

MERCIFUL AND UNMERCIFUL MERCY

James 2:10-13

(NIV) 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, 'You shall not commit adultery,' also said, 'You shall 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

We look today at how best to apply God's laws to ourselves and to others within our earthly family or church family with whom we share a bond of responsibility and love. Unless we have confidence that God's laws and the principles by which He guides us represent His extraordinary love for us, we may misunderstand or even resent what He expects of us. **Psalms 23** has been a favorite of God's people ever since Israel's shepherd-king, David, penned these words a thousand years before our Savior's birth. A High-Tech paraphrase of **Psalms 23** expresses confidence in the Lord's care of us in our complex, modern world:

The Lord is my Programmer, I shall not crash. He instilled His software on the hard disk of my heart; all of His commands are user-friendly; His directory guides me to the right choices for His name's sake.

Even though I scroll through the problems of life, I will fear no bugs or viruses, for He is my backup; His password and His technical support protect me.

He prepares an options menu when I am surrounded by pop-up enemies; His help is only a keystroke away; His provisions exceed my needs.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and my file will be merged with His and saved forever.

My personal, sometimes painful experience is that when God's laws are applied *to* us, or to others *by* us, with a *lack of supportive mercy*, this turns God into an ogre and discourages us from wanting to be godly. This is one of the evils James wrote to correct. Yet, if God's laws are applied with an *excess of sheltering mercy*, to spare people the consequences of their ungodly actions, this turns God into an indulgent grandfather and encourages us to be ungodly. We will explore today how to find the right balance between Merciful Mercy that draws us closer to the Lord and Unmerciful Mercy that pushes us away from the Lord.

I. MERCIFUL MERCY

James probably penned his letter 15-17 years after **Jesus'** Resurrection and the birth of the Church to give encouragement and guidance to believers in Christianity's early years. His words are as blunt and practical as Solomon's insights of **Proverbs**. Both men are concerned with the same key question: *How should my faith in the Lord influence my actions in the concerns of everyday life?*

Last week's sermon, "Favoritism Is Faithless," underscored that "favoritism" (which means "judging, evaluating, or determining the worth of others by external, superficial factors alone"), is one of the evils that being "born again" and "baptized" by the Holy Spirit into Christ's Church (**John 3:3; I Corinthians 12:13, 27**) is supposed to end. Why did **Jesus** command us, "Do not judge, so that you won't be judged" (**Matthew 7:1**)? He did so to remind us we *all* stand before the judgment seat of holy God Almighty as condemned convicts. Convicts on death row may have been good to their mothers, or may have given generously to charities, or may even have risked to lives to save someone from great danger. But their death sentence forfeits their privilege to sit as jurors and judge the guilt of others. We cannot admit we deserve to be condemned to everlasting death's row, and profess we desperately need God's mercy to save us by the perfect goodness of **Jesus Christ** alone, and still claim the right to judge without mercy the guilt or worth of others. A boy named Stephen, age 8, of Chicago, wrote this letter to his pastor: "Dear Pastor, I would like to go to heaven someday because I know my brother won't be there."

James 2:10 & 11 should be interpreted together: "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, 'You shall not commit adultery,' also said, 'You shall not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a law-breaker." With human legal codes, disobedience to a particular law makes us violators merely of that law. We can still think of ourselves as honorable, "law-abiding" citizens. We tell ourselves, "Aren't human laws often based upon changing human opinions of right and wrong?" Or, "Don't human laws sometimes lose touch with reality in the demands they place upon us?" A "green" Oregon law requires, "Dishes must drip dry" to reduce the "carbon footprint" of burning fossil fuels to generate electricity. A Tucson law declares, "When being attacked by a criminal or burglar, you may only protect yourself with the same weapon that the other person possesses." But each of *God's* laws represents *God's* will. Each law is also based upon *God's character*, and reveals to us some facet of *God's perfect wisdom and goodness*. This is why James insists that *any* violation of God's law is more important than the specific act we commit. If we dismiss as irrelevant or consciously break any Biblical commandment, we reject part of who God is ("He who said"). This makes us guilty of idolatry for exalting our will and desires above God's.

