

The Royal Law

Faith & Love Part 03
James 2:8-9 3-8-2015

Summary: Showing favoritism doesn't seem evil. It is rationalized by claiming "I'm just showing love." James' response is, "If that's really what you're doing, that's great. But if it's real love, there won't be any favoritism." The royal law is to love others as you love yourself (NOT a command to love self – we already love ourselves). This command is important (royal law), the standard is the highest there is (self-love), and the object is neighbor (anyone near you). If you fail, you will be judged without mercy (unless you are a believer, in which case you will repent).

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James 2:8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

The Importance of the Command

Is anybody here interested in seeing the most important thing God ever said? We have been studying verse by verse through the book of James, and we left off in chapter 2 where James has been confronting the sin of favoritism. An attractive, wealthy visitor comes into the church, and they give him special treatment. That is sin, but it is one of those sins that does not feel very sinful. It is the kind of sin you can easily rationalize. A visitor comes to the church and you give him a nice welcome, show kindness, invite him over for dinner – that doesn't really feel like sin. You are being nice to the person. You are being loving – what's so bad about showing love? And James' answer to that is, "If that's what you're doing, great!"

James 2:8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.

If that is really what you are doing - fantastic. That’s fabulous. Great job! Keep up the good work, because loving people – that is the fulfillment of **the royal law found in Scripture.**

Royal Law

Found where in Scripture? Leviticus 19, just a few verses after the command about favoritism.

Leviticus 19:15 ... do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great

And then three verses later...

Leviticus 19:18 ...love your neighbor as yourself.

James calls that **the royal law**. The word **royal** means *belonging to a king*. The only other place in the book of James where the idea of royalty or anything king-related is mentioned is back a few verses in verse 5. Those who love God are set to inherit a kingdom, and that kingdom runs on one basic rule. Picture a realm, ruled by a particular king, and that king has issued a decree that governs all the operations of the whole realm. And the decree is this: Love. The United State’s law code is thousands and thousands of volumes. Over 30 million words just in the tax code alone. This King’s kingdom is much larger and more complex than the United States. But He did not need hundreds of millions of words to define the legal code for that kingdom. He got it down to one word: love.

Now, if you want to expand that out a bit, there are two parts: loving God and loving people.

Matthew 22:35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested [Jesus] with this question 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

He asks the greatest man who ever lived the greatest question ever asked, “What is the greatest thing God ever said?”, and Jesus gives him the greatest answer ever given.

Jesus knows the answer right off the top of His head. He does not have to think about it. He does not say, “Well, it depends on what kind of a context you’re thinking about or the cultural situation.” He does not say, “It depends on what century you are dealing with.” He does not say, “It depends on if you are a child or an adult, man or woman, rich or poor.” Jesus just gives this man an absolute, definitive answer that is always true in every context.

In fact, Jesus gave him even more than what he asked for. He asked for the greatest, and Jesus gave him the answer and then said,

Matthew 22:38 “This is the first and greatest commandment.”

Greatest means of highest weight and importance, and **first** means highest in rank, influence, honor, or priority. He asked for the greatest command, and Jesus gave him a command that is not only greatest but also first, and not just greatest and first, but it is also a command that summarizes all the commands, so if you obey this one commandment you are obeying the entire Bible.

Have you ever noticed that the first half of the 10 Commandments focuses on God and the second half is about people? Love God and love people. If you love God you will keep the first four, and if you love people you will keep the other six. So this one, dual-sided command sums up the whole law of God.

Galatians 5:14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Romans 13:8 ...he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” 10 Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

And not only that, but take a look at verse 40.

Matthew 22:40 on these all the Law and the Prophets hang

Not only is this command the first and greatest, and not only does it summarize all the rest, but everything in the Bible depends on this command for its meaning. Nothing in the Bible has meaning apart from the command to love God and love your neighbor. If you feed all the hungry, care for every homeless person, heal every sick person in the world, and do every single good deed there is, but neglect this one command, you have done nothing the Bible commands.

And it is important to understand the dual nature of the command. When the guy asked Jesus which was the number one command, he didn't ask for number two – just number one. But Jesus gave him 1 and 2 because they are so inextricably connected. Number 1 is to love God and number 2 is to love people. And they go together because you absolutely cannot love God without loving people. If you are a monk in a monastery and you spend every single waking hour in prayer and Bible study – you are not loving God. In Matthew 25 Jesus said, “Whatever you failed to do to the least of these brothers of Mine you failed to do to Me.” It is impossible to love the Lord without loving people – period. If you do not love those He loves because He loves them, that will stand as a brick wall between you and God.

And conversely, you can't love people without loving God.

1 John 5:2 This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God

You can be the greatest philanthropist that ever lived, feed every hungry person, heal every sick person, provide clean water for every village, but if your motive is not to express love for the Lord Jesus Christ, it is not real love.

James mentioned loving God back in verse five. But his main focus here is on the “love your neighbor” command, because he is speaking about how we treat people. So he has already let us know that it is a love for neighbor that rises up out of our love for God.

That is the royal law of Scripture that governs our life of freedom in this kingdom that we are inheriting. That gives us a huge incentive to obey, both on the positive side and on the negative. On the negative side, it is a royal decree, which means any disobedience is treason. And on the positive side, we want to obey because this is the will of the God we so dearly love. This is the expression of the character we long to imitate. And this is the lifestyle that gives us the freedom that we crave - the lifestyle of liberty.

