

James 2:8-13

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James points to the main principle of God's word to us for how we should treat one another: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If we show partiality, we are not loving one another. Obeying in some areas of life while sinning in others makes us guilty of all sin. Rather than picking and choosing, we should obey God in all things. One key way of obeying God is by showing mercy and love to one another.

James is doubling-down on the problem of favoritism among his readers. He compares and contrasts two ways of living: one which fulfills the law of liberty, the other which is sin and brings conviction. We might also think of this as one which seeks the best for others and the other that seeks to exploit them for our own selfish gain.

After giving an illustration where some believers are favoring the rich and dishonoring the poor, James asked his readers why the rich are so important to them. The rich have oppressed them in the past. James is dealing with a community that has had instances of being exploited by the wealthy, but are still honoring them.

So now the author turns to how believers can obey God: by loving one another as they love themselves.

He writes,

If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well (v. 8).

Here he quotes Leviticus 19:18. The love-your-neighbor principle is the opposite of the favoritism which James has been describing and condemning. The opposite of prejudice and discrimination is to accomplish what sums up God's laws, as it pertains to how to treat others.

All that God commanded the Israelites, all that Jesus commanded His followers to do, is fulfilled in living out the principle, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

This is what Jesus taught, saying first that the greatest commandment was to love God with our entire life and person, and that the second greatest commandment was similar. To love God with everything, and to love everyone else just as we love ourselves:

*"This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."
(Matthew 22:38-40)*

The whole Law and the Prophets were the Old Testament scriptures. God's whole word is fulfilled by loving Him and loving other people as we love ourselves.

Jesus also gave His disciples a similar commandment:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”
(John 13:34-35)

However, the command of Jesus elevates the principle to another level. Rather than just loving others as we love ourselves, Jesus commands that we love others as He loved us.

Each person loves themselves by seeking what they perceive to be in their best interest. To love others as we love ourselves is to seek the best interest of others. To love others as Jesus loved us is to sacrifice ourselves in this life for an eternal benefit (Philippians 2:5-10).

James points to this summary principle of loving our neighbor and says that if his readers love their neighbor as themselves, they *are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture*. James is citing the authority of *the Scripture*, the word God has given His people.

This *royal law* is that we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves. James calls it the *royal law* because it is the chief law, the principle law regarding how we should treat others, the king of such laws under which all other good actions operate. If his readers fulfill this law, they *are doing well*, meaning they are doing rightly, correctly, living in harmony with God’s (good) design.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment was to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37). This basically sums up the first four of the Ten Commandments. And the fifth commandment (‘obey your parents’) can be considered as saying, “And if you aren’t old enough to obey God directly, then obey your parents.” Thus the Greatest Commandment can be considered as a summary of the first five of the Ten Commandments.

The second commandment, what James calls the *royal law* can be viewed as a summary of the last five of the Ten Commandments. If we love others as we love ourselves we will not physically assault them, injure them, lie to them, break up their family, or exploit them.

But, James writes, *if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors* (v. 9).

Again James points to the *partiality* some of his readers were practicing, giving honor to the rich and putting down the poor in their church assembly. When we *show partiality*, it is quite simply *sin*. Showing *partiality* is *committing sin*; *sin* means to be in error, to miss the mark; it is the opposite of *doing well* and rightly. It is taking actions apart from God’s design, and leads to exploitation, division, and ultimately violence.

If we commit *sin*, we are *convicted by the law as transgressors*. We have transgressed what is right and are *convicted* as wrongdoers. The *law* determines this, because we have not fulfilled it, we have done the opposite of what it directs us to do.

Just as the principle of “Love your neighbor as yourself,” is the *royal law* upon which all other laws depend, the failure to keep this law, or any one law, makes us culpable for all the rest.

James explains,

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all (v. 10).

If a person loves God and loves their neighbor as themselves, they are fulfilling the entirety of the law. But if someone sins, if someone *stumbles in one point*, then by extension that same person has unraveled the rest of the law. James cites several specific examples from the Ten Commandments:

For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not commit murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law (v. 11).

James points to God, *He who said*, and two of God’s commandments: “*Do not commit adultery*,” do not have sexual relations with someone to whom you are not married, and “*Do not commit murder*,” do not kill another person.

Now, James reasons, *if you do not commit adultery*, you are loyal to your spouse, *but do commit murder*, you do kill someone, *you have become a transgressor of the law*. You have failed to love your neighbor as yourself if you kill your neighbor. It does not matter that you had a perfect, faithful marriage if you also took someone’s life. You are a *transgressor of the law* and are *guilty of the entire law*.

He is showing that you can’t “love your neighbor as yourself” in some areas but not all areas. You cannot obey God in some ways, but disobey Him in other ways, and consider yourself as *doing well*, as living righteously (according to His good design for creation.)

The Apostle Paul makes a similar point about the completeness of the law in the love-your-neighbor principle,

“For this, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”
(Romans 13:9-10)

The fulfillment of the law (the whole law) is found in love, and transgressing the law (the whole law) occurs when we fail to love.

There are no half-measures in how we treat others. To show partiality is to express rejection to another person. And as James pointed out in verse 5, in rejecting the poor his readers were rejecting God’s chosen, the poor who would inherit the kingdom of God (Matthew 5:3). James’s readers might think they are doing well by treating their rich friends nicely (and by having rich

friends at all), but by dishonoring the poor in their church they are completely failing to obey God.

