

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself: James 2:8-13
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Show no partiality. That is the clear command that begins James chapter 2. We can't hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, and also hold onto an attitude of favoritism. The two don't go together. Last week we saw some of the reasons that James gives for why we must show no partiality. In verses 1-7 the main argument is found in verse 5—that partiality is inconsistent with God's nature.

The passage that we're going to study this morning continues the same theme of partiality, and here James takes the argument a step further. Here he shows us that partiality is not only inconsistent with God's nature, but it is also inconsistent with God's law which commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Of course, these two arguments overlap one another. But in verses 8-13 James impresses upon us very clearly and pointedly the serious nature of violating this law.

Verses 8-9 contain the main point of this passage, and it's clearly a continuation of the discussion about partiality. Verse 8 states the point positively, "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well." Then verse 9 states it negatively, "But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors." Verses 10-11 then explain why even one sin makes a person a transgressor of the law. And finally verses 12-13 put all of this in the context of the coming judgment. So I'd like to work our way through these verses by using 4 heading.

I. Love Your Neighbor as Yourself (verse 8)

"If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well." James points us to the great love command of Leviticus 19, which Jesus reiterated in Matthew 22, where He was asked, "which is the great commandment in the Law." And Jesus responded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). We are to love God and love neighbor, and Jesus says that those are the foundational commands of Scripture.

Paul states it in a similar way in Romans 13:8-10, "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves

another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up on this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

When we read in James that we are doing well if we “fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’” we will want to ask, What law is James referring to here? What is “the royal law”? James uses the word “law” 5 times in this passage, in verses 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12. He has only mentioned the word one time previously, and that was in 1:25, where he called it “the perfect law, the law of liberty.” And there it was virtually synonymous with “the word of truth” (verse 18) and “the implanted word” (verse 21). Now it is “the royal law.” In 2:12 it’s referred to as “the law of liberty” again. So what is this law?

I think what James has in mind here is the law that has been given to us by Christ. The Old Testament law, of course, is in the background of this discussion, but James is thinking of it in terms of Jesus’ fulfillment of it and in terms of how Jesus taught us to live. The word “royal” is related to the word “kingdom,” which was used in verse 5. Therefore it seems that James is speaking of the law of the kingdom. And it’s a law of liberty. It’s not an external law that imprisons us. Rather, it is an internal law that transforms us from the inside out and gives us the desire to do what we ought to do. It is the implanted word, which is able to save our souls (1:21).

James summarizes this law with the words of Scripture, from Leviticus 19, and reiterated by Jesus Christ, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This is the law that we are commanded to obey. And it is a law that is utterly incompatible with any kind of partiality or favoritism, because true love is not based on external criteria. Love is not based on the color of a person’s skin, or the amount of money in a person’s bank account. Loving others the way we love ourselves will mean instinctively thinking of the needs of others. We won’t consider whether or not the person can repay us. We won’t consider what the person’s status is in the eyes of the world. True love, the kind of love that fulfills the royal law, is love that crosses all kinds of social and ethnic boundaries. This love looks at others, not as black or white, rich or poor, but as individuals created in the image God.

Jesus illustrated this point for us in a powerful way in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In response to the question, “who is my neighbor,” Jesus told this story of a man who was robbed and beaten and left for dead. A priest and then later a Levite each passed by and did not help the man. But then a Samaritan stopped

to help, someone who was despised in the eyes of the Jews. It was the Samaritan who rescued the man. It was the Samaritan who proved to be a neighbor. It was the Samaritan who showed true love. Let us go and do likewise (Luke 10:25-37).

II. Partiality is Sin (verse 9)

The second point that we'll look at is in verse 9. And I'll summarize it with the heading, "Partiality is Sin." Verses 8-9 together convey the main point of this section. It's all related back to the command in verse 1 that we must show no partiality. Verse 8 gives us a positive statement about genuine love, and now verse 9 warns us against partiality, which is the opposite of love. You're doing well if you love your neighbor as yourself and thus fulfill the royal law. "But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

What we need to notice here is that partiality is sin. Maybe you haven't thought about it like this before. Maybe you think of favoritism as rude and unkind, but you wouldn't call it sin. Well, the verse states it about as clearly as it can be stated: "if you show partiality, you are committing sin . . ." This is serious. It's sin! When we give special treatment to certain people, and treat others poorly, based on external things, then we are committing sin.

And when we sin, whether it's the sin of partiality or some other sin, we are sinning against God, first and foremost. We are breaking His law. We are disobeying one of His commands. Throughout the rest of these verses we're going to see what a serious matter this is. But let this be a lesson to us to recognize sin for what it is. It will be our constant tendency to minimize our own sins, to justify our sins, to think of our sins as mere weaknesses. But we need to look honestly into our hearts and come to terms with the fact that these sins are an offense to our Holy God. We need to see our sin in this God-centered way. Yes, our sins affect others around us. Yes, our partiality is a sin against others. But, first and foremost, it is sin against God. It is a violation of His command that we love our neighbor as ourselves. And His law convicts us. It shows very clearly that we fall short.

