

Mercy, Judgment, and the Commandments

Deuteronomy 6:1-7; James 2:8-17

So what I've read to you from James' letter to the early Christians are words written by the little brother of Jesus to Israelite believers who were struggling to hold onto their Christian faith in circumstances where they themselves had been driven by their fellow Jews from their homes and from the lives they knew. So James' readers were people who once had lives in old Israel, but now, because they belonged to Christ, they had been driven from their own country and they now lived on the outer fringes of society in the new places they had to settle.

Not really Jews, not really Romans, these Christians longed to reclaim for themselves a place in society where they could work and trade and shop and share. And so when someone with standing, someone with wealth entered one of their worship services, it was really tempting for James' readers to lose focus on who they were and what kind of kingdom they'd been called to serve just to hold to some new person whose standing might help them find ...work for some of their poorer members on his estate, or connections, places the Christians could go to for direction, or friendship, or help or comfort. It was only human and perfectly understandable.

Except, James taught them, that one of the founding principles of Jesus' kingdom was that church was a place where great and small, rich and poor were equally in need of God's help and equally loved and forgiven by God based on the love and loyalty that lived in their hearts for Christ and for his people, people from all walks of life who needed a Savior and believed that only Jesus could get them right with God and themselves and each other. So every soul through the door was obligated to face the hard facts in Jesus' gospel, and every soul was entitled to the same warmth and love and kindness that Jesus gave to anyone, great or small, rich or poor, who gave their lives to him.

And to make his point, James had appealed to an obscure commandment he called "*the royal law*". Jesus had called it "*the second*" of all the commandments that Moses had ever given. The first commandment, "*You shall love the Lord your God...heart...soul...mind...and strength.*" was in our Call to Worship this morning. And strangely neither of the commandments Jesus identified as first and second was in the Ten Commandments that Moses had presented to Israel as the centerpiece of God's Law.

So what Jesus saw as the "*greatest*" commandment, Moses had offered at the end of his life as part of a meditation on child rearing. And what Jesus saw as the "*second*" most important, what James called "*the royal law*" was from some teaching Moses gave in Leviticus 19 about how believers should behave in court. The guiding principle of jurisprudence in old Israel was that all God's people were neighbors, and God's command was that "*You should love your neighbor as yourself.*"

And the really interesting feature in both cases is that, in both these passages, Moses began by talking about commands, firm, hard, objective, absolute realities. But what Moses taught about faithfulness in families and fairness in court in the end boiled down to love. Husbands and wives and children learn to obey commandments and judges learn to dispense justice only after their hearts are softened to love, first God, heart, soul, mind, and strength and then to love their neighbors and themselves. Love is the path God offers that will mold us into the firm, absolute holiness his commandments demand. Obedience and holiness will ever be beyond our reach till God teaches us to love. And love will always ever be beyond our reach till we begin to wrestle with the commandments.

So, like Moses, James teaches us to start with the commandments. It was wrong for the early believers to treat wealthy, successful people better than the riff-raff because Moses had taught Israel's judges not to favor wealthy plaintiffs in court way back in Leviticus 19. The point being that you know your heart is going wrong when you find yourself on the wrong side of Moses' Law. James warned them, *"For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of it all!"* In other words, what God required of Israel's judges, God requires of you and me in church today. We must love people equally their worldly status and success aside.

And I think this is the passage that, five hundred years ago, had Martin Luther's hands twitching to throw his translation of James into the wood stove at Wartburg Castle. All this talk from James about keeping commandments, not just one at a time, but all of them all the time, strained Luther's grip on that one gospel principle that had freed and healed him from the guilt and anxiety that almost took him down as an overconscientious monk. *"The just shall live by faith."* Luther had read in Paul's Letter to the Romans. *"For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of works, not of yourselves so that no man can boast."* Paul had written to the Ephesians.

So Luther had staked his life over and against all of medieval civilization that simple faith in God's more than abundant grace was all a person needed to save his soul. Luther believed quite correctly that our trusting God's grace was the thing that made all the teachings of Moses and the prophets, all the teachings of Jesus and the apostles hold together and make sense. And now here was James, the Lord's brother, admonishing the early Christians, *"So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty."* The very notion that, after all this, he might be subject to judgment under a law sent a chill of fear throughout Luther's stern medieval soul.

But he never did throw James into the wood stove because the other thing on which Luther had staked his life was that the Word of God as written is the only true guide a believer can depend on to get us anywhere near God, to teach us anything about life. Because the Pharisees in Jesus' day, and the popes and bishops in Luther's had blinded themselves to what the gospel actually said precisely because they allowed themselves to ignore and put aside teachings and principles in God's word that forbade where they wanted to go and what they wanted to be. So Luther

knew that, to keep God's grace, he would have to wrestle with God's word no matter how difficult he found it.

