

The Royal Law

James 2:8-13

Last week we studied the subject of partiality, or showing favoritism. Giving preference in the church to someone based on something outward and external, such as how rich they might be. I emphasized what James writes in verse 1 of chapter 2, namely that showing favoritism is not only evil but actually amounts to a contradiction of your faith!

v.1 "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality."

So the commitment not to be a respecter of persons, in the language of the original King James, that commitment is a necessary and essential component of the very profession of your faith. And as we continue this morning, that commitment is at the very heart of God's law as well, what James refers to in verse 8 as "the royal law." The law of the king! Or we might well understand James to mean the supreme law, the summary of the law which is the king of all laws, the sum and essence of ten commandments themselves. For remember how Jesus answered that question intended to test him, to trick him...

Mat. 22:34 "But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. 35 Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" 37 Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

So all the commandments, the whole of the law of God, hang on these two simple commandments, to love God with all your

heart, and to love your neighbor as yourself. James is addressing that second great commandment here in James 2, and that commandment comes directly from the words of Moses in the book of Leviticus.

Lev. 19:17 "You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. 18 You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."

Thus James identifies,

I. THE GLORY OF THE LAW.

It is, indeed,

A. The royal law.

Not just any law. Certainly not just some tradition of men. It is the very summary of all that the Lord requires of his people. It is the law that defines our duty and responsibility as the people of God, a law Jesus affirms and even intensifies.

Jesus reminds his disciples, and us, that he did not do away with that law.

Mat. 5:17 "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. 18 For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. 19 Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

Yet, do not be confused or misled. The law is not the means by which we earn our right standing before God. The law is not the way in which we gain entrance into heaven or even the status of adopted children in his family. All of that is by grace, through faith. It is a gift, not the payment of wages. The Bible can't be any clearer about that,

Eph, 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast."

In order to deny the error of thinking that you are justified by law-keeping, Paul writes to the Galatians,

Gal. 2:21 "I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."

And, Gal. 3:24 "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith."

So this law of love is a royal law, the king of all laws..."you shall love your neighbor as yourself." And that is James' focus in our text.

B. The law of love.

v.8 "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well."

That's what is so wrong with showing partiality, favoritism. It is the opposite of love. It is a contradiction of the law of love. It is a contradiction of your faith.

v.1 "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality."

With good reason, put as a warning in,

v.9

Here now we can see James' emphasis upon

II. THE UNITY OF THE LAW'S DEMANDS.

In other words, this royal law is, in one sense, singular. It can be summarized comprehensively, with a singular duty and obligation, to love. Here, to love your neighbor. And that demand comes to us as a warning, because,

A. The law identifies and convicts the law-breaker.

The law defines sin, and it identifies the sinner. So without mincing any words, we read what James writes,
v.9

It's a sin. It's wrong. It is evil. It is an offense against the Lord God himself. "If you show partiality, you commit sin."

Sometimes you will hear me say things like, "not everything is black and white." Or, "not every situation or decision is binary," meaning, there is the right answer and the wrong answer. There is the good solution and the bad solution. Some matters are not black and white, they are not limited to those to binary choices between right and wrong, good and evil. But, beloved, some things are! And that is the emphasis of James' words here. This is black and white, good or evil. "If you show partiality, you commit sin." If you show favoritism, you are doing what is evil. You are a law-breaker, violating the law of all laws, the law of love to your neighbor.

And not only are you identified as a law-breaker, you face the condemnation of that law.

v.9 "...but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

You are convicted...by the law. And we need to hear that warning! Thus the Apostle John writes,

1 John 3:10 “In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. 11 For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, 12 not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother’s righteous. 13 Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. 15 Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. 16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

Strong words of warning. “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.” The positive encouragement is there as well, that love is the evidence of true salvation. As I just read, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren.” But John gives the same warning as James, “He who does not love his brother abides in death.”

