

# Favouritism - Part 3

by Alistair Begg

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of loving our neighbor as ourselves, as summarized by Jesus in the gospels, and warns against the sin of showing favoritism.*

**Duration:** 37:59

**Scripture:** Exodus 20:13-14, Deuteronomy 4:15, Hebrews 10:16, James 2:8-10

**Topics:** "Favouritism"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the significance and seriousness of breaking God's law. The law of God is seen as an expression of his character and nature, and it reveals to us who God is. The speaker references Deuteronomy 4, where God reveals himself to the people and emphasizes the importance of obedience and the forbidding of idolatry. The sermon also highlights the importance of loving our neighbors as ourselves, which is summarized in the second table of the Ten Commandments. The law is not meant to be a ladder for salvation, but rather a mirror that shows our need for a Savior and a map for ordering our lives. The sermon concludes with a prayer for the Holy Spirit to illuminate the Scriptures and for the listeners to love and serve Jesus.

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## Transcript

I invite you to turn to James and chapter 2, page 855 in the Blue Bibles that are around you, and we continue our studies in James at verse 8. If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

For he who said do not commit adultery also said do not murder. If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. Amen. Just a prayer together as we look to the Scriptures.

Father, we thank you this morning that we have a Bible to which we're able to turn. We thank you for the work of the Holy Spirit to illumine the pages of the Bible to us, to conduct that divine dialogue in our lives whereby beyond the voice of a mere man we sense that this is none other than God himself knocking at

our door, speaking to us words of caution and challenge and comfort. Accomplish your purposes, we pray in this study, so that we might love Jesus and serve him.

For we pray in his name. Amen. Well, just one simple phrase has allowed James to, as it were, set the cat among the pigeons, and that phrase is back in verse one, don't show favoritism.

Don't show favoritism. It's one of those phrases where we're quite honest in recognizing that there is no part of it that we do not understand. James is clear, he's concise, he is candid, and he's actually pretty courageous.

Because for him to challenge favoritism was to challenge something very close to home. And for us to open our Bibles this morning and look at this particular section of Scripture is, once again, to be confronted by something that we find pretty close to home. And if we're honest, a little closer than we would be prepared, perhaps, to admit.

Because while all of us, without exception, would be unwilling to endorse the practice of discrimination, none of us are able to deny the presence of discrimination, the presence of favoritism, the presence of partiality. Indeed, we might argue that our whole culture is put together on the basis of choosing favorites and establishing ourselves in ways that disengage us from the people around us. And the prevalence of discrimination is among us as it relates to nationality, to social status, to school tie or intelligence, to race, and that's all just for starters.

And it would be one thing if this was simply a secular problem. But it is not. It is a religious problem.

It is, more significantly, a Christian problem. It is a personal problem. That's why I say to you that when we look down at the Scriptures here, we find them looking back up at us, and we realize, as we've done so many times before, that although we are trying to understand the Bible, the Bible is a book that understands us.

James, I think, without question, must have had in mind the story that Jesus told of the Good Samaritan. You can read it for homework in Luke chapter 10. But on one occasion, a man came up to Jesus and he asked him what he had to do to receive eternal life.

And Jesus said, well, how do you read the Bible? What do you know about the law? And he gave back to him the law. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and your mind and your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. And Jesus said to the man, well, go ahead and do that, and you will live.

Interestingly, the man comes back by saying this, who is my neighbor? Who is my neighbor? In fact, the King James version, if I recall it, reads, but the man seeking to justify himself said, who is my neighbor? What was he trying to do? He was trying to discriminate. It was customary for the Jews or the Essenes or the Pharisees to draw little circles around themselves when it came to the fulfilling of the law of God. And so the law is perfectly clear.

Love God in his entirety and with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. The man says to Jesus, could you please just tell me who my neighbor is? What's he trying to do? He's trying to limit the number of people that are in his circle so that he can disregard all the people that are outside his circle. And I say to you again, that man is not an unusual man.

