

Introduction

The world is captivated with the lifestyles of the rich and famous. There was once a television show by that name. It aired for over 10 years from 1984 to 1995. Even though that show is long gone, it was followed in 2007 by "Keeping up with the Kardashians" which ran for 14 years. Just this year many Americans have glued themselves to the televised court proceedings involving Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. Through the media, people have taken a look into luxurious lifestyles that they can otherwise only imagine. Humans tend to fantasize about what it would be like if they could live that lifestyle, imagining how wonderful it would be. However, what we observe in the real lives of the rich and famous is that such living is often associated with inexplicable eccentricities, haughty pride, and general misery.

We turn this morning in James to consider a lifestyle not of the rich and famous but of the rich in faith. They may not be wealthy, but those who belong to Jesus are made to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom of God. This lifestyle is not so far out of reach, at least from a financial point of view, as that of the rich and famous. It is a lifestyle that even the poorest of persons may live, by the power of God. It is in fact the lifestyle all followers of Christ are summoned to live. And the truth is it is the only lifestyle worth living. Now this what we should WANT to look at. And we can right here in God's word!

[Read Text and Pray]

What James is talking about in these verses is closely connected with the verses just prior to these. There he had been confronting the problem of partiality. And here he is continuing to demonstrate how contrary partiality is to the calling of those who follow Jesus. But as is often the case with James, he says that and so much more so that his instructions and exhortations overlap into much more than just the sin of partiality. In verses 8-13 of this second chapter, James asserts a number of truths which should inform our understanding. In the midst of the cluster, a single imperative statement urges the readers to put the truths into action in their lives. It becomes, therefore, his main point. He says in verse 12, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty." This is to be the lifestyle of those who are rich in faith, those who are heirs of the kingdom. It is how the rich in faith are to live. The other statements in this section help flesh out what that looks like. We may call it the kingdom lifestyle. Three aspects of the kingdom lifestyle stand out in James' instruction. Kingdom lifestyle is regulated by the law. Kingdom lifestyle is to be judged under the law. Kingdom lifestyle is permeated with mercy. These are key truths for us to understand and apply.

I. Kingdom Lifestyle is Regulated by the Law.

A. As given by God two laws supercede and summarize all others. There is the command to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. This is THE great commandment. In the context, James is focused on the relationships between human beings. It is in this context that the second great commandment applies. He mentions it word for word. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This command first appears in the scripture in Leviticus 19:18. It then appears in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Romans, Galatians, and here. It is a summary law covering all kinds of actions but regulating all under the demand to love others in the way that you love yourself.

And it is an undeniable fact that human beings by nature love themselves. You love you and I love me. But the love with which we love ourselves is not what our society usually envisions as love. In our world, love is a feeling, an emotion of yearning. But biblically, love is caring. Love seeks the well-being of the object of its love. We see love in action in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. A man was assaulted and robbed and left for dead on the roadside. Two Jewish religious leaders happened along, but both passed by the victim unwilling to lend him aid. A third man, a despised Samaritan, came upon the scene. He gave the man first aid and transported him to an inn where he could be cared for and paid for his care. Which of the three loved the victim? Yes, this third one. Love is demonstrated in his care. Each of us cares for ourselves. We live our lives in self-interest. The second greatest commandment of the kingdom requires that we love our neighbor the same way. We should love as the Samaritan loved the victim—for his well-being.

James wants us to realize that showing partiality violates this great commandment. Remember, showing partiality is differentiating our treatment of people on the basis of benchmarks that are irrelevant to heaven. Heaven doesn't care whether you are rich or poor. Heaven does not care what color your skin is. Heaven does not care what your IQ is or how popular you are. Now look. Impartiality does not mean we treat everybody the same. God does not treat everybody the same. It means that any difference with which we relate to people is not based on some worldly advantage they might pass along to us or some factor of outward attraction. When we become selective about whom we love on the basis of their worth to us, we are not loving them as we love ourselves. Partiality transgresses the commandment to love in this way.

