James 2:8-13

Mercy and the Heart of the Law

In continuing our discussion from last week regarding the reasons why God does not show partiality James told us that having such an attitude is not compatible with the teachings of Christ nor the law of God. In today’s message the goal is to determine what James concludes regarding partiality and the way it measures up to the law of God. What we concluded last week is that God wants us to love one another just as He has shown this love to us in Christ, but He also does not want us to treat others differently because of the way they dress, their physical appearance or their financial situation. All of us are joint heirs together in the blessings of eternal life that has been made possible by Christ’s sacrifice. Now we will turn our attention on another issue that is closely connected to favoritism, this issue is how we are to treat each other under the Law of God. Please open your Bibles to James chapter 2. Today we will be studying verses 8-13.

**8 If, however, you are fulfilling 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 violators. 10 For whoever keeps the whole Law, yet stumbles in one point, has become guilty of all. 11 For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do murder, you have become a violator of the Law. 12 So speak, and so act, as those who are to be judged by the law of freedom. 13 For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.**

For our time together I would like to share with you three main points that James is making in this passage. Each of these points provide important instructions for us to follow each day of our lives. When we do what the Word of the Lord says we will experience the approval of God. The first point James makes in this passage is that the Law of God is a “royal” law and that the heart of that law is the teaching that we are to love our neighbor just like we love ourselves. This foundational teaching is first shared with the children of Israel when Moses was giving the people the laws of God in the book of Leviticus. Lev. 19:18 reads “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.” Therefore, from the very beginning of the establishment of God’s law He laid the foundation that the very heart of the law is based not only upon the way we treat God, but also upon the way we treat each other. As I have also stated in this first point, the law of God is a “royal law” which means that it is similar to a decree that would be issued by a king and applicable to all of his subjects. With God being the king of the universe, this law applies to all people because He is the creator of us all. So, what we need to understand is that the way we treat each other reflects not only the attitude we have toward that individual, but it also reflects the attitude we have toward God.

One Scriptural reference I would like to share that might help explain this concept better is the way in which Jesus taught we should show our allegiance to God in our relationships. In the Sermon on the Mount He tells us that murder is not just the act of taking a life, but it also is the hate that a person may have in his heart towards another person. Hating someone is the same as murdering them in your heart (Matt. 5:22). Also, adultery is not just the action of sexual contact outside of marriage. Jesus tells us that adultery begins in the heart as lust and is viewed by God in the same manner as the physical act (Matt. 5:28). This is important to note because Jesus is instructing us that the thoughts we have in our minds are just as hurtful and damaging as the physical acts we do that are sinful. The sinful acts we commit begin as temptations that have manifested first in our minds. Therefore, if we hate and lust in our hearts God sees that as being just as much of a sin as He would if we committed the act with our hands.

In addition to thoughts, the actions we carry out towards others shows the love and compassion we have for them. We can pray for someone who we know is going through a trial without ever telling them that we have done so. Even if we do not tell them we are praying for them, we have still shown that we love them through the actions we have performed in our mind. Another way we can show love and compassion is by helping others with our time or financial resources without seeking recognition for what we have done. In Matthew 6:3 Jesus says that when we give to the poor and needy “do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” Doing these loving things in secret shows an attitude toward others that we love them not only because God tells us to but because we want to honor God through those actions. These actions also show that Christians are not selective. We are commanded to show the love of God to all people whether they are believers in God or not.

The second point that James is making in this passage is that showing partiality is a sin and by committing such a sin the transgressor is guilty of violating the entire law as a whole. This seems rather harsh because someone might ask how it is possible to be totally guilty of violating the whole law when they have only broken one part of it. To explain this better I would like to take a few moments to answer a question that many people ask regarding the concept of total depravity how Scripture addresses this topic. Total depravity is the concept that through the rebellion of one man sin entered the world and all people have inherited this sin nature. One of my friends, who has told me that he is an atheist, asked me how the entire human race can be guilty of sin when it was only Adam and Eve in the Bible who committed the first sin. In other words, you tell me that I am a sinner in need of a Savior, but how can I be held responsible for the sin of Adam? It was Adam who sinned, not me.

I believe that James is answering this question in this passage when he says that stumbling in one point of the law makes a person liable for violating all of the law. When Adam sinned he not only committed this sinful act on behalf of himself and Eve, but he made this choice on behalf of the entire human race. His children as well as all who followed inherited the original sin that was committed by him. The Apostle Paul says that sin entered the world through the sin of Adam and because of that sin death entered humanity as well. However, just as sin entered the human race through one man eternal life and salvation has also been offered to mankind through one man (Rom. 5:12-19). Jesus paid the price so that man can be reunited with God. If it is not fair that all men inherit the sin of Adam is it also unfair that men can be reunited with God through the sacrifice of one man, Christ? In both situations the descendants of Adam and Christ receive a handed down curse or blessing. What I attempted to explain to my friend was that God has made salvation available to all who call upon the name of Christ as their Savior. Therefore, when someone violates the sin of partiality they are not only sinning against God by choosing to elevate some over others, but they have also violated the entire law because they have shown they are rebellious toward God and will not honor His laws. To reject only one of those laws makes the person a transgressor against all of the law.

To dig into this subject a bit further let’s imagine that there are two kingdoms in a land that are only a few hundred miles apart. Let’s suppose that we have Kingdom A and Kingdom B. If you were a citizen of Kingdom A and your king declared war against Kingdom B you would be at war with Kingdom B because your King is your federal head. If this is the situation in this fictional kingdom then it is understandable how the entire human race is held accountable for the sin of Adam. Adam is our federal head just like that King, so when he sinned against God that curse was placed upon all of humanity. A citizen of Kingdom A might not think that it is fair that he has to fight in a war he did not declare, but since he is of that Kingdom he will be held accountable to fight that war along with his other citizens. Since all of us are children of Adam we all inherit our father’s sin.