That is why the challenge here in James chapter 2 reverberates through our congregation and indeed through our lives. I haven't found these verses the easiest to get a handle on, and so I've gathered my thoughts under four words. I'll tell you what the words are so that you can know that we're making progress.

The first word is if, the second word is but, the third word is so, and the final word is because. If, but, so, because. You recognize that there is a progression in this, and it's the progression that James provides for us here.

Verse 8 begins with our first word, if. If you really keep the royal law found in scripture, which is love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right. And we'll stop right there, because the next verse, verse 9, takes us to our second word, but.

What James has done, back up in verse 5, is remind his readers that they are the inheritors of the kingdom, a kingdom that God has promised to those who love him. And Jesus is the king in his kingdom, and because he is the king, he decides what happens in his kingdom. And the royal law that he has established is summarized, all of God's moral law summarized essentially in the words of Jesus, in love God with your totality and love your neighbor as yourself.

And it is this royal law found in scripture which bears all of the testimony to the kingly rule of Jesus. Love your neighbor as yourself, Jesus said, is a summary of the second table of the ten commandments. Some of us grew up in churches where the ten commandments were recited every Sunday.

Not a bad practice. It takes time, but it's purposeful. Others of us grew up in churches where the ten commandments appeared before us on the wall, and it meant that we were immediately, at least through our eye gaze, confronted by the fact that God has certain standards that he has designed and desires for us.

And when we get to the second tablet of the law, it says that there should be no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no lying, and no coveting. Well, how do we summarize that? Love your neighbor. If you love your neighbor, you're not going to commit adultery.

You're not going to lie to them, steal from them, covet. You're certainly not going to kill them. That's what Jesus has made clear in the gospels, and that's what his brother now is driving home in this letter.

The royal law found in scripture, love your neighbor as yourself. In other words, love is the ruling principle at the core of God's moral demands, a ruling principle which is then worked out in our everyday lives. It would be one thing if the call to love was a call to some emotional experience, whereby we went away in a corner and tried to engender it.

But it is not that. If you keep the royal law found in scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you do right. In other words, it's like a coin.

On the one side of the coin it says love, and on the other side of the coin it says righteousness. To love your neighbor as yourself, says James, is to do the right thing. To do the right thing is to love your neighbor as yourself.

So, it's not a question of feelings. It's a question of doing what is right. We often think of that completely upside down, don't we? A topsy-turvy way of thinking, and yet we're helped when we come to the

marriage service, because in the marriage service there's no question about how anybody's feeling.

Not in any sensible marriage service there isn't. Not in the ones that have stood the test of time over hundreds of years. The minister never asked the person how do you feel about her or how do you feel about him, because the answers would be multivarious.

No, the question is all directed to the will. Do you take her? Will you love her? Will you keep yourself only to her? Will you promise to do this, and do you promise to do that? And all of these promises are an expression of the royal law found in scripture. Love your wife as yourself.

Love your husband as yourself. Love is revealed in obedience, and obedience expresses itself in love. Now, when we move into anything that talks about the law, some Christians immediately get very fidgety, because they have grown up with a misunderstanding of the place of the law in the Christian life, and they have completely set it aside by using a particular phrase, which is a biblical phrase.

We are not under law, we are under grace. Well, of course we are. That's exactly what the Bible says.

We're not under law as a means of justification. We're not under law as the dynamic of our sanctification. But the fact of the matter is, the law, this perfect law that gives liberty, has an abiding place in the life of the Christian.

Otherwise, how do we know what we're supposed to do? If we're supposed to just sit around and wait until our feelings move us, how well have most of us been doing on that? How many have felt that it would be a good time, they just felt as though they ought to buy a Harley Davidson and run away to somewhere in the deep south or the far west. And if they've been sitting around for long enough, they may be able to add to that, and the Lord told me. No, he did not.

There's nothing about Harley Davidsons in the Bible, I can guarantee you that. There is something about Triumphs, but not Harley Davidsons. You see how dangerous it is, and it happens all the time.

