No mirror can do Photoshop to an image. What you see is what you get.

Do you like what you see?

Let's step in front of that mirror on our own as well.

Discussion

The Standard

James begins by providing a yardstick against which they can measure themselves. What exactly is the standard against which partiality is judged?

Listen to verse 8

“If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well.” (James 2:8)

James doesn't leave “law” general. Everyone thinks they obey the law. There is a specific law.

In Leviticus 19, which we looked at last week, the various laws are given. There is how you deal with a person who curses mother and father and their death penalty. The problem of witches comes up. And, as we say, there are statements about absolute fairness in the judicial affairs of Israel.

Then, buried in a single verse, verse 18, comes the law James focuses his readers' attention upon.

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19:18)

It was one of the jewels of the Mosaic law.

Rabbis sought to boil the law down to its essence. So they were constantly debating, “what is the greatest commandment?” They dragged Jesus into these discussions and asked him. He refused to play their games.

Instead, he asked them to tell him. It was simple. Love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself. He agreed. But his questioners sought to justify their ritual purity by asking, “And who is my neighbor?”

He told a story that we call the Good Samaritan. A man lay bleeding to death after robbers ambushed him on the Jericho road. The best of Israelite society approached—priests and Levites. But they hurried by a man in such shape without rendering assistance.

Then a man came along who stopped his donkey. He tended to his wounds, lifted the man onto his donkey, took him to the next stopping place, and paid for his lodging in advance. He was the mongrel dog of the Ancient Near East, a Samaritan. Hated by Jews, they had no standing at all.

And the question came, “who proved to be neighbor?” The corner in which the teachers of the law stood was surrounded by wet paint. “The one who showed compassion.”

Few like to see the implications of the commandment to love neighbor as self.”

Those two commands were the roots out of which all the laws grew. Everything in life is about loving God and loving neighbor. Law is the application of those principles.

It was the kind of law that everyone believed they kept. No one would raise their hand and say, “no, I just ignore that one.” Everyone is pristine when it comes to loving neighbor.

But we tend to generalize it. We love our neighbor because we don’t harm him physically. We may smile when we feel inclined, and we might not say those harsh things aloud that we are thinking about them.

We all love our neighbor in the most general way.

James calls this the “royal” law. No one knows for sure what he means by the phrase. It may be this is law fit for a king, one that even a king would keep. Or James may refer to it that way because a king gave it. Some believe it means that those who keep it act as if they were kings.

Whatever it means, James lifts it to a high level.

Then James wants to focus on a single issue. Are you really doing it well?

*“If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” **you are doing well.**” (James 2:8)*

If you really, actually do that, you do well. For James, the question is not what you believe but what you practice. So it is time to swing the mirror around so they can see themselves.

Their Practice

As we have seen, all believe they keep the law of “love neighbor as self.” No one confesses to the opposite.

So, James asks them.

*“But **if you show partiality**, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” (James 2:9)*

When James writes, he uses a construction which means, “since you show partiality.” It is true, not merely possible. They are showing partiality. Since they put people in different pigeon holes, it must mean something.

They are lawbreakers.

*“But if you show partiality, **you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.**” (James 2:9)*

Lawbreakers? No, not us. We keep the law.

But James puts them in a conundrum. If the law says to love your neighbor as yourself and you are mistreating and dishonoring some people, you are not keeping the law.

That means you are a lawbreaker. You are convicted as a transgressor.

James’s term for “convict” doesn’t have a legal sense of being pronounced guilty by a judge. Instead, it is more subtle.

In John 3, Jesus explains why wickedness lingers in the shadows of life. Thieves steal at night, and unethical activities take place behind closed doors. He says this is by design.

*“For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be **exposed**.” (John 3:20)*

They are “exposed,” and it is the same word James uses for “convict.”

Paul agrees. In Ephesians 5 he says:

*“But when anything is **exposed** by the light, it becomes visible,” (Ephesians 5:13)*

If your face is dirty, you never know it in the dark. But when you come into the light, it becomes evident. It is exposed.

James tells them their actions of showing partiality expose their true character as those who ignore the basic tenet of the law.

I am sure they protested, “but we did not do anything wrong. We don’t ignore the law. Just look at our record.”

So James says, “let’s find out.” He uses extremes to get his point across.

“For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” (James 2:10)

His reasoning is that the law is the law. Breaking one small commandment is breaking the law. It may not be the same law but ignoring one law is the same as ignoring all of it.

It was something these Jewish Christians understood. From their raising in Jewish synagogues, they had heard this before.

The Talmud, the accumulation of the teaching of rabbinic thought, said, “If a man do all, but omit one, he is guilty for all and each.”

He boxed them in with their own heritage. He tells them something familiar and accepted. If you accept that, then any deviation from the law marks you as a lawbreaker.

We know this from our own experiences.

If you drive in the Metroplex, the rule seems to be “go with the flow.” The speed limit sign may say 45 MPH, but if the cars around you are going 55, that’s how fast you go. Someone in front is usually going faster, but you travel at the same speed as people around you.

As you pass an intersection, a police car takes radar readings. When you pass, he pulls out, turns on his red and blue lights, and gets behind you. He flashes his headlights to signal you to stop.

He comes to the car window and asks for license and registration. But you protest, “I was not the only one speeding. In fact, cars are going faster than I was. Why was I pulled over?”

And the policeman, after listening to this protest, asks a devastating question. “Were you exceeding the posted speed limit?”