After thoroughly pulling apart any delusions of self-righteousness his readers have, James points them toward how they can amend their actions:

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty (v. 12).

James is saying, “Remember by what metric you will be judged! The Law of Liberty judges us, not partial obedience, not by getting in good with powerful people.” *So speak and so act* accordingly. The wealthy people with whom you carried favor in this life won’t be able to help you at this judgment.

The *law of liberty* was mentioned by James in Chapter 1:

“But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.”

(James 1:25)

This *law of liberty* is what James previously called the “word of truth” (James 1:18) and the “implanted word” (James 1:21). Said differently, the truth is the source of freedom from the “sin that brings forth death” (James 1:15). Abiding by the *law of liberty* is equated with being faithful to do the truth of God’s word that one hears; to be an effectual doer, to live the word of God by living by faith.

The faith required to live by the word of God is to believe that His ways are for our best. His ways lead to the greatest of rewards. To believe that the rewards of this world are fleeting, corrosive, and empty, and seek rewards that last. The greatest of all rewards is the glory, honor, and immortality that comes from gaining the pleasure of God for our good deeds (Romans 2:7). Deeds do not justify us in God’s sight, only the blood of Jesus received in faith does that. But deeds done in service to God do gain great rewards (2 Corinthians 5:10).

This teaching from James is compatible with the Apostle Paul’s teaching that walking by faith results in believers fulfilling the law:

“so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

(Romans 8:4)

Paul asserts that the law cannot make us righteous (Romans 9:30-32). That is because the law does not change the heart. It shows us sin, and it shows us righteousness. However, the Spirit is given to us to empower us to live in righteousness, and when we walk in faith, believing God’s ways are for our best and walking in obedience to His word, we fulfill the purpose of the law. The law’s purpose is to replace selfishness with love.

The fruit of the Spirit is love toward others (Galatians 5:22). When we follow the flesh we “bite and devour one another” (Galatians 5:15). Alternatively, when we walk in the Spirit we love and

serve one another thus fulfilling the *royal law* to love our neighbor as ourselves (Galatians 5:13-14).

The *law of liberty* then is the abiding word of God that liberates us from setting our mind on the flesh, which leads to a natural consequence of death (James 1:15-15; Romans 6:23). The *law of liberty* saves us from our sin nature, our flesh, which leads us to self-destruction (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). This *law of liberty*, God's word, will judge us. We choose our own standard of judgment by how we treat others (Matthew 7:1-2).

We can *speak and act* such that we walk in step with the *law*, rather than violate it. We cannot do this by our own efforts to justify ourselves. If we seek to justify ourselves, after having been justified by Christ, we are wasting effort—we can add nothing to Jesus's perfect sacrifice (Galatians 2:17). But when we follow the Spirit in faith, we can *speak and act* according to the *royal law*.

Next, James discusses *judgment* in further detail:

For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment (v. 13).

Every believer will be judged for the deeds they do while living on earth (2 Corinthians 5:10). James describes how for believers who have *shown no mercy* to others, their *judgment will be merciless*. But if we give mercy to others, we get it in return: *mercy triumphs over judgment*.

James is repeating the Mercy Principle which Jesus taught: within His kingdom, God gives us the same measure of mercy we give to others.

The Mercy Principle is one of the central tenets of Jesus's kingdom platform (Matthew 5:7, 5:44-47, 6:12, 6:14-15, 7:1-2, 7:12, 18:21-35). Mercy is a motivation for us to fulfill *the royal law* of "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*," (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39). When we *love* our *neighbor*, we are also doing what is in our own true self-interest (Mark 11:25-26)

Showing mercy affects our fellowship with God and others. It does not affect our relationship as God's children. There is nothing we can do to make God love us any more or any less, and God never rejects His own. But we can gain His approval or wrath, and the consequences that follow each, based upon how we follow Him by faith or disobey Him (in this instance, by showing *partiality*).

The main way we please God is by trusting Him that it is in our best interest to love other people through serving them, not exploiting or mistreating each other. James is warning those of his readers who have abused the poor in their congregation that God will deal with their sin. They should *speak and so act* according to God's word, the *law of liberty*, otherwise face *judgement* (a loss of reward, missing out on the opportunity to co-reign with Jesus in His kingdom).

These believers who have mistreated one another can triumph *over judgment*, however, by showing *mercy* to one another, by *fulfilling the royal law*—"*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*."

The mercy principle also occurs in [the Lord's Prayer](#). The central part of the prayer is the request for God to forgive us the same way we forgive others (Matthew 6:12). Jesus explained after the prayer why He featured this point as the central part of the chiasmic structure:

“For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”

(Matthew 6:14-15)

This deals with fellowship and rewards. God will treat us as we treat others. He will also judge us according to how we judge others (Matthew 7:1-2). When we love and serve others God promises He will reward us greatly (1 Corinthians 2:9; 1 Peter 5:5-6; Revelation 3:21).

In the next section, James will unpack the uselessness of having faith and love that is not lived out. Well-wishing, or pretending to love one another without acting on it, harms our faith, and leads to our faith growing cold, or even dying. Dead faith is faith that is inactive. But acting on our faith brings life to our faith. It is the same principle of not just hearing but also doing (James 1:25), to not only *speaking* but to *act* (v. 12).

Biblical Text

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