

Judgment Please, Hold the Mercy

Faith & Love Part 04
James 2:8-13 3-22-2015

Summary: Three reasons to show mercy to people: 1) If you don't, you won't get mercy from God. Favoritism is merciless judging. We must evaluate people, but doing so without mercy is sin. And excuses won't fly because the standard for judgment will be whether or not you really kept the law of love (you didn't pick and choose which parts to obey, as in the case of favoritism. The plus/minus approach is invalid). If you stumble at one point, you have broken the entire law because there is only one law and only one lawgiver. So live your life in light of Judgment Day (Christians will face judgment). 2) If you do, you will get mercy from God, because it will prove you have received mercy from God (and are therefore saved). There are degrees of God's mercy in this life that are conditioned on whether you are merciful. 3) If you do, you will have freedom – God's law is good for you! Everything in creation shows us mercy. Shouldn't we also?

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James 2:8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking 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 commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. 12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, 13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

Introduction

Think back – when was the last time you showed someone mercy? Mercy is when love and compassion in your heart drive you to take action and help a person in trouble... and the way you help them is by giving them what they need rather than what they deserve.¹ So think – When was the last time you did that with someone? How about this – When was the last time someone did that with you – they showed you mercy? Now another question – Can you remember the last time someone failed to show you mercy? Now one more: When was the last time you failed to show mercy to someone?

Mercy is a beautiful thing. It is an attribute of God. In fact, it is one of the most emphasized attributes of God in Scripture. And it is very important to God that we mimic His mercy. And so James gives us three really good reasons to motivate us to show mercy to people. The first one is negative, and the other two are positive. The negative one is the most negative motivation imaginable.

James 2:13 judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

1) Be Merciful to Avoid God's Merciless Judgment

We should show mercy, because if we don't, we will be judged without mercy. Those have to be the most terrifying words in the whole Bible. Let that sink in for a second - merciless judgment from God. You are standing there before the throne facing God's wrath, and you say, "Have mercy on me!" And God says, "No!" That is going to happen to some people. Who? Who is going to face judgment without mercy on Judgment Day? Answer: **anyone who has not been merciful**. Who are they?

Favoritism Violates Mercy

In the context, they are the people who show favoritism. If you read from verse 1 through this whole section that becomes clear. It is the people who show favoritism, and who therefore break the royal law of Scripture: love your neighbor as yourself. When we do that, that is a failure of mercy. Mercy is love directed to those who really need it. When you show favoritism, it seems like you are showing love to the people you favor, but you can tell it is not true, biblical love because there is no mercy.

A guy is sitting there in youth group, a visitor shows up, and it happens to be a really good looking girl. Suddenly he is Mr. Welcome Wagon.

"I'm showing the love of Christ by making her feel welcome. The fact that she's smokin' hot, (or, if you're a girl – the fact that he's really cute) that's just a coincidence."

James would say, "Ok - if it really is love, great. But one way you'll know if it's real love is if you are just as welcoming when some kid who needs mercy walks in. The kid who's kind of weird looking, and who acts really strange. But if you give more attention to the attractive ones, that's not love – it's favoritism because it doesn't show mercy to the people who need mercy."

Favoritism = Judging

"But what harm have I done to the lowly people? I haven't done anything to hurt them, just because I favor the attractive people or the wealthy people."

Actually you have. When you show favoritism you hurt the lowly people by wrongly judging them. That is why back in verse four, when he was rebuking the people for favoritism, he said, **have you not become judges with evil thoughts?** Favoritism is all about judging people.

¹ The classic illustration of mercy in Scripture is the Good Samaritan. When the Good Samaritan saw the man lying in the ditch, left for dead – he did not ask any questions about what that man deserved. For all we know, that guy fully deserved what happened to him. What he deserved never even enters into the story. The only factor was what he needed.