I'm feeling this, and I'm sensing that, and I believe the Lord is saying this, and the next thing. Stop most of that nonsense. The abiding rule of God's law is whereby we find the basis for determining what we're doing, and that is not legalism.

That is not legalism. Legalism is an approach to the law whereby we use it as a mechanism for putting ourselves in a right standing with God. We know that we cannot do that.

Legalism, says Graham Goldsworthy, is a subtle thing. Those who do not place the same emphasis on the law will be branded as antinomian, as against law, even lawless. But it needs to be emphasized that recognizing that God requires us to honor his law and to be lawful is not the same as being legalistic.

Do you get that? The fact that God requires us to honor his law and be lawful cannot be equated with being legalistic. If you really keep the royal law found in scripture, love your neighbor as yourself. It's interesting that as yourself is in there, isn't it? Just being love your neighbor, you say, well, okay, how do you want me to do that? So the word is love your neighbor as yourself.

How do you love yourself? Do you love yourself? Did you wake up this morning and say, oh, I love me, I love me, I love me? I hope not. I was greatly helped by this quote. If we want to know how we're to love our neighbor, then we must ask a prior question, how do we love ourselves? Never it is to be hoped with

an emotional thrill.

Rarely, as a matter of fact, with much sense of satisfaction, mostly with pretty wholesale disapproval, often with complete loathing, but always with concern, care, and attention. When we catch sight of our faces in the mirror first thing in the morning, the word, ah, comes spontaneously to the lips. Yet at once we take that revolting face into the bathroom, we wash it and tend it and make it as presentable as nature will allow.

And so it goes on through the day. Loving ourselves means providing loving care and attention. This is the model on which we're to base our relationships to all to whom we owe neighborly duty.

Everything conspires today to define love primarily in emotional terms. Scripturally, love is to be defined in caring terms, for the love that is owed to our neighbor is the love we expend on ourselves. So that love is not the victim of our emotions, but the servant of our wills.

See what he's saying? If, and this is a pretty big if, if you keep the royal law found in scripture and love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right. Why are you doing this? Because it's right. How do you feel? I don't know how I feel, but I'm doing this because it's right.

This is quite staggering, isn't it? Because we are at the end of a period of a couple of decades, 25 years really, in which within the framework of evangelicalism, there's such a shift away from any notion of duty, any notion of obligation. Anybody who does anything out of duty or obligation clearly doesn't understand Christianity, so we're told. I think that's wrong.

I think the Bible says it's wrong. You see, if we operate simply on the basis of the stimulation of our hearts or our emotional drifts, there's no saying where we're going to end up. Yesterday, I did something that was right.

I think it was an expression of love. I didn't feel any emotion in it at all. I did it because it was right.

I went over to see some people who were leaving, and I thought, I need to go and see them because they're leaving. Half of me said, forget it, they're leaving. They won't care.

And then I said, yeah, but that wouldn't be right. And so because it was right and because the rest would be wrong, I did what was right. I went over and loved them.

I loved them. How did I feel? I don't really know. I prayed with them, gave them a hug.

But if anyone keeps the royal law found in Scripture, love your neighbor as himself, herself, yourself. They do what's right. Second word, but.

Spent too long on the first. I apologize. We'll catch up.

But if you show favoritism. James still hasn't let go of this, you see. He's back at favoritism again.

The contrast is clear. If you keep this royal law, you do right. If you show favoritism, you sin.

Now, remember what James has introduced as his illustration back up in verses two and three. If you weren't here, you can just look up at the page and see what's going on. Suppose, he says, this is a supposition.

Imagine a man comes in and he wears a gold ring and has fine clothes and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show particular attention to the man wearing the fine clothes, give him a nice seat and you disregard the poor man, then you have become judges with evil thoughts. In other words, you violated the royal law found in Scripture.

Now, I find it very interesting that he comes back to favoritism, not on account of the fact that it was mentioned previously, but in light of what he then goes to in verses 10 and 11 to make his other point. He goes to murder and to adultery. Nobody can say that because they did one or failed to do one that they're clear in the other.