But why did James name "adultery" and "murder," not common sins like lying, stealing, or coveting? Was he suggesting we have the right to judge the worth or wrongness of others if we are not murderers or adulterers? Hardly! James probably had in mind how **Jesus** interpreted and applied the commandments upon murders and adultery in His "Sermon on the Mount." In **Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28**, **Jesus** clarifies we are guilty of violating these commands even by contemptuous hate and lustful thoughts. By these standards, we are a world of murderers or adulterers! James may also have cited these commandments to emphasize that as disgusting as murder and adultery are to our eyes, any "lawbreaker," anyone who "neglects," "exceeds," or "violates" the guidelines God prescribes for our safety and joy, becomes as offensive to a *holy and perfect God* as the worst lawbreakers appear to our *unholy and imperfect eyes*.

Vs. 12: "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom." "Speak and act" is a summary of all we do. In **Acts 1:1** (NASB), Luke summarizes his Gospel as an "account . . . about all that Jesus began to do and teach." James is urging us to weigh all of our actions in light of the reality, "we are *about* to be judged," as the Greek can literally be translated. In **II Corinthians 5:10-11** (CSB), Paul said it filled him with "fear" to realize, "For we [believers] must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."

Romans 8:2 & 4 (NCV) explain "the law that gives freedom" of **James 2:12**. It's the power of Christ's Spirit within His followers that gives us freedom from the power of sin and liberates us to live pleasing to our Creator and Master: "Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit that brings life made you free from the law that brings sin and death." ⁴ He did this so that we could be the kind of people the law correctly wants us to be. Now we do not live following our sinful selves, but we live following the Spirit." A story is told of a young girl who accepted Christ as her Savior and applied for membership in a local church. "Were you a sinner before you received the Lord Jesus into your life?" asked an old deacon. "Yes, sir," she replied. "Well, are you still a sinner?" "To tell you the truth," she replied, "I feel I'm a greater sinner than ever." "Then what real change have you experienced?" he asked. "I don't quite know how to explain it," she said, "except I used to be a sinner running after sin, but now that I am saved, I'm a sinner running from sin!" The church warmly received this young lady into their fellowship. She proved by her consistent, Christlike life that **Jesus** had truly set her free from the lure and domination of sin.

When the Lord liberated His people from Egyptian slavery, did He give them His laws to *restrain* their liberty or to *safeguard* their newly won freedom? Because we are created in God's image and His laws are a reflection of His image, God's laws "liberate" us to be exactly the people He created us to be and to guarantee the quality of life He created us to enjoy. By learning and applying God's law to our lives, we *expand* the possibilities of what we can do or become because we are *freed* from sin's crippling power over us.

In all times, people discard so-called "outdated morality" thinking it "cramps" their freedom. America today tragically testifies that freedom to indulge our whims and appetites without restriction, in the name of being "liberated," exposes us to unforeseen dangers and new forms of slavery, like addictions to drugs or pornography. Isn't it far more difficult to break away from a bad habit's clutches than it was to embrace it? The *Saint Petersburg Times* told about a thief who grabbed some sausages in a meat market one day. He hoped to dash off with a few sausages hidden under his coat. To his surprise, they were part of a fifteen-foot-long string. The police soon found him; tangled up in the stolen sausages. People often think they can get away with what they hope will be a hidden sin, but they usually end up so deeply entwined in their sin that they cannot get free without the power of God. The great Bible teacher **Augustine** (A.D. 354-430) taught, "Freedom is not having the liberty to do what we *want* but to do what we *ought*." The freest people on earth are those who experience "the law that gives freedom" (in Greek, literally "the liberating law") that not only *instructs* us how to live to be the people God created us to be, but *empowers* us to experience by the Lord's indwelling Holy Spirit the quality of life **Jesus** saves us from sin to enjoy!

