

Love and the Law



SABBATH—OCTOBER 25

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: James 2:1–13; Mark 2:16; Leviticus 19:17, 18; Romans 13:8–10; John 12:48.

MEMORY VERSE: “Those who have not shown mercy will not receive mercy when they are judged. To show mercy is better than to judge” (James 2:13, NlrV).

WE KNOW THE STORY WELL. The question is, *How well have believers accepted and made use of it?*

Going from Jerusalem to Jericho, a priest, then a Levite, saw a man lying half dead in the road. The priest and the Levite had just finished their religious duties. But neither of them felt it was their duty to help the injured soul. So, each man kept walking. Finally, a Samaritan, a half-pagan,¹ passed by. He took pity on the man, bandaged his wounds, and paid for his stay at an inn where he could get well. The Samaritan also promised to pay the innkeeper for anything else the man might need (read Luke 10:30–37).

Jesus told that story in answer to a question by a lawyer about eternal life. Rather than tell the lawyer, “Try harder!” or “Do more!” Jesus painted a picture of love in action. The story shows that we are to show love even in dangerous or unpleasant situations.² We are to love even those we do not like.

It is not easy and often goes against our nature. But true love involves some risk and asks us to tear down barriers that separate us as people, both outside and inside the church. This week we will see what James has to say about this very important truth.

DEFINITIONS

1. half-pagan—a person who mixed the worship of the God of Israel with the worship of many gods or goddesses or the earth or nature.
2. situations—all of the facts, conditions, and events that affect someone or something at a particular time and in a particular place.

THE MAN IN GOLD (James 2:1–4)

Read James 2:1–4. It is a study in differences. One person is rich, well dressed, and important. The other is poor, needy, poorly dressed, and not important. People are polite to one but not the other. One receives a comfortable seat. But the other one is told to stand off to the side or find a place on the floor.

The description is not a very pretty one, because the unkindness shown here is in a worship service! The Greek word for “gathering” or “assembly” in verse 2 is *synagogue*. The use of this word probably means a Jewish-Christian Sabbath service. Many such services would have taken place in private homes (read Acts 18:7, 8).

In the Greco-Roman culture of the first century, a person’s position was all-important. Those with wealth, education, or political influence were expected to use these things to get ahead. Any large gift to public or religious projects required the receiver to “pay back” the giver with favors in some way. The few upper-class people who attended Christian services expected special treatment. To ignore these expectations would have brought disgrace on the church. A failure to be “politically correct” would cause terrible problems in the church.

Read Mark 2:16 and Luke 11:43. How are members of society in Jesus’ day expected to behave? How do these expectations conflict (disagree) with the principles (important rules) of the gospel?

It is not a sin to be poor or rich. But one test for our Christian experience is how we treat people who are different from us in age, wealth, education, and even religious beliefs. We are likely to give more respect to those we see as “above” us on the social ladder and less respect to those “below.” We must remember that it is easy to get pulled into following social rules. But God calls us to be different (read Romans 12:2).

Let us face it: we might not be as open and as sensitive about it as James described. But do we not all play favorites? How can we learn to recognize this problem in ourselves and deal with it?



How we treat those who are different is a test of Christian love.

CLASS (GROUP) STRUGGLE (James 2:5, 6)

As religious book salesmen know, very often those who have *the least* are willing to sacrifice *the most* to buy Christian books. Well-to-do neighborhoods may be tough territory to sell books in. This is because the people who live there may be satisfied with what they have. Very often they do not feel their need of God as much as those who have less. The same pattern also can be seen in larger ways. For example, the church often grows faster in places where there is economic and social trouble. People who are struggling with big issues are often more open to the hope presented in the story of Jesus than are those who think that things are going great for them.

Read James 2:5, 6. How does James more fully explain what he wrote in the first four verses of chapter 2?

Judging from James 2:5, 6, it would seem that there were big problems in the church among the rich and the poor. God chose the poor who were “rich in faith.” And the rich used their wealth to make the poor suffer. This problem of the rich taking advantage of the poor was very real at that time. Even worse, Roman law made it possible for the rich to do this to the poor.

