

Christ Reformation Church

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A Faith that Works The Epistle of James

You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (2:24)

“We Shall be Judged by the Standard by Which We Judge”

August 2, 2015

Sermon Text: James 2:8-13

Scripture Reading: Matthew 26:18-35

Introduction-

James 2:8-13 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. (10) For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for 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. (12) 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.

Here, the Apostle James is calling us to live out the *gospel*, not the Law. This is a classic Scripture on the distinction between the two and this Law/Gospel dynamic is VITAL for each one of us to understand. The thing goes to the very heart of who a Christian is, who is saved, and who is not.

All of the following Scriptures address this very same subject James is presenting to us here, and in fact I think that what James says really

brings these other Scriptures into clear focus so we can understand them:

Matthew 5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Matthew 7:1-2 "Judge not, that you be not judged. (2) For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

Romans 2:1-3 Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. (2) We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. (3) Do you suppose, O man--you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself--that you will escape the judgment of God?

Luke 6:36-38 Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. (37) "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; (38) give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure

you use it will be measured back to you."

This subject is one of the most important doctrines set forth in the Scriptures, and probably one of the least understood.

Much of the present evil in our churches, including in Reformed churches, is a direct result of failing to understand and obey what James is teaching us here, as these other Scriptures are as well. Indeed, as the entire Bible does. *Discern between Law and Gospel and apply each correctly in every circumstance and to every person.* Disregard the Law of God where it properly is to be applied, and you have rank theological liberalism and libertinism. Fail to apply the gospel where it is to reign, and you have the oppression and burden of legalism.

It is not incorrect to say that if we will learn and obey and practice what James tells us here, we will be delivered from both of these traps.

Listen to the Lutheran theologian (Missouri Synod), Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther (born 1811) emphasize the importance of a correct handling of God's Word by correctly understanding and applying Law and Gospel:

1. The doctrinal contents of all Holy Scripture, both of the Old and the New Testament, consist of two doctrines that differ fundamentally from each other. These two doctrines are Law and Gospel.

2. If you wish to be an orthodox teacher, you must present all the articles of faith in accordance with Scripture, yet you must also rightly distinguish Law and Gospel.

3. To rightly distinguish Law and Gospel is the most difficult and highest Christian art – and for theologians in particular. It is taught only by the Holy Spirit in combination with experience.

4. Understanding how to distinguish Law and Gospel provides wonderful insight for understanding all of Holy Scripture correctly. In fact, without this knowledge Scripture is and remains a sealed book.

Walther then goes on to write an entire book on this subject, discussing in detail “Twenty-One Ways to Confuse Law and Gospel.” I will list just a few of his examples:

1. Improperly making Christ a Lawgiver....These people turn Christ into a kind of new Moses or Lawgiver. This transforms the Gospel into a doctrine of meritorious works.

2. Incorrect Preaching fails to distinguish Law and Gospel:

a. Failing to preach the Law in its full sternness and the Gospel in its full sweetness.

b. Preaching the Gospel and then the Law, or first sanctification and then justification, or first good works and then grace or first faith and then repentance.

c. Preaching the Law to those who are already in terror on account of their sins or the Gospel to those who are living securely in their sins.

d. You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you describe the universal corruption of mankind so as to create the impression that even true believers are still under the spell of ruling sins and sin deliberately.

And here is one more, a vital one:

e. You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you use the demands, threats or promises of the Law to try and force the unregenerate to put away their sins and engage in good works and thus become godly; and then, on the other hand, if you use the commands of the Law, rather than the

admonitions of the Gospel, to urge the regenerate to do good.

I highly recommend Walther's book to you, even though we would not agree with every point of Walther's doctrine (Lutherans are Arminian at some points).

Do you see? Let's read this passage from James again and I think with this background you will begin to understand that this Law/Gospel distinction is precisely what James is talking about-

James 2:8-13 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.

(10) For whoever **keeps the whole law** but fails in one point has become accountable for 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**.

(12) 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.

I. The Royal Law

In this passage we have two "Laws."

- The Royal Law, or The Law of Liberty
- The Law that convicts, pronounces everyone a transgressor, and judges with no mercy.

The first is the Gospel. The Second is the Law of Moses.

Now let's be very, very clear on this. James is addressing BELIEVERS. People who profess to belong to Christ. This is NOT a description of how the believer is to relate to Christ's enemies. "Judge not" does not mean that we are not to make judgments about the guilt and wickedness of evil men. What it does mean is that we are not to live out our lives in our churches and Christian fellowships according to the dictates of the law – of works righteousness – in which environment we condemn in judgment one another. The GOSPEL is our reigning covenant, not the Law of Moses. Under the Law, the offenders found no mercy, only judgment. James is telling us, as are all the verses we have just cited, that our churches must not be characterized by condemning

judgment without mercy. That is Law. It is not Gospel. And yet, must we not admit that it is not difficult to find many examples of such Law condemnation effected upon Christians by others who profess to be Christians.

And you know I'm going to say it, right? *This is precisely what is being done to victims of abuse in sooooo many churches. They are not shown mercy. They are judged and condemned and cast out. They are put under the Law where there is only condemnation, and yet they are our sisters in Christ.* As we are about to see, the Lord has some very harsh words for those who choose to function according to the Law and not according to the Gospel, getting this plain truth all wrong:

John 1:17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Now, remember, James has just warned them in very plain terms that the sin of *partiality* by which for example they would welcome and honor a rich man who came into the church, while dishonoring and disregarding a poor man who came. THAT is the partiality that he is referring to here again in verse 9.

