

The Royal Law of Liberty
James 2:8-13
ABC 5/26/19

In a Dilbert cartoon by Scott Adams, Dogbert says to Dilbert, *I decided to start a discount religion.* If you're wondering what a *discount religion* is? Dogbert explains: *The tithing would only be 5% & I'd let people sin as much as they wanted.* During this exchange, Dilbert is sitting in bed reading a book. Through it all, he never says a word. In the 3rd frame, Dogbert gives his own conclusion: *The only problem is that I don't want to spend time with anyone who would join that sort of religion.*¹ That sounds like the kind of religion most people already have. We've got a lot of *cafeteria* Christians who pick & choose what parts of the Bible they'll believe. They say things like, *I'll take the love of God, but I'm going to skip that stuff about judgment & hell.* They get an extra helping of God's promises, but they want no part of loving their neighbors. That's too hard for them. In James' little letter to the scattered Jewish Christians, he warns about *discount religion*. Talking a good game isn't enough. It's what you do that matters. The NT church was radically counter-cultural. It consisted of Jews & Greeks, slaves & slave-owners, rich & poor, all worshiping together. As we've seen, James was addressing the problem of showing partiality to the rich & disrespecting the poor. His concerns apply to any sort of partiality based on external factors. But favoritism pales in our estimation of other sins. We think, *I don't abuse children & have no pagan idols, what's a little partiality in comparison?* Because we all tend to congratulate ourselves for not committing *big* sins, while we shrug off our *little* sins as no big deal, this problem of partiality still plagues the church today. Last week we looked at the 1st 2 reasons why partiality is wrong. Favoritism contradicts the mind of God (5-6a) & it aligns you with God's enemies (6-7). Today we come to a 3rd reason (2:8-13): Partiality is wrong because it violates God's law of love. Here's the flow of thought: To show partiality violates the 2nd great commandment of God's law, to **love your neighbor as yourself**. This isn't just good advice. It's a command from our King. To break God's law is sin & to break even one part of it is to break the whole thing. Since God's law will be the standard by

¹ 8-29-05

which everyone will be judged, we should live in light of that coming judgment, especially by showing mercy to the poor. This is no *discount religion*. It's pure & undefiled. **1:26-2:13** PRAY

1. Law & Love In 1:25 James talks about **the perfect law & the law of liberty**. Here he speaks of **the royal law**. What is this **royal law**? **A. God's law is love & partiality violates that law 8-9**

James calls the law, **the royal law**. This means it comes from the King, the Lord Jesus Christ. It's different from the law of the rabbis or the way they understood God's law. This is the law as given & understood by the King Himself. **Royal** comes from the root word for *king, kingdom, or sovereign*. The King's law isn't a suggestion. It's His royal right to rule over all in His kingdom. It emphasizes the authority of His law. James has just mentioned that believers are heirs of the kingdom (2:5). As such, we must live under the law of the King. So **the royal law** probably refers to the whole law as interpreted & given to the church in the teachings of Jesus.² This was much different from the rabbinic or ritual law. This is the **royal law** of Jesus the King. To reject the King's law is to reject the King Himself.

James singles out a command from Lev 19:18 that Jesus focused on as well. **You shall love your neighbor as yourself**. This is quoted 6x in the gospels & again in Rom 13:9, Gal 5:14, & here in James. Jesus referred to it as the 2nd great command, after, **You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, & with all your soul, & with all your mind** (Mt 22:37). He then added, **On these two commandments depend the whole Law & the Prophets** (40). In the OT, just prior to the command to love our neighbor, Moses wrote, **You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly** (Lev 19:15). Part of biblical love for one's neighbor includes treating each person fairly & impartially. Loving your neighbor is having an impartial love, which is the point of James here. It's not just the people who you relate to or you like. It's also those who we have no natural inclination toward. Vs 9 says if you show partiality, you're committing **sin** & are convicted by the law as **transgressors**. **Sin** has to do with missing the mark of God's standard of righteousness. **Transgressor** refers to someone who willfully goes beyond God's prescribed limits. In one case, a person comes up short. In the other, he goes

² Peter Davids, *New International Greek Testament Commentary on James*, p 114

too far. Both are sinful. The law shows us where we fall short of God's standard, which most of us are familiar with, but I wonder if we think about the fact that the law also reflects the very character of God Himself. James had already talked in 1:25 about how God's **perfect law** is like a mirror. Those who look intently at it & abide by it, doing what the Word calls them to, those are the ones who will be blessed by God. We also saw that the mirror not only shows us our sin, it also shows us our Savior. It shows His face & nature & where we need to become more like Him. Why am I emphasizing that the Law reflects God's character? I'm sure all of us have looked at the law as restricting, but it makes a difference if we think of it as from a Person who we love & who's given us rules for our good because He loves us. Each law reflects His loving character to all people. Dt 10:17-19 says,

For the LORD your God is the God of gods & the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, & the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. He executes justice for the orphan & the widow, & shows His love for the alien by giving him food & clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

As John put it, **we love because God first loved us** (1 Jn 4.19). The Law doesn't just reveal His commands but also His character.

