

Week 7: James: The Law and Grace

Hook



Main Point: True followers of Jesus show mercy and walk in freedom.

In a classic scene from the 1955 Disney film *Lady and the Tramp*, the two main characters enjoy a spaghetti dinner by candlelight, a serenade, and an impromptu kiss, cementing their newfound love. And while the animated movie romanticized spaghetti on a first date, it seems unlikely to translate into reality. Pasta coated in tomato sauce is a fantastic way to stain your clothes and a recipe to bring even more tension to an evening. Whether the blemish is big or small, if a part of a piece of clothing is stained, the whole piece of clothing earns the title “stained.”

Q: What foods would you suggest people avoid on a first date?

Q: What do you do when you're out and about and you stain your clothes?

Q: Is there a particular kind of stain you find impossible to remove?

Transition: Today's lesson will challenge us to consider the law. Like a small stain taints the entire shirt, a breaking of one “small” part of the law moves us into the category of lawbreaker. If we are guilty of breaking one part of God's law, we are guilty of breaking the whole thing.

RECAP: So far in our study of James, we have learned that this book in the Bible is wisdom literature, applied wisdom that gives practical advice for real everyday situations from a Christ-centered perspective. In chapter 1, James touched on some main ideas – wisdom, trials and temptations, true religion, and being doers of the Word – which he returns to in more detail throughout the letter. In chapter 2, James started going into more detail on some of these topics. First, he taught that showing partiality to the rich was a sin because it was not loving the poor as ourselves. In this lesson, James talks about the difference between works-righteousness and the “law of liberty”. Breaking one “small” law, like partiality, earns one the title of “law breaker”.

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James 2:10–11 and Galatians 3:10–11 [Read]

Talking Point 1: If you break even one law, you're guilty of the whole thing.

Q: By the standards of these verses, who is cursed based on keeping the law?

Q: Why is it that no one can be justified by the law?

In this letter, James will soon tell us how we can be saved by grace through faith. But for that grace to make sense, he has to explain why we need God's grace – because we cannot be justified by the law. This is one of those times it is especially important to remember that James was writing to a Jewish audience. These were people who had been taught the law their whole lives and lived by the law their whole lives before hearing about Jesus. Both the Jewish Christians James wrote to and the Jewish Christians Paul wrote to in Galatians struggled with the same theological concept.

At this time in the early church, a sect of Jewish Christians called the Judaizers believed that to be a Christian, you also had to follow the Mosaic Law. They insisted that Gentile believers had to be circumcised to be saved. They had to first convert to Judaism, then they could come to Christ. It was a mixture of grace through Christ and works through keeping the law. Both Paul and James condemned this teaching and wrote that it is only grace through faith that saves us. They both taught that no one can be saved by the law because no one can keep it perfectly.

Devout Jews at the time, like the Pharisees, were absolute experts at keeping the law. They kept track of every single thing they did all day long. And if righteousness meant scoring as high as possible on the checklist of religious deeds, they would have been winning. But Jesus, Paul and James all told us that's not how righteousness works. These Jews typically thought of keeping the law much as many people today think about being a "good person." Most modern Americans imagine God's judgment at the pearly gates as something like putting all your deeds on a huge balance scale, good deeds on one side and bad deeds on the other. If your good outweighs your bad, you're a "good person" and you get to go to heaven.¹

But Scripture tells us that's not how God's law works. If you base your righteousness on keeping the law, it's not enough for your good deeds to outweigh your bad. You would

have to keep every single bit of the law, to the tiniest point (Deuteronomy 27:26; Galatians 3:10; James 2:10). If keeping the law were an exam, you'd have to score 100 percent. Anything less might as well be a zero. All or nothing. Even 99.999 percent doesn't cut it. Of course, none of us can score 100 percent. The Pharisees might have thought they were getting an A, while others were only getting Cs or barely passing, but even they couldn't get 100 percent. Basing our righteousness on the law only condemns us. The law gives us no chance to prove our *righteousness*; it only proves our *unrighteousness*. No one can be justified before God by the law (v. 11). There is no one who is righteous based on the law (Psalm 14:3; Romans 3:10-12). The truth is there are no "good people."

But this is how the law points us to our need for grace. In Galatians, Paul quoted Habakkuk, a relatively obscure Old Testament prophet who prophesied at a time when God's people were not following the law and were about to experience consequences for it. Habakkuk was trying to turn the people back to God's law, but God told him, "The righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). If we look at the whole verse, we see it's a contrast between the proud and the righteous: "Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith." The Judaizers were the proud, keeping track of everyone's score and priding themselves for scoring higher than others. But the righteous aren't proud of their scores, even if they're getting an A. The righteous are those who admit they can't stand before God on their own works. Their soul is right with God because they confess that they are *not* righteous.

