

Love *and the* Law



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *James 2:1–13; Mark 2:16; Lev. 19:17, 18; Rom. 13:8–10; John 12:48.*

Memory Text: “For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (*James 2:13, NASB*).

We know the story well; the question is, *How well has it sunk in?* First a priest, then a Levite, going from Jerusalem to Jericho, encountered a man lying half dead in the road. Though both just finished their religious duties, neither was, apparently, able to link those duties with any sense of obligation to the injured soul, and so each kept walking. Finally, a Samaritan, a half-pagan, happened by, took pity on the man, bandaged his wounds, and paid for his stay at an inn where he could recover. He also promised to pay the innkeeper for anything else the man might need (*see Luke 10:30–37*).

Jesus told that story in response to a question by a lawyer about eternal life. Rather than tell the lawyer, “Try harder!” or “Do more!” Jesus painted a picture of love in action. That is, we are to love even in potentially dangerous or unpleasant circumstances, and we are to love even those we don’t like.

Though it’s not easy, and often goes against our nature, true love involves a substantial amount of risk and calls us to tear down barriers that separate us as people, both outside and (especially) inside the church. This week we’ll see what James has to say about this crucial truth.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 1.

The Man in Gold

Read James 2:1–4. It is, among other things, a study in contrasts. One person is rich, well dressed, and, apparently, important, while the other is poor, shabbily dressed, and, apparently, a nobody. One receives the utmost courtesy, the other disdain. One is offered a comfortable, prominent seat; the other is told to stand off to the side or find a place on the floor.

The description is not a very pretty one, especially because it is depicted (potentially, at least) as happening in a worship service! The Greek word for “gathering” or “assembly” in verse 2 is *synagōgē*, probably an early reference to a Jewish-Christian Sabbath service, many of which would have taken place in private homes (see *Acts 18:7, 8*).

In the Greco-Roman culture of the first century, one’s public image and position were all important. Those with wealth, education, or political influence were expected to use these assets to enhance their reputation and benefit their personal interests. Any large gift to public or religious projects obligated the receiver to reciprocate to the giver in some way. Kindness was repaid with loyalty and generosity with public appreciation. The few upper-class people who attended Christian services expected privileged treatment. To ignore these expectations would have brought disgrace on the church. A failure to be “politically correct” or to reject societal values was a recipe for offense and a cause for division.

Read Mark 2:16 and Luke 11:43. What societal expectations are involved? How do they conflict with the principles of the gospel?

It is not a sin to be poor or rich, but one barometer of our Christian experience is how we treat people who are different from us in age, wealth, education, and even religious convictions. We tend to give more respect to those we perceive as “above” us on the social ladder and less respect to those “below.” We must remember that it is easy to get pulled into convention even though God calls us to be different (see *Rom. 12:2*).

Let’s face it: we might not be as open and as crass about it as James depicted, but are we not all easily susceptible to playing favorites? How can we learn to recognize this problem in ourselves and, ultimately, deal with it?

Class Struggle

As every literature evangelist knows, very often those who have the least are willing to sacrifice the most to buy Christian books. Well-to-do neighborhoods tend to be tough territory to sell books in, because the people who live there may be content with what they have and so very often do not feel their need of God as much as those who have less. The same phenomenon is also detectable on a much larger scale: the church often has grown the fastest in places and periods of economic and social stress. After all, aren't even those individuals who are struggling with big issues often more open to the hope presented in the story of Jesus than are those who think that things are going great for them?

Read James 2:5, 6. How does James expand here on what he wrote in the four previous verses?

Judging from this passage, it would seem that there were major issues in the church among the rich and the poor. God chose the poor who, though rejected by the world, were “rich in faith,” while the rich used their wealth to “oppress” the poor. This problem, that of the rich exploiting the poor, was an ever-present reality at that time. Even worse, Roman law codified discrimination against the poor and in favor of the rich.

“Persons of lower class, who were thought to act from economic self-interest, could not bring accusations against persons of higher class, and the laws prescribed harsher penalties for lower-class persons convicted of offenses than for offenders from the higher class.”—Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 694.

Read James 2:7. What important point does James make here about the impact of this bad behavior?

Their bad behavior is really blasphemy against “the good name” of Jesus. Bad actions are bad enough in and of themselves; what makes them worse is when those who profess the name of Jesus do them. And even worse would be those who, in the name of Jesus, use their wealth or power to gain advantage over others in the churches, which often leads to divisions and quarrels. Hence, how careful we should be that our words and actions match the “good name” we associate ourselves with.

