

Excerpts from Life-study of James, Message 5 Practical Virtues of Christian Perfection (5)

Bible Verses:

James 1:26-27 If anyone thinks himself to be religious and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this one's religion is vain. This is pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

We have pointed out that we need to have a balanced view of the Epistle of James. On the one hand, this Epistle is helpful in emphasizing practical Christian perfection. On the other hand, this Epistle serves as a warning that it is possible even for a very godly man not to be clear concerning God's New Testament economy.

In our Christian life we need to have a balance between practical Christian perfection and God's New Testament economy. The fact that the human body has two shoulders, two arms, two hands, two

legs, and two feet indicates that there is balance in God's creation. We should not be unbalanced Christians. We need to be balanced with God's economy and our practical Christian perfection. In what I have written concerning the Epistle of James I have endeavored to be balanced, pointing out, on the positive side, that in the Epistle of James we have practical Christian perfection and, on the negative side, a warning that a godly person may not have a clear vision of God's New Testament economy.

Let us now consider the situation in Acts 21. Verse 18 says, "And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present." After Paul had greeted them, "he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry" (v. 19). When they heard this report, "they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law." The Greek word rendered "thousands" actually means myriads, tens of thousands. This verse indicates that James, who took the lead to tell Paul about the thousands of Jews who believed and yet

were zealous of the law, believed in the Lord Jesus, but he still preached and taught the law of Moses. Although he had been saved through grace, he still kept the law. What do we have here in Acts 21 —the dispensation of law or the dispensation of grace? In this chapter we have a mixture. God would not tolerate this mixture of the dispensation of law with the dispensation of grace.

Paul had come to Jerusalem, where the first church had been established. According to Acts 21, he was meeting with James, who was a pillar of the church, and with all the elders. No doubt, Peter and John were present. Paul gave a testimony of how God had used him to work among the Gentiles, and they all glorified the Lord for this. Then they went on to point out that in Jerusalem there were myriads of believers who were zealous for the law. It is difficult to believe that James, a man reputed to be so godly, could say such a word to the Apostle Paul and that he would urge him to prove to the Jews that he continued to keep the law. James told Paul that the Jews who were zealous of the law “are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among

the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs” (v. 21). To walk after the customs is to walk according to the ordinances. Then James went on to ask Paul to go with the four men who had a vow upon them and to purify himself with them. Probably the vow they had taken was the vow of a Nazarite. Now they were required to shave their heads and to offer sacrifices daily for a period of seven days.

In Acts 21:26-28 we see that when the seven days were nearly over, certain Jews saw Paul in the temple, stirred up the people, and laid hands on him. This may indicate that the Lord did not agree with what Paul was doing and allowed him to be arrested. Eventually, Paul was sent to Rome to be judged directly by Caesar Nero. Although Paul was such a strong apostle, he was still human, and he took the advice of those Judaic elders in Jerusalem. God, however, would not tolerate the situation.

We have a strong basis in the Bible for saying that James was not strong in the revelation of God’s New Testament economy in Christ. Actually, James was

somewhat off from God's economy. As we have pointed out, he was still under the influence of the background of the old Judaic religion. His word in Acts 21 definitely and clearly indicates this.

We may say that James' view was obscure concerning the distinction between God's new economy and His old dispensation. This obscurity may have been due to the strong tradition James was in and to the background he was under. This tradition and background worked together with James' sympathy with Judaism to cause him to sacrifice God's new economy and compromise with the old dispensation. This compromise produced a mixture that was intolerable to God.

The divine principle is always to keep God's dispensations distinct and separate. In Acts 21 even Paul became somewhat involved in this mixture because of the atmosphere, the cloudy sky, in Jerusalem. Man's sympathy with tradition and background always brings in a mixture of the new with the old. It is a shame that a God-fearing man like James would have taken part in such a mixture. This is recorded in the Scriptures, and it is certainly

fair to call our attention to it so that we may realize the need to have a clear vision concerning God's New Testament economy.

Read the verses online: [James](#)

Read the complete message online: [Life-study of James](#)

Note: This version is not intended to be printed as material for pursuit during the small group gathering. Instead, it is to be used as additional reference for brothers and sisters who want to prepare in advance for fellowship on the message. We include here notes from the commentaries of the brothers in the life-study radio program. The points from these commentaries can help enrich our understanding and, eventually, our fellowship with the saints on the selected portions of the life-study message. We still recommend that, if possible, the saints still listen to the [audio message](#) in addition to reading the [life-study message](#) for personal pursuit and for preparation for small group gatherings. We also wish to point out that these notes have not been fully polished.

