

## Chapter VIII

### RESPECTERS OF PERSONS ARE LAWBREAKERS

If we accept James's statement regarding his audience at face value, it will do wonders for our understanding. James addressed *the twelve tribes scattered abroad*. This should be accepted as unsaved Jews of the diaspora until such a time as internal evidence should say otherwise. This is in keeping with the rules of interpretation. It is a Scriptural course of action and should be maintained until it cannot be maintained without doing damage to the Scriptures.

If such a course of action had been taken by the commentators, then all of the supposed contradictions between James and Paul would never have arisen, but they have arisen because of assumptions drawn from the language of James. For example, in chapter two James wrote:

My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your [synagogue] a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?

Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? But ye

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have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called? (James 2:1-7, emphasis mine)

In the minds of many the beginning of this verse immediately produces the assumption James wrote to Christians because of his statement about faith in Jesus Christ. This assumption gained further support in the English-speaking world, because the translator of the book of James translated the Greek word for synagogue as *assembly*. An assembly could be associated with Christians since this is the literal meaning of the word that is translated *church*, but a synagogue would definitely be associated with the Jews. Thus in the first seven verses of chapter two of James, we are confronted with a mystery, a mystery which we will endeavor to solve.

On the one hand we have an allusion to faith in Christ (*My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons*), and on the other hand we have a direct statement of a violation of the law by a common practice of the Jews. Christians are not under the law; but since the Jews vowed to keep all that the Lord had spoken, they continue in their covenant responsibility to the law until (in this age) they are freed from it by salvation in Jesus Christ (Romans 10:4).

Did James become confused about the precepts of the gospel and the responsibilities of believers? Was James intermingling law and grace? Some have assumed that he did because of James's request of Paul, when Paul returned to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey, at which time it is evident James and the elders in Jerusalem were all zealous of the law. They believed Jews in Christ should continue to live by the precepts of the law. However this was an erroneous idea and could not become a part of the Scriptural record in opposition to the truth of

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salvation by grace, apart from the deeds of the law, as put forth by the apostle Paul. Such a proposition would deny the inspiration of Scripture, as well as the immutability and omniscience of God. Thus James and Paul who lived and wrote in the same era, if inspired of God, could not put forth diametrically opposing doctrines of salvation, and they did not.

If James and the elders at Jerusalem had thought about the law in terms of its requirements, rather than from a sentimental point of view, they would have been in agreement with Paul from the beginning, but they were not. Remember Paul wrote, *At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge* (II Timothy 4:16). Further, in His sermon on the mount, our Lord told the Jews, *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect* (Matthew 5:48).

Contrary to much that has been written about this verse, this is exactly what the law demands for justification, and man is totally unable to meet this demand. So the perfection demanded by the law had to be met by One Who was able to fulfill it perfectly. Thus in life Christ fulfilled all righteousness and every jot and tittle of the law, and in death He willingly offered Himself as a ransom for sin. Consequently the apostle Paul wrote: *I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain* (Galatians 2:21). And again: *Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work* (Romans 11:5-6).

Given the fact that both James and Paul wrote under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, the writings of both are in agreement, but this can only be seen when we recognize James did not

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write to Jewish Christians, as so many noted theologians have said. Once we understand James's audience was unsaved Jews, all of the supposed contradictions between James and Paul disappear. Once we understand the faith of the Jews was *the faith once delivered unto the saints*, and the Lord of the Jews is also the Lord of the New Testament church, we will be well on our way to understanding the book of James. These truths stand despite the dispensational differences in God's relationship with the Jews (under law) and His relationship with the church (without the deeds of the law), and they are clearly expressed in Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (Ephesians 4:3-6)

James addressed two different kinds of Jews. He addressed those who were lost, with little knowledge of the gospel or the person and work of Christ, and he addressed those who were lost, but had made an erroneous approach to Christianity by giving lip service to Jesus Christ. The latter were involved in intermingling their belief that Jesus was the Christ with a belief that a Jew must continue to live his life by the precepts of the law.

We should recognize that if there are people who claim to be Christians in this age and are not, then there certainly were people in that age who were also false professors. The parable of the tares and the wheat and the Jews *who believed on Jesus*, but not unto salvation, in the eighth chapter of the gospel of John, proves this to be true. It should not be strange then that someone like James would write to them in order to reach them with the gospel.