But the interesting thing to me is that he doesn't say, love your neighbor as yourself, you're doing right. But if you murder, you sin and are convicted by the law as a lawbreaker. Or if you steal, or if you covet, he doesn't actually go to one of the commandments per se.

He goes back to favoritism, which makes it all the tougher. Because some of us are tempted to think that provided we haven't done any of the big 10 as it were, or not the main ones in the big 10, that we can somehow or another just go quite narrowly along with a little bit of slander and a little bit of gossip and a little bit of favoritism and a little bit of a judgmental spirit and so on. Because after all, you know, we're not breaking anything here really of significance.

James lays the X to that notion. Favoritism is not a small matter. Because favoritism says we have broken the ruling principle that summarizes God's expectation for his people to love our neighbor as ourselves.

You see, the moral law of God is not multiple choice. I don't know how it is here because I've never taken exams here, but in Britain when you take exams, especially in the arts, if you're taking an exam in history or Shakespeare or whatever it might be, they will often allow you to choose your questions so that they may set 10 questions, which are there on the sheet, and at the bottom it says six out of ten to be attempted. You don't have to do the whole ten.

You can choose whichever six you want, which is exactly the way in which we're tempted to regard the Ten Commandments. There's ten commandments. Have a go at six of them.

See how you're doing. You know, you don't have to all choose the same six, but just go ahead and choose six and do your best. No, no, it's not multiple choice.

It's not six out of ten to be attempted because look at what he says. Whoever keeps the whole law and stumbles at one point is guilty of breaking all of it. In other words, the law of God is not like a pile of stones whereby you can take one stone away and you still have a pile of stones.

The law of God is like a sheet of glass, and when that sheet of glass--for example, the windscreen in your car--takes that big ding and it goes, it's broken. I mean, you could argue that it's only one tiny piece of it that's broken, but I can guarantee you it's broken. The whole thing is now broken.

That is what James is saying here. The fact of our breaking God's law is significant and serious because God's law is an expression of his character and his nature. The reason we have the law of God is because it says to us, if you like, verbally what God is ontologically.

God does not reveal himself to the people in the Old Testament. Let me just show you this, if you want, in Deuteronomy 4. In Deuteronomy chapter 4, when God reveals himself--and this great call for obedience is

the hallmark of the chapter and then the forbidding of idolatry. Deuteronomy 4, if you just look down at verse 11, you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens with black clouds and deep darkness.

Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form. There was only a voice.

He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow, and he wrote them down. Verse 15, he comes back to the same thing. You saw no form of any kind the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire.

Therefore watch yourselves very carefully so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, and so on. The fact is that God revealed himself in what he said. He revealed himself in what he said, and what he says is expressive of his character and of his nature.

Therefore, if I look at the law of God and say, I don't have to deal with this one, what I'm saying is that, number one, that my love for God is deficient, but also at the same time that there are aspects of God's nature which actually don't matter. And that cannot be to say that one of the commands has less of an impact on me than another. To break God's law, to show favoritism, is to be a law breaker.

So, thirdly, so. There's no so at the beginning of verse 12, but we could put one in there without altering the flow of the argument if you do this in verse 8, but if you don't in verse 9. So let me tell you what to do in verse 12. Speak and act in the awareness of the fact that we're going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.

We're going to be judged by the law that gives freedom. Oh, you say, I don't like the sound of this. No, it brings us up, doesn't it? That's why in class, the students at the back always said, is there a test on this? Excuse me, is there a test on this? Why is that the first question in the class? Because they want to know it's going to change the way they approach everything.

If there's no test at the end, we might listen, we might not, we may show up, we may not. And what James is saying, there's a test at the end. Now, for the believer who has passed from death to life, who has been justified by faith through peace with God, for whom there is no condemnation because they're now in Christ Jesus, that does not remove the believer from the dimension to which James is referring here.

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom. It's the very same thing that we have when Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, when he talks about being confident that he is absent from the body and at home with the Lord, and he's confident, confident, and confident. And then he says in verse 8, 9, he has his own soul.