Those who are proud of their "righteousness" don't understand what righteousness really is. They have too high of a view of themselves and too low of a view of God. Anyone who really understands the holiness of God would know they could never measure up to His standard. When we live by scores, we measure our righteousness by the standards of other people, not God. As long as we're doing better than most people, we feel righteous. But that's not righteousness. It's important to remember Jesus' teaching on this in the Sermon on the Mount. He elevated their understanding that it's not just about following the letter of the law but understanding the heart behind the law. Even an angry or lustful thought renders us lawbreakers. God's standard of righteousness is perfection. It's 100 percent. Which is why it can only come from Jesus, the only One who is perfect. The only way to get righteousness is to accept Christ's righteousness on our behalf, to trade our score for His. Whether our score is an *F* or a *B+* or 99.99 percent, we must trade it for Jesus' perfect score to stand justified before God.

Q: If we accept that no one can perfectly follow the law, how does this understanding change our perspective on personal righteousness and the need for a savior?

Q: What would you say to a friend who told you, “Good people go to heaven”?

Q: How can we resist the temptation to justify ourselves by works of the law before God?

James 2:12–13 and Galatians 5:13–14 [Read]

Talking Point 2: We are judged by the “law” of liberty, not by our ability to keep the law.

Q: What would happen to us if we were judged based on keeping the law?

Q: What is the law of liberty? How does grace bring freedom?

The “law of liberty” is the gospel—that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, *not* by keeping the law. It is called a “law” here as a metaphor to make a contrast between the law of the old covenant and the grace of the new covenant. It is not a literal law, a covenant with stipulations and punishments for not keeping the stipulations. The juxtaposition of these contradictory terms, law and liberty, made the point to the Jews that this was a new way of thinking about salvation. The true “law” of God does not keep score of how well we follow the rules. The true “law” of God is walking in the freedom we have in Christ. Which turns out to be a more effective way to keep God’s commandments than just trying harder to follow the law.

If we focus on behavior modification we will constantly feel like we have to do better and work harder to keep up. We experience anxiety, worry, and stress from trying to do it perfectly all the time. But when we trust in salvation by grace through faith, we can walk in freedom rather than anxiety because we know our salvation is secure, no matter what. We have already been justified before God, and we know we cannot lose our salvation.

But it isn’t just about the freedom of knowing we are saved. It’s freedom from slavery to sin, which results in freedom to do what pleases God. The law of liberty says when we put our faith in Christ, God makes us a new creation. We experience a heart change. Instead of us just working harder to do better, God changes us from the inside out. He puts His Spirit in us. He lives through us and grows His fruit in us, which makes us more like Jesus. This actually does result in changed behavior. Behavior modification doesn’t work. But as your heart changes, your behavior changes because behavior is an overflow of what is in the heart.

Paul told the Galatians not to use their freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. The kind of freedom we have in Christ isn’t about freedom to do whatever we want, meaning whatever *our flesh* desires. Freedom in Christ is freedom from slavery to our fleshly

desires. When we are made a new creation in Christ, we are freed from the hold the flesh has over us; we are given the power to overcome those temptations. And our desires start to change. We don't want the lusts of the flesh; we want the things of God. We are free from slavery to the flesh, free to live the way God designed us to live.

As wisdom literature that gives practical advice for how to live in a way that is faithful to God, James described several examples of what it looks like to live in the way of Jesus:

- Not showing favoritism to the rich and powerful but valuing all people equally
- Controlling our tongues, being slow to anger, slow to speak, and quick to listen
- Caring for the poor and keeping ourselves unstained by the world
- Living in peace, with humility, wisdom, and good deeds
- Submitting yourself to the Lord and resisting the devil, trusting the Lord
- Praying in all circumstances, asking God for wisdom

But these things are not just behavior modifications; they are a complete change of heart, mind, and desires, which results in changed behavior. James told his people to speak and act as those who are judged under the law of liberty. Our actions must match our heart change because faith without works is dead. Those who have been freed from bondage to sin will live in a way that reflects that freedom. If we have really had a heart change, it will show itself in our behavior. Those who truly belong to Jesus will live differently.

Q: What ways do those who live by the law of liberty speak and act?

Q: In what areas have you experienced God changing your desires and your behaviors over time?

James 2:13 and Matthew 18:21–35 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Those who have been shown mercy will show mercy to others.

Q: What will happen to those who have not been merciful to others?

Q: In the parable, why did the master say the servant should have forgiven the other servant?

