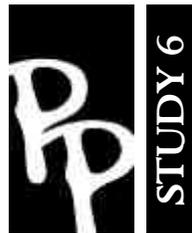


# CHRISTIANS AND GOD'S LAW



## James 2:8-13

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- Introduction to the passage
- What these verses mean
- Summary
- A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses
- Focus Point 1: God's law in the Christian life
- Focus Point 2: Rewards for Christians
- Over to you

## Introduction to the passage

It is important to remember that James is writing to Jewish Christian believers, people who were chosen by God to salvation, and given new life through the power of the gospel (1:18). He is not teaching them how to become Christians, but how they should live as Christians. If we forget this, we will think that these verses teach that the way to become a Christian is to obey God's law. But this would contradict what we find in the rest of Scripture, that we are saved by faith and not by obedience to the law of God (John 3:16; Eph.2:8-9; Gal.3:10-11). James teaches that because we are Christians, we must not only respect God's law, but we must pay attention to every detail of it. His readers may have thought that avoiding favouritism was not very important, but this is not so. Here James insists that all God's requirements are to be honoured and none can be overlooked.

## What these verses mean

Verse 8

***If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbour as yourself," you are doing right.***

James is saying that if we treat other people with equal respect we are acting in harmony with the law of God in Leviticus 19:18. He calls it "the royal

law" because Jesus Christ, who is the King, endorsed this rule as basic to all human relationships (Mark 12:29-31). It sums up all the laws in the second part of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:8-17). To love ourselves is not to indulge in proud self-congratulation, which is sinful. Rather it means that we should remember that our lives, bodies and souls, are God's gift to us, and that therefore we should give ourselves such care and attention as makes us pleasing to him. The teaching is that this is what we should have in mind in our relationship with other people. Jesus answered the question, "Who is my neighbour?" in Luke 10:25-37.

Verse 9

***But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as law-breakers.***

In the course of a whole range of instruction about relationships (Lev.19:9-18), the Lord says, "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly" (Lev. 19:15) and then, "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). Similarly, James moves from the sin of favouritism towards the rich to all forms of bias for unworthy reasons. If his readers should be tempted to think lightly of such matters, he reminds them, in very plain language, that this is a matter of God's law, and that is always serious. Note the emphasis on the words "sin" and "law-breakers". In the original Greek they convey the idea of being "short of the mark" and "stepping over the line". Favouritism is looked upon by God as falling short of his standard and the one who commits it is punishable as one who has trespassed, stepped over the marked boundary.

Verse 10

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

Not only must we realise the importance of the law about loving our neighbours, but James takes the opportunity to insist that every part of God's law is to be taken seriously. This is in complete harmony with our Lord's teaching in Matthew 5:17-20. It is also confirmed by the fact that though Adam disobeyed God at one point, the consequences were devastating and universal as Paul tells us in Romans 5:18-19. We must remember that the law is a reflection of the perfect character of God, so if we say that one part is not important we are detracting from God's perfection. The law of God is not like a pile of stones where one severed link breaks the whole chain. It is more like a chain where one severed link breaks the whole chain. Another comparison would be that of one small puncture which produces a flat tyre and makes it dangerous and unusable.

Verse 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 law-breaker.**

The principle of “one sin results in the whole of the law being broken” set out in 2:10 is now backed up by a practical illustration in this verse. It dismisses any idea that bad deeds can be cancelled out by good deeds. James takes two of the Ten Commandments, murder and adultery, to make the point unmistakably clear. A murderer cannot claim that he has not broken God’s law because he has not committed adultery. Of course Jesus taught that a lustful look meant that the sin of adultery had already been committed in the heart (Matt. 5:28). Likewise, being angry and resentful with someone is committing murder in the heart (Matt. 5:21-22). As we get hold of these truths we come to understand that in practice the more we try to keep the whole law, the more we realise how much we fail. The Christian is so thankful that he is covered with the perfect righteousness of Christ.<sup>1</sup> This does not excuse him, as he continues to be under the moral obligation to obey every part of God’s law. The law, however, does not save a person or keep them. That is all done by grace through faith in Christ. The righteousness comes from Christ and not by obeying the law. The teaching of these verses can be used in evangelism to people who are not Christians. They very often claim to keep some laws, while they forget those laws they know and do break.

