

• *Christian distinctiveness as opposed to being "stained by the world"*

After his explanation of the need of works of compassion to save the poor<sup>□1</sup>, James turns to the need to control the tongue<sup>□2</sup>. It is the master-key to spirituality. There are two kinds of wisdom. His readers need the wisdom from above<sup>□3</sup>. Then James 4:1 began to deal with Christian distinctiveness as opposed to being 'stained by the world'. It perhaps develops the third matter mentioned in 1:26–27. At present his people are at odds with each other<sup>□4</sup> and at enmity with God<sup>□5</sup>. Yet God gives grace; they must draw near to Him and resist the devil<sup>□6</sup>.

□1 2:1-26  
□2 3:1-12  
□3 3:13-18

□4 4:1-3  
□5 4:4-5  
□6 4:6-10

It is in this context that James mentions once again their transgression of what he calls 'the law'. *Brothers and sisters, do not speak against one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother or sister, is speaking against the law, and judging the law. But if you are judging the law, then you are not a doer of the law, but a judge<sup>□1</sup>. There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to rescue and able to destroy. But you – who are you to judge your neighbour?*<sup>□2</sup>.

□1 4:11  
□2 4:12

**James' use of the term 'the law'**

• *Not simply the Moses-given regulations*

What exactly does James mean by 'the law'? Obviously there is some connection between what he says and the law of Moses given on Mount Sinai. Yet he cannot be speaking of the law simply-and-straightforwardly, because he shows no interest in the hundreds of regulations that were in the Mosaic covenant. Before Jesus came 'the law' would mean the entire Mosaic covenant including regulations about food, clothing, agriculture, holy days and dozens of other matters. From this entire system the Christian has been released and James knew it! He shows no interest in the details of Mosaic legislation.

• *Here – selection among the prescriptions of the Torah in order to focus on the love-command*

'The law' is (it seems) some **principles** that the law was pointing to, transformed and coming to us via the Lord Jesus Christ. One might be inclined to think that the law is interpreted spiritually at this point. Is James spiritualising the sixth commandment and treating slander as a form of 'murder'? This is involved yet it is not the whole story. In view of what James has said already it is likely that he has in mind Leviticus 19:18 (mentioned previously in 2:8) and its near-neighbour Leviticus 19:15–16 which explicitly mentions ill-treatment of the poor, and slander. In this case what we have here is not spiritualization but **selection** among the prescriptions of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) in order to focus upon the love-command.

• *Here – he uses the law negatively and in an 'after the event' manner*

Also, James is dealing with sin **after the event** and is using the law in a negative manner. The law is **not** used by James when presenting positive instruction but is used for the purpose of rebuke among those whose salvation is not in doubt. The Christian is expected to fulfil the law. By focusing on love he will fulfil all that he needs to fulfil of the Mosaic law. James **directly** urges control of the tongue and compassion without using the law. Here he uses the law negatively and in an 'after the event' manner. In the light of James' **not** using the Decalogue positively we must say that he uses it to rebuke a **low** level of spirituality. Let me illustrate.

**An illustration of James' use of the law**

A young schoolboy is studying for end-of-secondary school examinations. However he neglects his studies and his work is poorly done. His teacher wishes to rebuke him. 'At the moment you could not even pass your primary-school examinations', he says to the pupil.

The pupil is not actually 'under' the primary school regulations at all! He is working for something much higher. The tutor talks of his failure of reaching **even** a low standard – that of primary school exams. He does so in order to shock, to insult, to rebuke, to bring the pupil to his senses. James is doing something similar. When positively urging a godly life he goes higher than the Mosaic regulations and talks of the 'law of liberty' – the high-level **fulfilment**

of the Mosaic law. Such a law of liberty neglects much of the minor details of the Torah but holds to 'the faith of Jesus'. When James does cite the Torah explicitly<sup>1</sup> he uses it selectively (referring only to the love-command) and negatively (using it to rebuke). 'You are **even** falling below the level of the law' he says to his friends. It is a severe rebuke, a high insult!

1 2:11

**The fulfilled law embodied in Jesus and His love-command**

• James does not relate good works to initial salvation

'The law' in James' letters is the **fulfilled** law embodied in Jesus and His love-command. For James the 'rule of life' is the love-command distantly **approached** by the Mosaic legislation but fulfilled in Jesus and His requirements. James has no interest in the ritual or national aspects of the law. His interest is in Leviticus 19:18 and those aspects of the Decalogue and perhaps other parts of the law (Leviticus 19:16?) that go together with it. James requires good works as a means of serving God. He does not relate such good works to **initial** salvation. Nor does he use good works to assure the believer himself of his own salvation (although he would not have disagreed that it gives assurance to others of a change in the believer's life). Such 'good works' consist primarily of deeds of compassion, or mercy, or brotherliness – works that 'save' others.

**James uses the word justification in a different sense to Paul**

James has a distinctive doctrine concerning receiving approval by God, which he calls 'justification by works'. Such 'justification' is the consciousness of being approved by God. It is a forward step in one's relationship to God but is not to be interpreted as 'justification' in Paul's sense of the word. Faith is the only matter James mentions<sup>1</sup> as the means of **initial** salvation. Thereafter faith has to be exercised in prayer<sup>2</sup> and in diligent ministry to others so that approval may be received from God. Such approval is not 'justification' in Paul's sense of the term; it is not initial salvation.

1 2:23  
2 1:6-8

• No real contradiction between James and Paul because James is not talking about initial salvation

James has no interest in any aspect of the law except the Ten Commandments, and even the Ten Commandments are not used in a straightforward, literal manner. It is not literally a rule of life but rather is used as a pointer to a more radical level of righteousness required from those who hold to the 'faith of Jesus'. James **uses** the Ten Commandments but he does so in his own subtle way. His **transformed** re-use of the law he calls 'the law of liberty'. He does not simply put the Christian 'under the law'. Despite the Jewishness of James and despite the different terminologies used by James and Paul, there is no real contradiction between them. There is tension between James and Paul only if James is thought to be handling the matter of initial salvation – but that is not the case at all! Neither Paul nor James wish the Christian to be simply under the Torah. Both of them see the Christian as keeping the moral requirement of the Decalogue, but not as the result of being 'under the law'. The Christian fulfils the law by the ongoing presence of the risen Jesus (Matthew's Gospel), by walking in the Spirit (Galatians), by holding to the faith of Jesus in a way that does not allow discrimination and which leads to the law's being kept in an indirect but heightened manner (James).

1 1:1

• Different way of expressing the same idea



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