Good and Bad Judgment

Now - not all judging is wrong. It is good when you look at a guy like Hitler and say, "Evil!" It is good to make proper distinctions between right and wrong, and between good and evil. You have to judge people in order to show love, because love covers over a multitude of sins. You can't cover over sins until you figure out that they are sins, which is a judgment. So there is a good kind of judging. But there is also an evil kind of judging. It is the kind Jesus was referring to in Matthew 7:1 when He said **do not judge**. Or Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:5 when he said **judge nothing before the appointed time**. Or James back in verse 4 when he said, **have you not become judges with evil thoughts?** There are several kinds of judging that Scripture forbids. For example – looking down on someone because they don't make the same judgment calls you make in gray areas. That is forbidden in Romans 14. Another example – assuming you know someone's motives. That is forbidden in 1 Corinthians 4:5. No matter how good you think you are at reading people - that kind of judging is never permissible. It is not discernment – it is playing God, and it is forbidden in Scripture. Those are a couple examples of sinful judging, but here James warns us about another kind: favoritism. Favoritism is judging based on the wrong criteria – like money or clothes or skin color or accent, etc. That is evil because it is a violation of the principle of mercy. Mercy helps the people who especially need it. Favoritism neglects those people.

Be Merciful

You are going to make evaluations of people. You are going to make positive judgments and negative judgments. That's perfectly ok – as long as the judgments are based on biblical criteria, and they are governed by lots and lots of mercy.

Look at the end of verse 13 - **Mercy triumphs over judgment!** Go ahead and make your judgments, and then let mercy triumph over judgment. Doesn't God's mercy on you triumph over His judgment on you? Isn't it true that even on your hardest, most miserable day, what you are receiving from God is still mostly mercy? And so is it too much for God to ask for you to deal that way with people in your life? When you evaluate people, which one gets the last laugh in your heart - your judgment or your mercy? If you want to judge people – knock yourself out, but just make sure that when you are done, what they deserve is lower in your priorities than what they need.

Really Keeping the Law

That is mercy. And if you are not showing mercy, you are not showing love. And if you are not showing love, James wants you to know, it is not going to go well for you on Judgment Day. Because on Judgment Day your whole life will be evaluated based on how you did with the love command.

12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law

What law? The royal law of Scripture – love your neighbor as yourself.

"But what if I sort of kept that law – I loved some people, just not others?"

In that case James would say you kept the law, but not really.

8 If you really keep the royal law ... you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

What is the difference between keeping God's law but not really, versus really keeping it? Keeping the law but not really keeping it is what the people were doing when they showed lots of love to certain people, but at the same time they were showing favoritism. Those are the people who think they can get credit for keeping one part of God's law even while they are breaking another part.

The Plus/Minus Approach

I call that the plus/minus approach to obeying God. Most people think whenever they commit a sin, that's a minus. And whenever they do a good deed, that's a plus. And when you just carry out your normal responsibilities, that's not a plus or minus – you just stay even.

“I'm minus one point for showing favoritism, but I'm plus a point for showing love, so I come out even.”

People like that think they will be fine on Judgment Day as long as they come out in the black overall.

It is very easy to slip into this way of thinking. You stumble into a sin, you feel terrible, and you say, “I need to do something to make up for this,” and so you go out of your way to do some special good deed to get a few extra credit points to make up for what you put in the minus column with your sin. Anytime you find yourself thinking, “I sinned – now I need to make it up to God” – you know you have fallen into this plus/minus approach. And so, in essence, you become your own redeemer. When you sin you try to redeem yourself by doing something to make up for it.

Break One, You Broke ‘em All

James demolishes that whole plus/minus approach in verse 10.

10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

Sometimes in school they will have tests where you can select which questions you want to answer. They will have 10 questions, and the instructions say, “Pick any six of these questions.” The 10 Commandments aren't like that. God doesn't give us 10 Commandments and say, “Take a shot at any six.” But some people seem to think that's the way it is. They think if they keep the big ones, breaking the little ones is not a big deal. Or if they keep most of them, the ones they break can be overlooked. Breaking the law of God is not like bowling - where you can knock some pins down and leave other ones standing. It is more like putting a baseball through a picture window. When you break it, you break the whole thing.

This Does Not Mean All Sin Is the Same

Does that mean all sins are the same? No. Some of God's laws are weightier, or more important than others. In Matthew 23:23 Jesus made it clear that mercy, justice, and faithfulness are more important than tithing. Tithing is important, but mercy is even more important. And when you break the more important commands, you have more guilt than if you break the smaller ones. That's why Jesus said Judas' sin was worse than Pilate's sin.