B. Next, James wants us to understand the nature of this great command and its relation to those who are rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom—that is to followers of Jesus. What is elsewhere in the New Testament called a great commandment, James identifies as law.

1. He calls it the ROYAL LAW. You see that designation in verse 8. Why does he call it "royal" law? Certainly it means it is important, really important, but the immediate context communicates to us a connection between the kingdom of Christ and this law. Those who are rich in faith are also heirs of the kingdom. James is tying this law to life in the kingdom. Life among those in the kingdom of Christ is regulated by the requirement and stipulation that those in the kingdom love one another as they love themselves. How wonderful it will be when this command is lived out fully and beautifully in the new heavens and new earth. We will all love one another perfectly in line with this standard. It is an anticipation worth living out for the glory of our king who certainly loved us this way.

2. In verse 9, James refers to the command simply as law. It is the rule and the standard in the kingdom and for heirs of the kingdom to strive after. When a person is converted, when they repent of sin and trust in Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection, they are set free from the law . . . the law of Moses. But we are not set free from obligation. It is not as though there is no law to which we are accountable to obey. We are not set free from obedience to Jesus Christ. No we are called to love him and obey him. We are called to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow. "He who has my commandments and keeps them," says Jesus, "is he who loves me."

When the Israelites were brought out the bondage of Egypt, they were led by the Lord to Mt Sinai where they received the law. And when sinners are brought out of our Egypt, the bondage of Satan and the darkness of our depravity, we do not come to Mount Sinai, a law that condemns us because we cannot keep it. But we come in fact to a law. It corresponds to the desire we now have to please and honor the one who has redeemed us. We see in the person of Jesus what that looks like.

And as we are being made to bear his image, that image is his royal law. His commands reflect his being, and these are our pursuit.

3. James articulates a further point about this law. It stands as a whole. You can't get away with only doing part of it. It is one complete unit. Several years ago, I replaced my shower door. Out with the old and in with a new one. But how to dispose of the old one? I saw on you tube how if you tap the glass in a particular spot the entire thing would shatter. So I took the old door and put a plastic garbage bag over it from the bottom and the same thing from the top. Then I raised my hammer and tapped the glass in only one spot. I heard a pop and the whole thing from one end to the other was reduced to a pile of glass shards inside the plastic garbage bags. Likewise, God's law, just like God himself, stands as a single unit. And if you hit the law even in only one spot, the entire thing is shattered.

The lesson is you can't think you are doing well because you keep one aspect of the law. You can't think Christ is pleased or his objective for you is fulfilled just because you obey one of his commands or some of his commands or most of his commands or even all BUT ONE of his commands. No, the whole of Christ is glorious and beautiful and so is EVERY SINGLE ONE of his commands. And they all hold together.

4. James gives us insight into why it is that the law of Christ and his kingdom stands as a whole. It is because all of it is an expression of who he is. The law and the commands of Jesus are not an arbitrary set of rules pulled out of thin air. And they are not simply rules that have been written down somewhere by some unknown prophet. The law has been SPOKEN by God. James writes, "For he who SAID, 'Do not commit adultery,' also SAID, "Do not murder." These commands have the force of personhood—God's personhood—because God spoke. The law is not just an isolated document. God spoke it. That is exactly what happened when the Israelites were gathered at Sinai. First came the spoken law. Then it was handed down on tablets. It is personal. Likewise, Christ's law is a reflection of himself. Jesus said, "If you love ME you will keep MY commandments."

Consider this. What is God doing in the lives of those he saves? According to Romans 8:29, his eternal purpose is that we be conformed to the image of his Son (like Jesus). According to 2 Corinthians 3:18, as we behold the glory of the Lord, we are being transformed INTO HIS IMAGE. 2 Peter 1 tells us that we who are Christ's are being made to partake of the divine nature—to be like God. And it is his commands, the law of Christ, that tell us what that is like. And it is a unit. We do not pick and choose the ways we are willing to be like him. It is all one. There are no choosing between the glories. As Alec Motyer writes, "to say one of the commands does not apply to me is to say that there is some aspect of the nature of God which does not matter, as far as I am concerned. I can get on without it; it is of no particular value" (89). And that dishonors God.