Loving Our Neighbors

Read James 2:8, 9, along with Leviticus 19:17, 18 and Matthew 5:43–45. What crucial message are we being given here?

James calls God’s law “the royal law” (*James 2:8*) because it is the law of the “KING OF KINGS” (*Rev. 19:16*). The law of His kingdom is given in detail in the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5–7*), which includes the first of nine references in the New Testament to loving our neighbor.

Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:43 suggest the way Leviticus 19:18 was understood at the time. For example, the immediately preceding commands in Leviticus use apparent synonyms for one’s neighbor: they prohibit hating one’s “brother” (*Lev. 19:17*) and holding a grudge against one’s fellow Israelite (*Lev. 19:18*).

Most likely, some interpreted these commands to mean it would be fine to be angry with or hate someone who was not an Israelite, because he or she is not specifically mentioned in these Levitical texts. After all, people who were not Israelites were also generally considered to be enemies. We now know that such an attitude existed in the Qumran community, a group of devout Jews who had separated themselves from the rest of the nation. They were taught to hate “the children of darkness” and “the men of perdition” (*The Community Rule 1QS 1:10; 9:21, 22*), labels which apparently included not only foreigners but even Israelites who had rejected the community’s teachings.

“Sin is the greatest of all evils, and it is ours to pity and help the sinner. There are many who err, and who feel their shame and their folly. They are hungry for words of encouragement. They look upon their mistakes and errors, until they are driven almost to desperation. These souls we are not to neglect. If we are Christians, we shall not pass by on the other side, keeping as far as possible from the very ones who most need our help. When we see human beings in distress, whether through affliction or through sin, we shall never say, This does not concern me.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 504.

Jesus’ life is the greatest example we’ll ever have of selfless love for the undeserving and those who didn’t love back. How can we learn to express such love for those whom we deem undeserving or who don’t love us back? Why, in the end, is complete self-surrender and death to self the only answer?

The Whole Law

Read James 2:10, 11. Now read the passages listed in the table below and classify them as either emphasizing the “whole law,” the “law of love,” or both.

	Whole Law	Law of Love
<i>Matt. 5:18, 19</i>		
<i>Matt. 22:36–40</i>		
<i>Rom. 13:8–10</i>		
<i>Gal. 3:10</i>		
<i>Gal. 5:3</i>		
<i>Gal. 5:14</i>		

It is hard for us to grasp how radical Jesus’ teaching on the law was. For devout Jews then (and for many today), one cannot really claim to keep the law without a commitment to keeping all the laws found in the books of Moses. Eventually, 613 separate laws were identified (248 positive laws and 365 negative ones).

The question put to Jesus about which law was *most important* (*Matt. 22:36*) was probably meant to trap Him. But although Jesus seems to have affirmed every “jot” (the smallest Hebrew letter, *Matt. 5:18*) as important, He also taught that love to God and love to our neighbor were the most important commandments because they sum up all the others.

Jesus’ teaching also shows that obedience cannot be done in a vacuum. It is always *relational*, or it is meaningless. In other words, if I tithe because I am afraid of being lost if I don’t, it is not relational. On the other hand, if I tithe out of gratitude for how much *God* has given *me*, then my actions are based on my relationship with God.

Jesus also spoke about the “weightier matters” of the law as being “judgment, mercy, and faith” (*Matt. 23:23*). All of these revolve around relationships too—with God and with other people. James is, therefore, not saying anything different than did Jesus or Paul: any transgression of God’s law damages to some extent our relationship to God and to others. So, it is not a question of having enough good deeds to outweigh our bad deeds. That is obedience in a vacuum, acting as if it all revolves around us. Instead, by knowing Jesus, we begin to direct our attention away from ourselves and toward devotion to God and service to others.

How much of your obedience comes from your love for God and others and how much from a sense of obligation? Is working from obligation always wrong though? Perhaps you don’t feel love for a person but help him or her only because you know you are supposed to. What, if anything, is wrong with that?

Judged by the Law

Read James 2:12, 13. See also John 12:48; Rom. 2:12, 13; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:12, 13. **What do these verses teach about judgment?**

Nothing is clearer than the teaching that we will be judged by the law based on what we have done, whether for good or for evil. At the same time, too, the Bible is also clear that through faith in Jesus, we are covered by His righteousness.

This covering entails two aspects: forgiveness (justification) and obedience (sanctification). “*As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him*” (Col. 2:6, NKJV); and “*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*” (Gal. 3:27, NKJV).

