

“Being A Healing Church”
James 2:1-17 and Mark 7:24-37

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=james+2:1-17

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+7:24-37

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God’s Grace and Mercy go hand in hand.

What I am sharing with you today is the product of much prayer and discussion over many years of my life. In this year of back to the basics, I want us to have a common ground upon which to discuss major issues. I want us to have a common vision upon which we do mission. Therefore, I am laying a foundation upon which we may, with God’s help, continue to grow as a healing and grace filled community under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

There are two key verses from the Scripture texts read today. The first comes from James 2: 13 (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=james+2:13). The context is the Christian church that is treating wealthy members in special ways and ignoring the marginalized people among them. James, the brother of our Lord, challenges this playing of favorites and urges all Christians to follow Jesus’ second law, **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”** (James 2:8) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=james+2:8) James then urges each Christian to **“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law of freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!”** (James 2:12-13) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=james+2:12-13) For this sermon I want us to commit to memory that last sentence. **“Mercy triumphs over judgment!”**

The second key Scripture verse comes to us from the actions and teachings of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Against the Jewish understanding of the law, He is traveling in Gentile territory. Against the Jewish religious piety laws, Jesus is indoors with a Gentile woman. Against the Jewish understanding of righteousness, Jesus touches a poor deaf beggar and heals him. Everything in these verses is against the popular Jewish understanding of God’s law. The verse that I want us to commit to memory this morning is the recorded words of Jesus as he moves beyond the Jewish law and establishes God’s law of love. **“Jesus looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, “Ephphatha!”(which means “Be Opened!”)**

God’s mercy triumphs over judgment in everyday life!

Perhaps a story from the depression era will help us to see a common theme in these passages of Holy Scripture. Celestine Sibley received a letter recently that made her recall a poor mountain girl she had written about some years ago. The girl was brought to the hospital by a Baptist minister. She was born with her bladder outside her body. Her mother and a seven-month-old-baby were with her day and night.

The girl had never been farther than 10 miles from home. Her family of seven children plus the grandparents lived in a two-room shack. They had no plumbing or electricity. None of the family attended school.

In the remote area where she lived, the girl had never seen a car. Somebody brought a truck somewhere close by and she had seen it but had been afraid to ride in it ‘because it’d jiggle you up.’ She had, of course, never seen a train.

It happened that Atlanta had only recently acquired two great commuter trains - the Nancy Hanks to Savannah and the Man-O’-War to Columbus. After reading Miss Sibley’s column about the mountain girl, a train official offered the girl a trip to Columbus. It was a short trip and she could go - with a nurse in attendance - and be back in the hospital in two or three hours.

Miss Sibley said she would never forget the lesson in kind manners that she received that day.

The railroad served lunch, and although it was no big deal, the white cloth and the silver dishes were beyond the experience of the young girl. When the waiter brought soup, she looked at it uneasily. She wasn’t sure how to tackle it, and before anybody could show her, she picked up the bowl and drank it down.

The waiter was amused and started to smile - until the official glared at him, picked up his own bowl and followed suit. Said Miss Sibley, "The rest of us did the same, and I noticed other diners caught on and joined us."

As Miss Sibley continued, "The desire to be right is often misleading. To eat soup correctly is nothing compared with making a poor mountain girl feel comfortable and at home." (Hal Brady, Dallas, Texas, 20 June 1993, citing a Celestine Sibley column, *The Atlanta Journal*, 28 May 1993, Section F.-)

- Church people can sometimes be doctrinally right but never share God's message of mercy.
- Church people can sometimes hold the right belief, but be out of touch with the Spirit of God.
- Church people can sometimes live properly within the Law and never experience God's amazing grace.

I want us to search our hearts and minds this morning and admit how we can so easily stay within our comfort zone, follow our interpretations and doctrines, and miss the power of God to heal, redeem and save.

To help me in challenging you, I want to utilize the metaphor of mountain climbing. In using this mental picture I am aware that I will be summarizing a great deal of information into a small picture. Metaphors can be misleading. Therefore, I ask you to continue dialoguing with me. Also, I recognize that within this metaphor is a value system. I am saying one way is a higher calling than another way. I ask God's forgiveness and mercy if I am wrong, but at this point in my life I just believe what I say to be Christ's truth.

Climbing up God's Mountain.

