

STUDIES IN THE EPISTLE OF JAMES – PART 3

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Scripture: James 2:1-13

We've been in the epistle of James for the last two weeks. James is one of those books or epistles or letters, that remind us that, post all the theological assumptions and beliefs that we have, and which they had at that time too, how do you make sense of the life that Jesus lived, His death, His resurrection? James begins to percolate that down and say because of all that has happened, this is what Christian behavior needs to look like. In that sense, James is a very hard-hitting letter because he kind of calls the shots. He tells us exactly what is and what should not be.

1st Week Recap – James 1:1-7

We were taken up by the audacious statement that he made, almost trampling on the fact that all of us go through difficult times, adversity, tribulations, trials; and saying almost callously, "Consider it all joy when you go through these kinds of difficult times". And we thought to ourselves: Wait a minute, James! How about a little compassion? Do you understand what's going on here? And then we found that he had a rationale for what he was saying.

But if we began to work our way back from v.5, we could see his logical steps:-

First, there was wisdom that was afforded to us generously from God. And it was only through the wisdom of God that we could ever understand what he was trying to say. Because all the knowledge that we had wasn't sufficient to understand 'consider it pure joy'. So we ask for the wisdom of God. Show us Lord, how do I make sense of all that is happening? Give me Your wisdom.

Through that wisdom, then we were able to see that we were called to be patient and to endure. He adds a little side line there and says: Don't try and stop it. don't try and jump in and say I've got to stop it, do something about it. Let it take its course. Why? Because in the midst of it, God is doing something good. He makes all things work together for good to them that love Him, and are called according to His purpose. Everything, every discomfort, every adversity, every trial, every tribulation – while it takes its toll on you, God on the other hand, is looking down and saying: I can make a pearl out of what's going on in your life. I can do something good through it.

And then James says: In that is where we find our joy. That tribulation, adversity, trial, all of it by itself, is not the end. the end is that our loving God is able to take that turn it into something good. So, consider it pure joy, beloved, when you go through difficult times.

2nd Week Recap – James 1:19-27

The bulk of what James is trying to say is that our faith must have very distinctive characteristics. And the first characteristics he talked about was found in vs. 19-27, where he says that the faith that we have must be an obedient faith. It must be a faith that looks at the Word and then is obedient. We cannot be ones who are just hearers of the Word. We need to be doers of the Word.

But first, he says, "be careful". The word can only be received if we take away all filthiness and wickedness from our lives. We looked at Isaiah, who when he saw God high and lifted up and His train filled the temple, said: Woe to me, for I am a man of unclean lips. Why? Because he saw himself in the light of God's glory. Then the seraphim took the coal and touched his lips and said, 'Your iniquity now has been taken away'. Then we see that wonderful word: Then I heard the voice of the Lord. James is saying to make sure that all filthiness, wickedness is taken away.

Then he reminded us that the Word of God is a word that is implanted in us, it's ingrafted into us. It's not a word that just falls upon us. Jesus alluded to this in the parable of the soils. He said, "There are some seeds that will fall along the wayside. Nothing happens. Some have very shallow roots, and when trouble comes, it dies off. Some are caught up with the cares of the word, and so don't bear fruit. But there is a soil that is fertile, where the seed grows and brings forth fruit". This is the ingrafted, implanted Word, which is the Word of God. We need to make sure that we have good soil for it to settle upon our hearts.

Then He said, "The Word of God is like a mirror." We wouldn't look at a mirror, look at yourself, and then walk away discrediting or ignoring what the mirror has shown you. We always go to the mirror to see what is wrong. Is there anything that needs fixing? A tie that needs to be straightened, or hair that needs to be set. What we see in the mirror, we go on to rectify those things. He says that the word of God is exactly like that. When you come to the word of God, it informs us exactly what needs to be changed, what needs to be realigned, what needs to look different. As we take that to heart, then we become doers of the Word.

FIRST CHARACTERISTIC OF FAITH: OBEDIENCE

So, obedience is a key characteristic of men and women of faith. If you have obedience, three things come from it.

1. We will be able to bridle our tongue. We'll be able to watch the words that we speak that have so much power.
2. We will be careful to look with compassion on orphans and widows, be able to look and have service towards community.
3. We will be unstained by the world; in the world and yet, not of the world.

