

Love Your Neighbor

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When last we met, as we examined these precious words of scripture, we spoke about the very "subtle" nature of "sin", and in particular, the subtle nature of the "sin of partiality". About the way that subtlety can so easily become a part of our character, especially within the gentile nature of our "Southern Personality". We spoke of how the "subtlety" of our "partiality" can be so well hidden within our southern charm that even we, ourselves are often fooled by its presence, not aware that it's taking place.

And such is just one more example of what God has been warning us about in some of the earlier verses of this Book of James, that of looking at ourselves in the mirror of His word, and then turning and quickly forgetting what we have just learned about ourselves.

Those words again, from chapter 1, verse 22,

22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.
23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. (James 1:22-24 (NIV))

How true these words are!

Also, remember folks, that the Apostle began this passage in verse 1 by addressing us as brothers and sisters in Christ. He said there, "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory."

Those words are not just a friendly greeting. They are intended as a reminder of exactly who that person is that we are seeing in the mirror of His word. We are “brothers and sisters in Christ”, “born again” saints, fully saved and sanctified, sons and daughters of God. And as believers, we not only have the very person of the Holy Spirit living within us to help and to guide us in our thoughts and behaviors, we also have God’s precious word “implanted” within our souls, making us doubly accountable to know and to remember the things that we are being told, and especially how we are to conduct ourselves with the people that God brings into our presence each day, our “neighbors”.

And may I take a moment to emphasize the words that I just said. Because too often, we see the occurrences of our day, and the people we encounter as just matters of random “happenstance”. We say things like, “guess who I bumped into today”! But folks, how often is that sort of encounter a real “happenstance” and how often is it an orchestrated event, providentially put into place by God Himself?

If there is one thing that we know for sure about God, it is that He is always “intentional”, always. Our Westminster Confession of Faith tells us that God is the “first cause” of all that takes place. Yes, we and our behaviors are involved as “second causes”, and it may look like we or someone else orchestrated a situation from the beginning. But not so folks! God is always sovereign and always providential. And His Presence and His Hand is ever and always “first”.

But what about “our part”, what are we supposed to do about the people and the situations that we encounter. And especially considering our nature and propensity to quickly forget all that we have just heard and learned about ourselves from the mirror of these scriptures?

There is a buzzword that has become popular in our culture. And while I don’t often subscribe to the use of cultural buzzwords, this one seems very appropriate for this particular matter. The word is “proactive”, “proactive”.

As for our part in the activities of the day, I am convinced that God would have you and me to be as intentional as He is and to be “proactive” as we engage in this special “principle”, yea this “command” that He is putting before us today, that of “love”, the

having and the showing of “love” to our “neighbors”. And in this context, our “neighbor” is anyone and everyone we encounter in our day.

And folks, the reason that I like the word “proactive” when considering this matter of “love” is that love is not at all a “passive” response. Love is, in every way, “assertive” in nature.

And that is also what the word “proactive” infers to me, that my “love” for the “Lord my God”, and my “love for my neighbor” must always be “assertive” and “proactive”.

And so then, as the circumstance that’s presented to us in this passage unfolds before us, what are we to do with this kind of opportunity? Here, a rich man comes into our church. Will we treat Him differently than we would treat a poor man who comes in. Or, perhaps, even if a similar occasion takes place in our neighborhood or in our workplace, or perhaps while we shop at Walmart, what are we to do? Are we to assume a “passive” posture, perhaps waiting for that person to be the first to approach us, or should we always have a plan in place in our minds and be aggressively proactive in carrying out that plan?

And again, this plan must not be a plan to “NOT” do something, to “not show partiality”, or to “not be uncaring”, and the like. No, getting caught up in simply “trying not to do something wrong” seems most always to fail. Instead, in this matter of “love”, our plan must be aggressively proactive to show and to “do” good and loving things. Being “doers” folks, is the only formula that succeeds.

May I say that again. The plan that God has put into place in the matter of “love” is always a plan to move forward and to “do” things, right things, giving, making provision, a proactive plan to aggressively show genuine love to the people we encounter. I commend to you the Book of 1 John to read. It is filled with these admonitions to “love our neighbor”.

And please note also that in this circumstance, there are only two choices that are possible, the choice to “love” or the choice to “sin”. Listen again to these words!

8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; 9 but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (James 2:8-9)

I want to emphasize again, that yes, these instructions about how one person should treat another person are right and good for anyone, believers and unbelievers alike, because everyone is held accountable. But here in these words, God is not addressing the general public. He is speaking specifically to us as Christians, to us as His beloved adopted children, members of His household. And as His children, there are different expectations of us than is expected from those outside of His family. As true sons, we are accountable to carry on the family business.

And with our new redeemed nature, we now have abilities we never had before. Listen to these words in 2 Peter 1,

3 His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:3-4)

The new nature that God has put within us truly has equipped us with a comportment and a behavior that is everything we could possibly need for any unannounced circumstance. We have the very image of Christ. Listen to these words in Romans 8,

29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Romans 8:29)

Folks, often as we read words such as these, we think that God is speaking about something that we are to “work towards” as we “work out our salvation with fear and trembling”. And that is true, very true. But please, may we also understand that much of this plan that God speaks about here is already in place. As we read a moment ago, 3 His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. (2 Peter 1:3)

And yes, even as I say these words, I’m reminded of how I, so often, still do keep falling short. But folks, though I fall short, I also still know that this really is all true and all possible if and as I surrender to “walk in Christ”. And I can see it slowly gaining ground in my life. And I know that is so in your life.

