

Sermon 11: James 2:8-13: Mercy Triumphs over Judgement

OUTLINE

The sin of religious people
The guilt of religious people
The judgement of religious people

INTRODUCTION

There are two types of religion, there is religion that saves and religion that does not. There is a faith that appears orthodox and has all the external markers; and there is a faith which marks a true work of inward grace proven by its fruit. One of the great ironies is that religious people talk a lot about sin but if they are not truly saved they will self-deceiving and unaware of the fact that they are in fact sinners in need of repentance and true faith. Jesus is the master evangelist when it comes to preaching to self-righteous; self-deceiving people. Jesus earthly preaching ministry included preaching to the most religious nation in the world. If you examine his tactics they are very illuminating, and we see that James has learnt much from the Master. Jesus was direct, confrontational, and His language was explosive as He sought to dislodge the hardened self-assurance. He spoke much about hypocrisy and the importance of the heart; he spoke about an external observance of the law which was often a replacement for love which fulfils the law. Jesus went after those sins which revealed deeper problems in order to prove that the Jews were playing at religion e.g. anger, lust, religion to be seen by men, etc., ticking boxes, content with performance, and being self-deceived while they and those who followed them were destined for hell. James has a very similar audience. He is ministering to Jews as well. These call themselves Christians but many are cultural Christians rather than true born again believers. Some are practicing this new faith in the same way they practiced Judaism and James has to go after them, just as Jesus did.

James is very concerned about true religion that really saves not hypocritical religion that ticks a few boxes but does not save. In 1:26-27 he has already spoken about religion that is worthless to save and that self-deceives. In 2:14-26 he will go on to talk about a faith that says the right things but does not do the right things exposing a false faith that cannot save. Our section is sandwiched in the middle where James has picked up on a symptom of false faith—partiality. You see those who have had a true heart change now change the way they see other people. Their values have changed, they are no longer judges with evil thoughts, they have been humbled and have a generous spirit in welcoming others, just as God welcomed them. This socially acceptable sin which was universally practiced is a sin put off by true believers. So James goes after it here as a way of faithfully pastoring those who are putting their trust in their false faith and religion.

Thomas has already begun this section for us. Last week we began to look at the sin of partiality. And we see through this whole section that James is giving three reasons why we should not practice the sin of partiality: God chooses the poor; it is the rich who are generally the oppressors; and now the section before us, partiality is a violation of the law. James following Jesus own tactic is going to convict these religious hypocrites that despite their external religious associations and religious talk, that they are worldly hypocrites who will be judged because of their loveless, lawbreaking partiality. This is a text book

sermon on how to preach to religious sorts. He will begin in v8-9 showing that partiality is in fact as sin that violates the law of love your neighbour; in v10-11 James will show by the unity of the law that the committing of one sin, makes one a transgressor of the law; in v12 he calls for all to live in light of the law because it is by the law we will be judged; and in v13 in dense and terse words he reveals that it is only those who are born again and have a true faith which shows itself in mercy not partiality that will have confidence on judgement day. Our three headings are the sin of religious people; the guilt of religious people; and the judgement of religious people.

The sin of religious people

V8-9, '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.' Partiality we see continues to be the central concern of this passage. First century culture would have had several faultlines where partiality would be expressed. James has spoken about rich versus poor; but male and female; slave and free; Roman citizen versus non-citizen; Jew and Gentile, etc. Sadly our sinful natures likewise draws lines of division and prejudice and mistreatment flow along them. The thing with partiality is that it was a socially acceptable sin. Everyone disregarded the poor; everyone gave preferential treatment to the rich, the powerful, the famous. Everyone is more comfortable with their own and give them privileges they do not give to the stranger, and so on. Today we can see blunt and childish versions of this partiality in things like football hooligans who prey on those who support a different football team; and more refined examples where we look down our noses and question the salvation of those who belong to a denomination to ours. The truth is that those who have been humbled by God, who have had their hate filled, loveless hearts exposed for the cesspit they are; who have since been saved, regenerated and filled with the Spirit who have a true and genuine desire to serve and do others good, partiality cannot live in the heart of someone who is truly saved. Sadly, those who are religious hypocrites can be believers in name and some external actions and not be saved; their lack of salvation despite their apparent faith is revealed by certain sins, partiality is one of them.