“People of lower class could not bring charges against persons of higher class. And the laws gave stricter penalties for guilty lower-class persons than for guilty persons of the higher class.”—Adapted from Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), page 694.

Read James 2:7. What important point does James make here about the influence of this bad behavior?

The rich people’s bad behavior really works against “the good name” of Jesus. Bad actions are bad enough in and of themselves. But what makes them worse is when those who claim the name of Jesus do them. And even worse those who, in the name of Jesus, would use their wealth or power to gain advantage over others in the churches. This often leads to divisions and quarrels. So, how careful we should be that our words and actions match the “good name” of Jesus!



Our words and actions must match the “good name” of Jesus.

LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS (James 2:8, 9)

Read James 2:8, 9, along with Leviticus 19:17, 18 and Matthew 5:43–45. What important message is given here?

James calls God’s law “the royal law” (James 2:8). This is because it is the law of the “KING OF KINGS” (Revelation 19:16). The law of His kingdom is given in detail in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). The first of nine blessings in the Sermon speaks about loving our neighbor (Matthew 5:3–11).

Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:43 suggest how Leviticus 19:18 was understood at the time. For example, Jesus’ commands in Leviticus do not permit hating one’s brother (Leviticus 19:17) or holding bitterness against one’s fellow Israelite (Leviticus 19:18).

Some people interpreted these commands to mean it would be fine to be angry with or hate someone who was not an Israelite. After all, people who were not Israelites were also thought of as enemies. We now know that such an attitude (feeling) belonged to the Qumran community. This group of devout Jews had separated themselves from the rest of the nation. They were taught to hate “the children of darkness” and “the men of perdition [sin]” (*The Community Rule 1QS 1:10; 9:21, 22*). To the Qumran community, “the children of darkness” and “the men of perdition” were not only foreigners but also any Israelites who had refused to accept the community’s teachings.

“Sin is the greatest of all evils. And it is our responsibility to pity and help the sinner. There are many who are faulty and who feel their shame and their foolishness. They are hungry for words of encouragement. They look upon their mistakes and errors until they feel almost hopeless. We are not to neglect these souls. If we are Christians, we shall not pass by on the other side. We should not keep as far as possible from the very ones who most need our help. When we see humans in trouble or suffering because of abuse or sin, we shall never say, This does not concern me.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 504.

Jesus’ life is the greatest example we will ever have of selfless love for those who did not deserve it and did not love back. How can we learn to love these types of people? Why is complete self-surrender and death to self the only answer?



We must draw near to those who most need our help.

THE WHOLE LAW (James 2:10, 11)

Read James 2:10, 11. Now read the verses listed in the table below and group them as the “whole law,” the “law of love,” or both.

	Whole Law	Law of Love
Matthew 5:18, 19		
Matthew 22:36–40		
Romans 13:8–10		
Galatians 3:10		
Galatians 5:3		
Galatians 5:14		



Breaking God's law damages our relationship to God and others.

It is hard for us to understand how different Jesus' teaching on the law was from the people's thinking. For religious Jews then (and for many today) one cannot really boast about obeying the law without keeping all the laws found in the books of Moses. There are 613 separate laws listed by the Jews (248 positive laws and 365 negative ones).

Someone asked Jesus about which law was *most important* (Matthew 22:36). This question was probably meant to trap Him. Jesus seems to have supported every “jot” (the smallest Hebrew letter; Matthew 5:18) as important. But He also taught that love to God and love to our neighbor were the most important commandments because they sum up (represent) all the others.

Jesus' teaching also shows that obedience cannot be done in an empty space. Instead, obedience is always meaningful to human experience. If not, it is meaningless.

Jesus also spoke about the “weightier matters (more important things) of the law” as being “judgment, mercy, and faith” (Matthew 23:23). All of these are centered on relationships, too, with God and with other people. So, it is not a question of having enough good deeds to outweigh our bad deeds. But, by knowing Jesus, we begin to direct our attention away from ourselves and toward faithfulness to God and service to others.