What the Apostle says here in verse 8 is that believers *really fulfill the royal law*, which Scripture plainly identifies

as: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. These are the Lord Jesus' own words-

Matthew 22:35-40 And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. (36) "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" (37) And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. (38) This is the great and first commandment. (39) And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (40) On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

And Paul's –

Romans 13:8-10 Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (9) For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (10) Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

We are doing well if we love in this manner. This is the chief law. The royal law of Christ's kingdom.

adultery but do murder, you have become **a transgressor of the law.**

“(8) 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.”

The Law reigns, and therefore judges and condemns, in many if not most professing Christian churches. I say this because not only do we have report after report from genuine Christians and their experiences in churches, but I have my own experiences having pastured three and planted a fourth. In every single one of those churches, the love of Christ was not the prevailing atmosphere or practice. Rather, there was rank partiality, rampant and unrepentant sin, and a harsh Pharisaism. Yet these very people were condemned by the very standard by which they judged others. Why? Because they rejected the royal law of the Gospel, love, and embraced the law of works. In breaking that law, they were condemned by it. Here is Paul once more:

BUT, you see, *if you show partiality*. If you fail to love your brother simply because he is poor, and then you show evil partiality to the rich man for your own selfish benefit, you are actually operating under the condemnation of the Law! You are transgressed the Law of Moses by not doing the very thing it commands, and you are condemned by it. If this characterizes you, if this is how you habitually think and function, then claim to be in Christ all you want, you are under the condemning judgment of the Law.

II. Where There is no Love, the Law Reigns

James continues:

(10) For whoever **keeps the whole law** but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. (11) For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit

Romans 2:1-3 Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. (2) We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. (3) Do you suppose, O man--you who judge those who practice such things and yet do

them yourself--that you will escape the judgment of God?

Choose to function according to a law without Christ, and you will perish at the sentence of that law.

Do you see it?

In any church, in any person, one of two laws is operative. Either the law of the gospel (the royal law), or the law of Moses. The one gives life. The other only condemns and does so without mercy. The one loves. The other judges and condemns.

Most professing Christians think they are living under the Gospel, but in fact they are living under the Law.

III. Those Who Operate According to the Law will Be Condemned by that Law on the Day

(12) 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.

Christians are saved by grace alone in Christ alone. That is the gospel. James is calling us to be sure that we are living out that gospel in our lives and in our interactions with one another. *The Christian's judgment is gone,*

over, finished at the Cross. There is no condemnation for Christ's true people. He has taken the curse for us. James calls the gospel here, *the law of liberty*. Freedom from sin's power. Freedom and liberty from the fear of death. Freedom from enslavement to the devil. THIS is the law we will be judged by when Christ comes, and the verdict is always good news.

THEREFORE, says James, *live out these truths in our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ. In our churches.* What is a chief characteristic of gospel living? James says, *mercy*. Not indiscriminate blind "mercy" (which is no mercy at all) to hardened, unrepentant, wicked people. No. But James speaks here of life in the body of Christ. This church and each one of us must be characterized by an atmosphere and climate of *mercy* shown to one another. This is how the law of liberty, the gospel, works itself out in practice.

And James goes on. He says once more, in different words here in verse 13, that those who profess to be Christians but who are characterized by a condemning judgmentalism even of (and probably especially of) those in the body of Christ, *will find themselves judged and condemned by the Law on that Day.*

In Christ you see, where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty and mercy, as James says, *triumphs over judgment* in the realm of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let me illustrate this very plainly. I have been around people who claim to be Christians and even put on a very zealous show of it. I have been in churches where the defining climate where many members exhibit this same spirit. But in fact, you don't have to be around such a place very long to begin to sense that *it is a merciless place*. Christ is not present. Law reigns, and law condemns.

One of the typical and identifying characteristics of a wicked, "Christian" hypocrite is this absence of mercy in his judgments of others. Oh he may quickly attack them with the charge that THEY lack mercy, but you see the irony. He *mercilessly* makes this charge of their lack of mercy! And he condemns. He does not have the love of Christ in his heart.

So-called Christian churches where this legal mercilessness reigns – how shall I describe them? Fear is used to control. Smiles are merely facades. There is oppression. There is a complete refusal to empathize with the pain of others.

Very often, and most of you have experienced this same thing, we have gone through very difficult times together in this church. Times when the enemy was working overtime to destroy this church and its ministry. At those times *it has become evident who are the children of God and who are the children of the devil*. And one chief way we have seen the difference is, *the children of God are full of mercy. The children of the devil are merciless*.

As I look back over many of the battles against this kind of evil these last three decades of ministry, it continues to just amaze me, as I came to realize it, how many who have claimed to be Christians were in fact totally devoid of mercy. Oh, false "mercy" yes – they could put on an outward show. But I would not need a calculator to add up how many people in the church have been characterized by something like this:

"Boy, this is really a very, very hard situation you are having to deal with. It must be a real burden on you. I know I would not want to be in a position of having to sort it out, but I want you to know that I am praying for you and will do what I can to help bear your burden."

THAT is mercy. But it has been very rare in the very places where it should be the characteristic practice. I am glad

to say that this has changed now for the better in this church. I sense mercy here, and less and less law. Mercy, it would seem is triumphing over judgment.