The law identifies and convicts the law-breaker. And James then makes a very significant point about the unity of the law’s demands. It is a point necessary for us to hear and understand, for we like to think that we can break one law, or even some multiple laws, maybe lesser important laws, but still be OK with God. The thought is that there are some laws identified as

greater than others, some that bring some sort of automatic disqualification or condemnation before God while there are others that are OK to ignore. For some people, that might people anger. They know they have a problem with anger, but that’s not as important as maybe actually hurting someone. Or for others, it might be lying, little white lies we say. Or stealing, we justify all sorts of ways of stealing things that don’t rightly belong to us. Or just showing favoritism—we just show favor to those people who are most able to benefit us and we discriminate against those people who just seem to be different than us, or are in some threatening to us in our own insecurities.

But James doesn’t let us make those sorts of distinctions. And here is why showing favoritism is so dangerous. Here is the great danger of that sin, shown to us with another warning.

B. The law is a unified whole when it identifies the law-breaker.

v.10-11

In other words, the law is one law, not a collection of separate laws. And your standing before the law is not graded on a curve, as we would say in an academic classroom. Your standing before the law is not relative, not established in comparison to someone else. Either you have kept the law or you have broken the law. And if you have broken one specific law, you have broken the law, the whole law. Either you are a perfect law-keeper or a lawbreaker. There is nothing to be identified in between.

That is a very important point, because while few people would ever consider themselves perfect law-keepers, they would not want to consider themselves lawbreakers either. That was something I had to learn about myself when I first started being involved in a prison ministry when I was a recent college

graduate, leading a Bible study with criminals, lawbreakers. Convicts. Inmates. When I began that ministry at the invitation of another man in the church I was attending, I worried somewhat about how I could relate to these men. Yet I did quite genuinely come to realize that I was really no different than they. I hadn't broken the civil laws that they might have done, I hadn't been sentenced by a human judge in a court of law, but if for a moment I stopped considering myself a lawbreaker, I could have not effective ministry with them. Quite frankly, that was humbling, to feel at home with a group of prison inmates. And that humbling was a good thing.

If you break just one of the commandments, you are a lawbreaker! You are "accountable for all of it." That is a warning you ought to give to non-Christians, those who think that they have done enough, that they are good enough, that their law-keeping is sufficient, even if it isn't perfect or complete. James' answer to that is plain,

v.10 "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all."

The Apostle Paul is plain as well,

Gal. 3:10 "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them." 11 But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for "the just shall live by faith." 12 Yet the law is not of faith, but "the man who does them shall live by them."

He shall be compelled to live by them. By all of them. Everyone of them. "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them."

That a quote from,

Deut. 27:26 "Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law by observing them." "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

You are under a curse for violating just one commandment, just once. The curse of death. The wages of sin is death. The wages of just one sin is an unending, eternal death. That's the curse. Partial righteousness is no righteousness at all. Imperfect obedience has no merit, no work deserving of reward and honor. So don't ever think, don't ever even be tempted to think, that somehow you fix yourself up and come to God to win his approval on that basis. Rather, let the curse of the law be that schoolmaster that leads you to Christ, that you might be justified by faith, not the law. That's the gospel!

This is also a good warning for us as Christians. You can't pick and choose among God's commands. Calvin rights, "that God will not be honored with exceptions, nor will he allow us to cut off from his law what is less pleasing to us...[n]one of us should presumptuously separate what he has joined together...[I]f we cut off from God's law what is less agreeable to us, though in other parts we may be obedient, yet we become guilty of all, because in one particular thing we violate the whole law."

Yet we do that, or we are tempted to do so. We get some of the big ones right--at least outwardly. No shoplifting from department stores, no drunken brawls in the bar, nor adulterous affairs. You avoid those things and you think to yourself that your sanctification is rather well advanced. And you are satisfied. And we need the warning. How dangerous it is to pick and choose. In the culture of a previous generation, to define sin by things not even absolutely forbidden by Scripture--drinking, dancing, watching movies and playing cards.

The Jews in James' time made a distinction between the more important laws and those that were less significant. The Roman Catholics do the same thing today, with lists of mortal and venial sins. But God's law is one. James stresses that the law is not made up of individual commandments but that it displays unity. If you break one of God's commandments, you sin against the entire law of God. Matthew Henry writes, "God requires perfect, not partial, obedience. We are not to choose out parts of the law to keep, which suit our whim, while we neglect others."

