

THE RULE IS STILL GOLDEN

JAMES 2:1-13; 3:13-4:3; 5:19-20

Today we're going to see what James has to say about treating people Jesus' way. That's going to get us into the territory of the Golden Rule. There might be a bit of confusion out there as to what exactly is the Golden Rule! Kymberly Nies, like any Christian parent, wanted her pre-school daughter, Katie, to respect and obey her parents. After giving a lengthy explanation of the Golden Rule to Katie, Kymberly decided to quiz her the next day. "So, Katie, what's the Golden Rule?" Katie gave her mother a look of exasperation and said, "I know, I know. You're the mommy!"

We're taking a journey through the New Testament book of James in January and February. James was a unique communicator of God's truth. His letter had an abrupt, blunt, very direct style that might be described today as "in your face." The big, overall theme of James entire letter was spiritual maturity. James was the half-brother of Jesus. He was also the pastor of the very first church – the church in the city of Jerusalem. As a key Christian leader in the first 20-30 years after Jesus went back to Heaven, he wanted to see disciples of Jesus in his church and other churches grow up spiritually and become the men and women God wanted them to be.

Several sections in James seemed to drill down on how followers of Jesus should treat other people – especially fellow Christians. It does remind me a great deal of what Jesus said. We call it the Golden Rule. "Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets." (Mt. 7:12 NLT) James needed to remind his congregation and other congregations to whom this letter was sent that the rule was still golden! The Golden Rule applied. Jesus' teaching on how to treat people was true. Apparently, many of these early followers of Jesus just weren't treating each other very well. In addition to some specific issues, James provided a kind of rationale or foundation as to why God gets offended when we don't treat people the way He wants us to. Let's start there. James helped us...

UNDERSTAND GOD'S RULES JESUS' WAY.

It's good to remember the first Christians were all Jews. There was no New Testament yet, so all James and the first Christians had was the Old Testament and oral stories about what Jesus said and did. That helps us understand James repeated use of the word "law" in his letter. He was thinking of the Old Testament, generally, and the Mosaic Law, specifically. Let's read what he says in 2:8-13. Even though James was very comfortable in his Jewish skin, he was more than aware of how Jesus had shaken things up and brought a fresh understanding of the Old Testament. Jesus' perspective was markedly different than that of other Jewish teachers and leaders. Yes, of course, God had rules, but they'd been seriously misinterpreted.

Jesus wanted us to understand and live out God's rules Jesus' way. For example, Jesus taught when I love God and I love people God's way, I completely fulfill God's rules. "One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, 'Of all the commandments,

which is the most important?’ Jesus replied, ‘The most important commandment is this: “Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.” The second is equally important: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” No other commandment is greater than these.” (Mk. 12:28-31 NLT) Jesus was the first person ever to bring those two Old Testament commandments together and make them essentially into one rule or one standard. When you combine that passage with the Golden Rule - “Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.” (Mt. 7:12 NLT), it’s another way of saying love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus was saying, “If you truly love God and truly love people in the ways God’s Word reveals, you are doing everything God wants you to do. That’s what it means to be my follower.” James highlighted this truth because he was going after how Christians were mistreating other Christians. When you don’t treat people with love, your ability to please God is totally compromised.

James brought out another interesting truth about God’s standards. To fail to obey God in any area of life marks me as a rebel against God deserving of His judgment. “For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God’s laws.” (Jam. 2:10 NLT) Back in James’ day, it was common for people to think of God’s standards as a series of detached, random rules. If you kept one of them, you gained spiritual credit. If you broke one, you incurred spiritual debt. The goal was to end your life with more credits than debts! That’s how you got into Heaven. That perspective still dominates the majority of human beings, unfortunately. “If I do more good things than bad things, God will let me get into His Heaven.” Most people who never come to church firmly believe that way. Sadly, even some people who come to church still believe that way.