How much of your obedience comes from your love for God and others? And how much comes from a feeling of just “having to do it”? Is working from your forced feeling always wrong? Perhaps you do not feel love for a person but help him or her *only* because you know you are supposed to. If so, what is wrong with that?

JUDGED BY THE LAW (James 2:12, 13)

Read James 2:12, 13. (Read also John 12:48; Romans 2:12, 13; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:12, 13.) What do these verses teach about judgment?

Nothing is clearer than the teaching that we will be judged by the law. This judgment is based on what we have done, whether for good or for evil. At the same time, too, the Bible is also clear that through faith in Jesus, we are covered by His righteousness (perfect life).

This covering includes two parts: forgiveness (justification³) and obedience (sanctification⁴). “As you . . . *have received* Christ Jesus the Lord, so *walk* in Him” (Colossians 2:6, NKJV; emphasis added); and “For as many of you as were *baptized* into Christ have *put on* Christ” (Galatians 3:27, NKJV; emphasis added).

It is often said that we will not only be judged on what we have done but also on what we have not done. Many have a wrong idea of what this means. It does not mean we are to be doing more *things*. That opens the door to discouragement and self-defeat. Notice how James describes it in the first half of verse 13: “Judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy” (NKJV). Again James is concerned about the nature of the relationship we have with others. The mercy in the judgment that God gives to a believer depends on the mercy a believer gives to others.

If we thought about it long enough, we could become so worried about the judgment that we would give up and feel hopeless. But that is *not* what it means to “fear [worship and honor] God . . . for the hour of His judgment has come” (Revelation 14:7, NKJV)! Instead, we must always trust in the righteousness (perfect life) of Jesus, who alone is our only hope in the judgment.

But at the same time, the warnings in the Bible about the judgment are there for our good. They prevent us from falling into a false sense of security (safety). James says, “To show mercy is better than to judge” (James 2:13, NIV). We must remember his words when we deal with those who have fallen into the worst of sins.

Do you remember when you messed up so badly that you expected punishment and judgment? Instead, you were given mercy, grace,⁵ and forgiveness. How did you feel? How can you make sure that you remember that the next time someone else messes up badly?

DEFINITIONS

3. justification—being forgiven, cleansed from sin, and covered by Christ’s perfect character (life of holiness).
4. sanctification—leading an obedient and holy life after giving oneself to Christ.
5. grace—God’s gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Ellen G. White, “Facing Life’s Record,” *The Great Controversy [War Between Christ and Satan]*, pages 479–491.

“God has accepted you before men and angels as His child. Pray that you may do no dishonor to the ‘worthy name by which ye are called.’ James 2:7. God sends you into the world as His representative [ambassador]. In every act of life you are to honor the name of God. . . . This you can do only through the acceptance of the grace and righteousness [holiness] of Christ.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, page 107.

“Through Christ, Justice can forgive a sinner without sacrificing one jot [bit] of its glorious [perfect] holiness.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 7, page 936.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Gandhi (the famous leader of India) summed up the thinking of many when he said, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” Why is it not hard to understand why he said that? It is so easy to look at what others have done in the name of Christ. But why must we first look at what we have done in the name of Jesus? How well do we show Him to the world around us?
- ② Is your local church a place where people feel important and respected, no matter who they are? If not, what can you do to make a difference?
- ③ What are some of the customs and social rules in your country that are not in agreement with Bible principles? What are some clear ones? What are some of the more “hidden” ones? After recognizing what they are, how can you change them so that they better reflect principles of the gospel and show others that Jesus offers us all a better way of life?
- ④ It is one thing to love your neighbor. But what does it mean to love God? In class, discuss what it means to love God, why we love Him, and how we show that love.
- ⑤ “To show mercy is better than to judge” (James 2:13, NIV). What does that mean in daily life, especially when we have to deal with those who do wrong?