Unfortunately, many Christians have taken the command **to love your neighbor as yourself** to mean we're commanded to love ourselves. In fact, they say, if we don't love ourselves properly, we can't love either God or our neighbor as we're commanded. They then spend all their time focusing on loving themselves & never get around to obeying the command as it is given. There are only 2 great commandments, not 3. Love God & love your neighbor. Love of self is assumed as the standard by which we must love our neighbor.

The point of the 2nd great commandment is this: You care about your own needs, therefore, show the same care for the needs of others. You care about your own feelings; show the same care for the feelings of others. You care about your own desires; show the same care for the desires of others. You care about how others treat you; treat them as you would want to be treated. When Jesus was asked, **Who is my neighbor?** He tells the story of the Good Samaritan to prove **neighbor** means all those we come in contact with, no matter who they are. Rather than ask, *who is my neighbor?* ask, *To whom can I be a neighbor?* We never know when we'll meet a neighbor who is

in need. The list never ends because everyone could be our neighbor. Will we be a neighbor to them? It starts with simple kindness & extends to greeting them. It includes welcoming them warmly to church. It means getting to know them. It could mean watching their kids or driving them to the hospital. It might mean sending them an encouraging note. It may mean giving them physical or financial aid. It will cost you time you planned to spend elsewhere. In case someone didn't get it, James goes on to apply the law of love specifically to partiality (9). To show partiality to the rich while you treat the poor with contempt, or to show partiality to a certain race, while treating those of another race as inferior, is to commit **sin**. James adds, you **are convicted by the law as transgressors**. We are guilty! Like a trial attorney, James knew his readers would try to squirm out from under this guilty verdict by saying, *OK, maybe we've not treated everyone fairly, but it's not that big of a deal. After all, we haven't been committing adultery or murdering people. We keep the important commandments, even if we haven't always treated the poor as we should.* Anticipating this, James continues & says,

B. To violate God's law on any level is a serious matter. 10-11

The word **for** shows that James is strengthening his argument from vs 9. He argues if anyone keeps the entire law (something no one has ever done, but for sake of argument he assumes it's possible), but stumbles in one point, he's guilty of all. In other words, the law is a unity, like a chain. A single broken link breaks the chain. The law is like a mirror or window. A single, small crack means it is broken. In Js 1:25 God's law is compared to a mirror we look into. If you throw one small stone into a mirror, what happens? It shatters. That's what one sin does to the mirror of God's law. One sin breaks the whole law. When we fall, all the world's kings' horses & all the kings' men can't put us back together again. Only King Jesus can do so & He does so by taking away our fallenness & replacing it with His perfect righteousness.

Does this mean all sins are equal? Are some sins worse than others? We'd be wrong to conclude from this that all the commands of God are of equal importance or that all sins are equal. Jesus said that the weightier provisions of the law are justice, mercy, & faithfulness. By doing so He implied that other matters, such as tithing spices, are less important (Mt 23:23). Mental anger is

sin, but it's a worse sin to murder someone. James' point is that whatever the sin, it renders you a lawbreaker. You can be a good person in every other way, but if you break the law, you're a lawbreaker. If a man is guilty of murder, when he goes to court it doesn't matter if he's been a faithful husband & father, has never had a traffic ticket, never robbed a bank, or never kicked his dog. All that matters is, did he commit murder? If so, he's guilty of breaking the law. How many crimes must you commit to be a criminal? One! The Bible clearly tells us, the best things we do aren't nearly good enough (Is 64:6) & are actually offensive in God's sight. He cannot tolerate anything unholy or imperfect (Hab 1:13). He requires perfection. & in His love He sent One who fulfilled the Law & all its demands perfectly for us. That's why Jesus came, not just to die, but to live a perfect, righteous, & sinless life. The God of the universe, in justice & mercy, transfers our sin onto Jesus on the cross. To those who put their faith in Jesus, His perfect righteousness is transferred to their account. That happens by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. No one is nice enough & no amount of human works can change the force of what Js 2:10 is saying. God's law convicts all of us as guilty sinners before God. It's when we grasp the law & our need that we then can understand God's love & why we so desperately need Christ's mercy & grace. But why does James bring up these 2 commandments, **adultery** & **murder** (11)? I don't know. It may be He's anticipating the way his readers would respond to his argument so far. They may have thought, *Well, I may be guilty of partiality towards the poor, but at least I've been faithful to my wife!* He may mention murder to imply that to commit partiality is to commit murder. Discrimination against the poor & failure to love one's neighbor is sometimes associated with murder in Scripture (Jer 7:6; 22:3; Amos 8:4; 1 Jn 3:15). James is saying, *Don't dismiss partiality as no big deal! It is a big deal, just as adultery & murder are big deals.* We can't substitute one sin for another. We can't say, *I didn't commit adultery, so it's OK if I rob a bank.* Obedience in one area can't make up for disobedience in another. There's no such thing as a moderate sinner. You're either a sinner or you're not. If you break any part of God's law, it's as if you've broken the whole thing. You can't repair the situation by trying to make up for your sin in other areas. It doesn't matter how good you think you are. You still stand in need of God's grace & mercy.