John 19:11 ... the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.

So all sins are not the same.²

There Is Only One Law

So then why does James say that if I broke one particular law I am guilty of breaking all of it? The answer to that comes in two parts. The first part James already gave us. The reason you are guilty of breaking the entire law even if you only stumble at just one point is that there is only one law - love. God's law is not a bunch of disconnected rules. It is one rule. We saw last time that the command to love

² If you fail to pray for someone that you should be praying for, that is sin (1 Sam.12:23). But it's not as severe as murdering that person. There are varying degrees of sinfulness, which is why Jesus said it will be worse on Judgment Day for some unbelievers than for other unbelievers (Mt.10:15). Even though all of them will be sent to hell, some will receive greater punishment than others (Lk.12:47).

God and love our neighbor sums up the entire law of God. So it is actually only one law, which means if you stumble in some area of loving God or loving your neighbor, you have broken the entire law.

So what is the difference between a gossip and a murderer? One of them took it further than the other one, but they both broke the same command. What is the difference between someone who disobeys his parents or is disrespectful, and someone who robs a bank at gunpoint? Those things are different in degree but the same in kind. They all broke the exact same law - the Royal Law of love.

There Is Only One Lawgiver (It's Personal)

So that is the first part of the answer – if you break one you broke ‘em all, because there is only one law. Another reason comes right at the beginning of verse 11.

11 For he...

Underline the word **he**. When we think about God's law, James wants us to think of a person, not a code or list of rules. The main issue with the law of God is the *Lawgiver*.

11 For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.”

Every commandment you find in the Bible came from the same Person. Committing adultery and committing murder are two different things. But the command not to do them came from the same Person. That is significant because the reason the law of God matters is that it is the expression of His will.

This is a very important concept to get, and it's difficult because we don't normally think of laws this way. When you obey the speed limit or pay your taxes, you might have various different reasons for doing that. But probably none of us obey those laws because of a personal relationship with the ones who passed those laws. We generally don't see law keeping as a personal issue between us and the lawmakers. But when it comes to God's law, the personal relationship is the most important factor. Breaking God's law is not mainly an issue of violating a code of ethics or breaking a rule or falling short of the standard; it is most fundamentally an issue of unfaithfulness to a person. It is a betrayal. The reason sin is bad is because it is an act of unfaithfulness to God. It is like being unfaithful to your spouse. If you commit adultery, your spouse is upset with you not because you broke a rule, but because you are unfaithful to them. It is personal. And that is exactly the same way it is with the law of God – it's personal.

And that is another reason why you cannot make up for a sin by doing good deeds. Every time you do a good deed all you are doing is being faithful to God. We should always be faithful to Him. So if I am unfaithful to Him right now, and then I am faithful to Him this afternoon, that does not cancel out my unfaithfulness. The only way I could cancel out my unfaithfulness would be if I went above and beyond my duty. But that is impossible. There is nothing higher than faithfulness to God.

Again, think in terms of faithfulness in marriage. Your spouse commits adultery with the neighbor, but when you complain, your spouse says, “Yes, I committed adultery with the neighbor next door. But I didn't commit adultery with the neighbor across the street. I was faithful to you with regard to the neighbor across the street. And so that faithfulness should cancel out my unfaithfulness.” No one would fall for an excuse like that. You see, when we realize that sin is evil because it is unfaithfulness to a person – a violation of our relationship with God, then you can see that no matter which sin you committed, the relationship is violated. If you steal something, that is like committing adultery with the next-door neighbor. If you tell a lie, that's like committing adultery with the neighbor two doors down. If you lose your temper, that's like committing adultery with the neighbor across the street. If you show favoritism, that's like committing adultery with someone at work. Are they different sins? Yes, but they are all the same in the sense that they are unfaithfulness to the one Lawgiver. That is why we can't pick and choose what laws we are going to obey in Scripture.

Illustration: Adultery and Murder

The illustration that James gives in verse 11 to make this point is a little bit sarcastic.