Yet, we will always *deserve* God's judgment because we will never fully conform to "the law that gives freedom" in this life. The book, *Children's Letters to God: The New Collection*, includes a letter a girl named Nan wrote: "Dear God, I bet it is very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in our family and I have trouble loving them!" Our only possibility of being saved from God's justice is for God to extend mercy to us that we desperately need but could never deserve, for the things we "have trouble" doing that God asks us to do. We need the reminder of **vs. 13**, "judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment." If we summarized the main point of **James 2:10-13**, it would be: "Those who never or rarely show mercy cannot be recipients of God's saving mercy, for they show no evidence of having internalized the mercy God has shown to them."

In **Matthew 23:23** (NASB), **Jesus** described "the weightier provisions of" God's "law" as "justice, and mercy, and faithfulness." "Mercy" is the outward manifestation of a pity that must *do something* to aid someone in great need rather than merely feel sorry for them. It's the application of the Golden Rule to ourselves (**Matthew 7:12**) to render the aid we would hope someone would extend to us if we were in similar need. **Jesus** promised, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (**Matthew 5:7**, NASB).

II. UNMERCIFUL MERCY

I suggested at the opening of this message that when God's laws are applied *to* us, or to others *by* us, with a lack of *supportive mercy*, this turns God into an ogre and discourages us from wanting to be godly. James has hammered home this essential point very well. But I also suggested to you if God's laws are applied with an excess of *sheltering* mercy, this turns God into an indulgent grandfather and encourages us to be ungodly. The crucial question we must answer is, "Are we demonstrating Christlike mercy to people if our 'mercy' encourages them to be unChristlike?" In other words, should our goal in demonstrating Christ's mercy be to encourage people to be more like **Jesus** and to abandon their ungodliness? Yes!

John 8:2-11 displays Christ's truly merciful mercy. He kept a self-righteous mob from stoning a woman caught in adultery with these memorable words: "The one without sin among you should be the first to throw a stone at her." When her accusers left, **Jesus** asked her, "Has no one condemned you?" 'No one, Lord,' she answered. 'Neither do I condemn you,' said Jesus. 'Go, and from now on do not sin any more.'" **Jesus** urged her to use her reprieve from ruin to break with her life of sin, commit herself to Him as her Savior, and begin to experience His liberating freedom from sin's control. It was her choice, but **Jesus** left no doubt in her mind what He expected of her.

CONCLUSION

Allow me to share a true story in closing. It may help us know the difference between *supportive* mercy, which encourages people to break from their sin through the power of our Savior's Spirit within them, and *sheltering* mercy that encourages people to remain ungodly.

Some years ago, two teenagers with a long history of crime and delinquency robbed a YMCA on New York City's Lower East Side. As they made their escape, they saw a young man at YMCA's telephone switchboard. Frightened, they assumed he must be calling the police. They seized and beat him savagely with brass knuckles and a black jack. Thinking he was dead, they hid him behind a radiator near the swimming pool and escaped. Later that evening, a woman who came to swim slipped on the man's blood, screamed, and then found Donald Tippet's body. He lived, but one eye was so badly damaged it could not be saved.

Meanwhile, the two teenagers were apprehended and brought to trial. Their prior records made long sentences seem certain. But Donald Tippet did an amazing thing: he asked the judge to allow the two young men to be paroled in his custody. He wanted to give them another chance. He believed they could change, given the right opportunity and encouragement. One of the boys blew his chance. He committed another serious crime, was caught, and sent to prison as justice demanded. *Supportive mercy* does not guarantee endless *sheltering mercy*. The other boy, however, responded to Tippet's kindness. He broke with his sin-driven life and yielded his heart to Christ for a fresh start. He went to college and later applied to medical school. He became one of our nation's leading eye surgeons. A reporter who wrote about Donald Tippet's remarkable story of forgiveness said this about the surgeon's accomplishments: "I wonder if he ever performs one of those delicate eye operations without thinking of that night in the YMCA and the young man whose confidence and forgiveness changed his life!"