That's the warning. But notice how James combines that warning with the encouragement of freedom,

III. THE FREEDOM OF THE LAW.

We read in verse 12 of "the law of liberty." The law of freedom. That's such an encouraging emphasis, such a helpful idea. You see, the law, God's law, is not the law of bondage, but the law of liberty. For God's law defines the boundaries by which we are designed by God to live! It is that law that we truly have freedom, and if I may use an analogy, it is the freedom that a train has when it is running on its rails. The law are the rails, and freedom for a train is only to be found on those rails!

The law of God is not burdensome. Rather, sin is what brings burden, especially the burden of slavery. It is sin that enslaves us, not the law! Bondage is to be found in law-breaking, isn't it? Slavery is found not by studying the regulations of God's law but by living in disobedience to it! Sin is what exercises dominion over you, so that you are bound. And the law? The law is sweet, sweeter than honey! The law is more precious than gold! The commandments of God are good, and holy, and righteous.

Do you want to know real freedom? Then obey God's laws. Do you want to know real slavery? Disobey. So live your life as

those who will be judged according to the law, the law that you find to be the great joy and delight of your heart, such that you can sing with the Psalmist,

Psalm 119:97 "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day....101 I have restrained my feet from every evil way, That I may keep Your word. 102 I have not departed from Your judgments, For You Yourself have taught me. 103 How sweet are Your words to my taste, Sweeter than honey to my mouth! 104 Through Your precepts I get understanding; Therefore I hate every false way. 105 Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path. 106 I have sworn and confirmed That I will keep Your righteous judgments."

And yet, to get back to the main of this text in James 2,

A. Freedom doesn't do away with accountability.

v.12 "So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy."

It is the law of liberty, the law which brings freedom. And in that freedom of living the way intends and commands us to live, we are still accountable to the God who has loved us! Yet, to conclude all of this with the greatest possible encouragement, look at the end of,

v.13 "Mercy triumphs over judgment."

Judgment will be shown, without mercy, to the hardened law-breaker who shows no mercy to others. Judgment will be shown to those who are hardened in their sin. But beloved, "Mercy triumphs over judgment."

B. Mercy brings freedom from the law with the promise of the gospel.

Freedom from the curse of the law. That's the triumph. Here's where James abolishes any legitimate accusation that he is teaching a system of work-salvation. His doctrine of salvation is the doctrine of mercy. Yes, the law brings judgment. It brings condemnation to the unbeliever. But for the believer, that same law brings freedom. And by the mercy of God, it brings the victory. By the mercy of God, we are saved.

I want you to recognize something. Mercy doesn't triumph over judgment by the abolition of the law! Mercy doesn't triumph over judgment by simply doing away with obligation and accountability. Mercy doesn't triumph over judgment when we think ourselves to be free from any obligation to fulfill the requirements of the law. No, mercy triumphs over judgment in two very, very significant ways, both of which uphold the perfect standard of righteousness found in the law.

The first is this, that in Christ, we are enabled to obey the law. And that is the context for all these exhortations! As a Christian, you are enabled to obey the law because the bondage and dominion of sin is done away with! You are enabled to obey the law, to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling [because you know that] it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

God is at work in you, enabling you to do what he commands. God is at work in you, enabling you to "be doers of the word, and not hearers only." You are enabled to love the law! In that way, mercy triumphs over judgment! And that is true in a second way. The judgment of the law, the condemnation of the law that you deserved, was inflicted upon someone else. His name is Jesus.

God doesn't ignore the requirements of his commandments when he saves us. Rather, in mercy, in his infinite loving-

kindness, he sends his only begotten son to live among us. Under the law, submitting to the law and perfectly keeping its requirements so that his righteousness can be imputed to you. And not only that, to satisfy divine justice in his own flesh. To receive the covenant curse that we, covenant breakers, have earned.

Gal. 3:13 "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"— 14 so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.'

Mercy triumphs over judgment!

Rom. 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Mercy triumphs over judgment.