Verse 12

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

It is all too easy to speak about the law of God without acting upon it. We might study God’s law, and discuss it with much enthusiasm, and yet continue to live as though it does not apply to us. This seems to have been a fault among the dispersed Jewish believers. Paul had to write along similar lines to the Jewish Christians in Rome (Rom. 2:17-24). So James insists that we need both to know what God requires of us and to act upon it. But we must not only seek to obey the law, we must do so with diligence and zeal because at the judgement our lives will be assessed on the basis of God’s law. Since we are believers in Christ, and have been saved from the wrath to come, this judgement is not with a view to condemnation and banishment, but to the rewards we shall enjoy in the new heaven and earth (1 Co. 3:12-15; 2 Co. 5:10; Rev.22:12). In being judged, the believer will have to account for his life. This may include, sadly, a life that has grieved God. The result may be seen more in losses than rewards. The judgement that is to take place is

<sup>1</sup> This is known as the doctrine of Justification. See the Focus Point on page 59 of the Preachers’ Study Papers on Galatians (Book 1).

based upon “the law that gives freedom”. This phrase has already come up in 1:25 (Study 4). James is using this phrase in the context of writing to believers and is meaning that they will be judged in the light of the gospel. This “law” has already freed the believer from the curse of the law and all its requirements. He now has life and not death.

Verse 13

**Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.**

This clearly reflects the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:7 and 6:14-15. Any person who is a true Christian will be merciful towards other people in kindness and forgiveness. This means that if we are not merciful we lack a sign of being born again, and therefore will come under God’s judgement. Trusting in Christ must not lead us to be careless about obedience to God. Paul tells us that the reason for our salvation is “that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us” (Rom. 8:4).

**Mercy triumphs over judgment!**

For the person who knows that in his heart he has been changed from a selfish person to someone who shows mercy there is that confidence that the mercy of God he has experienced will prevail on Judgement Day. No Christian will be able to face that day and deserve to stand in God’s presence. God’s mercy will triumph over the judgement that his people ought to face. If we fail, and seek God’s pardon, he is ready to show mercy. He delights in mercy (Mic. 7:18).



## Summary

James has been dealing with behaviour towards our fellow men. His teaching began in 2:1 and he is condemning attitudes and behaviour based on worldly standards. In the first part of chapter 2 James tackles favouritism. Now he examines this behaviour in direct relationship to God’s law. The Christian is a person who, through faith in Jesus Christ, has been saved from God’s condemnation, and no power on earth can alter that fact. But this does not mean that we can be careless about any part of God’s law or any part of the Bible. We will come before God at the judgement when Jesus returns, not to be condemned, but to give an account of our lives as Christians, and receive our reward, according to our faithfulness. In the accounting the Christian will know of his failures and there will be reliance upon mercy. In all this God’s mercy will rise above judgement for he is a merciful God.



## A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

**Theme:** Christian compassion – Showing mercy

### Introduction

- i. The world tends to be a very harsh place. Rich countries are not very concerned for others. There is much exploitation of drink and drugs, careless of their dire effects.
- ii. Many of the works of compassion that does exist in the world were begun by Christians. For example, hospitals.
- iii. Christians must be known for their kindness and the mercy they show to others.

### I Why Christians should be merciful

1. Because that is the character of the God we worship.
2. Because that is the teaching of our Lord and his apostles.
3. Because we have received mercy through the death of Christ for us.

### II How Christians should show mercy

1. In pity for those who are needy.
2. In forgiveness for those who offend us.
3. In spreading the gospel for rescuing people who are under the wrath of God.



## Focus Point 1: God's law in the Christian life

How can it be scriptural to say that Christians are under the law? Is James bringing us back into bondage from which Christ liberated us? What place has “law” in the life of the Christian?

