

True Religion: Test of the Royal Law

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James 2:8-13

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Reminder about the preceding verses about partiality or preferential treatment. Partiality in the early church, it went far beyond the rich and poor illustration James used there. Early in Acts we hear complaints against the apostles by the Hellenists/Greeks, charging that Hebrew widows were getting preferential treatment and their own widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. The New Testament also reveals long held racial prejudices the Jews had against the Samaritans and Gentiles, which continued into life of the church. Different teachers travelled from church to church seeking to impose different elements of the law on Gentile Christians, including circumcision. Even Peter needed to be openly rebuked by Paul for his sinful separation from Gentile believers, and a church council (*which James presided over*) was called to reach a consensus on the matter. Partiality was no small issue in the early church, but James was aware the issue ran much deeper than just a few errant preferences.

James 2:8–13 [8] If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. [9] But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. [10] For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. [11] 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. [12] So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. [13] For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Main Idea: We must be broken by the Law, so we can be freed to really fulfill the law.

The nature of the law is not random codes of conduct or unthoughtful whims from a fed-up God. It is the author of life saying, “This is how I created life to work. You were made in my image and the more accurate your reflection of me, the better life works.” That’s at least part of what James is saying when he says, “if you really fulfill this - you are doing well!” It doesn’t mean life is easy - we still live in a fallen world. But it recognizes God made us to exist in a world that runs according to His rules. And when we honor what He has established there are blessings that accompany that and harm that comes when we don’t.

The first ‘law’ we taught our daughters was Ephesians 6:1–3: [1] *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. [2] “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), [3] “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”*

We didn’t have a long list of do’s and don’ts for our children - we had ‘honor and obey’ - the action of obedience and the heart of honor. But what we pointed out countless times was that we want you to honor and obey because it is right (honors God), but also because this is the place of God’s protection and blessing for you. “Mommy and Daddy aren’t making the promise that it will go well for you and you will live long in the land, God is!” “When you remain in a place of honoring and obeying it will go well with you, but when you choose to disobey - you are in danger! Danger of correction...danger of natural consequences - hot stoves/electrical sockets/cars that can’t see you...and ultimately the danger of persisting in your sin.” We wanted them to see that ‘law’ was there for their blessing and protection, and that disobeying

isn't just an isolated act, but removing themselves from the benefit of that promised blessing/safety.

The nature of sin is such that we want to think we are the masters of our own fate, captains of our own souls, and that the rules don't apply to me. I can choose to not honor God's authority, but I still exist in His universe. Breaking God's law doesn't render it powerless in my life. Just like Eve, we mistakenly think freedom is found in flaunting the law, not obeying it (no one is going to tell me what to do!). This is rooted in the idea that God is a killjoy, rather than the source of life and freedom. We fight against His law because the liberty God offers is not the freedom we crave. We want not just to choose our actions, but freedom from consequences for those actions. We turn down the freedom of God, in an attempt to get freedom FROM God. Craving not just no rules, but no Ruler.

James is aware we are blind to our own sin - we deceive ourselves. So, he points out that this partiality he's been talking about— its serious!

[9] But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

James seeks to see the law do its work by using "love your neighbor" in two ways as he begins. 1. He highlights HOW we are breaking the law - not loving neighbor as self. 2. He identifies WHICH we are breaking - the Royal Law.

Jesus didn't say: "You have to learn to love yourself before you can really love others." Jesus said, "You already love yourself. You are constantly looking out for yourself, tending to your needs and desires and getting upset when it seems others get in the way of our desires." The problem isn't that we don't love ourselves, the problem is that our love often ends there. I'm not looking to tend to others' needs as thoughtfully or resolutely/carefully as I give attention to my own. Love is acting in the best interest of someone else (like I do my own). The sin of partiality and favoritism is that my care for another depends not upon their need, but whether they meet whatever criteria *I have erected* as someone worthy of my time, my effort, my love.

Jesus's criteria was: "love your neighbor". In the parable of the Good Samaritan He highlighted neighbors aren't just people you like or that are like you or those that are nice to you, but include even those you are tempted to despise. The command to love my neighbor doesn't stop at my family or CG, my tribe or nation.

I am to treat the needs of others with the same care and attention I constantly devote to my own. But instead of heeding Christ's command to love them because they are my neighbor, a fellow image bearer of God Himself, partiality inserts my own law of who someone must be or what they must do before I will love them. James makes clear, this violates the 'royal law', (King Jesus declared that all the law and prophets depended on this). In case our 'Inner Lawyer' is searching for an out and a way to excuse or minimize the damage, he continues...

James knows that many of his primarily Jewish readers were tempted with the same self-righteousness many of us growing up in the church are tempted with. Seeking to use the law to justify ourselves, because we haven't broken 'the really bad parts'. For those tempted to believe their sin isn't really that serious, James brings out this 2x4 of truth and starts swinging: **You** have broken **the whole law!** Because if you think the law shows how good you are, you've missed the work it's trying to do in you! [10] For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. [11] 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.