Commentary:

Introduction

[MM]: We have pointed out in our first four radio programs on the life-study of James that we need to have a balanced view of the Epistle of James. On the one hand, this epistle is helpful in emphasizing practical Christian perfection. On the other hand, this epistle serves as a warning that it is possible, even for a very godly man as James, not to be clear concerning God's New Testament economy. Today we're going to get a view from chapter 21 of the book of Acts that James was not clear about God's economy.

[BD]: Actually, God's economy is the subject of the entire Bible, and it's the central theme we find in the Scriptures, even from Genesis to Revelation. God's economy stresses the dispensing of God Himself into His people through the life-giving Spirit so that God's chosen people could be born of Him, to be His children, to have His life and have His nature, and could live and serve Him in this divine life and divine nature, not so that they could keep the law. Of course, if God's people live in and by the Spirit of God, they will spontaneously keep the law. But the law in God's economy was not the central item. In fact, it was something added in along the way. And when Christ came and accomplished redemption and rose from the dead to be the life-giving Spirit, all the requirements of the law were fulfilled, and the law was put aside and no longer became the way that God deals with His people so God deals with His people through His New Testament economy, which has nothing to do with the law of Moses.

[MM]: The Scripture reading for today's program is Acts 21:17-26. I would encourage all of our listeners to read those verses because it tells a story that is the basis of our whole program today. It's one of the most striking portions in the whole New Testament to me because it shows the confusion in James and the elders in Jerusalem about God's New Testament economy.

Part 1

[MM]: This incredible advice from James to the Apostle Paul that contradicts God's New Testament economy is just amazing to me. I am shocked when I read this, yet it really underscores the point that Witness Lee is trying to make in this life-study about James, doesn't it?

[BD]: It really does. I was very struck by Brother Lee's statement here. He said, James believed in the Lord Jesus, but he preached and taught Moses. Whereas, if we read Paul's epistles, Paul announced Christ, very clear, very big contrast between Christ, the living person, and the law of Moses. Moses, the giver of the law.

[MM]: Even Ephesians 2.15, Witness Lee quoted the Apostle Paul that the law was abolished by Christ.

[BD]: Yes, all these ceremonial ordinances of the law, such as the holy diet, circumcision, keeping of the Sabbath, all these things were altogether abolished. But James even insisted or taught the Jewish believers to keep these Jewish ordinances. And then, when Paul went to Jerusalem, James brought Paul into the same kind of practice. He entreated him to join four brothers to keep the Nazarite vow, when God had abolished all those rituals and ceremonial things of the Old Testament through the death of Christ. So that the Jews and the Gentiles could be joined together as one Body, even one new man in Christ, with Christ as their constituent, as the person. Not the law, but Christ is the center of God's New Testament economy. But James, it's very clear, there's a mixture here. On one hand, James was a brother in Christ. He believed in the Lord Jesus, he was saved through grace, which is all a part of God's New Testament economy, or God's eternal economy. But James brought in this mixture. He could not abandon, or did not abandon the Old Testament practices of the

law of Moses. And he brought these into the church life and mixed them with God's New Testament economy. And God is not a God of mixture. He can't tolerate mixture. God had abandoned the law, as Paul had made abundantly clear in his epistles. God had abandoned the law as the way that He would relate Himself to His chosen people. He had used the law for a period of time, for a certain purpose. But when that purpose was fulfilled, God abandoned the law. And He brought in the life-giving Spirit, who is Christ in resurrection, to replace the law in His New Testament believers. It's very clear from Paul's teaching.

[MM]: But here we have a clear view that James had not yet made the transition from God's old dispensation, or old economy, into the new economy of God. And so, he brought in a mixture, and that mixture was devastating to God's economy.

Part 2

[MM]: Let's talk about this atmosphere of mixture that Paul was under with James that Witness Lee describes as hard to get out. In Galatians 2, you see that same mixture affecting Peter. Here it affects Paul when he was in Jerusalem. But earlier in Paul's ministry, he wrote the book of Galatians and talked about how Peter was not faithful in Galatians 2:11, and even that he was in hypocrisy by being with those who were of the circumcision. This is incredible that two of the top writers in the New Testament could both be influenced by this atmosphere, this strong atmosphere of mixture.