We ended with that beautiful verse: in this place, God's blessing rests upon us. Who wouldn't want God's blessing? James is saying, "Obedience as a faith characteristic, opens the storehouse of heaven for God's blessing to rest upon us."

Today I want us to move further.

James 2:1-13

¹ My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. ² For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, ³ and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," ⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? ⁷ Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?

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 transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. ¹¹ For He who said, "DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY," also said, "DO NOT COMMIT MURDER." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Abba, would You speak to us? Would You let Your Holy Spirit move in our hearts and in our minds and show us, Lord, those things that we need to think about? And Lord, those things that we need to focus on, let there be game changers in our lives, that they would bring about change in accordance with the values of Your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

"My brethren," he says, "do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism."

SECOND CHARACTERISTIC OF FAITH: FAITH REMOVES DISCRIMINATION

Faith removes discrimination. Faith doesn't show partiality or favoritism. Then he gives us this scenario. It's a hypothetical scene where he says, "Imagine two men walk into a church, and one is clothed well, has expensive clothes and valuable rings on his fingers, while the other man is poor and dressed shabbily. You say to the one who is dressed well, 'You sit here on this nice place'. And then to the one who is shabbily dressed you say, 'Just sit here, or sit on the ground'. You treat them differently.

There are three conclusions that come from this scenario.

1. You have paid special attention (v.3). You have placed **misguided attention**, as I like to say, to the situation. The attention has been on and in the wrong place. How? Because the attention has been focused on the external. Remember when Samuel went to look for God's anointed, and he went to Jesse's house? 1 Samuel 16 says, When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and said, "Surely here before the Lord is His anointed." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not see as man does. For man sees the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Attention is misguided in and when we look at people for how they appear and treat them deferentially.
2. You have made **distinctions** among yourselves (v.4). Paul reminds us in Galatians 3, "All of you are God's children because of your faith in Christ Jesus." No distinctions; all equal. When you were baptized, it was as though you had put on Christ in the same way you put on new clothes. Faith in Christ is what makes each of you equal with each other. That's the faith that James is talking about. It makes us equal, whether you're a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman.
3. He says in v.6, "But you have **dishonored** the poor man." To dishonor someone is to bring shame and disgrace upon them. And you have done that by the way you treated them, and the place where you have put them. We have shamed them, disgraced them within the community of the church or the fellowship.

v.8 he says, "If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself', you are doing well." He commends them. If that's what you're following, if that has become the yardstick that determines how you treat people, then you're doing well. But he says, having pointed out the wrong in terms of partiality, he recognizes that there must be some kind of motivation to do the right thing. And that's why he brings in this line from Leviticus: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. He points out that if we look at everyone as our neighbor and respond to them as we would ourselves, then there would not be any partiality. Everyone would be equal.

Jesus, when He talked about the good Samaritan in Luke 19, was asked a question by a lawyer who was trying to outsmart Him. At the end of it, he asked, "But who is my neighbor?" And Jesus doesn't answer that question, but comes back with another question: "To whom can I be a neighbor?" is the real question. Who is my neighbor? is a question that has implicit within itself the potential to

alienate. Because the moment I know who my neighbor is, I know who my neighbor is not. and Jesus points out through the parable, that the real question is: To whom can I be a neighbor? Who was it? the Samaritan found that he could be a neighbor to a Jew who despised him.

Then interestingly, he calls this the royal law. Why? Possibly because it was given to us by the King of Kings, but also because it fulfills every other law and supersedes every other law. As Jesus Himself said, "You shall love the Lord, Your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The greatest command!

I want to just add this. Sometimes we think that loving people means we need to always agree with them. I don't think that's what James means here. It is quite okay to not fall in love with people who maybe don't think the way you do or respond the way you do. You will notice that I'm talking about falling in love. The love that James is talking about – the way we need to treat others is a love that says, "Just as God has treated me, I will treat another person." So, it's okay to have differences with people as long as you want the highest good for that person. That is the kind of agape love that he is talking about. Sometimes, I've seen people who beat themselves up saying, "God told me to love this person, but I just can't get along with them." Paul says, "As far as it is possible, live peaceably with one another." I am so glad he put that 'as far as it is possible', because sometimes it is really far and impossible to do that. But we can pray and invite God's highest good on them, and thus fulfill the law of love that he is talking about. Romans 13:10 says "Love is the fulfilling of the law'.

