

The Law and the Christian, Part I

James 2:8-13

1/2/2000

Turn, please, to the book of James, chapter 2. The book of James, the second chapter. We are continuing together our study in the book of James. The opening verses of this chapter deal with the subject of partiality. And in dealing with the subject of partiality, James refers to the source of authority upon which he bases his rebuke of the partiality that was being exercised in the churches to which James was writing. And that source of authority is nothing other than the law of God itself. So what we want to do then, is we want to pick up the reading at verse 8 of James, chapter 2. We want to read down to verse 13. James, chapter 2, verses 8 through 13.

“If ye fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbor 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. So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty. For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.”

The Christian’s relationship to the law of God is one of great controversy in Evangelical circles in our day. There are those who still practice and observe the dietary restrictions of the Old Testament, such as the Seventh Day Adventists. There are those who wish to reinstitute all of the civil and penal laws of civil government, such as the Christian Reconstructionists. And then there are those who think that *all* the Old Testament laws are done away with, including the Ten Commandments—those who are the Evangelical Antinomians.

And so this controversy and difference of opinion regarding the Christian’s relationship to the law is a source of great confusion to many believers. They are unsure as to what exactly they *can* and *cannot* do and still be in obedience to God. Now part of this confusion arises from the failure to properly distinguish and to determine the meaning of the word “law” in its various contexts. Just like the word “world” can have five entirely different meanings depending upon the *context* in which it is used, in the same way the word “law” can also have several different meanings, depending upon the *context* in which it is used.

- Sometimes the word “law” refers to all of the writings contained in the Old Testament. And so the totality of the Old Testament is called “the law”;
- Sometimes the word “law” refers exclusively to the writings of Moses, excluding the remainder of the Old Testament;
- Sometimes the word “law” refers to the Old Covenant—the Mosaic Covenant, the covenant that was made at Mt. Sinai;
- Sometimes the word “law” is used to refer to the ceremonial law; that is, the law that had to do with temple worship and the ordering and activity of the priesthood;

- Sometimes the word “law” refers to the *civil* law; that is, those ordinances that governed and directed the civil government of Israel under the Old Covenant; or
- Sometimes the word “law” refers to the *moral* law of God, the Ten Commandments, and all of those commandments that relate *to* them.

And so, therefore, unless we properly distinguish between these various meanings of the word “law” and rightly determine what meaning applies to the *usage* of the word, we are going to be sunk into a mass of hopeless confusion, because we have in the Bible what *appears* to be—and I emphasize the word *appears* to be—very contradictory statements in Scripture regarding the *Law*. On the one hand, we are told in some places that we are *no longer* subject to the Law. And in other places, we are told to *observe* and be *subject* to the Law, and to fail to do so is *sin*.

Now if we do not understand these various meanings and usages of the word “law,” then we are going to be sunk into a mass of hopeless confusion and contradiction. And so there must be some simple attention paid to, number one, the covenantal *structure* of redemptive history, because understanding that helps us to understand the meaning of the word “law” in various contexts. And also, giving some simple attention to the *context* of the passage under consideration will help us to easily determine the meaning of the word “law” as it is used in any particular *passage*. And it will help us harmonize all that the Bible has to say about the law into a coherent unity instead of the mass of contradiction that passes for a doctrine of biblical law in our day.

Now in our passage before us today, James has a number of things to say about the Law of God and the Christian’s relationship *to* it. He has four things to say, in fact, and we will deal with the first two of those this evening, and then, God willing, the second two next Lord’s Day evening.

So what we want to do this evening is to look at what James has to say about the law of God and our relationship to it, and see how that should impact and affect our behavior. And so the first principle that James brings out that we want to consider together this evening is that Christians are *still* accountable to obey the law. Christians are *still* accountable to *obey* the law.

Now notice if you will, James, chapter 2, verses 8 through 9. He says, “If ye fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ye do well: But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.” And so what he is saying here is if we *obey* the law, we’re doing *well*. And if we *disobey* the law, we’re committing *sin*. Clearly, whatever law he’s talking about here is a law that still has validity, it is a law that our behavior, with reference to, has *significance*.

Now there are laws, for example, in the country of Canada. We have no relationship to that law, we have no accountability to that law, and if we obey or disobey that law, it is a matter of irrelevance. But we *are* under the law of the United States, and if we obey or disobey *that* law, it’s *very* relevant. Why? Because the one law is utterly inapplicable to us and has no validity with reference to us, while the other is binding upon us.