11 For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

James is purposely choosing the most obvious example to make his point. No one in his right mind would stand before a judge in a courtroom and say, “Yes, I did murder that person. I admit that. But judge, you are overlooking one key fact in this case. I never committed adultery! Therefore you have to let me go free.”

That kind of argument would be absurd. And what James is doing here is showing us that it is just as absurd when we try to justify ourselves by focusing on the sins we didn’t commit.

“Well at least I didn’t do *that*.”

“I may have done X but I never did what you did.”

“I never crossed this line.”

That’s great that you didn’t do those things. But if you were unfaithful to God in some other area, you are still guilty. The issue on Judgment Day won’t be the sins you didn’t commit. The issue is the ones you did commit. You will be held accountable for those on Judgment Day.

Christians Will Face Judgment

And I realize many of you have been taught that there is no judgment day for Christians. But Scripture is very clear that even as believers, we will face judgment.

Ecclesiastes 12:13 ... Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

1 Peter 1:17 Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in fear.

The kind of fear that takes an authority seriously.

Romans 14:10 ... For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. 11 It is written: “ ‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.’ ” 12 So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

2 Corinthians 5:9 So we make it our goal to please him ... 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

There is no question that we as believers are going to stand before God on Judgment Day. And on that day we will be rewarded for the things we have done that were pleasing to God, and we will have to give an account for things that were not pleasing.

1 Corinthians 3:13 [Each man’s] work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. 14 If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. 15 If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Judgment Day is going to happen, we are all going to be there, and we are all going to be evaluated. And the fact that we will be judged should serve as a motivation for us to obey God.

James 2:12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law³

Live Like a Defendant

Imagine you committed some kind of crime, and you were sent to prison. And living in prison is an absolute nightmare. You have 10 more years on your sentence, but you don't feel like you can endure it even one more day. And so you put all of your hope in your probation hearing. But you don't know when that hearing is going to be. In the meantime, you don't know how to handle prison life. People are provoking you to get into fights, stealing from you, and you have no idea how to exist in prison. Now imagine there is a guard in the prison who has befriended you. And you go to him one day for some advice.

“How do I handle all this? What should I do?”

And he gives you these words of advice: “Behave like a person is just about to go before the probation review board. If you just keep that in mind every day, and you let your actions and words be governed by that, you'll be just fine.”

That advice is basically what James instructs us to do in verse 12.

James 2:12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law

That is how we are to live our lives. In fact, in the Greek it is even more dramatic language. Literally it's, **speak and act as those who are about to be judged by the law**. Act like it is about to happen at any moment.

Andrew Boner was a pastor in Scotland in the 1800's. On Dec.2, 1888 he wrote something very striking in his diary: “I have been thinking tonight that perhaps my next great undertaking may be this: appearing at the judgment seat of Christ.” How would you be living right now if you knew that the next main event in your life would be Judgment Day? What James is teaching us here is to live every moment as if it were the last moment before the judgment.

In school, students always want to know: “Is this going to be on the test?” Why do they ask that? Because - when you are a student, there is nothing worse than discovering that you learned something that you didn't have to learn so students are always careful to avoid that. They are always asking, “Is this going to be on the test?” What James is telling us right here is, “You know when God said the thing about loving your neighbor as yourself? That's going to be on the test. And it will be pass-fail.” That is the greatest threat known to mankind. It is a more terrifying prospect than if North Korea, Iraq, and ISIS all got nuclear weapons – that would not be as dangerous a prospect as Judgment Day – the day when all of mankind will face the Creator and answer for all their deeds.

³ Many Christians object to the idea of judgment day as a motive for obedience, because they have been taught that we should obey God only out of love and gratitude, and those are the only acceptable motives for obedience. So obeying out of fear of Judgment Day would be legalistic or works-based.

Should we obey God out of love for God? Absolutely! But one of the most common mistakes people make in understanding the Bible is the error of reductionism. And what I mean by that is they find some statement in the Bible that gives a reason for something, and they assume that must be the *only* reason. They find a verse that says we should obey God out of love, and so they assume that's the only valid motivation for obeying God. People like to read the Bible that way because then they can keep their theology in really neat, tidy little packages. But God never intended us to chop up His Word into bits and pieces and then pick and choose. If one passage says that we should have a certain motive, and another passage says we should have a different motive, then we need to have both. Then if you find eight others elsewhere in Scripture, then we need to have all 10. Some of the biggest errors in theology come when people read a verse in the act like that is the only verse in the Bible. Just because the Bible says something does not mean that is the only thing the Bible has to say on that topic. We need to take in the whole counsel of God. Scripture gives us many, many, many different motivations for obeying God. And concern about Judgment Day is most definitely one of them.