There's another aspect of James' argument here. If we view the law as a series of individual commandments, we could assume that disobedience of a particular commandment brought guilt for that commandment only. But the individual commandments are part of one indivisible whole, because they reflect the will of the one Lawgiver, the **He who said**. To violate a commandment is to disobey God Himself & render a person guilty before Him.³

Which leads us to...

2. Judgment & Mercy We must live as those who will stand before God for judgment (12-13). Humanity has always thought as long as we don't commit the major sins (as we define them), & if we're good people who do enough good things, God will grade on a curve, & our good works will gain us eternal life. In Mt 19:16-21 we read,

Someone came to Jesus & said, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?" & He said to him, "Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." Then he said to Him, "Which ones?" & Jesus said, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER; YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY; YOU SHALL NOT STEAL; YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS; HONOR YOUR FATHER & MOTHER; & YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go & sell your possessions & give to the poor, & you will have treasure in heaven; & come, follow Me."

Mk 12:21-22 adds that when Jesus was looking at him, he felt a love for him. **But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.** Jesus wanted him to see that he wasn't good, only God is. He wanted him to recognize he doesn't & can't keep the commandments & earn salvation that way. The man should have said, *I can't keep God's Law as God intends. I love myself more than my neighbor, & I've tried, but I keep sinning. How can I or anyone be saved?!* That's what the disciples said. **"Then who can be saved?"** & looking at them Jesus said to them, **"With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible"** (25-26). In vs 18, Jesus quotes 5 of the 10 Commandments & adds what James calls the **royal law ... love your neighbor as yourself** (Lev 19:18). That one command alone none of us can keep consistently. If I want the Lord to show mercy to me, I must show mercy to others. But it doesn't start with me. We could say it this way: Because God has shown mercy to me in Christ, I will show

³ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, pp 114-115

that same mercy to others so that mercy will be shown to me when I stand before the Lord. James makes two points here:

A. Believers will be judged by the law of liberty 12

Some wonder & think, *I thought believers wouldn't be judged because Jesus bore our judgment on the cross. What does it mean, then, to be judged by **the law of liberty**?* Jesus has paid the penalty for our sins. He has been judged for them, right? Jesus said, **Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, & believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, & does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life** (Jn 5:24). Paul clearly states, **Therefore there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus** (Rom 8:1). These & other similar vss show that Jesus bore the punishment we deserve for our sins. If we've trusted in Him, we won't face God's eternal wrath at the final judgment (the **great white throne** judgment, Rev 20:11-15). But even though we don't need to fear that judgment if we are in Christ, Paul wrote, **For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad** (2 Cor 5:10; cf Rom 14:10-12.) The word **bad** means *worthless*. Our sins have been judged & removed from us through the death & resurrection of Jesus. But our lives as believers, the way we speak & act, will undergo God's heart-level evaluation. Those things that were done out of love for Christ & for His glory will be rewarded. Those that were done out of selfish or proud motives are worthless in God's sight & will be burned as wood, hay, & stubble (1 Cor 3:11-15). Commenting on 2 Cor 5:10 & anticipating the next section in James, Philip Hughes writes,

It is worth remarking that a passage like this shows that, so far from there being discord, there is an essential agreement between the teaching of Paul & that of James on the subject of faith & works. The justification of the sinner, it is true, is by faith in Christ & not by works of his own; but the hidden root of faith must bring forth the visible fruit of good works.⁴

James again refers to the law as **the law of liberty** (2:12; 1:25). As we saw in 1:25, James speaks of God's law as the **law of liberty**, which can be translated **the law that brings or gives liberty**. He isn't referring simply to the law of Moses. Instead, He's pointing to the interpretation & fulfillment of