And so clearly, if Paul is saying here that by our interaction with this law, there are relevant consequences. Then he is saying that that law definitely has application and binding authority *upon* us. You see, if we disobeyed a law that had no relevance to us, we could not be said to have either done *well*, or to have *sinned* in the way in which we have responded to and dealt with that law. So the very fact that we either sin or do well demonstrates that the law that those things have reference to still is present, binding, and valid *upon* us.

Now he says here, verse 8, “If ye *fulfill*,” and the clear implication is, is that we *must* fulfill that which he describes here as the law. Now then, what law is speaking of here? He calls this law “the royal law according to the scripture.” Now the reason why this law he is speaking of here is called a “royal law” is because it is a *super* law, it is a law of laws, it is a law that stands above and comprehends all *other* laws that regulate horizontal relationships. In other words, we have laws in our land, don’t we? We have a state constitution and we have local county and city ordinances. But we have a *supreme* law of the land, a law that stands above all of those laws, and which comprehends them, namely, the Constitution. The Constitution is, if you will, the royal law, under which all other laws in our land are comprehended and *to* which they must agree.

Well, in the same way, this law—thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself—is a supreme law. It is a law under which all other laws that regulate our horizontal relationships with our fellowman are comprehended. And so this law to love our neighbor as ourselves is to govern *all* our human relationships and guide all of our behavior towards other people.

Now when it says here, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” this being the “royal law,” or the supreme law, if you will, of what does this law consist and what does it *include*? Well, a little simple attention to the context will make it very clear. He says, describing the law in verse 8, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. . . . 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.”

Now notice verse 11, “For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill.” Now what law is he talking about? He’s talking about the Ten Commandments, isn’t he? He’s talking about the *moral* law of God. And so the law of loving one’s neighbor as oneself is simply a *summary* of the second half of the Ten Commandments, which regulate our relationships with our fellowman—the Ten Commandments, otherwise being known as the moral law of God.

And so the law that he’s talking about here is not the whole Old Testament. It’s not all the writings of Moses. It’s not the old covenant. It’s not the ceremonial law. It’s not the civil law. What is it? It’s the moral law. That’s the law he’s talking about in this context. He is not telling us we have to obey all the old covenant rules and regulations. What he *is* telling us is that we are *bound* to obey the law as it is comprehended in the Ten Commandments, especially, in this context, its application being that of how we treat our fellowman.

So he is saying here, the law of loving one’s neighbor as oneself is simply a summary of the second half of the Ten Commandments. And so the *way* in which I love my neighbor as myself

is by keeping God's law regarding how I am to *treat* him. How am I to treat my fellowman? How am I to love him as I love myself? Well, I preserve and protect his life; I do not kill him. I respect and promote the sanctity of his marriage; I do not commit adultery with his wife. I guard and observe his property rights; I do not steal from him. I speak the truth to them; I do not bear false witness before them. And I seek to further my neighbor's material advantage instead of *coveting* it and desiring it for *myself*.

By obeying the moral law of God towards my neighbor, I avoid creating barriers to intimacy with him and I *remove* any barriers to intimacy that may *exist*. And thus, I am showing love towards him and move towards becoming as close to him and intimate with him as I am close to myself and intimate with myself. Because this is what it means to love—to remove barriers to intimacy and to draw the object of my love to myself.

As it says in Jeremiah 31, and verse 3, God speaking here, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee." And so the manifestation of love is that of a drawing of another person to oneself and doing whatever is necessary to remove the barriers to intimacy between you and them, and of course those barriers to intimacy are *sin*. And that's why when you *don't* sin towards someone and you do *righteousness* towards someone, you are *loving* them.

The Ten Commandments were made to guide us in our relationships with other people, and they will remain binding and authoritative upon us as long as relationships between people and God and between people and people *exist*. The reason why we no longer need the *ceremonial* law is because our relationship between us and the *ceremonies* don't exist. But we still need the moral law of God because the relationships between ourselves and other people still *do* exist. And as long as they exist, that law will be binding upon us.

And while it is true that we are free from the condemning *power* of the law of God, we are still under the controlling *authority* of the law of God. No longer can the law of God claim our lives—the soul that sinneth, it shall die—no longer can it claim our lives for its violation, because Christ has substituted *His* life in that regard. But it still claims a controlling authority over us. And that controlling authority is the right to *regulate* our relationships with other people.

And so the New Testament authors were adamant that the old covenant with its ceremonial and civil laws had passed away, and forbade their *obligatory* observance. But they were equally adamant that the moral law of God, the Ten Commandments, were still in force and were still binding upon us in every respect, other than the fact that they had lost their condemning power. But they *still* had their controlling authority.