An Obligation

So in the kingdom of God, the law of the land is love. And that comes as a shock to our culture. Our culture thinks they know all about love, but they don't know the first thing about love. Literally. Because the first thing you need to know about love is that it is the law. Love is an obligation. That is totally foreign to our culture's thinking.

“I fell in love with her so we got married. Oops! Now I fell out of love, so get a divorce. The love just went away. Too bad.”

And God says, “You don't have the option of falling out of love. I require that you continue to love your wife. That's the law in My kingdom. Break it and you will be punished.”

Love is a feeling – no question about that. When people try to say that love is not a feeling, they are going too far. It is most definitely a feeling, but it is a feeling that can (and must) be kept alive by an act of the will. Last weekend I performed my daughter's wedding. And at no part in the ceremony did I ever ask either one of them how they felt. I asked them a lot of questions about what they were vowing to do, and what they intended to do, and what they are committed to do – but no questions about how they felt. Feelings are absolutely crucial. If there are no feelings, there is no love. Feelings are essential, but feelings are not what keep love going. The resolve of the will is what keeps it going when feelings go up and down. When feelings go away, you can do things to bring them back – but it requires willingness and commitment and sometimes sacrifice.

So if a man says about his wife, “I just don’t love her anymore,” I say, “That’s pretty bold of you to admit, right in front of the King, that you are breaking His royal law. I suggest you stop breaking it and start obeying it.”

So all that under the heading “**royal law.**” That shows us the *importance* of this law. Now let’s take a look at the *standard* of this law.

The Standard: Self-Love

I think most people in the world probably think they are a loving person. If we reduce the command down to a single word and just tell people, “Love,” that wouldn’t really tell us much, because everybody has some love. The question is, how much love are we required to have, and what kind? What is the standard for love? How can you tell if you are obeying the command, or falling short? We don’t have to wonder about that, because the answer to that question is built right into the command itself.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

That is the standard. The way you love yourself – that is the way you must love your neighbor. Any love that falls short of that standard is inadequate.

Now, here is where a huge amount of confusion enters the picture. We live in a culture that is basically one giant self-love cult. That is the religion of our culture – self-love, self-esteem, self-reliance, self-acceptance - whatever your problem is, the solution is for you to love yourself more.

And that doctrine is so dominating and prevalent in our culture, that it finds its way in to the church. It finds its way into sermons and Christian books, as if it were from the Bible. In fact, many Bible teachers have tried to put it into the Bible.

And this is the most common place they try to squeeze it in. What they say is, “When God said that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, what He really meant was first we must learn to love ourselves so that we can properly love others.” The idea is that if you have a good, robust love of yourself – high self-esteem – then that will make you socially healthy, well-adjusted, and you will treat others better.

That interpretation of the royal command of Scripture is incredibly pervasive. It is incredibly popular because it falls right in line with one of the cardinal doctrines of our culture.

The problem is, it is not what the Bible says. It does not say, “First learn to love yourself.” It assumes you already do love yourself.

God Wouldn’t Use a Low Standard

If you didn’t already love yourself, then it wouldn’t be a very good standard for loving others, would it? If there really are a bunch of people running around out there who don’t love themselves, why would God tell us to use self-love as the standard for how we love others? Suppose your kids really hate liver. Every time you have liver for supper, they choke and gag and throw up and act like they’re going to die. If that is how they felt about liver, would you ever say, “Hey kids, I want you to love your brother and sister the way that you love liver?” No, because you would basically be telling them to hate their brother and sister. God would not use self-love as a standard if that were a low standard. He would never tell you to love your neighbor the way that you love yourself, if you didn’t really love yourself very much.

What about Self-Loathing?

Now I know at this point some of you are thinking, “What about self-loathing? What about the fact that I look in the mirror and I hate what I see?” There is no question that all of us, at one point or another, have felt disgust toward ourselves. We all have certain *parts* of ourselves that we don’t like. But the parts of me that I don’t like – the reason I don’t like them, is because they cause problems for the rest of me. For example, maybe you hate your physical appearance because you think it’s ugly. Why is that a

problem? Why does that make you feel sad? It makes you feel sad, because being ugly causes problems for you, and you don't want problems for you, because you love you. One thing I hate about myself is my laziness. I hate it because it causes problems for me, and I don't want problems for me. And the fact that I don't want problems for me is evidence that I love me. Because if you really, truly hate someone, you are glad when they have problems. If you really hate someone, you are glad when everyone makes fun of them. But you are not glad when everybody makes fun of you, because you love you. There are some things about yourself that you don't like, but overall, you love you.

Examples of Self-Love

In fact, you love yourself more than you love anyone. That is why God chose self-love as the standard for loving others – it is the highest standard of love we know. You treat yourself like a king. Your wish is your command. In fact, you treat yourself better than a king. If you're thirsty you get a drink, if you have an itch you scratch it, if your nose is running, you wipe it; if the king's nose is running, you let him wipe it himself. Every time you inhale a breath of air it is because you love yourself. Whose teeth did you brush this morning? Whose hair did you comb? What person on this planet have you wept the most tears over when that person has gotten hurt? You!

If you think you hate yourself, just watch what happens some night when your covers slip off and you get cold. What do you do? You reach over and pull those covers over you so you can warm up. Why? You wouldn't do that for someone you truly hated. That is actually a very kind, considerate thing to do for someone. If you see someone else sleeping and you get a blanket and cover them up, people would see that and say, "Aw, how sweet. What a considerate thing to do." But you do that for yourself every single night because you love you.