Judgment Please, Hold the Mercy

So be very careful how you treat lowly people. Those people in verse 2 who showed favoritism – you don't want to be in their shoes on Judgment Day. The Judge will say to them, "I was hungry and you gave Me nothing to eat, thirsty and you gave Me nothing to drink, and when I visited your church, I couldn't get your attention because you were fawning over some guy who didn't even honor Me with his life. You welcomed him but not Me." The people you don't really want to greet on Sunday morning – in your eyes those are "the least of these" – right? Jesus said, "Whatever you failed to do for the least of these, you failed to do for Me" (Mt.25:45). When you withhold mercy from people, that is like calling up God and saying, "Judgment please – hold the mercy. Go ahead and just pour out Your wrath on me without mercy."

And that brings us to point number two. Everything I have said so far is under the first heading - we should show mercy in order to avoid merciless judgment from God. That is the first motivation he gives us. The second motivation he gives us is the converse of that – we should be merciful so that we will receive mercy from God. On the negative side we want to avoid judgment, and on the positive side we want to receive mercy.

2) Be Merciful So You Will Receive Mercy

Do you want God to show you mercy? Do you want God to give you what you deserve, or what you need? The mercy you receive from God will be measured in terms of the mercy you showed others. Before you make a decision, before you open your mouth and say something to someone, before you respond, before you reply to an email – remind yourself, "My whole life is going to be evaluated on the basis of how I showed mercy."

Matthew 7:2 in the same way you judge others, you will be judged

The way that you judge other people determines the way God judges you. If your mercy on others triumphs when you judge them, then God's mercy on you will triumph when He judges you. This is the flipside of what Jesus said in the Beatitudes.

Matthew 5:7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

God will show mercy to those who have been merciful, and He will not show mercy to those who have not been merciful. We all stumble in showing mercy, but if you love the Lord, you will repent when that happens. When it says, *those who have not been merciful* – that's talking about people who are unmerciful but they don't repent. If you are withholding mercy from someone, and you are unrepentant - you are content to just live that way, that is an indication that you are not born again.

It is not that you earn heaven by showing mercy. Obviously that's not the case, because if you deserve to go to heaven you wouldn't need any mercy. Even if we show mercy all our lives, we still deserve to go to hell because our mercy is imperfect and shot through with sin. So no matter how loving you are and how merciful you are, the only way you will ever go to heaven is if God shows you mercy on Judgment Day. And God will show mercy to all those who have their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But what James is showing us here is that one of the chief ways you can know if your faith in Christ is real faith, is if you follow Jesus' footsteps when it comes to showing mercy, and you repent when you stumble.

Or to put it another way, if you show mercy, God will show you mercy on Judgment Day, because your life of showing mercy is evidence that you had already received mercy from God. So here's how it works:

- 1) You come to God as a broken, condemned, guilty sinner begging for mercy and forgiveness.
- 2) God sees that you have faith in His Son, and so He shows you mercy and forgives all your sins, and you are born again. That was the day you became a Christian.
- 3) The result of that is you live a life of showing mercy, and when you fail you repent.

- 4) That lifestyle is evidence that you really are saved. It's evidence that you really have received God's mercy.
- 5) And so on the basis of that evidence, God has mercy on you on Judgment Day.