Not only do we see James here calling upon Christians to still submit to and obey the law of God as it is contained in the Ten Commandments, we see Paul doing the same thing in Romans, chapter 13, verses 8 through 10. In Romans 13, 8 through 10, Paul says this. And notice once again, James stressed the relationship between *loving* people and keeping the law towards them. Paul does exactly the same thing. He says, in verses 8 through 10, "Owe no man any thing,"—

Romans 13:8—“Owe no man any thing but to *love* one *another*: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

So we cannot know how to love people, and we cannot extend love *to* people in the absence of, and understanding of, and an *application* of the law of God. Because what the law does is it provides the regulations that *produce* closeness, affection, intimacy, trust between people. And that’s the reason why God has *given* His law *to us*, is in order to provide us with a guideline as to how to love *people*.

And so when I take the commandments of God and all of their implications, both positive and negative, and let that be the regulating authority and guide to my behavior in life, then I will be a person who *truly* loves other people. Loving other people does not mean ignoring their violations of the law of God. Loving other people means *requiring* them to obey the law and requiring *ourselves* to obey the law in relationship *to* them.

And so people talk a great deal about love—love, love, love—all the time talking about love. Well, what is love? How do you *love*? Well the Scriptures say that if you keep the law of God, that’s how you love. And so as long as we are to love, we are to keep the moral law of God.

So it is clear from both James and Paul that Christians are still accountable to obey the law because this is how they love each other. And this is how they tear down barriers to intimacy. And this is how they draw *close* to each other by treating each other as God has directed them to do in the Ten Commandments.

The second thing that James says about the law of God is not only that Christians are still accountable to the law, but secondly, he tells us in James, chapter 2, that the law is a law of liberty. The law is a law of *liberty*.

Now twice, James tells us that the law is a law of liberty. Back up in chapter 1, and in verse 25, he says, “But whoso looketh into the perfect law of *liberty*, and continueth *therein*...” And what law is he talking about? Pay attention to the context. You find the answer in verse 11 of chapter 2: don’t commit adultery; don’t steal. That’s the law he’s talking about. And he calls it a law of liberty.

Now notice, if you will, verse 12, “So speak ye,” after talking about the Ten Commandments in verse 11, he says, “So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of *liberty*.” So twice he refers to the law of liberty, and he refers to the law of liberty as being the Ten Commandments, the moral law of God, two of which are, don’t kill, and don’t commit adultery.

Now people often resent having obedience to the law of God pressed upon them, as though they were being subjected to the chains of slavery, and the most dreary and depressing of lifestyles by

having to obey the law of God. They think that the law of God is going to rob them of liberty, enjoyment, and fulfillment. Well, nothing could be further from the truth. The law of God is not a yoke to be thrown off, but rather it is a blessing and a liberty to be *rejoiced* in, because *it*—the law of God—sets us free from bondage to all that is destructive to true happiness. By obeying the law of God, we have the maximum level of possible freedom, security, and happiness.

Now James doesn't call the law "the law of liberty" for no reason. He calls it the law of liberty because the law secures liberty *to* us. Now the law secures liberty to us in two ways. First of all, it secures our *right* to be free from the tyranny of men. It secures our *right* to be free from the tyranny of men. Now our Declaration of Independence of the United States contains accurate theology when it states that "All men are created equal and they are endowed by their Creator with certain *inalienable* rights." God has given to all mankind *rights*, and these rights are set forth in the *Ten Commandments*.

We have a *right* to worship God as God *requires* us to worship Him, contained in the first four commandments. We have a *right to life*, contained in the sixth commandment—thou shall not kill. We have a *right* to marriage and the sanctity of the family in the commandment to honor father and mother, and in the commandment to not engage in adultery. We have the *right* to property—to private property—in the commandment that says "thou shall not steal." We have the *right* to honesty and justice in other people's dealings with us in the commandment that says, "Thou shall not bear false witness."

In short, a right to all that is *contained* in these commandments, a right to all that is *implied* by these commandments, a right to all that is *necessary* for the carrying *out* of these commandments is secured to us *by* these commandments. Governments have no authorization from God to deprive us of those rights, and when they attempt to do so, they may be resisted and rebelled against in a proper manner without fear of disapproval from God.

The Declaration of Independence goes on to say not only that all men are created equal and they are endowed by their Creator with certain *inalienable* rights, enumerated in the Ten Commandments, but it goes on to say that to *secure* these rights, governments are instituted among men. In other words, the purpose of civil government is to secure to people the rights enumerated in the law of God. This is congruent with Romans, chapter 13, which says that civil government has been *ordained* by God to be a *minister* of God to do what? To punish evil and to reward good.