[BD]: Peter and Paul were the top apostles in the book of Acts, yet both of them came under the influence of James' mixture, mixing up God's New Testament economy with the law of God's Old Testament economy. And from this portion that we see here in Acts 21, we can see that the strongest atmosphere of this mixture was in Jerusalem, with the church at Jerusalem, when Paul, who had been the apostle to the Gentiles, where you don't have the practices of the Mosaic law. But even there, Paul had to write Romans and Galatians to the Gentiles to keep the churches in the Gentile world from being invaded by this kind of teaching to keep the law of Moses. This is very striking. Then Paul, no doubt, he had a desire to help the believers, the misled believers in Jerusalem, concerning the matter of God's economy versus the law. But when he got into that environment, that strong atmosphere of law-keeping, and it's very graphic here, zealous. Tens of thousands of believers were zealous for keeping the law. Then the elders in Jerusalem said, we have four men. That means the church had four men. That means this was a common thing in the church, to practice the Old Testament ordinances, even the keeping of the Nazarite vow. The atmosphere was so strong. And Paul had a heart. He wanted to help them. And here they came to him, entreating him in order to be accepted by the believers here. Because they've heard, you've been teaching apostasy from Moses. In order for you to be accepted by them, why don't you join these four men and join in their vow and even pay for their offerings and sacrifices for them?

[MM]: Then everyone will know that you're a keeper of the law.

[BD]: Everyone will know that you're just like they are, keeper of the law. Oh, Paul was, you could say he was seduced by this. In one sense. No doubt he had a good heart to help them. But somehow this was such a prevailing atmosphere that even Paul could not withstand it. And he was drawn in to this mixture himself. Of course, Paul himself would never agree with such a mixture. And his writing in Romans and Galatians indicates clearly that he realized how serious it was to have such a mixture. That God's economy would be annulled if the Jewish things invaded the church. Including the keeping of the law of Moses. That's not the focus of God's economy. The focus of God's economy is God Himself who is processed and consummated to be the life-giving Spirit coming into our being to dispense Himself into all the three parts of our tripartite being so that we can be the sons of God and the members of the Body of Christ for His corporate expression. This has nothing to do with the law of Moses. Although, if we do live by the Spirit, we will fulfill all the requirements of the law spontaneously. So, Paul taught that we should not allow the law to come in. But yet he himself was drawn in to this mixture.

[MM]: And surely the Lord could not be happy with that. And as we see, the Lord actually intervened in that situation as you read the book of Acts.

Part 3

[MM]: To understand the book of James, it's really important to see this shameful mixture that James participated in.

[BD]: Yes, we can see this, of course, in the book of Acts. We see it in Galatians 2, as you pointed out. There, when Peter came to Antioch, which was a Gentile city, he ate with the Gentiles. But there it says, when some came from James, that means from Jerusalem, the heavy atmosphere of the mixture of the law, then Peter withdrew from eating with the Gentiles and practiced hypocrisy. And Paul had to stand up there and rebuke Peter to his face. Peter was carried away by the influence of the law-keeping mixture. And then in the epistle of James, 1:25, he talks about the perfect law of freedom and that we need to look into this law and be a doer, that means one who keeps the law. Then in 4:11, James says clearly that we need to be doers of the law. So, it's very clear, James taught the keeping of the law of Moses. And in Acts 15, when the decree was issued to all the Gentile churches, that decree ended with and we should remember Moses. We should not eat things strangled and should not drink blood as is taught in the law of Moses. There was a little foxtail in this decree to all the churches in the Gentile world. Let's remember Moses. You can see it's very clear. James was under this heavy influence and I appreciate Brother Lee's bringing out this divine principle of God—always to keep the dispensations distinct and separate from one another. God would never mix the dispensation of the law with the dispensation of grace. He would always have a clear separation. But with James there was no such separation. And Peter was influenced by this mixture. And Paul, as we've seen in this broadcast today, was strongly influenced by that mixture. What would have happened if Paul had been able to finish the Nazarite vow? God's economy would have been severely damaged by that. So, the Lord came in on the seventh day and raised up a turmoil and Paul was arrested. Eventually he was imprisoned. And it was while he was in prison that he received new revelation, more light concerning God's economy. And he wrote some of his most crucial epistles while he was in prison. This was the Lord's wisdom and His sovereignty to preserve His apostle from that mixture to keep His New Testament economy pure and unmixed.

[MM]: Well, you can sure see why Martin Luther depreciated the epistle of James and call it a straw epistle and the obvious question many have is, well why would this be in the New Testament? And we've been trying to point that out program after program it's there as a warning and a balance.

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