Ephesians 5:29 No one ever hated his own body. He feeds it and cares for it

Those of you who think you hate yourself – what do you do when you get a rock in your shoe? Do you say, "Aha – serves me right! I think I'll take it out and sharpen it and put it back in?" I don't know about you, but there have been days when I have been so disgusted with myself I could hardly stand it. And yet even on those days, if I got a rock in my shoe, I would take it out. Why? Because I love this disgusting self of mine.

Even people who destroy themselves through suicide – why do they do that? They do it because of self-love. They want to escape the pain. And they don't care if killing themselves will create pain for all the people around them; they just care about escaping their own pain. That is loving self more than others.

How Would It Work?

Suppose we granted, for the sake of argument, that maybe the verse would allow for this doctrine that if you develop a strong, robust love for yourself, that will help you love others more. How would that work? Suppose I want something for myself but it would be good for you to have it instead. Selfishness tells me to take it for myself but love tells me to give it to you. How is loving myself more going to help me in that situation?

Suppose you and I get into an argument. And we are both doing what everybody naturally does in an argument – I'm thinking of all the factors that support my view, and I make much of those, and I downplay all the factors that would support your side. In my mind and heart I make much of all the things that would point to me being in the right, and I downplay all the things that would point to me being in the wrong. And I do just the reverse for you. I focus a lot of my attention on your faults, and not very much to attention on your good points. That is just what we naturally do when we get to fighting with each other. So tell me – how does developing of more robust love for myself help me stop doing that? How does increasing self-esteem and self-love and self-worth cause me to give more of a compassionate listening ear to your side even though it hurts my cause? These people that say we need to learn to love

ourselves so that we can love other people – I don't know if they ever think that through and actually try to apply it to real life.

The Golden Rule

One of the most famous things Jesus ever said is the Golden Rule – Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Lk.6:31). Even in the world I think most people like that standard. They find it helpful. Why? Why does the Golden Rule work as a standard? Treating others the way I want to be treated works great as a standard because I always want to be treated well. I love being treated well, and I don't like being treated poorly – why? Because I love me. If I just really wanted to be treated poorly, the Golden Rule would be useless.

So that “Learn to love yourself” doctrine is not what the Bible says, it does not make any sense, and it does not work.

The Problem of Too Much Self-Love

If low self-love were a danger, the Bible would warn us about it. But not only does the Bible never warn us about getting too low on self-love, it warns us about the exact opposite. The danger is not getting too low on self-love – the real danger is too much self-love. It is good to have the normal self-love that causes you to eat and drink and sleep and all the rest so that you can function in life. Even Jesus had that. Even Jesus, when He slept on the boat, put his head on a cushion - instead of on a sharp rock. The problem comes when that self-love rises up in our priorities higher than loving others. That is when we cross the line into selfishness. It's fine for me to cover up with a blanket when I'm cold. But if you're also cold, and there is only one blanket, my priority should be for you to be warm above making myself warm.

Philippians 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition ... but in humility consider others more important than yourselves.

So too much self-love is sin. In fact, it is a sign of the wickedness of the end times.

2 Timothy 3:1 But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. 2 People will be lovers of themselves, ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God

The greatest enemy to true love is selfishness.

There are so many people who think the solution to all their problems is for people to love them more and to pay more attention to them.

“People aren't loving me. People aren't welcoming me. People aren't showing me gratitude. People aren't paying attention to me.”

The solution to that problem is not for people to start treating you better. When you get infected with the disease of selfishness, giving more attention to you is like serving drinks to an alcoholic.

Do you need love? Yes. And God has already showed you as much love as you could ever need –and more. The problem is, you can't enjoy it when you have an inward, selfish focus. The only way to enjoy it is to shift your focus outward. God's love for you will feel best when you feel it going through you to someone else.

The solution to your problems is not for you to feel better about yourself. The solution is for you to feel better about other people, because feeling good about others feels better than feeling good about yourself.

As Yourself

So, what is the standard for how to we are to love one another? The kind of love we have for ourselves. This world would be a lot better place if some people would love their neighbor as much as they love their dog or cat. This world would be a much better place if some people loved their neighbor

half as much as they loved their car. If God would have said, “Love your neighbor as you love your favorite athlete or singer or actor” – for a lot of people that would be a really high standard. But God was not satisfied with any of those. He went all the way to the most extreme standard we know of in the whole human realm – love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.

Can you even imagine what the world would be like if everyone did this? That is going to be one of the most astonishing things about heaven – every single person will do this.

The Object of Love

Who is it, exactly, that I am supposed to love with this incredibly high standard of love? Answer: my neighbor.

Who is that? There is a limit to how many people I can take care of. Who counts as my neighbor? Somebody actually asked Jesus that exact question one time. And the reason he asked the question is that he wanted to justify himself.