May I remind us that God does not give us commands such as these, without also giving us all that it takes to carry them out. You and I need only to take a step forward, to be “proactive” in our willingness to “walk in Him”. And I am convinced that as I, as we, take each step forward, God will enable the next step and the next and the next.

And while the plan that God has for us has many facets, its basic parts are simple and concise. His plan is that we would love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and that we would love our neighbor as our self. Listen! This is the command that Jesus gave in Matthew 22,

37 . . . "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40)

And please take note of those last words, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” Jesus is saying that if we will step forward and be “proactive” in our love for Him and in our love for our neighbor, we will, in the process of doing that, be fulfilling all the many other things that God would desire for us to do.

And folks, practically speaking, if we will busy ourselves with the “doing” of God’s command to “love”, we will be so busy “doing” and “giving” love, that we will not have to be concerned about getting caught up in sinful “judgmental behaviors” like “showing partiality”.

And the whole solution lies in the simple act of “love”, loving the Lord so much that we would always want to bless and please Him, and loving our neighbor because the Holy Spirit has now fully enabled us to do it.

May I here, take the opportunity to emphasize a point that God appears to be making in this passage. Here, God, very intentionally make a comparison and a contrast between “showing partiality” and being guilty of “adultery” and “murder”. For some of us, this might seem to be an overstated contrast. Most of us would never think that partiality was as evil and as wicked as adultery or murder. But what does God think about it? Listen again to our text!

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and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. 11 For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. (James 2:8-13)

Folks, here God is making some simple statements about His definition of "sin". And He wants you and me to hear and understand it from His perspective and not from our own. From His perspective, "sin is sin" and "the wages of sin is death".

We must not try to redefine God's laws and His commands. We must instead, join Him in His definition and His regard for sin. And the best "simply put" understanding that we can grasp from these scriptures is that "sin" takes place whenever we show any lack of conformity to, or we transgress any of the laws of God.

And from these words we are studying today, and from other scriptures like them, we learn that God regards all sin to be the same, with eternal death and hell as the punishment for any of them.

And yes, these scriptures do give us reason to believe that there will be greater punishments in hell for the more heinous of sins. But folks, hell is still hell, and hell is the sure and certain punishment for any form of sin, no matter how we might judge some sins to be worse than others.

So many people, in today's culture are terribly confused about this matter of sin. Even many of those who would profess to be Christians seem to have the idea that each person can define sin for themselves. They say, "What is true for you might not be true for me, and what is true for me, might not be true for you."

But dear friends, may I strongly remind you and me that we do not have the intellect, nor the right, nor the privilege, nor the responsibility to define "truth", and to determine "right from wrong" from our own perspective. That option, unfortunately, was the one taken by Adam and Eve in the Garden. And their wrong and sinful decision failed us all, leaving us in the destructive condition we're in today. There is only one "truth", only one

definition of right and wrong, and it is God who gives that definition. And when we violate God's definition of right and wrong, we "sin".

Consider with me for a moment . . . you and I do so much want to go to heaven when our time on this earth is done. And heaven is a perfectly pure and holy place without even one tiny molecule of sin in it. And no sin, no matter how small or how great we might deem it to be, will ever be permitted to enter into heaven.

And because of that, before any of us will ever be permitted to enter heaven, every vestige of sin must first be removed from our souls, whether our sin be the sin of "showing partiality" or the seemingly more heinous sins of "adultery" or "murder", or even the much greater sins of not "loving the Lord our God" or the sin of not "loving our neighbor".

Sin is sin and it is a line that we should never cross. But thanks be to God, when we do, He has generously provided a remedy for our sin. God calls it "propitiation", the precious blood that Jesus shed on the cross to pay for and to remove our sin. And He has generously and freely given the "gift" of His cleansing "propitiation" to anyone who will believe and receive Him! Praise be to God!

. . . We are nearing the end of our time together today, but before we close this message, I want to emphasize again, that the answer, the perfect alternative to the sinful responses spoken about in this passage is a relatively simple one. It is "love", loving our Lord and loving other people.

And I'd like to give one other thought regarding this command for us to love our neighbor as ourselves. In John 13, verse 34, Jesus said,

34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. (John 13:34)

This is a very special command to Jesus' disciples, disciples like you and me. And Jesus seems to be saying here that as we mature and grow closer to Him, our love for other people will also grow and mature. And as that takes place, we'll find that we will desire to love those other people even more than we love ourselves. We will love them as Jesus loves them. Isn't that a wonderful thought?

I'd like to close by giving three scripture passages about love. First, from 1 John 4:20-21

20 If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:20-21)

And from 1 John 4:7-8

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)

And lastly, from John 14:21,

21 He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him." (John 14:21)