III. Every Sin Incurs Guilt (verses 10-11)

Thirdly, we see in verses 10-11 that every sin incurs guilt. Every sin brings upon us the pronouncement: guilty. In case anyone were to question whether one sin, like partiality, would really cause someone to be convicted by the law as a transgressor, James gives this explanation. "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a

transgressor of the law.” The point here is that God’s commands are a unified whole. We can’t pick and choose when it comes to God’s guidelines for our lives. Isn’t this what we would like to do? Isn’t this what we try to do so often? We want to pick out certain commands that we think we can live up to, but then there are others that we ignore. We all have blind spots. We all have areas of sin that we ignore or keep secret. But God’s Word will point them out to us.

You may come to God’s Word thinking that you are living up to God’s standard. You may think that you’re a righteous person. You may think, for example, that you’re a righteous person because of your strict guidelines concerning what you watch and don’t watch on TV. But at the same time you are living an utterly selfish lifestyle. You aren’t making any sacrifices in order to serve others. That may be one way in which you think you’re upholding one of God’s commands while you are falling far short in other areas. Or it might be the other way around. Maybe you are serving others in many ways, and you think well of yourself because of that. But your thought life and your personal morality is filled with wickedness.

Or, as James is stressing for us in this passage, it is very likely that many of us think we’re doing pretty well in various areas of our Christian lives. And yet there is a subtle and hidden and ignored *prejudice* that is present in our hearts. We show favoritism toward certain people, without even noticing it. We are partial toward those who are similar to us, or toward those who are highly respected by our society, and there are others whom we ignore or treat badly. And we don’t see anything wrong with this. *Until* we come to God’s Word and let it shine into our souls to convict us and instruct us and change us.

James does not mean to imply in verse 10 that anybody fails in only one point. The truth is that we all fail in many points. James is simply stating a hypothetical situation in order to show us the seriousness of each and every sin. Just assume for a moment that it was possible to live up to God’s perfect standard in every way except one. Even if that were possible, you would still be accountable for the whole thing. You would still be guilty before God, convicted by the law as a transgressor. God doesn’t evaluate our obedience with percentage points. So many people think that if our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds, then we must be on God’s good side. But that’s not how it is. It’s not based on percentage. It’s pass or fail, and the only way to pass is perfection.

Now, why is it that all of the commands hang together as a whole, and if you disobey one you are guilty of the whole thing? Verse 11 explains. It’s because it’s the same Person who gives all of the commands. You see, our sin is an offense against a Person.

Our sin is an offense against God. Therefore, it doesn't matter which command we break. Whether we view the offense as big or small, any disobedience separates us from Him. Any area of rebellion puts a barrier between us and Him. Every sin incurs guilt. And since we have all sinned, not just failing in one point but failing in many points and in many ways day after day after day, we are guilty. We are accountable for all of it. We are transgressors of the law.

This is a difficult truth to hear. It's not the self-esteem boost that we often hear from the world around us, but it is what we need to hear. And it is a glorious message because it is what we must hear in order to understand the Gospel. Imagine yourself in a doctor's office, and the doctor tells you very solemnly and seriously that you have a life-threatening illness. That's not the news you wanted to hear. But it is the truth you must hear if you are to be cured. It's the same with this News. We don't want to be told that we are sinful, that we are wicked, that we have transgressed God's law. But if we don't hear this difficult news, we'll go on thinking that we're healthy. We'll go on living our lives thinking that we're not sick, thinking that we're not going to die, thinking that we are righteous in God's eyes. We have to receive the bad news in order to understand the Good News. We have to be confronted with our own sinfulness in order to understand what Christ has done on our behalf.

So now let's think about these verses in light of what Jesus Christ accomplished in His life and death and resurrection. We've been focusing on the sad reality that we all fall short of God's standard in so many ways. But consider this: Jesus never sinned. NEVER! Jesus kept the whole law perfectly. He lived up to God's righteous standard in every way! In both thought and deed, He remained absolutely pure and holy. Just think about what this means. He never showed favoritism of any kind. He never gossiped. He was never angry in a sinful way. He had a righteous anger, but He was never angry in a sinful way. He never had a lustful thought. He was never jealous. He never wallowed in self-pity. He was never gluttonous in His enjoyment of food. Children, listen to this: He never disobeyed His parents. He was submissive to them (Luke 2:51). He was never selfish, or anxious, or impatient. Aren't these things amazing to think about!