The answer is “yes.” That means you broke the law. It doesn’t make any difference if someone is doing it worse than you. You are still guilty by going beyond what was posted.

So James decides to give an example with extreme pieces.

“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.” (James 2:11)

You are not an adulterer but a murderer. Are you not a lawbreaker? Simply because you did not break the law of adultery does not absolve you of the guilt of breaking the law. You break one, and you have broken all.

But you know how we try to rationalize ourselves? We point at other and say, “at least, I’m not....”

Fill in the blank, but it will always be someone worse than you.

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- I'm not Hitler.
 - I'm not a drunk driver.
 - I'm at least pay my taxes.
 - I don't beat my wife.
 - I'm not as bad as the hypocrites at church.

And the list could go on. While all may be true, if there is something you are guilty of, you remain convicted as someone who has not kept commandments.

Someone has observed, "we only believe as much of the Bible as we practice."

If we say we believe that the Word of God is true and then interpret our way out of not obeying it, have we not negated our statement that it is true? If you ignore the uncomfortable and difficult parts of scripture, have you not ignored all of scripture in a way?

That's the point James makes. They, because of their partiality, had violated the law of "love your neighbor as yourself." And because of that, they are lawbreakers, something that none of them coming to worship would admit.

It must have hit them hard. James' audience had a self-image of those who respected God and his law. They stayed faithful. But in their showing of partiality, they crossed a line and stood convicted.

And they stood there stunned. How can we handle this?

The Remedy

James is not willing to let them feel the devastating weight of their sin. Instead, he prescribes a way of going forward and changing their lives.

*"So **speak and so act** as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty." (James 2:12)*

Acting and speaking make up all of the ways we interact with others. He wants to bring a theological lesson into the practical arena. When you speak to others and interact with others, what should you do?

First, they are to remember they will be judged under the law they live under. The law of liberty, which we say in chapter 1, means that we are free when we do God's will. We are liberated from worry, stress, and consequences.

We will be judged, though. Remember that one day all will answer for their actions toward the poor and in favor of the rich. God will not let that stay dormant.

What James does is ask them, "will your actions pass the newspaper test?"

The same concept was part of the advice the billionaire Warren Buffett gave an audience in 2005. He spoke to people who came to wonder how to make more money. For Buffett, who lives reasonably modestly in Omaha, Nebraska, that was the wrong thing to worry about.

He told them:

If an article "written by a smart but pretty unfriendly reporter" appeared in a local newspaper about a decision or action you made, and your family, friends, and neighbors read it, how would you feel about it?

In short, if everyone knew what you were doing, could it stand examination, and are you satisfied with that? Is there any embarrassment in it?

Someone has said that we should live our lives so that, when criticized, no one will believe it.

That's what James says. Act, knowing God is going to judge you.

But how? What should actions toward others look like?

He completes his discussion with this issue of partiality with these words:

"For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment." (James 2:13)

The verse raises a couple of questions.

- Who is doing the judging in this verse?
- Who needs the mercy?

For one, God judges all, and we need mercy from him because of the sin in our lives. But is that all this is discussing?

James has been speaking to those who show partiality. The problem with partiality is that it looked at a man by his outward appearance and judged them. When it came to seating rich people in the best seats, it was a judgment made. When the poor man was told to stand, or if he must sit, sit in the dirt, people made a judgment. In fact, James had told them they

*“Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become **judges** with evil thoughts?” (James 2:4)*

The very act of making a distinction between people was a judgment of the worthiness of people. The rich were more worthy than the poor. They had decided in their hearts to encourage the rich and dishonor the poor.

In this passage, in addition to God judging all, they were judging other people.

And don't we make judgments? It has been said that we are hard on others and easy on ourselves. When we fail, we simply made a mistake. Others sinned. We were honestly mistaken. They were intentionally cruel. We know us, so we cut ourselves a lot of slack.

But James says that judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. In their dealing with people, they should be harder on themselves and easier on people. They needed to see the poor with mercy. They were to grant them the grace they needed. They were not venal but poor. Their economic status was not the same as their spiritual status.

More importantly, treat them as you would treat yourself. Do you want to receive mercy at judgment before God? Then you need to have that same attitude toward those who require mercy on earth. They should treat the poor with respect if that is how they wish God would treat them.

It is a theme carried through the teachings of Jesus.

“Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:36)

If your Father is merciful with you, you must treat others in the same fashion.

And in a well-mangled verse, the same point is made.

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.” (Matthew 7:1–2)

The measure you give will be the measure you get. Do you want God to treat you the way you treat the poor man? If not, then stop showing partiality.

And James ends this lesson by saying,

*“For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. **Mercy triumphs over judgment.**” (James 2:13)*

Mercy overcomes judgment. God will look at it when he looks at you.

So, when you start to think about showing partiality, how do you want God to judge you? Now, go ahead and treat that person the way you want to be treated.

And does that not express the whole meaning of “love your neighbor as you love yourself?”

Conclusion

While James has painted the practice of partiality with a black brush, he is careful on how he wants to approach these people. He does not lambast and demean. Instead, he treats them with mercy. He gently holds the mirror before them and says, “look carefully. Are you keeping the royal law of loving your neighbor as you love yourself? And when you show partiality, do you not ignore that law and therefore become a lawbreaker.”

And he has a single prescription. We should measure our own actions, not according to what others do but in light of God's judgment.

Do you want God to treat you as you treat others?