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## Prayers

### To God

*Weekly theme: the history of God's people*

*Give thanks for the manner in which God's people were shown to be sinful, and yet returned to the Lord their God for forgiveness. They show us what we must do to find the love of God through Jesus; we must repent.*

### For myself

*Pray about how much you watch television. If you do not, should you sometimes use this powerful tool to understand the world in which you are set? If you use it too much, think and pray about what you would be able to do with the time you spend watching TV?*

### For others

Thank You, heavenly Father, for the blessing of work and employment. There are times when we do not find it easy to do our work, but this brings us an income by which we are able to meet the needs of our families. Bless those who struggle with work, help those who do not have any work, encourage those who are changing their work, and call all of us to work firstly according to Your will and pleasure. **AMEN**

## Meditation

Lord of all;  
Lord of every life;  
Lord of every living thing;  
Lord of every wonderful and fascinating human being;  
Lord of space, of the solar system and distant galaxies;  
Lord of countries and continents; sky, land and oceans;  
Lord of time, creator of the past and present and future;  
Lord of banking, politics, pressure groups and charities;  
Lord of commerce, industry, factories and building sites;  
Lord of history, geography, sciences, maths and the arts;  
Lord of all that could be;  
Lord of all that will be;  
Lord of all;  
Save, redeem, and make all things anew!

# Bible Passage

## James 2:8-13

<sup>8</sup> If you are indeed fulfilling the Royal Law as found in Scripture; '*You shall love your neighbour as yourself*,' then you do well; <sup>9</sup> but if you show favouritism, you commit sin and are exposed by the law as a lawbreaker. <sup>10</sup> For whoever observes the whole Law but fails in one point, is found guilty in respect of it all. <sup>11</sup> For He who said, '*You shall not commit adultery*' also said, '*You shall not murder*'; so if you do not commit adultery but commit murder, you are nevertheless, a lawbreaker.

<sup>12</sup> Consequently, speak and act as people who know you will soon be judged by the law of freedom,<sup>13</sup> for there is merciless judgment for those who show no mercy themselves. Yet mercy triumphs over judgement!

## Review

In the passage we read yesterday, James castigates those Christians who exhibit favouritism towards other worshippers. He memorably paints a picture of a church steward fawning over the rich to show them the best places to sit, and paying little attention to the needs of the poor (2:1-7). Today's passage follows on directly from this, adding some further sharp criticism of those who show preference in the treatment of others. James wanted to convince his readers that the sin of favouritism could not be overlooked, as if it was a simple, perhaps understandable, misjudgement.

Our reading flows easily enough, and contains some memorable phrases. Firstly, James appeals to what he calls the 'Royal Law', which is the great summary of ethical law found originally in Leviticus 19:18, '*You shall love your neighbour as yourself*'. Jesus quotes this passage every time He is asked to confirm His opinion of God's Law, for example, to the scribe who asked which was the greatest commandment of all (Mark 12:31), and to the young man who asked about gaining eternal life (Matthew 19:19). So it is not surprising that his brother, James, should hold this rule in high esteem. His underlying point here is obvious; if the man who fawned at the rich and dismissed the poor (2:1-7) had lived by this Scriptural law then he would not have slipped into the sin of favouritism!

We can almost hear the shouts of 'legalism' raised in objection! No wonder then that James then defends his point (2:9-11). In his day as in ours, some wanted to push the idea that because Christ saves by grace, His people are no longer subject to the law (an interpretation of Galatians 3:25), but this is to misunderstand both Paul's writing and the New Testament as a whole. Since the time of Christ, the Law of the Old Testament stands as the revelation of the holiness of God and the practical and moral standards expected of those who are His. The difference between Christianity and Judaism is precisely this; the Jew believes it is possible to be saved by faithfully doing God's law, but the Christian knows that this hard but faithful work will never bring salvation, only Christ can save by grace while the Law continues to reveal sin. I assure you that no part of Scripture contradicts this fundamental teaching (see Romans 3:19-21, Matt 5:17, 7:12, 22:36-42, John 1:17, and much more).

In this passage, James unashamedly quotes standard Jewish teaching about the Law, which states that it stands and falls as a whole, and it is either kept as a whole or it is broken by one omission; '*whoever observes the whole Law but fails in one point, is found guilty in respect of it all*' (2:10). This sounds terribly harsh, but remember that this is not merely Judaism; it lies behind the whole doctrine of salvation by grace. It is precisely because we all fail the

standards of the Law that we must depend on the grace of God for our salvation, a grace shown by Jesus Christ. We cannot wriggle into God's favour either by being so perfect that we get everything right in His eyes, or by getting most things right and only failing on a few small items. This doctrine is the difference between true Christianity which preaches the salvation of the sinner, and false Christianity which tempts us to believe that if we strive hard enough, God will surely overlook our small failings and save us because we have done our best.