It is often said that we will be judged based not only on what we have done but also on what we have not done. While this is true, many have a wrong idea of what this means. It is not about doing more *things*. That is a recipe for discouragement and self-defeat. Notice how James describes it in the first half of verse 13: “judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy” (NKJV). Again, it is a *relational* definition of “doing.”

If we thought about it long enough, we could become so paranoid about the judgment that we would give up in despair. But that is not what it means to “fear God . . . for the hour of His judgment has come” (Rev. 14:7, NKJV)! Instead, we must always trust in the righteousness of Jesus, whose merits alone are our only hope in the judgment. It’s our love for God, who has saved us by His righteousness, that should spur us on to do all the things that He has called us to do.

At the same time, the warnings in the Bible about the judgment are there for our good, so that we do not lull ourselves into a false sense of security. James says, “Mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13, NKJV). We must remember his words, especially when we deal with those who have fallen into the worst of sins.

Have you ever messed up really bad, and when you expected only condemnation and judgment, you were given mercy, grace, and forgiveness instead? How did you feel? How can you make sure that you don’t forget that the next time someone else messes up bad?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “Facing Life’s Record,” *The Great Controversy*, pp. 479–491.

“God has acknowledged you before men and angels as His child; pray that you may do no dishonor to the ‘worthy name by which ye are called.’ James 2:7. God sends you into the world as His representative. In every act of life you are to make manifest the name of God. . . . This you can do only through the acceptance of the grace and righteousness of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 107.

“Through Christ, Justice is enabled to forgive without sacrificing one jot of its exalted holiness.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 936.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Gandhi summed up the thinking of many when he said, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” Why, unfortunately, is it not hard to understand why he said that? And though, of course, it’s so easy to look at what others have done in the name of Christ, why must we instead look at ourselves and at what we have done in the name of Jesus? How well do we reveal Him to the world around us?
- 2 Is your local church a place where people feel valued and respected regardless of their background, social standing, idiosyncrasies, and so on? If not, what can you do to make a difference?
- 3 What are some of the traditions and social norms in your country that are contrary to the principles of the biblical faith? What are some overt ones, and what are some of the more subtle ones? After identifying what they are, how can you learn to transcend them so that you are able to live out and reveal the principles of the gospel in a way that could show others that Jesus offers us all a better way of life?
- 4 It’s one thing to love your neighbor, but what does it mean to love God? In class, discuss what it means to love God, why we love Him, and how we express that love.
- 5 “Mercy triumphs over judgment.” What does that mean on a practical level, such as when we have to deal with those who do wrong? What kind of balance is needed there?

Angels on Main Street: Part 2

ISMAEL SERRANO

As the girls hurried on through the night, they passed three young men. They didn't look up when the boys pointed fingers at them and made crude remarks but kept walking as quickly as they could. Then they became aware that someone was following them. *It must be one of the three boys*, Rocio thought. The girls did not look back but kept walking toward their destination. Rocio squeezed Mery's hand and whispered a prayer, "Dear God, please help us!"

Suddenly the girls heard a noise. Was it a shout? A cry of surprise? Out of the corner of her eye, Rocio could see that the boys who had been following them had turned and were running the other way. They seemed to be fleeing something—or someone—as if they were being chased.

The girls hurried on their way, stopping for nothing until they had reached the safety of the university. Again they thanked God for guiding them safely back home.

The next morning Rocio dressed and hurried to the bus stop to wait for the bus that would take her to work. As she stood waiting, she overheard a conversation between two young men. "Last night we tried to take two girls that we saw walking alone. We followed them for a little ways, looking for the best chance to grab them. Then suddenly we saw two men walking with them. I don't know where they came from, but they were strong and looked threatening. They frightened us, so we ran the other way!"

As Rocio listened to the boy's conversation, she felt as if she had touched electricity! *Two strong men? I saw no men, only the troublemakers*. When the boys had stopped talking, she turned and looked into the eyes of the boy who had told his friend what had happened the night before. "Do you know who I am?" she asked. The boy shook his head no. "Those two young girls you are talking about are my sister and me. We were coming home from church when you began to follow us. But we believe in Jesus, and we asked Him to take care of us. Those two men you saw with us last night were God's holy angels."

The boys stood speechless as they listened to this girl talk openly about God. "If you like, I can help you get to know God. I invite you to visit my church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church." The Holy Spirit moved the heart of that young person, and the next Sabbath he visited the church. He continued attending the little church in the ghetto and soon began Bible studies. In time, he was baptized.

That little neighborhood church has grown rapidly, and today a large congregation meets to worship the all-powerful God of heaven. And the young people of Medellín continue to visit neighborhoods in search of those honest-hearted people who are seeking God.

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