Then, he goes on in vv. 9-10 *"9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all."*

Christians in the first century, didn't think too much about the fact that they were showing favoritism. It was an accepted fact. It was a norm to treat somebody who was kind of well-off or looked good, or was a rabbi or leader or teacher or scribe, and elevate them. I don't know how many of you have seen "The Fiddler on the Roof". One of the key songs in that is 'If I was a rich man. In that, he says, "I'd love to sit and have all the people bow before me and say, 'O, just give me adulation.'" That was one of the things that he was hoping for. And that came out of Jewish culture. And so, for the Jews, it was no problem at all to have this kind of partiality.

But what James is saying is that "You have committed sin by doing this. It is not okay if you keep all the laws, and break one tiny thing and think it's okay. It's not okay. If you break one, you've broken it all" this is something that is sinful." Why? Because you have demeaned another person. You have brought down another person. You have treated him or her by hurting them with the way that you have treated them.

vv. 11-13 *¹¹For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said "Do not commit murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.*

We may not all agree on when the final coming of Jesus is going to be, and how it's going to be, and the final judgment and all of that. But we do know that there will be a judgment and that we will be judged, as we see in Romans 14:10 and 2 Corinthians 5. What will we be judged on? We will be judged on the words that we have spoken, the things that we have done, our deeds, the attitudes that we have had. If we have been merciful to others, God will be merciful to us. God has shown us incredible mercy in the way He has dealt with us. And He expects us to show the same kind of mercy to people around us. It's a sobering verse that says, "For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy."

You remember the parable that Jesus gave us in Matthew 18. It came on the heels of Peter asking, "How many times should I forgive my brother? Seven times?" And Jesus told him, "No, Peter, not seven times, but seventy times seven." Basically, till you can forget counting; you get to 400 and you forget that you still have to get to 490. It's not the math, Peter. It's just that you continue to do it.

Then He gave us this parable of the master who called his servants to him, and wanted to settle their accounts. There was one who owed him 10,000 denarii. When the master called him, he cried out, "Please forgive me. Give me time, I'll pay." And the master forgave him the debt. But then this servant went and found another fellow servant who owed him only 100 denarii. And he caught him and put him in prison. This actually enraged the other workers because they saw how he had been treated and how he treated another fellow servant. So they went to the master and told him. And the master was so angry. He called him and said, "I let you off so much, and you couldn't let this person off?" and he sent him to the torturers. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy.

God has shown great mercy to us. And it is our responsibility to also show mercy to people around us, to make sure that there is no partiality. I know that as we look at the Indian culture and society, that there are many opportunities we have to keep people in various levels. Sometimes, breaking those levels also, is an issue. And yet, the point that James is making here is at no point can you create distinctions, at no point can you shame somebody, because everybody is equal.

He ends by saying this: "Mercy triumphs over judgment." What does he mean by that? Mercy and judgment came together in such horrifying tension on the cross. For the wages of sin is death. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. They came together and mercy triumphed because all of us have been dealt with mercy. God has shown mercy to us. On the one hand, judgment was met at the cross, but mercy came out of that. mercy triumphs over judgment.

There are so many takeaways from this passage – about being impartial to people, treating them well. but also, in v.4, he says, "When you have made distinctions, how did you make them? You became judges with evil motives." How we need to make sure that mercy triumphs the judgment that we make about people. Why? Because judgment is always based on what we see, behavior that is visible. God always looks beyond, at the heart. he's the only one who can really judge perfectly. And to us, beloved, He says, "Be merciful. Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy." Proverbs 21:13 says, "Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered.

That's where I'd like for us to park today. Just think of this characteristic that James has given us, that in the faith that we espouse, that we follow, that we hold so dear, there can be no room for partiality or favoritism, for everyone is equal under God. Maybe there are different areas that the Spirit of God has touched you and said, "Maybe there needs to be a little bit of reconsideration of your stand here." And so we leave that to the Spirit of God to do. So let's take a moment. Would you just do what you need to do to connect with God, whether it's bowing your head, closing your eyes, or whatever. Let the Holy Spirit speak. If there is anything that He is underscoring in your heart that says: This should go, this should change, then would you just go to Him, be reminded that He says, "If we confess our sins (for that's what it is, that's what James says it is), He is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Lord, we hear You speak, and we have responded. We ask, Lord, that You would continue to speak, continue to show us those areas that need our attention. Help us Lord, to make sure that we showcase true characteristics of the faith that we have. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