We're so familiar with our sinful lives; it is almost incomprehensible to think about Jesus' life which was completely sinless. We should meditate on this glorious reality. We should exult in this, because Christ is our righteousness. We're guilty, convicted by the law. But Jesus is righteous. He fulfilled the law. He obeyed perfectly. And then the most amazing thing happened. The Perfect One took the place of the guilty ones. Jesus suffered

and died on the cross in order to erase our guilt. And He rose again on the third day, showing that He is powerful to conquer sin and death.

If you are trusting in Christ and walking with Him, let this glorious truth land on you afresh this morning. May we exult in the perfect life of our Lord, and may we exult in His grace and mercy that He died in our place.

If you are not a believer, I plead with you to embrace this precious Savior. Every one of us is convicted by the law as transgressors. And in order to be forgiven, you must admit that you are, indeed, guilty before God. You must look into God's law and own up to the fact that you fall far short of His standard. And then you must renounce your sinful ways and turn to Jesus Christ. Look to Jesus' perfect life, and His sacrificial death, and His glorious resurrection, and put your hope in Him.

IV. Judgment is Coming (verses 12-13)

The final point is the most severe. It is the climax of James' warning against showing favoritism. He has told us that favoritism is sin, and that every sin incurs guilt. And now he shows us how serious that guilt is by reminding us that judgment is coming.

“So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” James is telling us that in the coming judgment God will have mercy on the merciful and will condemn those who have shown no mercy.

He's saying the same thing that Jesus said in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7). James is simply stating the flip-side of this truth. He's saying, Cursed are the unmerciful, for they shall receive no mercy.

What's being taught here, as well as in other parts of the New Testament, is that we will one day be judged according to our works. God will evaluate us based on how we've lived our lives—based on how merciful or unmerciful we have been, based on how loving or unloving, impartial or partial. And the thoughts and deeds of our lives will demonstrate very clearly whether we were saved or not.

To speak of judgment by works may sound very confusing. You might be thinking, Isn't salvation by faith and not by works? And the answer is: Yes, salvation is by faith alone, and not by works. There is no way to earn our salvation. That is a clear teaching of the Bible, and it is central to the Gospel message. What the Bible also teaches, and James is going to flesh this out for us much more in the following section, is that saving faith will

necessarily produce works. When God brings us forth by the word of truth, when He implants the word within us, when He regenerates us, we are created anew, and as new creatures we will act differently. Our behavior will be different. And when it comes to judgment day, the actions of our lives will be clear evidence that God changed our hearts and we were walking with Him—imperfectly, of course, but walking with Him and continually being changed more and more into His likeness. Or the actions of our lives will show that, even though we made a profession of faith in Jesus, it was an empty profession, and we were never truly saved. So this is serious. We're talking about heaven or hell, here. We're talking about your eternal destiny.

So how's your walk? James gives us some very practical ways to examine ourselves. Are we merciful people? Are we impartial people? We will not attain perfection in this life, but if we are true believers there WILL be change and growth in these areas. Do you see that in your life? Do you see God refining you? Can you see that God is making you more merciful? Can you see that God is breaking down the barriers of partiality in your life?

The scary reality is that those who give lip service to Christianity while remaining merciless and showing favoritism, they will receive no mercy in the judgment. However, the Good News is that those who have been changed by the sovereign power of God and whose lives have increased in mercy and love and impartiality, they will triumph in the judgment. That's what I think the last phrase refers to: "Mercy triumphs over judgment." Those who are merciful will receive mercy—their lives will be evidence that they have truly been saved by God's grace, and therefore they will not be condemned in the judgment, but rather they will triumph.

Examine your heart today. Is God at work in your heart, changing you and sanctifying you? Or do you just give lip service to Jesus, with no real desire to be changed by Him?

To summarize, we've seen a bold exhortation to show no partiality, and in our passage this morning it is emphasized again with the command to love your neighbor as yourself. And then we've seen these very pretty serious warnings against partiality. Partiality is sin. Every sin incurs guilt. And judgment is coming.

I hope that this passage will not fall on deaf ears. I pray that we will hear and heed this instruction. This is not "5 ways to be a friendlier church." That's not what James is talking about here. This is not a pragmatic lesson in how to get along with each other. This is not about being politically correct. This is not about racial diversity as an end in itself.

What I hope you can see from this passage is that James presents impartiality as a fundamental characteristic of the

Christian church. This is authentic Christianity. If we're showing partiality, then we don't deserve to be called a church. We're just playing games, and we're no different than any secular club. But if God is truly at work in our midst, then we will have a growing love for our neighbors, no matter what the color of their skin, no matter what their income, no matter what their background. And we will yearn to see our local congregation be more and more diverse, and thus look more and more like heaven. We will pray for God's grace to be magnified and for our joy to increase as we watch Him save individuals who are rich and poor, and as He saves individuals from every ethnic group in the world. Let us pray and work and live to that end!