So, we make it our goal to please him, whether we're at home in the body or away from it. Now, here comes his because. Because we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Now, which part of that don't we understand? It's mysterious, it's hard to put the pieces together, but it is impossible to step back from this. Although in Christ, our eternal destiny will not be unsettled by this examination, this examination will nevertheless take place. And that's why James speaks so clearly.

Now, what he does is simply drive home what he's going to come to in verse 14, which we're not going to come to, and you can relax on that. James is giving indication here that the proof of justifying faith is works. The proof of justifying faith is works.

The ground of our salvation is the work of Jesus. The evidence of our salvation is to be found in our works and in our deeds. Hence, verse 14, what good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? He's going to come and hit this very, very hard.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith and yet disregards the royal law which gives freedom? He doesn't say, can faith save? He says, can such faith save? Because we remember already that at the end of chapter one, he's pointed out the fact that there is a kind of religion that is absolutely spurious. It is worthless. It is useless.

It is not that people aren't going around saying, I'm religious and I think I'm okay. They're doing that in totality. But the judgment of the Bible is, it's a waste of time.

It's completely useless. It's facile. Now, there is a religion that God our Father regards as pure and as faultless.

What is it? It is a compassionate heart, a controlled tongue, and an uncompromising testimony. What is he addressing here? The compassionate heart. If the religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is a compassionate heart, and if a compassionate heart reveals itself in the royal law that gives freedom, love your neighbor as yourself, and we do not love our neighbor as ourselves, then we call in question the validity of our profession of faith.

That's what makes it so challenging. And that's what's supposed to happen when we take these tests. That's why the book of Hebrews is full not only of promises, but of warnings.

Promise, warning, warning, promise, so that the warning may make us go, whoa, and the promise may bring us back to the place of security. Now, let me wrap this up. Having escaped God's just penalty on our sins, on account of Jesus' death on the cross, we are then put in a position where we gladly accept duties, the obligations to which the law points us, because of the indwelling spirit of God, who gives to us the resources to enable us to keep the law as never before.

That's why in Hebrews 10 you have it classically, quoting Jeremiah 31, whereas before the law was written on tablets of stone, now the law is written on the fleshy tablets of our hearts. That's the prophecy of Jeremiah. And after the writer to the Hebrews is dealt with the finished work of Christ, he says, and we have this on the strongest of authority, and he quotes Jeremiah 31.

In other words, the law is written into us, and it's a law which sets us free. It's a law which enables us, because in Jesus, the precepts become promises. Oh, they remain precepts, but they become promises.

Imagine a thief coming to church on a Sunday. He comes in, and he's just so obviously a thief. He steals stuff all the time.

Not everyone knows this. In fact, the people around him have got no clue. He sits out in the church, and he looks up behind the pulpit, and he finds that the Ten Commandments are up there in bold letters.

And there it says it, thou shalt not steal. And he sits a little lower in his chair, because he realizes that the law condemns him. The minister then explains that Jesus Christ, the perfect one, has kept the law in all of its detail, fulfilling all of its precepts for those who will love him and trust him, and that this same Jesus has paid the penalty that the law brings upon the unbeliever by his death upon the cross, and that this wonderful liberation is available to those who will come and trust in Jesus.

And the thief says, that sounds fantastic. That is exactly the kind of thing I've been looking for. I want to be free.

I want to be free in my conscience. I want my sins to be forgiven. I want to be a new person, just like the thief on the cross.

And out he goes into his week, and he comes back the following Sunday, and he takes his place again in the congregation. And he looks up, and the Ten Commandments are still there in all of their brightness and convicting power. But when he looks up at thou shalt not steal, it's not N.O.T. that is flashing.

It's shout that is flashing. And he realizes this, that the prohibition has become a promise in Jesus. That he, in giving his spirit to live in his life, enables him to do what the law requires him to do.