The Gospel hymn, "*Higher Ground*," helps me at this point. The words are a challenge to each of us who are seeking to be faithful to the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. Johnson Oatman wrote these words almost one hundred years ago. They are fresh as today. (*Higher Ground*, as found in Hymns for the Living Church, pg.355)

***I'm pressing on the upward way,
New heights I'm gaining every day;
Still praying as I'm onward bound,
"Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."
Lord lift me up and let me stand
By faith on heaven's table land,
A higher plane than I have found;
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."***

The image in the song is mountain climbing. Surely we are on a journey through life. At times the journey feels steep and impossible. At other times the way is easy and gentle. If we study the spiritual journey of people, then we will find predictable points along the way. In this sermon I want to lightly touch upon two major levels of the climb. The first level is that of the keeping of God's Law. The second level is that of God's grace.

God's Law Level is part way up the Mountain

The Apostle Paul struggled with this level of God's upward journey most clearly in the letter to the Roman Church. Paul writes, "***I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what it was to covet if the law had not said, "Do not covet.".....So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous, and good.***" (Romans 7:7&12) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=romans+7:7;12) God gave human beings eternal principles by which to guide their lives. Stephen Covey says that there are true north principles by which you must align your life or you will lose your way. God's Law is the North Star that God gives you to direct your life in the path of goodness, success, and righteousness. Jesus told us that God's law would not be abolished. (Matthew 5:17) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+5:17)

Therefore, we can be assured that the level of God's Law found on the journey of life is necessary, important, and not changeable. All of us need to know God's Law. All of us need to experience the profound understanding of God's Law that teaches us the eternal consequences of our actions. God's law is present in

the world to guide us, to warn us, and to move us into God's presence. Let me affirm with all my heart and soul the importance of this level and the eternity of God's Law.

Let me also point out two extremely dangerous camps on this part of the mountain. If we stop at the level of God's Law and become comfortable in either camp, then we can do great damage to ourselves and others.

The Danger of being stuck in the Legalism Camp

Legalism is the worship of the Law. Surely those who have made their home at this level speak of God a great deal, but they worship the Law.

- Their **life focus** is upon what is right.
- Their **motto** can easily be discerned to be, "I am standing upon the Holy Book."
- **Membership** is determined by those who are righteous which is defined as being those who obey the law.

You are disobeying the law if you associate with anyone who is not a righteous member of the Law Camp. Therefore, you must exclude yourself from anyone who does not obey the law as you interpret it.

There is some attraction to this particular camp. It is a very secure feeling to have someone tell you what to believe and do. There is comfort in feeling that you are in the right camp and everyone else is wrong.

I believe that it is safe to say that through the centuries of legalistic religion the law keepers have made sure that the laws that are enforced are the ones that do not hurt themselves very much. I remember in my youth the law code taught and enforced by the Southern Baptist Church in which I grew up. Alcohol, dancing, card playing, movie going, and necking in the back seat of the car were all prohibited. After all, we were taught, our bodies were the temple of God. What they failed to include on the list was smoking tobacco. Now I agree that our bodies are the dwelling places of the Holy Spirit and must not be defiled. What I am interested in is the way one of the most violent forms of abuse to the body was left off the list because it was politically incorrect to include smoking as a sin in South Carolina in the 1950's.

The "Legalistic Camp" found on God's Law level has created pain and suffering from the time of Jesus and beyond. Jesus was crucified at the instigation of religious legalist. The Jews of Europe were robbed, raped, and murdered by religious legalists from the 13th century to the 20th. Thousands of persons suffered under the pain of religious legalist in the Spanish Inquisition. Slavery and segregation in the Southern United States was condoned by and supported by religious legalist. This off shoot of God's Law is dangerous.

The Dangerous Cheap Grace camp.

Just as dangerous as the legalist camp is the camp ground on the other side of the path of God's Law. This campground we might call "Cheap Grace." It is populated by people who are rebelling against God's Law. They are so intent on having their own way over against God, that they create a living area where anything goes.

- Their **focus** is on feeling good. If doing good for others feels good, then do it. If not, forget it.
- Their **motto** is "If no one is hurt, then I can do what I want."
- **Membership** in this camp is easy and quick. They will tolerate anyone and anything.

The "Cheap Grace" camp ground has a heart break hotel. When community standards and especially God's Law, are ignored, and even shunned, then we get the secular, materialist world we live in today. We have a group of people over burdened with stress, over addicted to multiple things, anemic, and living within a laissez-faire, anything goes mildly tolerable semi-religious atmosphere. Religion just provides a veneer that allows us to feel good at one moment. This is a dangerous camp to visit too long.