Luke 10:25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” 27 He answered: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” 8 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” 29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

I have spent most of the sermon so far trying to persuade you of what a high standard loving your neighbor as yourself really is, because our culture has dumbed it down so far that it takes some doing nowadays to show people what an incredibly high standard it really is. But this guy knew immediately that it was an impossibly high standard. It was obvious to him that if loving God with all your heart and loving your neighbor as yourself is the standard, he is going to come up condemned on Judgment Day. He understands that loving your neighbor as yourself is such an incredibly high standard – nobody could do that... unless... And at this point, he does what so many people do when they run into something hard in the Bible. He tries to reinterpret one of the words to make it a little more manageable. Some people go after the word **love**, and try to redefine that to make it a little more manageable. A lot of preachers in our day go after the phrase **as yourself**, and twist that around to make it a little more manageable. But what this guy wanted to do was go after the word **neighbor**. He was sure that Jesus would give him some kind of modified definition of neighbor so that on Judgment Day, this guy would come out okay. Basically what he wanted was to turn this into a command that required him to only love the people he already loved - or the people he wanted to love.

He was a Jew, and so, no doubt, he had nothing in his heart but disdain for Samaritans. And so he wants Jesus to affirm, “Yeah, the word neighbor – that doesn’t include Samaritans.” Basically what this guy was trying to do was justify his favoritism. He showed favoritism to certain people, his love was selective, and he wanted Jesus to affirm that as being a valid way of carrying out the royal law of Scripture. He wanted some kind of interpretation of the word **neighbor** that would allow for his favoritism and still give him credit for obeying the **love your neighbor as yourself** command. So Jesus answers by telling a story about a guy who gets mugged and left for dead. And a couple of Jewish religious leaders see him and walk right on by.

Luke 10:33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

Now here is where Jesus gives this guy a direct answer to his question. Remember, the question was, who qualifies as my neighbor? So Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, and then says this:

36 “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” 37 The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Did you see how Jesus turned the question around? You see, the question isn't, “Who is my neighbor?” The question is, “Am I functioning as a good neighbor to the people around me?”

Jesus was teaching a very important principle. Real love depends on the subject not the object. The object is the one receiving the love. The subject is the one doing the loving. So in your case, you are the subject - you are the one doing the loving. So when it comes to love, the responsibility is on you, not on the object.

Our natural tendency is to put the responsibility on the object. You have to be lovable, then I will love you. You have to be beautiful, you have to be attractive, you have to be wealthy, you have to have the right skin color - you have to measure up to some level of love ability, and then I will love you. But that is not what God's love is like. He loves because it is His nature to love.

Another way to describe this is that our love should be like a lightbulb instead of a laser. You only get the light from a laser if it's pointed at you. So we point our laser of love only at certain objects. But a light bulb just shines everywhere. All someone has to do to get the light from a lightbulb is to just be there in the room. Our love should be like a lightbulb – it just goes out from you in every direction so that in order to receive your love, nobody has to measure up to any certain standard of loveliness. All they have to do to get your love is be there in your presence.

Loving Those Near You

So if you want to know who your neighbor is, your neighbor is whoever is near you. There are some people who love all of humanity except for the ones nearby. They love those poor, starving children in Africa, they love the people who are oppressed and in trouble, they give to various charities to help those people, they are against every war because they just want all of humanity to dwell in peace and harmony – but he can't get along with his wife. And he yells at his kids. And he is at odds with the guy next door who has the barking dog. When he is out driving, he loves everyone in Denver except for the one guy who happens to be driving right in front of him and doesn't use his turn signal.

Don't worry so much about loving the whole wide world right now – just love the people to come across your path. Love the people in your house and at work. The car in front of you on the highway – remind yourself, “That's not just a car. That's my neighbor.”

So Jesus' answer to this guy is no. He wants to know, “Can I show favoritism and still get credit for obeying the love command?” And Jesus' answer is no. And that is exactly the same point James is making here.

Favoritism and Love Are Not Compatible

James 2:8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

You can tell if it is real love by the fact that there is no favoritism involved. The level of interest you are showing in the person has absolutely nothing to do with superficial things like money or attractiveness. You can tell it's real love when you show it just the same to the lowly person who has nothing to offer. Favoritism is not love; it is anti-love.

“Jesus, I know you love all people from all cultures, but there are some cultures I like more than others.”

Racism. For other people it's sexism. Women who want to be feminists so they hate men. Or men who are chauvinists so they mistreat women. Or maybe it's classism.

"Jesus, I know you don't evaluate people based on their bank account, but personally, I like being around wealthy people."

Or "I'm poor, and so I hate rich people. They're all just a bunch of greedy capitalists."

"Jesus, I know you look on the heart rather than the outward appearance, but me, I'm just not attracted to obese people or ugly people. I like magazine-cover types."

"Jesus, I know you have a special love for the lowly, but when I see someone who is autistic or disabled - it makes me uncomfortable."

"Jesus, I know Your Word teaches the importance of the older and younger generations mixing together in the church, but honestly, I prefer to hang around people I can easily relate to."

"I'm married with kids and I don't have an interest in being around singles."

Or "I'm single, and I can't really relate to married people."

If that is you, no matter how much so-called "love" you think you are showing to the people you favor, you need to realize that you are shattering the royal law of God because the royal law of God is that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

Love Your Neighbor

And if you want to know what love is, here is a definition: Love is when I care enough about you emotionally to desire your highest good. It is when my feelings for you are such that your well-being and joy are bigger priorities than my own preferences and comforts. So whenever there is a situation where it is a choice between my comforts and preferences vs. your highest good – I choose the latter. I gladly give up my comforts and preferences for your highest good. That is love.

And what is your highest good? Holiness. Nearness to God. Joy in God. Satisfaction in Christ. Loving something does not mean you give them everything they want. It means you do whatever you can to increase their joy and satisfaction in the Lord.