⁴ *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p 183

that law in the teaching of Jesus. When James calls it **the law of liberty**, he's referring to the new covenant promise of the law written on the heart, accompanied by a work of the Spirit enabling obedience to that law. When you see the word **law** you probably think of something binding & restrictive, not freeing. But Scripture is binding & is freeing & liberating (Ps 119:45, Jn 8:32). The phrase, **of liberty**, indicates that this law gives the experience of freedom in the lives of those who wisely observe it. This is the Christian freedom from bondage to sin that the believer knows through faith in Jesus. As we submit ourselves to Christ's transforming power, this **law of liberty** works in our life an ability to do God's will joyfully. It prompts obedience without compulsion. James now associates it with the law of love which Jesus said sums up & fulfills the OT law. The believer isn't free from the obligation to do God's will as revealed in His Word, but love gives him the desire to do his Father's will. We are truly free when we want to do what we ought to do. You are free when you've been released to be truly what you were built to be. Rather than keeping the external rules of the old law, the new commandment of love is written on our hearts. Thus there's a new motivation to do everything we do out of love for God & love for others. When James says, **So speak & so act**, he's referring to our total conduct. Words alone aren't enough. It's easy to say to a poor brother, **Be warmed & be filled** (Jas 2:16) & yet do nothing. Our words need to be accompanied with godly actions. James is telling us to live this way in light of the knowledge that we'll soon stand before Jesus Christ, who will reward us for our faithful obedience. Our total conduct should be lived in light of the fact that we will one day stand before Christ whose law of love will judge & reward good & faithful servants. No longer is God's law a threatening, confining burden. It's now a **law of liberty**, one we follow joyfully knowing that God has both liberated us from the penalty of sin & given us, in His Spirit, the power to obey His will. To use James' own description (1:21), this law is an **implanted word, written on the heart**, that has the power to save us.⁵ 1 Jn 5:3 tells us, **this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; & His commandments are not burdensome**. That's the **law of liberty**.

⁵ Douglas Moo, *James*, p 117

Let me ask you a stupid question: When you stand before God, do you want judgment or mercy? I think I answer for everyone when I say, *Mercy!* **13**

B. Those who refuse to show mercy will face God's merciless judgment. Those who show mercy will receive mercy. As I understand it, the 1st part of vs 13 refers to unbelievers, whereas the last part refers to believers. Keep in mind, though, that the unbelievers described in the 1st part may profess to know Christ & be in the church. While their lips may say the right things, their deeds will show them to have a dead faith, as James will go on to explain (17). If you profess to know Jesus, but don't show mercy to those who are needy, if you don't **love your neighbor**, your profession is worthless. When you stand before God, you won't receive mercy (Mt 18:23-35). What is *mercy*? It's the outward manifestation of pity & compassion in kindly action toward the misery of another. It doesn't look at what the person deserves but what he needs & responds accordingly in word & deed. It's as we show mercy to others that we demonstrate we've already received mercy from God. As Jesus said, **Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy** (Mt 5:7). He didn't mean we earn mercy by showing it to others. Mercy, by definition, is unearned! Rather, mercy flows to others from those who've already received it from God. They'll receive mercy in its fullness at the final judgment. The last half of vs 13 refers to believers. But there's debate about whether **mercy** refers to God's mercy or to the mercy we show to others. If it refers to God's mercy, it means that while setting a strict standard, 100% conformity to God's holy law, as the basis of judgment, God ultimately is a God of mercy, who provides in His grace a means of escaping that judgment.⁶ If it refers to the mercy we show to others, it means when we're merciful toward others, we demonstrate a heart made right by the work of God's grace. In a way, these 2 ideas blend together, in that our attempts to show mercy are always imperfect. Thus we must always fall back on God's mercy to us in Christ, which will triumph over judgment in our salvation. Again, the point isn't that human works somehow earn God's mercy. Mercy is always unearned & undeserved! But outward mercy shows what's on the inside. If God's mercy has been truly received in the heart, it will show up in the life (14-17) & so they need not fear judgment. Why? Because **mercy conquers judgment.**

⁶ Moo, p 118

If I get what I deserve, I'll end up in hell, & so will you. We don't want justice, because it will condemn us. What I deserve, I don't want. What I need, I don't deserve. It's not by our works, but Christ's work in us, that enables us to be more than conquerors through Him who loved us. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, the One who put Himself under the law to bring us under His saving mercy. Mercy & justice met, & mercy triumphed over judgment at the cross!

I don't know exactly how you need to apply this today, but the Holy Spirit does. If you think about it & ask Him to apply it to your heart, you will grow in practical deeds of love for those whom you might naturally despise or disregard. I do know we must all apply this to ourselves & not to someone else. We must ask ourselves, how is my heart in this matter of favoritism? & as you love your neighbor as yourself, you are fulfilling the **royal law** of our great King!

*Mercy there was great, & grace was free;
Pardon there was multiplied to me;
There my burdened soul found liberty at Calvary.*

*By God's Word at last my sin I learned;
Then I trembled at the law I'd spurned,
Till my guilty soul imploring turned to Calvary.*

*Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan!
Oh, the grace that brought it down to man!
Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary!*

*Mercy there was great, & grace was free;
Pardon there was multiplied to me;
There my burdened soul found liberty at Calvary.⁷*



⁷William Newell, *At Calvary*, #338 in our old hymnal