Because I ultimately answer to an absolutely holy God, I’m destined for His judgment. James reminded us, “So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law.” (Jam. 2:12 NLT) Every act judged. Every attitude judged. Every act judged. Of course, James knew Jesus paid the debt of our sin at the cross. But if anyone refused to repent of his or sin – Christian or non-Christian – James said you just opened yourself up to something very serious and devastating – the judgment of God. Apparently, some Christians in James’ day thought showing favoritism was either not a sin at all or a small sin at worst. Another example on James’ mind and heart was ignoring the needs of poor people as if that was no big deal. Certainly, God would overlook “little sins” on Judgment Day, right? Don’t be so sure or so foolish said James! Now all of that – understanding God’s standards Jesus’ way - was important in laying the foundation for what James wanted to say about how to...

TREAT PEOPLE JESUS’ WAY.

Over in Paul’s letter to the Christians in Galatia, we find the fruit of the Holy Spirit. “But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!” (Gal. 5:22-23 NLT) Those are character traits that ought to show up in

your life and mine as a follower of Jesus. Paul wasn't trying to be comprehensive, but you get the idea. As we look at these passages in James, we begin to see James' own "fruit of the Holy Spirit" list, so to speak. Like Paul's list, James wasn't trying to be comprehensive either. Instead, it was probably a list of character traits he felt was lacking among the Christians of his day and time. So, what's on James' list?

I see James saying, first of all, that a follower of Jesus is impartial. There's just no place for favoritism or partiality, because when you do that you're not loving your neighbor as yourself. You're not doing to others as you would like them to do to you. And when that happens in any way, shape, or form, you're not loving God. This was a very important issue for Pastor James in his day and time. Let's read about it in 2:1-7. And just in case anyone had trouble putting 2 and 2 together, James said again in the section we read earlier, "But if you favor some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law." (Jam. 2:9 NLT)

James set up a hypothetical situation that was probably pretty close to some actual, literal situation. Imagine those first Christians getting together for a worship service. The majority of them were economically poor and of low social status, because those were the kind of people the good news about Jesus first attracted. But one day in walked a wealthy man. You could tell because wealthy people wore many rings on their fingers and their clothes were actually clean and well made. Maybe he was a first time visitor. How exciting! The welcome team rushed to greet him and personally escorted him to the best seat in the room. He was followed in by another visitor who was obviously poor. No rings. Shabby clothes. Oh, boy.... The welcome team allowed him to find his own seat. There weren't any. "Oh, too bad, nothing available? Well, here's a cozy spot for you on the floor next to me while I'll just continue to sit in my seat."

James just lights them up, doesn't he? He pointed out how their actions weren't even rational. It was even easier back then for rich people to exploit and take advantage of poor people to get what they wanted. In James' day, if you owed someone money and you were a little late in paying off your debt, your creditor could do a citizen's arrest on you and drag you off to some court where you might be thrown into jail. But, more importantly, favoritism is inconsistent with who Jesus is and how He treated people. Jesus was Himself poor - at least during His years of ministry - because He depended on others to provide for His needs and the needs of His disciples. And yet, James reminds us, He was the glory of God. "My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others?" (Jam. 2:1 NLT) In addition, Jesus was noted for his impartiality. Even His enemies admitted, "You are impartial and don't play favorites." (Mt. 22:16 NLT) Jesus looked on people's hearts, not their outward appearance. We know He was far more impressed by the two pennies a poor widow put in the offering plate than the bags of gold put in by some rich Pharisees. He saw great potential in people the larger society wrote off as valueless - the immoral woman he met at a well outside of town; Matthew, a despised tax collector who He called to be His disciple; even Simon Peter, who bumbled his way through life - saying and doing stupid stuff - until the Holy Spirit showed up.