So, let's love one another. When a visitor walks through those doors, our Lord requires that we love that person like we love ourselves. Rich or poor, pretty or ugly, male or female, black or white, your type or not your type - treat that person like a king or queen. Kids, love your brothers and sisters like you love yourself. Husbands, love your wife like you love yourself. Wives, love your husband like you love yourself.

Conclusion: What If I Fail?

"But what if I fail?"

If you fail, then you have shattered the King's law. If you have broken the royal law of Scripture the King would have every right to banish you from His kingdom forever.

James 2:13 Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

That is exactly the same thing Jesus said.

Matthew 18:33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

So if you have broken the **love your neighbor as yourself** command you can forget about being in God's kingdom... unless... you are one of those people described in verse 5. In verse 5, James says that God promised His kingdom to a certain group of people. Who are they? They are people who love Him and who have faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ. If that is you, then on Judgment Day, God's mercy will triumph even over His judgment in your case.

“How do I know if I’m in that group? I think I love God, and I think I have true faith – but how can I tell for sure?”

One of James’ main purposes ~~is~~ in writing this chapter is to answer that question. How can you tell for sure if your faith in Jesus Christ is real and you really love God? You will obey His commands. You will love your neighbor as yourself. You will show mercy to those who deserve punishment. And when you fail in those things, you will repent. Instead of trying to justify yourself you will simply admit your sin to God and others, ask forgiveness, take whatever steps you can to change your heart and become more loving, and then trust 100% in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross in your place, for salvation and forgiveness of sins. You cannot earn salvation by loving people. The only way to be saved is to place your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And you can tell you have done that when you love God, and you love your neighbor as yourself, and when you fail at those, you repent. If that is you, then God will show you mercy instead of judgment. And if you have received mercy from God – if His mercy toward you has triumphed over His judgment of you, then let your mercy toward others triumph over your judgment of others.

Benediction: 1 Peter 1:22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

1. In your life, what tends to get in the way of loving your neighbor as yourself?
2. Think of someone in your life you have a hard time showing mercy to (don’t mention any names). Now think of times when God has shown you mercy similar to the type you are withholding from that person. Share with the group those ways that God showed you the very mercy you need to show others.
3. Do you know someone whose love is more like a light bulb than a laser? Describe that person to the group (feel free to use names!).

Devotionals

Day 1

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

S is for Seek

Psalm 119:176 I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.

All our seeking after God will be worthless if He does not seek us. Begin by asking God to come near to you.

I is for Incline

Psalm 119:36 Incline my heart toward your statutes.

Inclination has to do with what you like and dislike. We do not observe life with a detached, robotic analysis. We have a sense of liking and being attracted to some things and disliking and being inclined away from others.

Before you open your Bible take a moment to remind yourself that you could begin reading, come across some wonderful truth about God, and be bored by it. Horror! What could be worse than being unable to be delighted by the glory of God? Before reading, ask the Lord to incline your heart toward whatever it is He is about to show you so that when you see it you will love it.

O is for Open

Psalm 119:18 Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.

When you read something in Scripture about God and it does not thrill your soul and cause great joy, peace, comfort, or awe, there is only one explanation: your eyes are blind to what is wonderful about that truth. Every truth about God in Scripture would absolutely thrill you if your eyes were opened to see what is so wonderful about it. And only God can do that. So before reading, pray—"God, open my eyes."

U is for Unite

Psalm 86:11 Unite my heart, that I may fear your name.

When we come to the Word of God, we usually come with a scattered, distracted heart. We must pray, "Dear God, please unite my heart so for this brief little time I can focus my entire being on You."

S is for Satisfy

Psalm 90:14 Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

The presence of God is like food—it always satisfies the soul. If you go away from your time in the Word unsatisfied, then, it is because you did not experience the presence of God. It is good, before we open the Bible, to remind ourselves of the purpose of coming to God’s banquet table. The goal is not just to gather information, but to leave the table with our souls satisfied!

Read:

Read carefully and prayerfully through 1 Corinthians 13.

Meditate:

Leviticus 19:15 ... do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great

And then three verses later...

Leviticus 19:18 ...love your neighbor as yourself.

James calls that **the royal law**. The word **royal** means *belonging to a king*. The only other place in the book of James where the idea of royalty or anything king-related is mentioned is back a few verses in verse 5. Those who love God are set to inherit a kingdom, and that kingdom runs on one basic rule. Picture a realm, ruled by a particular king, and that king has issued a decree that governs all the operations of the whole realm. And the decree is this: Love. The United State’s law code is thousands and thousands of volumes. Over 30 million words just in the tax code alone. This King’s kingdom is much larger and more complex than the United States. But He did not need hundreds of millions of words to define the legal code for that kingdom. He got it down to one word: love.

Now, if you want to expand that out a bit, there are two parts: loving God and loving people.

Matthew 22:35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested [Jesus] with this question 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

This man asks the greatest man who ever lived the greatest question ever asked, “What is the greatest thing God ever said?”, and Jesus gives him the greatest answer ever given.

Jesus knows the answer right off the top of His head. He does not have to think about it. He does not say, “Well, it depends on what kind of a context you’re thinking about or what the cultural situation is.” He does not say, “It depends on what century you are dealing with.” He does not say, “It depends on if you are a child or an adult, man or woman, rich or poor.” Jesus just gives this man an absolute, definitive answer that is always true in every context.