The common practice of the Jews to give preferential treatment to the rich and ignore the poor was clearly a violation of the royal law, *Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*. Since

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believers are not under the law and are in fact counted to be dead to the law, this statement could not be directed to Christians. This fact does not suggest Christians should not treat people fairly and without bias. It merely indicates James did not write to Christians, but to a people who were still trying to establish their own righteousness by the law and were still failing in that regard. Incidentally, in this age of grace, the Jews remain under their covenant relationship with God based upon the performance of the law until they come to faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 10:4).

James knew the Jews were respecters of persons. So he used that particular characteristic to show them they were unjust in their dealings with one another. They were cowed by the rich. They honored the rich above the poor, but they continued to pretend they loved their neighbors as they loved themselves. Thus James wrote:

If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: but if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors. For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all. For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law. (James 2:8-11, emphasis mine)

At this point a clarification is needed. The ten commandments were divided by the Jews into two commandments. The first, or great commandment, dealt with man's relationship with God and included the first four commandments. The second, or royal law, dealt with man's relationship with man and included the last six commandments. These two divisions are clearly seen on the occasion when a Jewish lawyer came to Jesus and:

... asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:35-40, emphasis mine)

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When we speak of man's inability to keep the law, it is not that we are opposed to good behavior, but man's behavior, at best, can never make him fit for the presence of God. There is nothing wrong with doing the right thing. You can even feel good about doing the right thing. There is nothing wrong with that, but if you perceive your goodness to be sufficient to make you accepted of God, then you are wrong. According to James's argument, this should be self-evident, because the law demands perfection, and the least imperfection spoils the whole.

In essence James said, *It does not make any difference what sin you have committed, whether you regard it as big or little: the most minor infraction condemns you so that you cannot be justified by law.* Then he advised them, *So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.* This is the only hope for a sinner. He must be justified by the grace of God or he cannot be justified at all. Consequently all men need the grace of God because:

The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are altogether become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one. (Psalm 14:2-3)

We have already looked into the *perfect law of liberty* in James chapter one. The perfect law of liberty is, of course, the grace of God. This is the only hope for the Jew. It is also the only hope for the Gentile. James presented the grace of God to the Jews so that they might be justified freely by His grace. Despite their failures before the law, there were those Jews who persisted in claiming they were justified by the law.

These Jews were like Cain. When their offerings of human effort were proven to be inadequate, they were enraged. They were ready to kill their brother, who was more righteous than they. Cain, in a rage, made a bloody sacrifice of Abel; and Israel sacrificed the Lord Jesus

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Christ in a similar rage. Cain and Israel meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. Therefore the sacrifice of Abel typified the sacrifice of Christ. This can also be seen in Joseph when his brothers cast him into a pit. They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good (Genesis 50:20). Thus with the passage of time, Joseph became Israel's savior; and in the fulness of time, God sent forth His Son to be a vicarious sacrifice for the Jews, as well as for the Gentiles.

It was necessary for James to remind the Jews that any failure, no matter how slight, constituted a failure before the whole, with the resultant condemnation. All of the Jews' efforts to establish their own righteousness were empty and vain, and by the law, which they revered, they stood condemned. Despite this, many of them still delighted in judging one another by their traditions, thereby gaining a sense of superiority. A legalistic spirit always manifests itself by self-righteousness. It operates on the principle of accusing others and excusing oneself. This is true if one was a Jew under a covenant relationship of law, or if one is a Gentile, who merely agrees with the principles of the law:

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which shew the work of law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another. (Romans 2:14-15, emphasis mine)

This is the reason Paul told the Romans not to judge one another. If they judged one another to justify themselves, they merely added to their own condemnation, because they did the same things they condemned in others. Therefore James said: *For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment* (James 2:13).

In other words, if you want to judge a man by your traditions, unmercifully, then do not expect mercy when it comes to your own judgment. Nevertheless in the grace of God, as revealed

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in Jesus Christ, *mercy rejoiceth against judgment*. That is, Christ has borne the judgment of the believing sinner; therefore, the believer rejoices in God's mercy. Thus the Jews found themselves between the proverbial rock and a hard spot. This could not continue. They would have to abandon their empty, useless faith for a viable faith in Jesus Christ.