The first twenty chapters of Exodus are a huge, God-given, visual aid on this subject. When the story begins, our ancestors were slaves in Egypt; at the end (Ex.19-20) they are a free people, camped at the mount of God, Mount Sinai. It was not by accident that they arrived there – notwithstanding that the Lord brought them out of Egypt in order to bring them into Canaan. When he sent Moses on his mission of liberation, the Lord gave him this assurance, “And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain” (Ex.3:12). From the start, then, the Lord intended Mount

Sinai as a primary destination. He took the wonderful step of acting as his people’s guide, in the pillar of cloud and fire (Ex.13:17-22), in order to guarantee that they would arrive there.

Here then is our visual aid, drawn in the vivid colours of history. The first act of God is to redeem his people (Ex.6:6). Then he brings his people to the place where he reveals his law to them (Ex.20:1). To put the matter another way: those who have experienced the benefit of the blood of the lamb (Ex.12:13; 21-23) must come under obedience to the law. God the Redeemer and God the Law-giver are the same. Grace comes first, the law follows.<sup>2</sup>

See also the Focus Point on The Law of Christ in Galatians Study 24 (Book 3, pages 242-3).



## Focus Point 2: Rewards for Christians

The Bible teaches that there will be rewards at the return of Jesus Christ for those who serve him faithfully (1 Co. 3:12-15; Col. 3:23-24; Matt. 19:27-29). This subject needs to be understood in the context of God’s final judgement. The Bible teaches that this will occur as part of Christ’s return to earth. Jesus Christ will be the judge (Matt. 25:31-33. John 5:27, Acts 10:42, 2 Tim. 4:1). Unbelievers will be judged by what they have done and this will include degrees of punishment (Matt. 11:22, Luke 12:47-48, Rev. 20:12,13). Believers too will appear before the judgement seat of God (Rom. 14:12). In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus teaches that on Judgement Day believers will be separated from unbelievers and believers will be rewarded with Christ’s blessing.

There is uncertainty as to exactly what is meant by rewards and what form they will take, but the following is generally agreed –

### 1. There is no credit to us

There are no rewards in the usual sense, because whatever we do is in the Lord’s strength and by his grace. Our works of love and mercy are not the grounds of our confidence that will justify us in God’s sight. Rather, these works are proof of the greater mercy already shown to us.

### 2. Rewards are an incentive

Nevertheless, the promise of rewards is an incentive to faithfulness and godliness (Phil. 3:12-14; Heb. 10:35). Understanding this truth should help believers to encourage each other that all may increase their heavenly

<sup>2</sup> John Blanchard, *Truth for Life* (Evangelical Press) quoting Motyer.

reward (Heb. 10:24-25). This should motivate a believer to wholeheartedly work for the Lord at whatever task the Lord calls him to do. The believer then seeks that his reward is not wealth or success, but the Lord's approval. God's capacity to bring blessing to all his children is unlimited. There is no danger that it will run out and all will be used up.

### **3. No loss but fulness of life**

There will be no sense of loss in heaven; all will enjoy fulness of life (Ps. 16:11; 2 Tim. 4:8; James 1:12). Although there will be degrees of reward in heaven, the joy of each person will be full and complete for eternity. The level of reward will not affect our happiness. It is our worldly perception that happiness is based upon what we possess or the power we wield. True happiness comes from delighting in God and rejoicing in the status and recognition that he has given to the believer. Differing rewards will not mean differing states of happiness; otherwise there would not be full happiness in heaven. Those with greater rewards and honour, nearer to the throne, will not delight in their status but only in the privilege of falling down before God to worship him (Rev. 4:10-11).

### **4. The greatest reward for all will be God himself**

Whatever our understanding of heavenly rewards that await all Christians, we are in no doubt that the greatest reward will be God himself (Gen. 15:1; Rev. 21:3). We will never tire of worshipping God; our worship will be continuous and joyful. We will be overwhelmed by his presence and our response will not need the prompting that we currently experience on the present earth. We will burst out with unending praise of God's holiness and his worthiness to receive glory, honour and power.



## **Over to you**

Does your ministry maintain an equal stress on our freedom from the law for our salvation and on the requirement that as Christians we must seek to obey God's law?

Are there people in your congregation who are trying to gain salvation by keeping God's law? From this study how would you teach such a person that they will not succeed?

How much do your people understand the mercy of God? It may be that a lack of understanding this and how we do not receive the judgement that we deserve is a cause for great misunderstanding.