In fact, Jesus gave him even more than what he asked for. He asked for the greatest, and Jesus gave him the answer and then said,

Matthew 22:38 “This is the first and greatest commandment.”

Greatest means of highest weight and importance, and **first** means highest in rank, influence, honor, or priority. He asked for the greatest command, and Jesus gave him a command that is not only greatest but also first, and not just greatest and first, but it is also a command that summarizes all the commands, so if you obey this one commandment you are obeying the entire Bible.

Have you ever noticed that the first half of the 10 Commandments focuses on God and the second half is about people? Love God and love people. If you love God you will keep the first four, and if you love people you will keep the other six. So this one, dual-sided command sums up the whole law of God.

Galatians 5:14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Romans 13:8 ...he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” 10 Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

And not only that, but take a look at verse 40.

Matthew 22:40 on these all the Law and the Prophets hang

Not only is this command the first and greatest, and not only does it summarize all the rest, but everything in the Bible depends on this command for its meaning. There is nothing in the Bible that has meaning apart from the command to love God and love your neighbor. If you feed all the hungry, care for every homeless person, heal every sick person in the world, and do every single good deed there is, but neglect this one command, you have done nothing the Bible commands.

And it is important to understand the dual nature of the command. When the guy asked Jesus which was the number one command, he didn't ask for number two – just number one. But Jesus gave him 1 and 2 because they are so inextricably connected. Number 1 is to love God and number 2 is to love people. And they go together because you absolutely cannot love God without loving people.

If you are a monk in a monastery and you spend every single waking hour in prayer and Bible study – you are not loving God. In Matthew 25 Jesus said, “Whatever you failed to do to the least of these brothers of Mine you failed to do to Me.” It is impossible to love the Lord without loving people – period. If you do not love those He loves because He loves them, that will stand as a brick wall between you and God.

And conversely, you cannot love people without loving God.

1 John 5:2 This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God

You can be the greatest philanthropist that ever lived, feed every hungry person, heal every sick person, provide clean water for every village, but if your motive is not to express love for the Lord Jesus Christ, it is not real love.

James mentioned loving God back in verse five. But his main focus here is on the “love your neighbor” command, because he is speaking about how we treat people. So he has already let us know that it is a love for neighbor that rises up out of our love for God.

That is the royal law of Scripture that governs our life of freedom in this kingdom that we are inheriting. That gives us a huge incentive to obey, both on the positive side and on the negative. On the negative side, it is a royal decree, which means any disobedience is treason. And on the positive side, we want to obey because this is the will of the God we so dearly love. This is the expression of the character we long to imitate. And this is the lifestyle that gives us the freedom that we crave - the lifestyle of liberty.

Memorize:

Review James 1:19-2:7.

Memorize James 2:8. Say it 10 times word for word from memory, and then at least two more times later in the day.

Pray:

Talk to God about what He said in 1 Cor.13 and in James 2. Ask Him to show you what changes you may need to make in your life based on these passages.

Share:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Do!

- What would be three ways you could carry out some of the things in 1 Cor.13 today that you wouldn't normally do? Check this box when you have done them.

Day 2

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

Read:

Read carefully and prayerfully through 1 Corinthians 13 again.

Meditate:

So in the kingdom of God, the law of the land is love. And that comes as a shock to our culture. Our culture thinks they know all about love when in fact they don't know the first thing about love. Literally. Because the first thing you need to know about love is that it is the law. Love is an obligation. And that concept is totally foreign to our culture's thinking.

"I fell in love with her so we got married, but now I fell out of love, so I'll get a divorce. The love just went away."

And God says, "You don't have the option of falling out of love. I require that you continue to love your wife. That is the law in My kingdom. Break it and you will be punished."

Love is a feeling – no question about that. When people try to say that love is not a feeling, they are going too far. It is most definitely a feeling, but it is a feeling that can (and must) be kept alive by an act of the will.

Last weekend I performed my daughter's wedding. And at no part in the ceremony did I ever ask either one of them how they felt. I asked them a lot of questions about what they were vowing to do, and what they intended to do, and what they are committing to do – but no questions about how they felt. Feelings are absolutely crucial. If there are no feelings, there is no love. Feelings are essential, but feelings are not what keep love going. The resolve of the will is what keeps it going when feelings go up and down. When feelings go away, you can do things to bring them back – but it requires willingness and commitment and sometimes sacrifice.

If low self-love were a danger, the Bible would warn us about it. But not only does the Bible never warn us about getting too low on self-love, it warns us about the exact opposite. The danger is not getting too low on self-love – the real danger is having too much self-love. It is good to have the normal self-love that causes you to eat and drink and sleep and all the rest so that you can function in life. Even Jesus had that. Even Jesus, when He slept on the boat, put his head on a cushion - instead of on a sharp rock. The problem comes when that self-love rises up in our priorities higher than loving others. That is when we cross the line into selfishness. It's fine for me to cover up with a blanket when I'm cold. But if you're also cold, and there is only one blanket, my priority should be for you to be warm above making myself warm.

Philippians 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition ... but in humility consider others more important than yourselves.

So too much self-love is sin. In fact, it is a sign of the wickedness of the end times.

2 Timothy 3:1 But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. 2 People will be lovers of themselves, ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God

The greatest enemy to true love is selfishness.