Do it Because You Have Received Mercy

That is another reason why we don't earn our salvation by showing mercy and love. Because the only reason we can show any true mercy and love is because we have received them already from God. God's mercy on you is always the most fundamental motive for you to have mercy on others. In Matthew 18 we read the parable of the unmerciful servant. He owes his master billions of dollars, he begs for mercy, and the master forgives the entire debt. Then he meets a fellow servant who owes him four months' wages, that fellow servant begs for mercy, and he chokes the guy and throws them in prison. When the master hears about that he calls that guy in and says:

Matthew 18:33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'

And then he reinstates the debt and punishes the guy. God calls us to show mercy on the basis of the mercy we have received. Whenever you find that you are having trouble showing mercy to someone, it is always because you have completely lost sight of how much mercy you have received. When you struggle to forgive someone that means you have completely lost sight of how much you have been forgiven. It is an impossibility to refuse to forgive someone if you have a true awareness of how much you have been forgiven.

How Much Mercy Am I Receiving?

The reason we struggle to show mercy and to forgive people is very simple – pride. We think that our debt that God forgave was small. To some degree that is every one of us in this room. I can at least speak for myself. Do I have a grasp of what it is about me that was so incredibly evil that it required the death of the Son of God to pay for it? Do I have any conception of my own wickedness that is in any way proportionate to what it cost to save me? If I am having trouble with love – that is the place to go – more time spent thinking about how much punishment I deserved, and how much mercy I received instead.

God's Mercy in This Life

So be merciful so that you will receive God's mercy on Judgment Day. And not just on Judgment Day, but also in this life. The primary idea James has in mind is probably final judgment on Judgment Day. But I also think there is a temporal aspect to this as well. As you live your Christian life you will experience more or less mercy from God depending upon whether you show more or less mercy to people. The more merciful we are the closer we can approach God. And the closer we approach the more we experience all His attributes, including this one. So next month when some huge, painful hardship hits your life, the quickness and degree of mercy you experience from God may very well be greater or lesser depending on how you respond tomorrow night when your spouse is short with you. When someone at church is inconsiderate. When you get a nasty email. When someone mistreats you.

If I distance myself from God tomorrow or the next day by being unmerciful to people around me, I forfeit a certain amount of grace, and push myself a little farther from God's presence, and when the time comes when I need mercy He will not be as near. And maybe that mercy will not come nearly as soon as it would have otherwise. Or maybe it will come but it will not be nearly as much mercy as it might have been.

3) Be Merciful So You Will Have Freedom

So far we have two motives for showing mercy to people. We do it so that we will avoid God's judgment, and we do it so that we will receive God's mercy. Now one final motive. Did you notice how James described the law by which we are going to be judged?

12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom

That is the second time James has called it **the law of freedom**. He did that back in chapter 1 and now again here. Even when he is talking about the law as the frightening standard of judgment, he still wants us to remember what a good, beneficial thing it is.

The Law Gives Freedom

So many people think freedom means no law - no restrictions, no requirements, no prohibitions. But that's not freedom; it is license. License is when you can do whatever you feel like doing without worrying about any consequence. God does not give us license, but He does give us freedom. God's Word gives us freedom like a train track gives a train freedom. It is restrictive in the sense that it only goes one direction, but it is freeing because it enables the train to function as a train. God's Law enables us to function as we were designed to function. The more you obey it, the more you want to obey it. And the more you are able to obey it.

Have you ever noticed the verse that introduces the 10 Commandments? The people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt, they cried out to God to deliver them from that bondage, and He did. And after bringing them out of slavery, He gave them His law – the 10 Commandments. And here is how He introduced it:

Exodus 20:2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 3 You shall have no other gods before me...

I delivered you from slavery, and here is my Law... Their whole lives they had known nothing but slavery. And so as soon as God brings them out, the first thing He says is, "Ok, now that you're free, let Me show you how to live in freedom." And then He gives the 10 Commandments. You see, the law of God is the blueprint for the lifestyle of liberty. It is God teaching us what it looks like to live in freedom. If you are a Christian, as long as you stay within the boundaries of the law of God, you enjoy complete freedom. You can do absolutely anything you please inside those boundaries. But the moment you cross that boundary, you become a slave to sin and lose your freedom.

So it is a two-sided motive. God is saying, "I've got one law – love. That's the law. Break it, and you'll be judged without mercy. Keep it, and you get two things: mercy from Me, and a life of freedom."

The Law Is Good for You!