Now how do you define and determine what *is* evil and what is *good*? Answer: By looking at the law of God. The law of God says, This is evil. The law of God says, This is good. It is the duty of civil government to look at what the law of God says is evil and to punish it, and to look at what the law of God says is good, and to reward it, and thus secure to the people the rights which are enunciated *in* that law against those who would strive to take away those rights, in *violation* of it.

So—the law of God says, thou shall not kill. I have a *right* to life. And if someone comes along and tries to *kill* me, unjustly, the government is to step in and *stop* that person from doing that, or

punish that person for doing that, and secure to me the right that the sixth commandment gives to me. The eighth commandment gives to me the right to be secure in my *property*—to not be stolen from. And if someone is going to come along and steal stuff from me, or *does* steal stuff from me, it is the duty of the civil government to secure to me the right to be secure in my property and to *stop* that thief or to *punish* that thief if he violates the right that God's law gave me to be secure in my *property*. So it is the duty of civil government to secure the rights contained in the Ten Commandments to the people.

And so the purpose of government is to secure to the people under its authority the rights they possess, which are set forth in the Ten Commandments, which rights are given to them by God, and therefore, which no government has the right to take *away*, because the government never *gave* those rights. Do we derive the right to be secure in our property from the *government*? Do we derive the right to life from the *government*? We do not. The government never gave those rights, and so the government can *never* take those rights *away*. Those rights were given to us by God, and if someone tries to take those rights *away* from us, they are acting in rebellion *against* God.

And so no government has the right to take away those rights which God has given to us, and *every* government has a *duty* to secure to the people under its authority those rights that have been given by God. And so this, then, is the whole purpose and duty of government. And the rule by which it is to be judged is, Does it secure to the people the rights that God has given to them, which are *inalienable*.

And so the law of God is a law of liberty because it secures to us rights which cannot be alienated, or separated, *from* our persons by any other person, or indeed, by any other *government*. And that's why our Declaration of Independence goes *on* to say that when a government abdicates its responsibility to secure to the people the rights given to them by God, when the government abdicates its responsibility to do what Romans 13 *requires* it to do and becomes instead of a punisher of evil and a rewarder of good and *punisher* of good and a rewarder of *evil*, then it ceases to be a legitimate government. And it is not only the right of the people, but the *duty* of the people to throw it off. That's the theological basis of the American Revolution. It's all contained in the Declaration of Independence.

You see, in the place of the Ten Commandments, they said the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But by those three words, they meant the rights that are secured to us by God from His law. So those rights which the law of God gives to us are what constitutes our liberty and what secures that liberty to us from the arbitrary rule of sinful man. Therefore, when our government attempts to take away from *us* or from anyone else a right that has been *given* to them *by* God, then it is our duty to attempt to *reform* the government and to bring it back into its Godgiven purpose, which is to secure those liberties to those people. The government does not have a blank check and an unlimited license to pass any law it pleases and to impose any obligation it desires upon the people over which it rules. Government itself is restricted by the law of God and must function according to it.

People say that we are to submit ourselves to *every ordinance of man* for the Lord's sake. Well suppose man passed an ordinance that said you had to strangle half your children because there was too large a population in the United States. Are you going to obey? It's an ordinance of *man*. Well of course you're not. It is not a blanket authorization of every and any and all ordinances of men; it is only an authorization of those ordinances of men that are *congruent* with and *supportive* of the law of God. And any ordinance that is *not* congruent with or supportive of the law of God is an ordinance that may be safely disobeyed with no fear of the disapproval of God.

Now there are times when we *do* obey ordinance of men which are not authorized to them by God for other *reasons*, but it is not for the reason of obligation. If you'd like further information on the whole subject, I invite you to get a copy of the message that I preached on the book of Titus, chapter 3, and verse 1. My understanding of *biblical* political philosophy is set out there in more detail.

And so the law of God is a law of liberty because it secures our right to be free from the tyranny of men. The law of God is what stands as a bulwark between the citizen and the government to protect the citizen from the government.

Secondly, the law of God is a law of liberty, not only because it secures our right to be free from the tyranny of men, but secondly, because it secures the *method*—it secures the *method* to be free from the tyranny of *sin*. It secures the *method* to be free from the tyranny of sin.

Now in stating my second point, I do *not* mean to imply that the law sets us free from the tyranny of sin. The law cannot, never has, and never will set us free from the tyranny of sin. Only the Gospel can do that. Only the Gospel breaks the power of sin. Only the Gospel delivers us from the penalty of sin. And only the Gospel enables us to live victoriously *over* sin. But the law, with its commands and its prohibitions, sets before us a *pattern of behavior*. It sets before us a *pattern of behavior* that *if followed* will *liberate* us from the destructive effects of a sinful pattern of *life*.