Those who keep score of who is doing a better job of keeping the law are constantly comparing themselves to others. They either feel prideful about how well they're doing or self-deprecating about how they're not measuring up. They are tempted to point out others' faults to make themselves look better. But those who have been shown mercy

are grateful for receiving grace they didn't deserve. They are humbled by it. And that results in wanting to pay that mercy forward to others.

But to really appreciate the mercy we have received, we must understand James's first point – that keeping the law perfectly is impossible; there is no one who can be justified by the law. Only when we really understand that will we be able to grasp just how great God's mercy is toward us. Because if it were something we could earn, His grace wouldn't be so amazing.

This is the point of the parable of the unforgiving servant. The first servant owed the king 10,000 talents, an astronomical amount of money. One talent was equal to 6,000 denarii, which would take a day-laborer roughly 16 years to earn. So, to earn 10,000 talents would take him 160,000 years. The hyperbole of this number makes it clear that this was a debt he could never repay, no matter how hard he worked. Even in a thousand lifetimes.

The king forgave him this astronomical amount of money, but he did not really appreciate it. If he had, he would have forgiven his fellow servant for the relatively small amount he owed him – just 100 denarii, roughly three months wages. This wasn't an insignificant amount of money, but it was nowhere near the amount the king had forgiven him. The unforgiving servant was happy to receive grace from the king, but he didn't show even a fraction of that same grace to others. This is the attitude of one who lives by scorekeeping, not the law of liberty. You can't receive the law of liberty for yourself but then hold everyone else to the law of scorekeeping. As the unforgiving servant found out, if you hold others to scorekeeping, you will be held to scorekeeping, too. And you'll quickly find out that your score won't measure up.

Those who really appreciate just how much they have been forgiven by God will live by the law of liberty. They will not only receive grace for themselves, but they will also show that same kind of grace to others. When you have received such an amazing gift, how could you not pay it forward to others? When you've been forgiven billions, how could you not forgive someone a few hundred dollars? When you live by the law of liberty, there is no longer any comparison between who is doing better or worse with their scores. We all win. There is freedom in that, too.

There is freedom in showing mercy, in not holding a grudge, in refusing to harbor unforgiveness in your heart. Not forgiving someone affects you more than it affects them. Unforgiveness begins to eat away at your heart because you're bottling up your anger rather than working through it. It's been said that not forgiving someone is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Forgiveness is an act of freedom.

It's letting go of the anger and the hurt, healing from it, and moving past it. Those who really understand mercy will show mercy to others. Not only because it's the godly thing to do but because they realize it is good for them, too. It's freeing for their heart and their soul.

Q: Describe a time when you struggled to show grace to someone else. Why was it a struggle? What difference would it have made for you and the other person if you had?

Q: Describe a time when forgiving someone felt like freedom, like a weight had been lifted off your shoulders. Why did it feel that way?

Q: How does showing mercy reflect God's character and contribute to the reconciliation and healing of broken relationships?

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Took

Main Point: True followers of Jesus show mercy and walk in freedom.

Like an impossible stain on a white shirt, removing the blemish of our sin is not within our power. However, we are reminded that the atoning work of Christ accomplished that for us (Isaiah 1:18). As recipients of the righteousness of Jesus, walk in freedom and choose to live in a way that pleases God – not out of fear but love and gratitude; knowing that God gives us both the desire and the power to do what pleases Him (Philippians 2:13).

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on what it means to live by the law of liberty, both for yourself and for those around you. What would that look like practically in your life? How would it bring freedom? Joy? Gratitude? Peace? What else would it bring? What would it look like to speak and act as someone who *really* believes in the law of liberty?

PRAY for God to give you a heart of mercy toward others. Ask Him to soften your heart and help you show grace, mercy, and love in all situations. Ask Him to mold you more and more into His image, including His mercifulness. Confess any unforgiveness, anger, or hatred you may be harboring in your heart. Ask God to help you speak to the person you are struggling with in a way that is loving, kind and healing for both of you.

ACT: Walk in freedom. This week, let go of any efforts to keep score. Instead of focusing on behavior modification, focus on walking by the Spirit and ask God to grow you to be more like Jesus. Commit to faithfulness not out of fear or score keeping but from a gratitude and desire to please the Lord.

¹ 76% of Americans believe “good people” go to heaven through good behavior.

“Counterfeit Christianity: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the Most Popular Worldview in U.S. Culture,” Arizona Christian University, April 27, 2021 - <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2021/04/27/counterfeit-christianity-moralistic-therapeutic-deism-most-popular-worldview-in-u-s-culture/>