If your greatest sin is not showing the same compassion to someone in need that you care for your own needs: you have transgressed the same law as the murderer or rapist. His royal law isn't broken into sections that are *acceptable and understandable* to ignore, and others are *Real Disobedience*. Somewhere we got this perception we can break part of the law as long as we don't violate the really big parts. It's like saying, “I broke the window by throwing a rock at the left corner, not the middle which is *so much worse!*” Except that no matter where the rock hits, all the glass is shattered.

James points out that the law is an indivisible unity. All of it is in response to some aspect of God's nature. He calls those created in His image and redeemed by Him, to reflect Him as He is. Bearing **false witness** isn't just telling a false set of facts, its telling a lie about who God is because *we represent Him* (and He is trustworthy/true and cannot lie.) **Adultery** is a big deal — including Christ's expansion of even looking lustfully at someone — because we are called to reflect Christ's faithfulness to His bride. It's not an innocent look, but a lie about His purity and faithfulness. **Partiality** is sinful because God is loving and calls us to reflect His contra-conditional love to all those around us, love that He displayed by laying His life down for us!

Each command has its basis in God's character. To say that any command does not apply to me is to say some aspect of God does not matter in relation to me. We can't violate part of the law without bringing offense against all of God because He isn't broken into separate pieces. Failure at one point makes us guilty of all of it because the same God that said, “don't murder” also said “don't commit adultery” and summed up both with “love your neighbor”. Every sin may have different *human collateral damage*, but each sin's primary offense is against the God who calls us to reflect and represent Him!

James wants us to be absolutely haunted by the ultimate fruit of not heeding the Royal Law. Vs 13: *For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.* James reveals this is what favoritism and partiality are at heart— not showing mercy! Placing rules or requirements that keep others from benefitting from your love — that's not kind or merciful. Whether occupation or race or nationality, stances on immigration or guns, real sins or annoying habits... Love isn't about what another deserves, but serving their best interests, even when it costs us something.

When James states “judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy”, it is very reminiscent of Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant, who faced judgment for not forgiving the smaller debts of others after he was forgiven a much larger debt. We cannot merit mercy by our mercy — because if our mercy could earn it, we wouldn't NEED mercy. The reason the unmerciful don't receive mercy is because they aren't truly new creations, born again by the Spirit of God. Our mercy and love to those around us is the *evidence* that we have been transformed by God's mercy and love. James wants any reader not consistently displaying mercy and love to his neighbor to be very sobered by the significance of their sin. Because the purpose of the law isn't to justify us, but to break into our self-sufficiency and self-righteousness so we see our need for the mercy of the Savior! **We must be broken by the Law, so we can be freed to really fulfill the law.**

[12] So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. [13] ... Mercy triumphs over judgment!

Apart from relationship with the merciful Savior, James' designation of the "law of liberty" is a nonsensical oxymoron. If we aren't viewing the law through the lens of knowing Him and His great love for us, we will believe the same lie Satan has been peddling since the Garden - that God's Law is trying to keep us from the best stuff rather than point us to the best stuff!

Picture of the Yungas Road in Bolivia -

"The largely single-lane road has few guard rails and cliffs of up to 2,000 feet. During the rainy season, rain and fog can severely hamper visibility, and water runoff can turn the road into a muddy track, affecting traction. In the summer, rockfalls are common and vehicle dust limits visibility as well. One of the local road rules specifies that the downhill driver never has the right of way and must move to the outer edge of the road. This forces the faster downhill vehicle to stop so that passing can be negotiated safely. Unlike the rest of Bolivia, vehicles on this stretch are required to drive on the left side of the road to give the driver a better view of the vehicle's outside wheel [to make] passing safer."

Nicknamed 'Death Road' - with approx. 200 annual fatalities...Two-way traffic, single lane width, few guardrails. Our trip - was in a bus... Traveling a road like this gives one a new appreciation for guard rails. No guardrails does not equal complete freedom. You wish for guardrails to provide clear boundaries and safety. Guardrails aren't there to restrict you from going where some mean bureaucrat doesn't want you to go, but to provide freedom from the constant fear of going over the edge — they are caring!

In the context of relationship, the heart behind the law is life and freedom, not restriction. Think about the garden: "I have made a beautiful place for you to live and enjoy and serve as my representative. It has everything you need. Every tree here is provided for your blessing and sustenance. Only one is harmful - but it will result in your death." Saying "Don't eat from that tree" is not cruel or unkind! It is the most loving thing God could say! Not mentioning the tree wouldn't be kind, nor is: "Somewhere in here there is a tree here that will kill you if you eat it...Good luck! I don't want to tell you what to do..." No boundaries or guardrails is not helpful or liberating! That wouldn't produce trust or love for God, but show He doesn't really care about our welfare. Relationship transforms!

He loves...through His law. First to show us our failure, and our need for His saving mercy. So that secure in His love, we can be freed to really fulfill His Royal Law. Freed from the penalty of what our sins have earned. We are freed from fear, to love Him because of His great love for us. And He empowers us by His Spirit to reflect that amazing love to those around us. The gracious, compassionate, merciful God sent His only Son to reveal His contra-conditional love by laying down His life for rebels and lawbreakers, haters and enemies of God - for us!

Mercy triumphs over judgement — Hallelujah!

Paul writes a very complementary couple verses in Galatians 5:13–14 where he says: *[13] For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. [14] For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

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