While James doesn't state it, his entire argument is based on the biblical truth that human beings are made in God's image and they're creatures for whom Jesus died and rose again. When we show favoritism, we dishonor God who never does. The Bible says, "For God does not show favoritism" (Rom. 2:11 NLT) Some of our church's "snowbirds" worship at the First Baptist Church in Naples, Florida when they're away from us. I was intrigued by a story I read about a former pastor, Max Cadenhead, who has since passed on. One Sunday, he began his message with a bold confession. "My message today is on the parable of the Good Samaritan. Let me start with an illustration. Remember last year when the Browns came forward to join the church?" Everyone nodded; the Browns were a very influential family. "Well, the same day a young man came forward and gave his life to Christ. I could tell he needed help—and we counseled him." No one nodded because no one remembered that young man. Cadenhead continued, "We worked with the Browns, got them onto committees. They've been wonderful folks. The young man...well, we lost track. Until yesterday, that is. As I was preparing today's message on the Good Samaritan, I picked up the paper, and there was that young man's picture. He had shot and killed an elderly woman. I never followed up on that young man, so I'm the priest who saw the man in trouble and crossed to the other side of the road. I am a hypocrite."

We still struggle with favoritism? Of course, we do and we always will! Maybe it's not so much favoring the rich over the poor, but because we're sinful human beings, we'll always struggle with partiality. It's still possible to treat each other in church and outside the church differently on the basis of wealth, skin color, social status, disabilities, or many other factors. Another example. I think because it's a major issue in our society right now – and Christians are getting caught up in it, like it or not – the value of some human beings is being questioned on the basis of whether they're citizens of the US or not. Does a person become less valuable in the sight of God because he or she is here in our country - even illegally? How should followers of Jesus treat them?

Sometimes we judge people on the basis of their past sins, instead of their future potential for Jesus. We keep them at arm's length. That happened to Paul. Before he became a Christian, he persecuted Christians. Bad dude. Many of them found it hard to accept Paul after his conversion to Jesus. That's a good question to ask ourselves today: Who are we keeping at arm's length and why? We need to look at any and every person through the eyes of Jesus. We fully accept every fellow believer because Jesus lives in him or her. If someone is not a believer, we open our lives to him or her because he or she is someone for whom Jesus died and rose again. The way we treat people indicates what we really believe about God.

We can't separate human relationships from our relationship with God. The Bible says, "If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?" (1 Jo. 4:20 NLT) Have you ever heard the phrase "God's upside-down kingdom"? It simply means God values and acts in ways opposite to what the world values and how it acts. God, who sees and loves all people alike, wants us to reflect His generous, universal

love to other people. We now relate to people on the basis of God's grace, not human merit or social status. God values impartiality and wants it to show up in our lives.

In order to extend our list of ways to treat people Jesus' way, let's look at another section of James – 3:13-4:3. Yes, a follower of Jesus is impartial. The rest of James' list goes much quicker, but they're all important. A follower of Jesus is also sincere. "But the wisdom from above is first of all pure.... It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere." (Jam. 3:17 NLT) Purity and sincerity mean pretty much the same thing here. It's living life before God and other people without hypocrisy. We steadily refuse to deal deceptively. We never pretend to be someone we're not. We never manipulate people to get what we want.

James contrasted purity and sincerity with what we so often witness in normal human relationships. "What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure. (Jam. 4:1-3 NLT) Selfish desires focused on getting our own way, having an agenda, looking to use people rather than to love people. All of that can show up among Christians. It did in James' day and it still happens today. But none of that belongs in a follower of Jesus. Purity. Sincerity.

A follower of Jesus is peace-loving. "But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving.... And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness." (Jam. 3:17-18 NLT) Sometimes the early church is painted in a more positive light than it deserved. Peace in the church was a primary aim of James' entire letter because his church lacked peace-loving people! From the other letters in the New Testament, we know Corinthian Christians were suing each other and believers in Galatia, Ephesus, and Philippi were having spats about stuff and having a hard time staying unified. God loves it when we foster peace, initiate peace, and promote peace with God, with others who follow Jesus, and – when it depends on us – even with those who don't follow Jesus. Peace-loving.