There are so many people who think the solution to the all their problems is for people to love them more and to pay more attention to them.

“People aren’t showing love to me. People aren’t welcoming me. People aren’t showing me gratitude. People aren’t paying attention to me.”

The solution to that problem is not for people to start treating you better. When you get infected with the disease of selfishness, giving more attention to you is like serving drinks to an alcoholic.

Do you need love? Yes. And God has already showed you as much love as you could ever need –and more. The problem is, you can’t enjoy it when you have an inward, selfish focus. The only way to enjoy it is to shift your focus outward. God’s love for you will feel best when you feel it going through you to someone else.

The solution to your problems is not for you to feel better about yourself. The solution is for you to feel better about other people, because feeling good about others feels better than feeling good about yourself.

So, what is the standard for how to we are to love one another? The kind of love we have for ourselves. This world would be a lot better place if some people would love their neighbor as much as they love their dog or cat. This world would be a much better place if some people loved their neighbor half as much as they loved their car. If God would have said, “Love your neighbor as you love your favorite athlete or singer or actor” – for a lot of people that would be a really high standard. But God was not satisfied with any of those. He went all the way to the most extreme standard we know of in the whole human realm – love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.

Can you even imagine what the world would be like if everyone did this? That is going to be one of the most astonishing things about heaven – every single person will do this.

Memorize:

Review James 1:19-2:7.

Memorize James 2:9. Say verses 8&9 ten times word for word from memory, and then at least two more times later in the day.

Pray:

Talk to God about what He said in 1 Cor.13 and in James 2. Ask Him to show you what changes you may need to make in your life based on these passages.

Share:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Do!

- What would be three ways you could carry out some of the things in 1 Cor.13 today that you wouldn’t normally do? Check this box when you have done them.

Day 3

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

Read:

Read carefully and prayerfully through Matthew 5 (pay special attention to vv.37-48).

Meditate:

Who counts as my neighbor? Somebody actually asked Jesus that exact question one time. And the reason he asked the question is that he wanted to justify himself.

Luke 10:25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” 27 He answered: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” 8 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” 29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

I have spent most of this set of devotionals so far trying to persuade you of what a high standard loving your neighbor as yourself really is, because our culture has dumbed it down so far that it takes some doing nowadays to show people what an incredibly high standard it really is. But this guy knew immediately that it was an impossibly high standard. It was obvious to him that if loving God with all your heart and loving your neighbor as yourself is the standard, he is going to come up condemned on Judgment Day.

He understands that loving your neighbor as yourself is such an incredibly high standard – nobody could do that... unless... And at this point, he does what so many people do when they run into something hard in the Bible. He tries to reinterpret one of the words to make it a little more manageable. Some people go after the word **love**, and try to redefine that to make it a little more manageable. A lot of preachers in our day go after the phrase **as yourself**, and twist that around to make it a little more manageable. But what this guy wanted to do was go after the word **neighbor**. He was sure that Jesus would give him some kind of modified definition of neighbor so that on Judgment Day, this guy would come out okay. Basically what he wanted was to turn this into a command that required him to only love the people he already loved - or the people he wanted to love.

He was a Jew, so, no doubt, he had nothing in his heart but disdain for Samaritans. So he wants Jesus to affirm, “Yeah, the word neighbor – that doesn’t include Samaritans.” Basically what this guy was trying to do was justify his favoritism. He showed favoritism to certain people, his love was selective, and he wanted Jesus to affirm that as being a valid way of carrying out the royal law of Scripture. He wanted some kind of interpretation of the word **neighbor** that would allow for his favoritism and still give him credit for obeying the **love your neighbor as yourself** command. So Jesus answers by telling a story about a guy who gets mugged and left for dead. And a couple of Jewish religious leaders see him and walk right on by.

Luke 10:33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

Now here is where Jesus gives this guy a direct answer to his question. Remember, the question was, who qualifies as my neighbor? So Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, and then says this:

36 “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” 37 The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Did you see how Jesus turned the question around? You see, the question isn't, “Who is my neighbor?” The question is, “Am I functioning as a good neighbor to the people around me?”

Jesus was teaching a very important principle. Real love depends on the subject not the object. The object is the one receiving the love. The subject is the one doing the loving. So in your case, you are the subject - you are the one doing the loving. So when it comes to love, the responsibility is on you, not on the object.

Our natural tendency is to put the responsibility on the object. You have to be lovable, then I will love you. You have to be beautiful, you have to be attractive, you have to be wealthy, you have to have the right skin color - you have to measure up to some level of love ability, and then I will love you. But that is not what God's love is like. He loves because it is His nature to love.

Another way to describe this is that our love should be like a lightbulb instead of a laser. You only get the light from a laser if it's pointed at you. So we point our laser of love only at certain objects. But a light bulb just shines everywhere. All someone has to do to get the light from a lightbulb is to just be there in the room. Our love should be like a lightbulb – it just goes out from you in every direction so that in order to receive your love, nobody has to measure up to any certain standard of loveliness. All they have to do to get your love is be there in your presence.

Memorize:

Review James 1:19-2:9.

Pray:

Talk to God about what He said in Mt.5 and in James 2. Ask Him to show you what changes you may need to make in your life based on these passages.

Share:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Do!

- Think of a way you could put a principle from Mt.5 into practice today. Check this box when you have done it.

Day 4

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

Read:

Read carefully and prayerfully through Mt.5 again.

