

***James 2:8-13.***

A lawyer once asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25-37). He felt pretty good about himself, and so the Lord asked him a question, “What’s written in the Law?” The lawyer summed it up with two commands—love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself.

He answered right, and Jesus told him if he fulfilled these, he would certainly gain eternity: “Do this, and you will live.” Encouraging, isn’t it? Not really, because no one can perfectly love God or others. We fail, and what we need for eternal life isn’t better law keeping, but to throw ourselves upon divine grace. We need mercy.

Well, this had no effect on the lawyer’s self-image. He still felt good about how well he had kept the Law of Moses. Desiring to further justify himself, he had one more question for Jesus: “And who is my neighbor?” *If loving my neighbor is 1/2 of the entire Law, then I’d better be certain I’m loving the right people.*

Jesus answered with the story of a man beaten by robbers and left for dead. A priest and a Levite saw the man struggling for life, but they kept walking. It was a Samaritan who actually stopped. He was an enemy or outcast, and yet, he showed compassion. He bound the man’s wounds, fed him, and took him to an inn.

*So, who is my neighbor?* It’s anyone with a need. To love your neighbor as yourself is to respond to those with a need as if it was your own.

The lawyer’s question revealed he hadn’t a clue about loving others. He wanted to know *who* to love rather than *how* to love. “Do I need to love this person?” isn’t the right question. Rather he should’ve asked: “How can I love this person?” His love was deficient and made distinctions.

***James 2:8—“If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well.”***

James quotes Jesus about loving your neighbor and then applied it to playing favorites. How so? Partiality makes distinctions. It picks and chooses who will receive love and who won’t based upon some kind of sinful standard.

What does God see when He looks at men and women? He doesn’t see skin color, social status, fashion symbols, or academic degrees. He sees sinners in need of salvation, and in love, He responded by sending His Son to meet their need.

**BREAKING THE LAW**

**(JAMES 2:8)**

“For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (Jas 2:10). All of it? *One sin, and I’ve broken the whole law?* Exactly. You can’t keep bits and pieces of the Mosaic Law. For those who were under it, if someone lived a holy life except for one little white lie, it would’ve been the same as multiplying by zero.

The Pharisees were the religious teachers of the day, and it’s critical to remember that James’ audience had sat under them. His readers were Jewish Christians. The Pharisees taught that the Law was a series of individual commands such as “Do not murder” or “Do not commit adultery.” Keeping one of God’s commands was thought to gain a bit of credit with Him; to break one incurred debt. It was taught that a man was made righteous by keeping more of God’s commands than he broke—having a net credit.

The churches to whom James wrote had been influenced by this (Jas 2:11), and James told them to quit keeping score. If you’ve ever failed to love your neighbor as yourself, there’s no score to keep. You’ve already transgressed God’s law. Game over. Worse, you didn’t just break one law, you actually broke the entirety of the Law. One infraction, one failure to love set against even a trillion loving deeds, and all is lost (Isa 64:6).

The Law of Moses was a perfect unity. Every piece was linked to every other piece like the shards of a stained-glass window. There were no stand-alone commands. All of them either told how to love God or how to love others. To break any of those lesser commands was to break one or both of these greater commands.

This is so very different than how we understand Illinois or U.S. Law. To violate the speed limit... is to violate the speed limit. There likely isn’t a greater law that’s broken. To commit tax fraud probably isn’t related to shoplifting. Our laws tend to be stand-alone and have little or no bearing on one another.

# The Law of Liberty

---

Under the Old Testament Law, nothing was stand-alone. Do you really want to be judged by that standard? It means every violation is major—even a small bit of favoritism. It isn't so small as a parking violation. No, under the Law of Moses, every violation is a failure to love God or to love others. Fail in one small way and you've broken one or both of these overarching commands to love (Rom 13:9; Gal 6:2). That's why James calls the command to love your neighbor as yourself the royal or sovereign law—it was a law above all others.

## LAW AND GRACE

(JAMES 2:9-12)

In the previous section (Jas 2:1-7), James focused upon partiality in the church. Here's a recap: Most churches were poor at the time, and he saw a problem with believers pandering to their rich visitors. *Welcome! Good to see you! Please sit here.* Jewish churches didn't have rows of seats for everyone. Most people stood during the worship service or sat on the floor—it was an honor to be seated (Matt 23:6).

---

**“THE CHURCH SHOULD BE A COMPETITION-FREE ZONE...  
INSTEAD OF COURTING ONE ANOTHER'S FAVOR WE REJOICE  
IN GOD'S FAVOR” — DOUG WEBSTER.**

---

Yet, the rich man wasn't the only visitor one Sunday morning. A beggar entered the doors as well and wasn't treated kindly. *Just get wherever you're going, buddy.* He was humiliated.

Showing partiality to one person is failing to show love to another. It breaks the royal law (Jas 2:9). Love meets needs, and in this case, showing love would've meant reaching out to meet the needs of a poor visitor. He was the church's “neighbor.”

*James 2:12-13—“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.”*

If the royal law is to love your neighbor as yourself, what is the law of liberty? It's the gospel. Christians aren't under the Mosaic Law or even the royal law—Christ fulfilled it all for us (Rom 3:19-24). Are we still called to love though? Of course, but when we fail, there's grace. There was no grace under the Law.

When Moses received the Law from God, the scene was terrifying. Israel stood before a mountain ablaze with fire. The ground shook violently, lightning cracked throughout the sky, deep clouds rolled in, and thunder pounded. God had descended upon Mt. Sinai to give the Law, and He meant business (Ex 19:16-18; Heb 12:18-21).

Under the Law of Moses, there was only judgement. God gave this system to teach about His holiness and to show that none could live up to it (Gal 3:24-25). By failing to measure up, we see our need for grace and mercy. That's why the gospel is called the law of liberty (Jas 2:12). It frees the believer from the unmerciful chains of the Law—even the royal law. There's no standard we can fully keep.

## FROM OPPRESSION TO LIBERTY

(JAMES 2:13)

God's people receive mercy through Jesus Christ. We haven't come to a terrifying mountain to be condemned by the Law. We've come to Christ (Heb 12:22-24). Yes, we're called to love one another. However, there's no condemnation from God when we fail (Rom 8:1). How can that be? Because the verdict was already rendered by the Judge. In Christ, we're justified and free (Rom 3:24).

James has made a theological case. If God has been infinitely merciful to believers, how could they be unmerciful? How could some of the churches reading James' letter humiliate the poor? They saw a man's need and denied him mercy, though in Christ, they had received such great mercy. It doesn't add up. God's people should be filled with mercy for others and the most eager to show it.

So, James ends with a warning: “Judgement is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy” (Jas 2:13). The way we treat others reveals how much or how little we understand of God's mercy. It's quite possible that the “one who has shown no mercy” isn't saved. Thus, judgement.

This short letter is only 5 chapters, and the theme is faith in action. In the next section (2:14-26), James drills deeper. What do we do with a Christian who says he has faith but there's no evidence of that faith? As Jesus said, “The tree is known by its fruit” (Matt 12:33).