I love the approach James takes here. He says, "Speak and act as those who are about to be evaluated by a law that is nothing but good for you." Don't think of the law as a job description. Think of it as a doctor's prescription. A job description is a list of things you do to earn a wage. And that is burdensome. A doctor's prescription is a list of things you do to get healing and wellness and strength and life. And it is not burdensome – it is hope giving.

The Law Reveals God's Nature

We are going to be judged on the basis of a law that, if we would follow it, would give us freedom and life and every good thing! In fact, the more we obey God's law, the more we get the greatest thing of all, namely, Christ-likeness. One of the main purposes of the law of God is to reveal God's nature. All the various laws He gives us are simply descriptions of what He is like. And one of the main reasons we obey

them, is because we want to be like Him. That's another reason why we don't pick and choose which laws we are going to obey. If we do that, we are saying there are some areas of God's nature that are important to us and others that are of no value.

Conclusion: The System of Mercy

It is hard to overstate the importance of mercy in God's economy. We live in a system of mercy. Everything about the way this whole world is set up just oozes with God's mercy on us from every direction.

I read a great statement from Thomas Watson about alms (gifts of charity to the needy). The world translated "alms" in the Bible is just the Greek word for mercy. When they gave money to the poor, that was known as "alms," or showing mercy to the poor. Here is what Watson said: "We ourselves live upon alms. Other created things generously contribute to our needs. The sun does not have its light for itself but for us; it enriches us with its golden beams. The earth brings us a fruitful crop ... One creature gives us wool, another oil, another silk. We are eagerly willing to go a-begging to the creation. Shall every creature be for the good of man and man only be for himself? How absurd and irrational is this!"⁴ You and I are the ultimate charity cases. Every breath we take is a gift of charity. We are poor, miserable beggars who will die if the atmosphere does not give us a handout every single time we need a breath of oxygen. This whole created world is nothing but one giant machine for the dispensing of mercy from every direction at every moment. What an absurdity it is when I stand out as the one created thing that fails to dispense God's mercy! If I am the one part of what God created that doesn't give. When we do that we become a tear in the fabric of the entire created order. Mankind is the crowning glory of all that God created – and so what a ridiculous travesty it is when we become the one gear in the machine that turns in the opposite direction and damages and destroys the whole process! But on the other hand, how beautiful and fitting it is when we display God's mercy, because when we do so it is a far greater picture of God's nature than the sun or the soil or the atmosphere, because unlike the sun and the earth we can show God's mercy willingly and with a heart of intentional love and worship. We can do it like God does it. We can choose to do it, and even sacrifice some of our own comfort and preferences in order to do it. Only we can reflect God's glory in those ways, so that just as God's glory is seen in His great mercy, so His glory will be seen in our mercy.

I started by asking you, "When was the last time you showed someone mercy?" Let me close by asking this: When will be the next time you show someone mercy?

Closing Prayer

Of all the truths about Yourself that You have revealed to us, dear Father, one that You repeat more often than the others in Your Word is the marvelous truth of Your infinite mercy.

You told us in Your Word that Your anger lasts only a moment, but Your favor lasts a lifetime. Your anger against us is like lightening—awesome and dangerous, but momentary. But Your mercy is like the light from the sun—constant, pervasive, enduring—persisting even when our eyes are closed. Just one tiny ray from the sun engulfs the entire earth. And even on a cloudy day, the earth gets mostly sunshine, even if it's a little diffused by the clouds. On the hardest, cloudiest days of our lives, what we are receiving is still mostly mercy from You. Even when You bring out Your awesome rod and You discipline us – even then what we are receiving is mostly mercy. Every moment of every day, yesterday, and last month, and the last 10 years, we have received mostly mercy from You.

⁴ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/watson/beatitudes.xvii.html>

We have received so much mercy that we are in constant danger of taking it for granted and failing to see it for what it is. Oh Lord, rescue us from that! Open our eyes to Your greater mercy, that we might learn to follow in Your steps.

Benediction: Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses ... 16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

1. Give an example of a specific time in your life recently when God gave you what you needed rather than what you deserved.
2. What would it look like in your life right now if you shifted to dealing with difficult people according to what they need rather than according to what they deserve? What is preventing you from doing that?
3. What kinds of sins in your life are you most tempted to rationalize or justify by saying, "At least I didn't..."