Meditate:

So if you want to know who your neighbor is, your neighbor is whoever is near you. There are some people who love all of humanity except for the ones nearby. They love those poor, starving children in Africa, they love the people who are oppressed and in trouble, they give to various charities to help those people, they are against every war because they just want all of humanity to dwell in peace and harmony – but he can't get along with his wife. And he yells at his kids. And he is at odds with the guy next door who has the barking dog. When he is out driving, he loves everyone in Denver except for the one guy who happens to be driving right in front of him and doesn't use his turn signal.

Don't worry so much about loving the whole wide world right now – just love the people to come across your path. Love the people in your house and at work. The car in front of you on the highway – remind yourself, “That's not just a car. That's my neighbor.”

So Jesus' answer to this guy is no. He wants to know, “Can I show favoritism and still get credit for obeying the love command?” And Jesus' answer is no. And that is exactly the same point James is making here.

James 2:8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

You can tell if it is real love by the fact that there is no favoritism involved. The level of interest you are showing in the person has absolutely nothing to do with superficial things like money or attractiveness. You can tell it's real love when you show it just the same to the lowly person who has nothing to offer. Favoritism is not love; it is anti-love.

“Jesus, I know you love all people from all cultures, but there are some cultures I like more than others.”

Racism. Or for other people it's sexism. Women who want to be feminists so they hate men. Or men who are chauvinists so they mistreat women. Or maybe it's classism.

“Jesus, I know you don't evaluate people based on their bank account, but personally, I like being around wealthy people.”

Or “I'm poor, and so I hate rich people. They're all just a bunch of greedy capitalists.”

“Jesus, I know you look on the heart rather than the outward appearance, but me, I'm just not attracted to obese people or ugly people. I like a magazine-cover types.”

“Jesus, I know you have a special love for the lowly, but when I see someone who is autistic or disabled - it makes me uncomfortable.”

“Jesus, I know Your Word teaches the importance of the older and younger generations mixing together in the church, but honestly, I prefer to hang around people I can easily relate to.”

“I'm married with kids and I don't have an interest in being around singles.”

Or “I'm single, and I can't really relate to married people.”

If that is you, no matter how much so-called “love” you think you are showing to the people you favor, you need to realize that you are shattering the royal law of God because the royal law of God is that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

Memorize:

Review James 1:19-2:9.

Pray:

Talk to God about what He said in Mt.5 and in James 2. Ask Him to show you what changes you may need to make in your life based on these passages.

Share:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Do!

- Think of a way you could put a principle from Mt.5 into practice today. Check this box when you have done it.

Day 5

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

Read:

Read carefully and prayerfully through Mt.18:25-36. Ask the Lord to give you insight.

Meditate:

Definition: Love is when I care enough about you emotionally to desire your highest good. It is when my feelings for you are such that your well-being and joy are bigger priorities than my own preferences and comforts. So whenever there is a situation where it is a choice between my comforts and preferences vs. your highest good – I choose the latter. I gladly give up my comforts and preferences for your highest good. That is love.

And what is your highest good? Holiness. Nearness to God. Joy in God. Satisfaction in Christ. Loving something does not mean you give them everything they want. It means you do whatever you can to increase their joy and satisfaction in the Lord.

Let's love one another. When a visitor walks through our church doors, our Lord requires that we love that person like we love ourselves. Rich or poor, pretty or ugly, male or female, black or white, your type or not your type - treat that person like a king or queen. Kids, love your brothers and sisters like you love yourself. Husbands, love your wife like you love yourself. Wives, love your husband like you love yourself.

“But what if I fail?”

If you fail, then you have shattered the King's law. You have broken the royal law of Scripture and the King would have every right to banish you from His kingdom forever.

James 2:13 Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

That is exactly the same thing Jesus said.

Matthew 18:33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

So if you have broken the **love your neighbor as yourself** command you can forget about being in God's kingdom... unless... you are one of those people described in verse 5. In verse 5, James says that God promised His kingdom to a certain group of people. Who are they? They are people who love Him and who have faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ. If that is you, then on Judgment Day, God's mercy will triumph even over His judgment in your case.

"How do I know if I'm in that group? I think I love God, and I think I have true faith – but how can I tell for sure?"

One of James' main purposes in writing this chapter is to answer that question. How can you tell for sure if your faith in Jesus Christ is real and you really love God? You will obey His commands. You will love your neighbor as yourself. You will show mercy to those who deserve punishment. And when you fail in those things, you will repent. Instead of trying to justify yourself you will simply admit your sin to God and others, ask forgiveness, take whatever steps you can to change your heart and become more loving, and then trust 100% in Jesus sacrifice on the cross in your place, for salvation and forgiveness of sins.

You cannot earn salvation by loving people. The only way to be saved is to place your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And you can tell you have done that when you love God, you love your neighbor as yourself, and when you fail at those, you repent. If that is you, then God will show you mercy instead of judgment. And if you have received mercy from God – if His mercy toward you has triumphed over His judgment of you, then let your mercy toward others triumph over your judgment of others.

Memorize:

Review James 1:19-2:9.

Pray:

Talk to God about what He said in Mt.18 and in James 2. Ask Him to show you what changes you may need to make in your life based on these passages.

Share:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Do!

- Think of someone in your life who deserves judgment from you. Think of at least two ways you could show that person mercy, like God showed you. Check this box when you have done it.