And it is not a ladder up which this poor thief is trying to climb to gain acceptance into heaven, but it is a mirror which has shown him his need of a Savior. And then it is a map which orders his way of life. That's, you see, why it is referred to as the law that gives freedom.

Freedom. Freedom was offered last night all around Cleveland to people, and it's bondage. Smoke this, try this, go here, do this, have this.

You want to be free? Invitation to bondage. The Bible is the only place that you can discover freedom. Because the Bible is the only place that is honest about the predicament of man.

And the predicament of man is that he is enslaved. And he's enslaved to himself and his own passions and his desires and his wants and his interests. And he needs to confess his enslavement, and he needs somebody who can set him free.

And that person is Jesus. And when that Jesus sets us free, he doesn't just set us free to run around the community and do whatever is in our tummy to do. He says, now, not only am I giving you a forgiveness, I'm giving you a family, and I'm giving you a framework.

And I've written it down here in my book, and I want you to go and read this book, because it is my book to you. And the precepts are promises as well as prohibitions. Well, our last word is because.

If you keep it, you do right. If you show favoritism, you break the law. So, speak and act in light of the fact that you're going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.

Because, notice a word of caution and a word of comfort. Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. For your homework, you can read the story of the unmerciful servant in Matthew chapter 18, 23 to 35.

Bottom line, a failure to display mercy is an indication of the fact that we have not entered into the mercy that is offered to us in Christ. Human mercy is proof of having received divine mercy. And when we learn to live in obedience to God's word, we will deal with others as God's has dealt with us.

Therefore, no grudges, no grudges, no acrimony. No, I'm not writing to her stories. No, well, he's my brother, and he did it, and he stole the car, and that's why I haven't spoken to him in seven years.

There's none of that at all. Not in Christ, there isn't. Because I'll tell you right now, judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

What is it that our mercy earns? God's mercy? No. It is that our mercy reveals that we understand mercy. That's why the story of the unmerciful servant is so powerful.

He owes a sum that he cannot pay. He's forgiven. He has a few workers in his garden.

He goes out to one of them and owes him five dollars. He says, hey, where's the five dollars you were going to give me? The man says, oh, give me a chance. I'll get it back to you.

He grabs him and chokes him by the throat and wants him cast into jail. And the master of the unmerciful servant said, come here, you. He said, you obviously don't understand what happened to you if you did.

You would not treat that person like that. If you want to think about it in terms of another parable, think about it in relationship to the story of the prodigal son. The father represents God, and he's running down the street with open arms.

The Pharisees out in the backyard say, there's going to be no party for my brother. I'll tell you that right now. That son was lost, big time lost, because he refused to show mercy, because he didn't understand mercy.

And then the word of comfort, mercy triumphs over judgment. Mercy triumphs over judgment. It's a great word, isn't it? Because ultimately, even our own merciful acts are tainted, aren't they? They come from mixed motives.

And when I ask myself the question, how merciful am I really? I don't like the answer I get back. That's why we have to retreat again to the place where mercy there was great and grace was free. And pardon there was multiplied to me.

And there my burden soul found liberty at Calvary. Because that's where the ground's level, isn't it? That's where it doesn't matter what your school tie is, or what the square footage of your house is. Doesn't matter if you're black, white, green, or yellow.

Mercy there was great and grace was free. And pardon there was multiplied to me. Therefore, with the same comfort that I have been comforted, with the same mercy that I've been I'm going to show that to others.

Father, thank you that there's pardon for sin and a peace that endures. And your Holy Spirit to cheer and to guide their strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. And blessings are all ours with thousands beside.

Because of your great faithfulness, because of your mercy, because of the Lord's mercy that we are not consumed. They are new every morning. If you treated us as our sins deserve, if you treated us the way we are tempted to treat some other people, we wouldn't have a hope in the world.

But we thank you that you are a faithful God. And we pray in your Son's name. Amen.

That concludes this message. Thanks for listening to Truth For Life. If you'd like information on ordering additional messages from Alistair Begg and Truth For Life, then call our resource line at 1-888-58-TRUTH.

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