James has to turn to the law to expose these socially acceptable sorts of sins. Sins like the angry xenophobia against immigrants that justifies mistreating people from other nations because they are perceived to be here to steal jobs or Islamize the nation. Sins like hating all white people and not offering them common courtesies because of the perceived problem of systemic racism. The book of James has a wonderful theology of the law of God. He calls it the perfect law, the law of liberty, and in this section he calls it the royal law; shows its integrity and its use in exposing sin and being the standard by which we are judged, and again calls it the law of liberty. The law is good and spiritual, it was originally written upon our hearts, but in our sin we have fallen away from keeping it. The law is still used by God to restrain and punish evil; to sanctify the Christian and reveal God's will to us; but here we see what is called the second use of the law where James uses it to expose sin. James calls it the royal law. Why this name? It could be because it is God's law, and He is king; or because it is the best of laws above the laws of men; many think that it is called the royal law because of Christ who is King who illuminated its full meaning and who modelled how to live it. Think for a moment about the parable of the Good Samaritan. A lawyer asks who is my neighbour and Jesus gives a parable to

expose the partiality in the Jewish mind that was racist along religious lines and justified not helping people because they were sinners, unclean, half breeds, heretics. Jesus expanded the definition of neighbour to include enemies, foreigners, the unworthy, etc. He Himself ate with tax collectors and sinners modelling God's love and grace towards sinners. The religious mind can think it virtuous to honour the rich above the poor man because God has already blessed him for his greater righteousness after all. If someone is poor it must be their own fault and we are only agreeing with God by not blessing them. James confronts this self deception with the clear light of God's law. Loving your neighbour as yourself is the law which exposes partiality. The Jews would have had a way of interpreting this that excused mistreating certain groups but James is applying it as Jesus did. Every human being is your neighbour not just the ones you like or agree with. We must not miss that James unites love and law. There are so many false antithesis as wrong theologies view Spirit and law opposed; or love and law. Love and law are not enemies but mutually informing. Law shows how love must be given, so many things are done in the name of love that go against God's law showing that law defines love. But on the other hands we also need to appreciate that it is love that fulfills the law. Many think that they render obedience to God when their hearts are not doing their actions in love but out of a sense of duty or guilt or fear, it is love that fulfils what the law requires. James lays it on thick as he convicts of sin in v9. He uses the word 'sin' which is 'missing the mark' this should not be perceived of as a whoopsy, but a deliberate avoidance of good. The word 'commit' is literally 'work' and stronger word than do. The word 'convicted' means shown to be guilty. And the word 'transgressors' literally means lawbreakers. Just as Jesus told the Jew that they may not have murdered, they have still violated the 6th commandment by their rage towards their neighbour; so James is helping these religious people see they are in fact lawbreakers.

Now this should be no surprise but sadly we all think we are better than we are. This talk of sin is necessary as a first step in helping someone thinks they are ok to get saved.

The guilt of religious people

I can imagine someone who is self-righteous being offended that they would be put into the same category as a transgressor/lawbreaker; someone who is convicted. James goes on in v10-11 to use some arguments to establish the guilt of this sin of partiality. Even if you have excuses; even if it is a socially acceptable sin and everybody is doing it, you are really guilty before the law for doing it. V10-11, '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.' James here is illuminating the unity of the law in order to show that smaller sins damn as much as bigger sins. James begins with a big opening statement. If you could keep the whole law, and none of us do, but hypothetically if you could, but then broke only one law, you would technically become a law breaker and be guilty of all of it. Now you might think it strange that James makes this point but it is a most necessary one. One of the strategies in our self-deception is compartmentalization. I am not a bad person because I have not committed that type of sin. This is the lie we tell ourselves so that we can continue to see ourselves as good people. Jesus uses the strategy of showing that we break the law in our hearts even if we have not done it outwardly showing God demands purity of heart. James uses the strategy of

showing that if we break what we think is a minor law, a socially acceptable sin, no matter how religious we claim to be, we are lawbreakers.

James explains why breaking one law makes you guilty of all. Because 'for He who said.' God gave both of the commandments, righteousness is not a case of ticking boxes when it comes to certain laws but whether you are a rebel who has violated the law of God or not. We all have areas of our lives where we are stronger and weaker, we can all point to some area of our lives where we might even be better than others, but each one of us also has other areas where we allow sin to dwell, where we sin secretly, where our sinfulness and need for salvation are exposed. God made you; you are His; He has given your life a purpose, to walk in His ways; every single human being no matter how many good things they may do has a basic default of rebellion against God. James is using the reality of the partial obedience of religious people to show that religious people can be rebels before God.