In this brief mention of the 'Law', James is solidly in the centre ground of Christian doctrine. He rubs the point home then in verse 11, by warning that each and every sin brings down on the sinner the judgement of God; *'if you do not commit adultery but commit murder, you are nevertheless, a lawbreaker'* (2:11). Remember, Jesus said the same in the Sermon on the Mount, where he warned in a slightly different way that the heinous sins of adultery and murder lay in the hearts of men and women who harboured anger or sexual desires (Matt 5:21-27). He confirms, the Law reveals sin, but this does not save the sinner.

So as James develops this theme, his call in verse 12, to *'speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law of freedom'* is a riposte to two criticisms of standard Christian doctrine. Firstly, it says to those who want to ignore the consequences of sin that God remains 'judge'; the law of God has not changed and His standards have not altered in the new age of the Kingdom of God. But secondly, His judgement of sin through Christ is a judgement of liberty, not legalism, and the one who truly repents is saved by Christ. This is what is meant by the phrase, *'judged by the law of freedom'* (2:12).

This all sounds very doctrinal; and it is. As far as the steward who fawned at the rich is concerned (2:1-7), these very basic Christian doctrines warn him that he must recognise the full consequences of his sin of favouritism. He may be a saved sinner but he remains a slave of his earthly passions, and his favouritism is no small thing because it contradicts God's nature and His holiness. So as a Christian soul he must repent of his sin before the Father because it a sin that separates him from God. But once this is done, God judges according to the *'law of freedom'*, in which, according to the Gospel of Christ, *'mercy triumphs over judgement'* (2:13)! Now there are a number of places in Scripture that sound very much like this (e.g. Habakkuk 3:2, *'in wrath may you remember mercy ...'*), but this is the only place where we find this great cry, which goes to the heart of the Christian Gospel.

It is easy to read this passage of James and assume we understand it first time. However, as soon as we read it carefully, then we find ourselves having to think very carefully about the most basic Christian doctrine. Much of the letter of James is like this, because at heart, James' letter attempts to help people apply the spiritual teaching of the Gospel to practical Christian living.

## Discipleship

### ***Application***

#### ***Treating sin casually?***

The reading demonstrates James' intent to counter the idea that Christian living can be treated casually. As if the individual Christian can escape the full consequences of their action merely by being a 'saved' person. James was attacking the stewards who fawned over the rich, but his message applies to all of us. If we fall into sin, then the only cure is full repentance and submission to God, who alone by the Holy Spirit can help us change.

So the Christian cannot just treat sin casually; salvation is not a means of escape from the consequences of sin for those who find themselves caught up in it. We can imagine that the

people James criticised (2:1-7) would never sin again by favouring the rich after reading James' letter! He may have felt his sins forgiven as a consequence of his salvation in Christ, but he needed to be vigilant in life to sustain the godliness of one who was called to demonstrate the values of God's Kingdom.

### ***Mercy over judgement***

I find it helpful to recall that the Greek word 'mercy' often translates the hebrew word 'loving-faithfulness' (Hebrew 'cheseth'). If you replace the term 'mercy' by 'loving kindness' in this passage of Scripture, then it makes even more sense. In particular, the last verse reads like this; *'for there is judgment without loving kindness for those who show no loving kindness themselves. Yet loving kindness triumphs over judgement!'* The softer feel of this translation helps us discern the Gospel within this section of James' letter, something that can easily be obscured by his (necessary) talk about the Law.

### ***Ideas for what to do***

- How much do you know of God's commands? Look them up in the Old and New Testaments. Do you feel that you are someone who is able to learn from God's Word and grow in your faith? If not, what holds you back?
- Look up the words 'Mercy' and 'Judgement' or 'Justice' in a Biblical Dictionary and check out your knowledge of these two important concepts.

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. If you had to sum up what you believed to be the teaching of this passage, how would you do it, and why?
2. Discuss in your group the answers you have given to question 1.
3. What part of James' teaching here do you find difficult to understand? Why is this? Try looking up the references in this study to find out more.

## **Final Prayer**

Lord God; You have guided each of us along a path of life which has been full of many unexpected things. Save us, we pray, from falling into the temptations and oppressions of the world around us; and through Jesus Christ, keep us pure, in faith, in hope, and in love.  
AMEN