Our ladies just wrapped up their spring study on Psalm 119. This psalm testifies that the word of God expresses the person of God. The commands and the law and the word of God are also called his testimonies and his ways. Do you want to know God? Listen to what he tells you to do. All of it reveals him. Reduce the importance of one of his commands and you are reducing the glory of God himself. Someone might say, "God? I love God; it is his rules I can't stand!" That could not be further from possible. You cannot love God if you do not love his law because God's law and his commands show you who he is.

5. And when we fail to fulfill any of the Lord's commands, we are not simply making a mistake. James says when we show partiality (and a host of other unmentioned sins), we haven't merely

made a mistake. We are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. We are in fact law-breakers. We are outlaws, criminals against the law of the kingdom, and therefore criminals against God himself. Keeping the royal law is doing well. Breaking it is evil. James no doubt is seeking to convey the vile nature of all sin including the seemingly small peccadillo which is showing partiality. It is not small after all. It violates God's royal law and convicts of sin and transgression, of wrong-doing, and carries with it the horror of false worship because it misrepresents the person of God. It carries with it the shame of violating the law of King Jesus. And it carries with it the guilt of bringing harm upon the kingdom's reputation.

All of what James is saying here reflects what Jesus said in the sermon on the mount. Matthew records it in chapter 5. "Truly I say to you until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass away from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:18-20)

Do not take lightly ANY of the commands of Jesus. Realize the seriousness and the shame involved in diminishing him and his glory as well as behaving in hostility to him. Understand that the lifestyle of the kingdom is to reflect the glory of the King and what an amazing privilege it is to become like him. Embrace his commands as the directives to show you who God is and to guide you into his likeness.

II. The Kingdom Lifestyle Is to be Judged Under the Law.

Those who hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ are to live the lifestyle of the kingdom, following the royal law. But James takes it a step further. Our lifestyle is to be lived as such in anticipation of being judged under that law.

Look to verse 12. James issues a strong exhortation. "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty." In other words, "Let the manner in which you speak and the manner in which you act take full account of the fact that you will stand before God and be judged under the law of liberty."

A. What you say matters just as much as what you do. Your speech and mine are as much a part of what we do as anything else. And yet, James does not want us to forget it. Speech is the first aspect of what we do that he addresses. And he is not through. He has more to say about what we say. But let us etch it in our minds as we hear all of what James says that we really, really, really need to give attention to what we say. Words can break God's law just as much as actions. Words in the lifestyle of the rich in faith should express and demonstrate and perform love, loving others as I love myself, doing them good. Paul writes in Ephesians, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." You know Jesus warned we would be judged for what we say. "On the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak." So as we move forward in this point, do not forget that your speech is included in this judgment. At the same time, life is far more than what you say. Words alone without actions are hollow and empty. So speak AND so act as those who are to be judged under the perfect law.

B. The standard of the judgment is the law of liberty. It is the same law of Christ that James has been highlighting in these verses, but now he refers to it as the law of liberty. The commands of Christ do not restrain freedom. The royal law does not restrict the freedom of the rich in faith.

Indeed the commands of Christ ARE the way of true freedom. First of all, they are commands given to those who have been set free. We are not talking here about the law of Moses given to reveal our sin. That is the law of sin and death. In Romans 8, Paul teaches that for those who are in Christ, the law of the Spirit of life has set them free from the law of sin and death. Because of the work of Christ, the requirement of that law has been fulfilled in us. We are free from law in that sense.

But we are now under the law of liberty. How strange that sounds! But here is the truth. We were made in God's image to be that image in our hearts and in our actions. As we have pointed out, God's law is his nature expressed in commandments. When are we truly free? It is when we are unrestrained from doing what we were made to do.