James uses big sins to make his point. If you are not a murderer, but you are an adulterer, or vice versa, are you a sinner against God? Given the seriousness of the sins we would not dare to contradict James' point. No one could seriously deny they are a good religious person if they are a murderer, it would be self-evident. Having established this principle by using big and obvious sins, James is moving from the greater to the lesser. If being a murderer makes you a sinner, then breaking the law of God to love your neighbour by showing partiality also makes you a sinner.

James is doing what Paul did in Rom. 1-3. Paul was showing that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, whether you are a Gentile that breaks the law on your heart; or if you are a religious Jew, who is circumcised, who has the oracles of God, who worships in the temple, who is a hypocrite. The law shows all of us up as sinners, as having no hope in ourselves. Anyone who looks at themselves and says they are a good person is deluded and self-deceiving and needs the point that James is making. To break one law is to make you a rebel against God and liable for judgement.

The application of this point for believers is obvious. We do not pick and choose between God's commandments, we aim at keeping them all. We do not pretend we are doing well when we have obvious inconsistencies in our lives. We do not excuse socially acceptable sins or so called little sin, for sin is sin.

The judgement of religious people

V12-13, '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 is reminding us that the life of a true believer is a life of integrity that is lived in light of the judgement. Judgement day is not going to be based on our race; our denominational affiliation; certain ceremonies; on whether we have a criminal record or not. No, James reminds us that all of our words and our deeds will be brought into consideration. Jesus is the one who talks about our speech being the basis for our judgement, Matt. 12:36-37, 'I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.' Many verses talk about a judgement according to deeds like 2 Cor. 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.’ This is a way of describing the final judgement to make those who think that they are going to get in on the basis of their false religion wake up to the impossibility of doing so. If you take James’ last thought and combine it with this one. You can only conclude with Paul, Rom. 3:19-20, ‘Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.’

Secondly, you will notice that our words and deeds will be weighed by the law. James has to stress this point because these religious people have been committing socially acceptable sins that everyone has been doing. It is the law that will decide whether a deed is good or not, not what everyone else is doing around us. And James has already shown that the law, if only broken once condemns one as a criminal.

Thirdly, in v13 James alludes to the teaching of Jesus where the measure you use will be the measure that is used against you. This is not saying that God will sin against sinners, no it is saying that on the day of judgement there will be a fitting return of the consequences of sin upon sinners, killers will be killed, those who judged will be judged, those who did not forgive will not be forgiven, etc. And judgement will be without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. This is a memorable way of saying that your deeds will catch up with you; a final reckoning will be inescapable; justice will have its way with you.

Fourthly, James tells us that if we want to triumph in the judgement, the word there is literally ‘boast against’ the judgement, indicating having confidence in the judgement. If we want to triumph, mercy triumphs over judgement. Now let us be very clear, James who has just told us that one sin disqualifies a person, is not saying that doing the work of mercy will somehow outweigh all our sins and prevail in the judgement. James is not denying what he has just said and teaching a justification according to the work of mercy. Nor does James mean that God will be merciful to all, and is teaching some sort of universalism. What does James mean? We have two options. Some have thought that the mercy that triumphs is God’s mercy to those who believe, so that mercy is describing God’s action not man’s. I prefer the other interpretation which takes mercy for the act opposite to partiality, the action which those who do believe in Jesus, and are regenerate naturally produce as evidence of their saving faith. Those who believe in Jesus will produce mercy, those who have this faith wrought mercy will overcome on judgement day. And in contrast to what James is saying: those who have shown partiality will perish on judgement day.

We cannot help but be reminded of the teaching of Jesus in Matt. 5:7, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.’ Likewise Jesus is not teaching that mercy is the new work that saves us. No, those who are poor in spirit and have repented of their sins; those who have mourned. Those who are born again and are typified by Holy Spirit wrought behavior towards others, like meekness; who have a new desire in their lives where they are hungry and thirsty for righteousness; who have a new disposition towards others in need they show mercy; these are also the ones who practice true religion of the heart not only external religion; whose relationships are filled with peace; and who provoke the hatred of an unbelieving world. These are the ones who are true believers and who practice true religion, and whose lives are filled with mercy. These are the ones who will receive mercy, not the ones who are self-righteous, fixated on

external religion and whose lives are filled with judgementalism, prejudice, lovelessness and partiality.

So which are you? Are you the one who regards others with mercy or with partiality? Is your religion something done from the heart or mere externalism? Have you truly sin your sin, repented and fallen before God pleading His mercy in Christ, and have a faith that now gives to others in generous gratitude; or are you a good person, who has no need for Christ and whose actions towards others are cold and minimalist? These are the sorts of questions that James is asking us. Do we have true faith by which we are saved? the test to see is if you are filled with mercy not partiality.