And it was difficult to hear James warn us that we, people saved by God's grace, cleansed by Christ's blood, made alive by God's Spirit, that we still should speak and act as people "*who are to be judged under the law of liberty*". And the fact that James and Jesus both point us to passages from Moses that are loaded with warnings that the commandments must be obeyed requires us to understand "*the law of liberty*" to be those moral boundaries and fences that God has used to mark what Jesus pictured as a "*narrow... gate*" leading to a "*hard... way*" for God's people in every age.

So the moral and spiritual fences and boundaries laid out by Moses way back when are still in effect today. Marriage is still marriage as God defined it in Genesis 2. Male is still male, female is still female. The family and church covenants are still primary and still binding in all their particulars. The patterns and disciplines for prayer and worship that God commanded for all believers are still mandatory, worship together once every seven days, a stable regimen of prayer and study by ourselves, with our families, and with each other if ever we can.

James calls what Moses taught a "*law of liberty*" because it is through the narrow gate, on the hard way, within the boundaries and fences Moses taught that God frees us to become our true selves. Because if he is God, he knows better than us what will fill the needs and longings that so often lead us astray. David, who had some experience going astray, taught this in Psalm 37, he said, "*Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*" In other words, if we learn to love God and learn to follow his ways, our hearts will get fed.

Jesus promised in John's gospel, "*You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.*" No one in the world nowadays believes that! In books, on TV, in the movies, people who care about truth, people who are fussy about doctrine and particulars are almost always pictured as dreary, sad, burdened individuals who know little about being free and nothing about being happy. But in fact, James teaches, the exact opposite is true. God's law leads to liberty. Wrestle with God, follow the truth, stop fending for ourselves and we can rest in God's grace and be free.

Of course, it takes faith to do that. Because the first step away from what we always thought we had to have is painful. It is painful to bend our patterns of life to fit what God commands, firm, hard, objective, absolute realities. It is painful to persevere at bent, broken, complicated relationships because God has declared that they are sacred and necessary. "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" Easy to say till you've met my neighbor! Heaven's way of life is wonderful, but it is also foreign to us when we begin to learn it. And it must be learned. There is a world of confusion about what from Moses' Law still applies today and what does not, because some of it does not!

All the symbols in Moses' Law that foreshadowed who Christ would be and what Christ would do for us, animal sacrifices, kosher diet, ritual washing, a holy land where the authorities would judge and punish people for moral and spiritual errors, all that went by the wayside when Christ appeared on the stage of history. He told his disciples to put their swords away because the Church would be different than old Israel, a spiritual kingdom conquering the world by changing people's hearts, not invading over their borders. But for a thousand years in the Middle Ages the Church was hopelessly confused about this, trying to impose a Christian version of old Israel all over Europe.

It was Luther, Zwingli and Calvin among others who began the slow and complicated process of building the civilization we enjoy today, founded on gospel principles that Jesus taught, the sanctity of the individual conscience, the separation of the civil from the sacred, the dignity of every person created in God's image, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, the necessity of checks and balances for all human authority based upon the hard, firm, objective, absolute truths about life and human nature taught in God's Word. Which is not to say that Western Civilization is free from sin, or without its own outrages against God's justice or decency or charity.

What I'm saying is that separating civil and sacred authority, disarming the Church and teaching God's people to take up the mission Jesus gave us, to be light and salt in the societies God's placed us, to live as servants among unbelievers and to offer them both the truth Moses taught and the grace Jesus offers, this biblical balance that Luther and company set in motion five hundred years ago has changed the world for the better even if you take into account the outrages that continued to happen because the world is still fallen and people, even Christians, are still sinful.

There's so much to say and we've made so little time and place in our lives to think about things like this. So I'll close with one last irony. James closes this passage about firm, hard, objective, absolute commandments by talking about mercy. *"So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment."* James has already taught us what Jesus also taught in the Sermon on the Mount, that God's grace in no way changes what is moral and spiritual in Moses Law.

Jesus taught his disciples in the upper room, *"If you love me, you'll keep my commandments."* The spiritual disciplines and moral boundaries set out by Moses still apply to the disciples of Jesus even though old Israel and all her symbols have passed away. But James goes on to teach that the severity of minding the commandments actually softens our hearts to show mercy to people we might be tempted to sweep aside if we weren't wrestling with the commandments ourselves.

Because, beginning with Jacob in Genesis 32, it is by wrestling with God, wrestling with the firm, hard, objective, absolute qualities that God brings to the table, that we learn how often and how badly we need mercy ourselves. Read the life stories of the so called heroes of the faith in the Old Testament and what you'll find is that none of their lives were victory parades. All of them collided with God's holiness and found themselves broken and bent, hurt and vulnerable and needing mercy. And it is what they learned from failing and finding mercy that made them great. To imagine a grace that doesn't lead to holiness is to deprive ourselves of the lesson.