Among my grandson, Titus's, favorite stories right now are stories about a train named Thomas. So I have been learning a bit about trains from reading him these stories. One thing that is true about trains is they were made to run on a pair of parallel rails. Freedom for a train is not the lack of restraint. When there is a lack of restraint with a train, it is off the tracks. It is de-railed and all sorts of damage and chaos result. A train is free when it adheres to the tracks. Likewise, people made to radiate the image of God are truly free when we follow the commands and the law that are the true way of freedom. Obedience to Christ is liberation. Here is incentive not to disdain or hold in drudgery the commands of Christ but to embrace them. They are given to those who have been set free to obey them in order to live in liberty from sin and its bondage. And since we have been set free and given a new heart from the Spirit of God, we can obey! We can be free!

C. Speech and action are what will be judged. The standard is the law of liberty. But what is this judgment? Will Christ's followers be judged? That's what James says. It is also what Paul says. In speaking about Christian brothers and sisters, Romans 14:12 states, "So then each of us will give an account of himself to God." Our lifestyle, our words and actions, will be assessed under the law of liberty. Those words and actions, imperfect though they are, will serve as evidence, however, of whether we were recipients by faith of God's gracious saving work in Christ. We can never be saved by our works. But we will be judged by our works. They will be sufficient evidence to demonstrate either the presence or absence of saving faith.

The fact of this judgment and our awareness that we will never meet the standard and that we will always be in need of God's mercy should have an abiding effect upon the way we live. That's why James says, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by this law of liberty." What are the effects? Take serious this law. Appreciate that it is not restraining but freeing. Diligently obey it because you will give an account and you want to please God.

Just keep in mind that if you are not in Christ you cannot please God. If you are not in Christ no amount of works will make you right with him. In order even to embrace the law as the law of liberty, you must first embrace Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior. You must turn from sin and trust in Christ. THEN receive his commands as the royal law of liberty.

III. The Kingdom Lifestyle is Permeated With Mercy.

A lifestyle of mercy is another effect of bearing in mind we will be judged under the law of liberty. We all fall short of living perfectly according to this law. Every genuine follower of Christ fails to obey him completely. Much as we want to please God, we fail and fall short. We continue to need the mercy of God. But judgment will be without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.

Jesus vividly illustrated this truth in the parable of the unforgiving servant. That servant owed his master far more than a lifetime of debt. Yet when brought before the master, he implored the master to be patient with him. Out of pity, the master had mercy on the servant. He forgave the insurmountable debt and released him. But that servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a pittance compared with what he had been forgiven. He demanded immediate repayment and then threw the slave in prison until the debt should be repaid. You know what happened when the master discovered what the servant had done. He summoned the servant and said to him, "You wicked slave! Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?" In anger he delivered the servant to the jailers until he should pay his debt in full.

Those who show no mercy will receive none. All of us who have received God's mercy and who anticipate receiving God's mercy when we stand before the judgment under the law of liberty, should all demonstrate mercy as well. Those who have received mercy should be merciful. Jesus said as much in the great sermon, "Blessed are the merciful for THEY shall receive mercy." Mercy pities those in need rather than turning the heart from them. This is what we must have from God, and if we have received mercy from God how could we do any less toward others?

Our mercy to others will never merit God's mercy to us. Motyer points out, "If we could make ourselves worthy, we would not need mercy!" No. Here again our mercy does not merit God's mercy. Rather it evidences that we actually have received the mercy of God with its life-transforming power. By the work of God, mercy triumphs over judgment. That is to say that judgment demands justice, but God in his mercy provides his Son. And through his sacrifice God extends mercy to sinners. The mercy of God overcomes the demands of justice that cry out for satisfaction within his own being. And we should do likewise to others.

Conclusion

The world may dream of living the high life of luxury and wealth. But the lifestyle that honors God and displays the glory of God, which enjoys the truest freedom and promises hope in the day of judgment, the lifestyle that will be lived in the new heavens and the new earth, is one in which neighbors are loved like we love ourselves, where we show love in what we say and what we do. It is a lifestyle marked not by self-seeking but by being merciful as God himself is merciful to us pitiful sinners. Praise him that mercy triumphs over judgment.