Let me be personally honest at this point. I have lived in both camps. I am not judging anyone else. I am only sharing that I know the danger and the pain of both camps on this level. If you are in one right now, then I challenge you to rise up to another level on the mountain. God's Law level of the mountain is there to enable you to keep climbing toward something far greater than the law.

God's Grace Level is up on the Mountain Top

I return to the Apostle Paul for guidance up God's mountain to this level. Again in Romans Paul writes, ***"So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ that you might belong to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God."***(Romans 7:4) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=romans+7:4) Jesus is Paul's mentor in saying this because Jesus said, ***"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."***(Matthew 5:17) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+5:17)

On God's grace level the Law is not abolished it is fulfilled. Over five hundred years before Jesus the Prophet Jeremiah foretold of a time when God's law would be written upon the hearts and minds of God's people and a new family relationship would be formed. (Jeremiah 31:33) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=jeremiah+31:33) In Jesus Christ this new covenant is established. The law becomes a personal relationship with the Living God. Jesus becomes our savior, teacher, brother, and friend. The Holy Spirit is given to us to guide and empower us to live God's abundant life.

Jesus came to fulfill the law. With Jesus Christ the possibility of a close personal relationship with God is a reality. The relationship with God and God's people is built upon the gift of grace through Christ Jesus. The fulfilled law is summarized by Jesus in His response to the legalist as recorded in Matthew 22:31-40 (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+22:31-40). Essentially he says that the sum total of the law is that we will love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and body with the second commandment being to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Martin Luther, following the Apostle Paul said that if we can truly love God as Jesus recommends we are free to do anything because our love relationship with God becomes the determining factor in everything we do or say.

- On God's grace level the **focus** is on living in a faithful relationship with Jesus Christ.
- The **motto** is following the leadership of Jesus Christ.
- **Membership** open and available for all of God's created children no matter what they have done or who they are. If you desire a relationship with God, then you are a part of "God's Family." God determines who is accepted, not us.

Again I must go to the Apostle Paul who speaks of the importance of God's grace.

Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ. (Romans 3:21-24 The Message) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=romans+3:21-24)

I could go on and on quoting Scripture that urges us to grow up into Christ Jesus, to celebrate God's grace and our entrance into God's kingdom as God's children. I will just say that I think Scripture means what it says. There is a higher calling than the law. There is a higher ground called God's grace. Not cheap grace, mind you. God's grace that demands that you love God with everything in your being that requires you to love your neighbor and yourself.

In one week during the year 1997 two grace filled women who walked in the grace path died. One of these women was from privilege, rank, and royalty. Princess Diana was no saint. In his eulogy of his sister, Diana's brother urged us to see her as a vulnerable human being who was seeking to live and do good. Her passion was to care for the downtrodden, homeless, orphans, AIDs patients, and war wounded. She sought to share God's love in the only way she knew. Elton John sang of Diana telling of a woman who shared "the grace that placed itself where lives were torn apart." The other woman was Mother Theresa. She died in her adopted India. She was a woman of peasant origin who gave her life on behalf of the poor. India may have declared some people untouchable, but with God's grace Mother Theresa touched them. Some declared infants unwanted, but by God's grace, Mother Theresa found them a home. The dying were too unclean for the regular population, but through God's grace, Mother Theresa declared that they would not die alone.

These two women from different stations in life, bearing the marks of sin, lived on the grace path seeking to share God's love "where lives were torn apart."

During my years at Chilson the issue of God's grace and God's law has been raised in the public arena time and again. I have been characterized as being in cheap grace camp more than once. There have been points in my life that I have camped out there, but I am not there at the moment. I was raised in the religious legalist camp. I know that camp's language and tone. But, I am moving up the mountain!

My urgent call to myself, to you, and to the community in which we live is that we move to higher ground. Let us move beyond legalism and cheap grace to a level of loving God so much that God's grace flows from our very beings. Let us ask Jesus to heal us, to pray "Ephphatha" over us. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to remove any favoritism, any exclusiveness, any prejudice, any fear from us. Let us seek to live in faithfulness with Jesus Christ so that God's grace is so abundantly flowing within us that God's mercy triumphs over judgment and we are healed. And, through God's grace, we become healers.