If we would avoid the misery and bondage and destructiveness that *sinful* choices bring upon us, then we can do so by simply obeying the law of God, and *thereby* be *free* from that misery, bondage, and destructiveness that sin *produces* in those who *practice* it. You see, the law of God is designed not to limit our liberty, happiness, and enjoyment in this life, but rather to *produce* liberty, happiness, and enjoyment when we *obey* it.

After all, who is happier, and who has more enjoyment, those who worship God as He prescribes, or those who invent their own method and means of worship? Is Abel happier, or is Cain? Who is happier, those who honor their parents, or those who hate them and reject them and rebel against them? Who is happier, those who save lives, such as doctors, or those who *murder* them, such as abortionists? Who is happier, those who have faithful marriages, or those who go from partner to partner to partner to partner? Who is happier, those who work for what they have, or those who *steal* and are thieves? Who is happier, those who tell the truth, or those

whose lives are filled with lies and deceit? Who is happier, those who are content with their possessions, or those who are filled with envy and jealousy and covetousness?

Well, the answer's obvious. You know people who follow either one or the other pattern of those lives, and you can just simply *observe* their life and it is *clear* as crystal who is happiest, who is most fulfilled, who has the most *freedom* and liberty. It is those who obey God's law. Obedience to the law of God *frees* us from the destructive lifestyle of the wicked and the tyranny of sin that they live under, that brings them into bondage, misery, and personal destruction.

There's a verse in Proverbs that I just had pop into my brain. I need to look at it for a moment and see if fits what I am referring to. Yes, Proverbs 5:22. It says of the wicked man, "His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins." Does he know liberty? He's *tied up* with *ropes*. And what are the ropes with which he is tied? His sins—his violations of the law of God. And that's why when we *obey* the law of God, we're *freed* from those ropes. We are freed from the cords of sins.

You see, departure from the law of God produces bondage to misery, while *obedience* to the law of God produces *liberty* from misery. And that's why the law of God is called a law of liberty. Therefore, to follow the law of God is to know the most perfect freedom from all that is binding and destructive, and to enjoy all that is blessed and good and fulfilling and delightful and happy.

Well, those are the first two points that James makes. He makes two others, and we shall take them up next week, God willing. But I trust that we as the people of God are under *no illusions* about our relationship with the law of God. We as Christians are *still accountable to obey* the Ten Commandments—all of them. And we as Christians are given *liberty* by those commandments from the *tyranny* of men and from the tyranny of sin.

And so the law of God should not be looked at as something that is a *yoke* around our neck to make us miserable and to destroy us. But rather, it is a blessed, a wholesome, and a fulfilling guide to a pattern of life and behavior that fills us with good things and provides for us a perfect liberty. Paul says in Romans, chapter 7, verse 12, "Wherefore the law is *holy*, and the commandment *holy*, and *just*, and *good*."

I run into Christians on a fairly regular basis, professing Christians, who are all the time talking about, "Stay away from legalism!" But what they mean is, Ignore the *Ten Commandments*. I want to tell you, they're wrapped up in the worst form of legalism. They're wrapped up in the bondage of sin. And I'll take the liberty of the law of God any day to the bondage of sin. Well, let's pray together.

Father, thank you for your law. It is holy and just and good. It is a delightful law, a perfect law, a marvelous, wholesome law, a law that cannot be improved upon. Father, thank you that we still have it as a guideline, and thank you, Father, for the liberty that it provides us with in setting us free from the tyranny of men and providing us with a method to be free from the tyranny of sin.

Lord, I pray that we would love one another, as your law prescribes for us to do. Help us, Father, to manifest that love in all of our relationships and in our treatment of one another. Thank you for your kindness, Father, in providing us with such a guide. And Lord, we pray that as we continue to consider this matter of your law, that you might further illuminate our minds regarding it, that we might rightly understand it.

Father, we pray that we would know your law, not just in the bare statements contained in the Ten Commandments, but in all of the positive and negative *implications* of those commandments in all of their applications in all of the areas of our lives. Father, we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Page 6, 4th paragraph: “Do we derive the right to be secure _____ *government?*” There was a gap from “secure” to “government.” Inserted: in our property from the

Page 8, last full chapter: “And so the law of God should not be looked at [inserted: as] something that is a *yoke* around our neck to make us miserable and to destroy us.”