The kingdom of God operates in such a way. Those who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior are citizens of the kingdom of God. Christ, who is our King, has paid the ransom for all of His citizens and now because of their citizenship they enjoy the full benefits of the price He has paid for their salvation. So, just as sin entered all men through the sin of Adam so has salvation to all who accept Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Before moving on to the third point I wanted to spend a moment on the comment James makes regarding the law. He tells us that the same God who has commanded us not to murder is the same God who also commands us not to commit adultery. If we say that we are followers of Christ, but then do not practice the teachings of Scripture this makes us hypocrites. Jesus tells us that in order to show Him that we love Him we are to follow His teachings (Matt. 7:24) and if we do so we are building our house upon a solid rock. On the other hand, if we decide not to heed the teaching found in Scripture and choose to do things our own way we will have a house built upon shifting sand that will not be able to withstand the rains and floods. James is expanding on this teaching of Jesus by telling us that if we do murder, but do not commit adultery we are still violating the same law because the maker of the law has established both of those commands. Many of us as parents have dealt with this issue in the way we deal with our children. Have any of you ever had a child try to argue that they really did not do anything bad when they disobeyed one rule, because they have been doing a pretty good job following all of the other rules? Sometimes we also treat our relationship with God the same way. We are trying to cover our sin by claiming that what we have done is not that bad. For example, someone might willingly admit that they are a liar, but then say that is not so bad because at least they are not a murderer. Is being a liar in the sight of God any less of a sin than murdering? James is saying that if we get into the habit of trying to justify our sin by comparing it to other sins that our culture may deem to be much worse we are missing the entire point of the law. Our goal should not be to only commit certain sins that we might see as not being as harmful, our goal needs to be to pursue holiness and live in a way that honors God. Instead of justifying our sin, we need to resist sin and aspire for holiness, which can only be attained by accepting Christ’s sacrifice and living as His disciple. With that being said, I don’t want anyone to think that I am arguing that any of us can reach perfection and that making mistakes or stumbling at times makes us bad people. The Epistle of James is not arguing that our deeds can redeem us before God, our deeds should represent the faith we have in such a way that others will see the fruit of our faith and come to have a better understanding of who Christ is and what He has done for us all. Our goal as Christians is to work for godliness, with the understanding that without the saving work of Christ all of us would be lost. Therefore, faith and works function together in the life of a Christian, not separately.

The third and final point in this passage that we will look at today is the point that those who show mercy are better able to accept the mercy they have been given by God and that those who do not show mercy will not be shown mercy by God. All of us can think of a time in our lives when someone showed us mercy. This could have been in school, in a friendship, in our jobs, in our family or in our marriages. No matter where we have experienced this mercy we can understand what it feels like to have someone else show us mercy, especially if we did not deserve it. This is such an important teaching in Scripture that Moses takes the time to remind the people in Deuteronomy that if they are to take possession of the Promised Land and keep it they must always honor God as well as others. Deut. 6:4-5 tells us we are to love God with our entire heart, soul and mind. In order to show God that we really do love Him we are to show this love intellectually and emotionally, but also through the compassion and love we have for others. The question that I would like to pose to all of you is this: “How can we show the love and mercy of God to others and practice favoritism at the same time?” I would like to answer by saying that this is not possible. To say that we are Christians and love others, but in that same breath elevate someone because of who they are, how much money they have or how they dress, makes a liar out of us. When Christ died on the cross He didn’t die only for the rich, the poor, the well-dressed, or the well-educated. His sacrifice paid the ransom for the sins committed by everyone who call upon His name for salvation. If God shows this kind of mercy and compassion to those who accept Him, why should we, who bear His name, treat our fellow man any differently? We should share the love of Christ with anyone who comes across our path regardless of their situation. As we have said so many times in our discussions, it is not our role to save mankind. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. Our calling is to share the love of Christ and the good news of the gospel with everyone. We are promised that if we take this calling seriously and show God’s love to others He will bless our efforts and help us to honor His name throughout creation.

In what way does mercy triumph over judgment? In the pages of Scripture God continually shows that He is a God of mercy and lovingkindness (Nehemiah 9). When the people of Israel rebelled against Him He did not forget the covenant He made with their Fathers, but He honored that covenant even though the people still needed to face punishment for their sin. God has always shown mercy even to those who cursed His name or those who sinned against Him. What we need to remember is that when we come across someone who is hostile to the Christian faith and says things against us we must not respond in a defensive or angry manner, which is so easy to do. Our charge in this passage is to respond with love, compassion and patience, but we should also stand up for our faith by making certain that others understand our faith correctly. We can do this without getting into shouting matches and in a reasonable manner. If we represent Christ in such a manner He will be glorified, and others will have the proper understanding of who He is and how He has changed our lives.

In conclusion, today we have discussed why the heart of the Law of God is mercy and why it is important for us to remember that showing partiality in our lives is a violation of God’s law. We cannot show favoritism towards others while at the same time honor God by loving our neighbors as ourselves. The attitude we have towards God must be reflected in the way that we treat others as well. The testimony of a follower of Christ is supported through actions. James wants us to remember that the things we do in the name of God will be witnessed by others and those actions may either validate our citizenship in God’s kingdom or cause others to question our true motives. May each of us take this words to heart and remember them every day. May we live in a way that honors the God whom we serve and shows Jesus Christ that we appreciate the sacrifice He made to make us right with God again. Let us pray.