A follower of Jesus is gentle. "But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times." (Jam. 3:17 NLT) I'm told this might be the hardest Greek word in the entire New Testament to translate into English. It means knowing when not to apply a strict interpretation of the rules, when to make allowances for people without being weak, how to temper justice with mercy and understanding. Someone defined it as "sweet reasonableness." Gentleness. A follower of Jesus is willing to yield. "But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others." (Jam. 3:17 NLT) You don't have to win. You can be persuaded to do or to react differently than you'd first planned. You can listen and change your point of view. Willing to yield.

A follower of Jesus is merciful. “But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy.” (Jam. 3:17 NLT) James had a heart for poor, needy people, so he probably had them in mind here. But he also gives another example kind of out of the blue. It’s found in the very last two verses of his letter: 5:19-20. James was talking there about restoring people who have wandered away from Jesus for some reason. Because following Jesus is something you do, not just something you believe, of course it’s possible to wander away from Him until you forsake Jesus altogether. “Wander” is a good word for it. Most people who wander away from following Jesus do it gradually. What should you do if you see that happening in the life of a family member, a friend, or a fellow church member? The end result of wandering away from Jesus is death. So, to ignore it or refuse to address the wanderer is a dereliction of your Christian duty. You may get rebuffed by the person – true enough – but take the chance and pursue him or her in love. Pray for him. Warn her. Take the initiative. And if and when he or she comes back to Jesus, rejoice that a child of God has been restored. Merciful.

Finally, a follower of Jesus lives a fruitful, humble life filled with good deeds toward others. “If you are wise and understand God’s ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom.... But the wisdom from above is... full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds.” (Jam. 3:13, 17 NLT) James contrasted two very different kinds of wisdom there in chapter 3. There’s a kind of worldly wisdom that’s proud, willing to step on and over others to get what you want, and incurably self-centered which means it creates division and strife with others. But then there’s God’s wisdom which is humble to the core. Humility wasn’t something James’ culture prized at all, and I don’t think it’s prized in today’s culture either. But God prizes it. It showed up big time in Moses, “Now Moses was very humble—more humble than any other person on earth.” (Num. 12:3 NLT) Jesus was humble. “Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Mt. 11:29 NLT) What does God’s humility look like in you and me? It’s not aggressive, unwilling to boast, vulnerable, promotes peace between people, and willing to be extended to meet the needs of others routinely and habitually. A fruitful, humble life filled with good deeds toward others.

Treat people Jesus’ way. I was wrong about the late Fred Rogers. When I was a younger man, I kind of wrote him off as sappy, silly, and effeminate. I see him much differently today. For over 25 years, Francois Clemmons, played the role of friendly Officer Clemmons on *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. Clemmons was the first black actor to have a recurring role on a children's television series. Fred Rogers was clearly going out on a limb to cast Clemmons as a police officer. Clemmons had strong reservations. He’d grown up in the ghetto and didn’t have a positive opinion of police officers. Police were white men who sicced dogs on black people and blasted them with water hoses. He wasn’t excited about being Officer Clemmons at all. But he eventually agreed to take on the role.

There's one scene in particular that Clemmons remembers with great emotion. It was from an episode that aired in 1969, in which Rogers had been resting his feet in a

plastic pool on a hot day. He invited Officer Clemmons to come over and rest his feet in the water with him. Clemmons realized this TV icon, Fred Rogers, not only was showing Clemmons' brown skin in the tub with his white skin as two friends, but as Clemmons was getting out of that tub, Rogers helped him dry his feet. Fred Rogers wrapped up the program that day, as he always did, by hanging up his sweater and saying, "You make every day a special day just by being you, and I like you just the way you are." Clemmons was aware Rogers had been looking right at him when he said those familiar words that day. After the show ended, Clemmons asked him, "Fred, were you talking to me?" "Yes, I have been talking to you for years," Rogers said. "But you heard me today." Francois Clemmons says, "It was like telling me I'm OK as a human being. That was one of the most meaningful experiences I'd ever had."

An essential mark of spiritual maturity – that was Pastor James' big concern - is asking God for His grace and power to treat people – all people, every person – Jesus' way. Each one made in God's image. Each one someone for whom Jesus died and rose again. The Golden Rule? It's still golden.