

Keep the Royal Law

- James 2:8-13
- Last week we attempted to unpack the principle found in verses 1-7, namely, “Show no partiality.” We saw that to honor the rich and to dishonor the poor is not consistent with faith in the Lord Jesus, the Lord of glory. And that our tendency towards partiality extends beyond finances and social status. We can separate ourselves from others who are not like us very easily, can’t we? The great danger is that we may eventually live inside a tiny circle, like the Pharisees, because only we are good enough to be there. But you know this to be true: even if you were the only person with whom you would associate, there would still be problems, right? Big ones!
- You have heard the story of the man stranded on a deserted island for seven years. When he was finally found he showed his rescuers around the island and the place where he had lived. There were three huts in his little village and they asked what they were. He pointed to the one on the left and said, ‘that’s where I sleep.’ The one in the middle, he said, is where I go to church. What’s the other one? Oh, that’s where I USED to go to church! It reminded me of DL Moody’s statement: “I have had more trouble with me than with any man I ever met.” I know how he feels. “Everywhere I go, *I* show up and ruin the whole thing!” The problem with any kind of prejudice starts in the heart, and we need only look in the mirror to see someone with a heart problem.
- That’s why James follows up verses 1-7 with verse 8, “If you really fulfill the royal law of Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well.’ Let’s examine this passage today with three brief points: the law, the test, and the final exam.
- **The Law**
- What does James call the royal law? The same thing his big brother Jesus called the royal law. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Remember Jesus was asked what the most important law was and He answered that there were two upon which hung all the law and the prophets. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.” He said that was the greatest commandment. And the second is like it, He said: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt. 22:34-39) So we have it on the authority of Jesus Himself that if we keep these two commandments, we have kept them all. The bad news? None of us has ever had a single day when we did that, and none of us ever will. The good news is that Jesus never had a single second where He did NOT do that. He kept the law perfectly, which is the Gospel: we who were sinners incapable of doing anything to please God received the righteousness of Christ who did everything to please God. Now, because of Jesus, we can start living in obedience to the two great commandments. We can love God. We can love our neighbor. Love is always revealed in obedience, and obedience is always an expression of love. Love is not a feeling. Remember the lawyer who asked Jesus how he could have eternal life? Jesus asked him what he knew about the law. The lawyer answered with the two great commandments. He knew them word perfect! Love the Lord your God...and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said, “Ok, you answered well. Do this and live.” Not, “know this and live.” Do this. We know the lawyer was hoping for a way to live life just loving those he FELT like loving because of what he said next. The text says, “But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” He knew the royal law, but he didn’t do the royal law.
- The royal law is royal because it was given to us by our King, and when we love others the way we love ourselves, the King works in amazing ways. Ernest Gordon wrote a book called *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, about allied prisoners who were kept in a Japanese concentration camp during WWII. In 1942 the camp was a sea of mud and filth, and the prisoners were brutally abused by the guards. There was little food, and the law of the jungle prevailed: every man for himself. One year later, the camp was spotless and clean. The bamboo bed slats had been de-bugged. The huts had been rebuilt, and on Christmas morning 2,000 men were at worship. What had happened to bring

about such a change? One man that year had shared his last morsel of food with another man who was also in desperate need. Then the man who had given up his food died. When the prisoners went through his belongings, they found a Bible. Some who knew about his selfless act of giving his food to another wondered if the Bible had anything to do with that. So they started to read it, one by one. The Spirit of God moved into that camp and changed those men, and a spiritual and moral revolution took place. One man living out the royal law made a difference among thousands.

- To love your neighbor as yourself, then, is this: all of my concerns for my own well-being and safety and health and success and comfort and happiness, I now have those same concerns for someone else as though he were me. That's what the prisoner did in the concentration camp. He loved his neighbor. That's what the Samaritan did for the beaten man on the road to Jericho. He loved his neighbor.
- **The Test**
- James brings up partiality again, because there are people you and I might walk past on the side of the road, because we are at political or social or spiritual odds with them. If we walk past them, James says in verse 9, we are convicted as transgressors. Kent Hughes writes, "It is not merely a lack of courtesy, but a scandalous breach of God's love."
- Why is James making such a big deal out of favoritism? Being partial to some over others? Because it is a test that points to a heart condition. James mentions it in the same breath as murder and adultery because as he says, "whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it."
- This is heavy stuff, and a difficult word, but let's start with the simple, which does NOT mean easy! Here it is. Love your neighbor as yourself starts with your own family. I remember Paul Trip telling the story of getting a bowl of ice cream for himself and his wife, and as he walked up the steps to the bedroom, he was weighing each bowl to see which one had more, because he was going to make sure he gave the smaller amount to his wife. And he thought, "What am I doing? Here is the woman who has given herself to me, who has taken care of me when I was sick, who has given birth to our children, who has sacrificed what she wanted to do to what I wanted over and over, and I am trying to cheat her out of a spoonful of ice cream?!" Love your wife as yourself. Paul said that in Eph. 5, "Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies." Children, young men and women, love your brother and sister the same way you love yourself. Let them have the first turn with the new toy. Help them do their chores. Eat their quinoa salad so they don't have to. ☺ And of course, the royal law extends to the church, our spiritual family, and into the places where we work, where we shop, where we go on vacation. It even extends to the highways we drive on...even there, we are to love our neighbor as ourself. Because it blesses them and honors God. And because there's a final exam coming!
- **The Final Exam**
- I love it when my students ask me the age-old question: Will this be on the final exam? Or, "Is the final exam cumulative?" And the answers are yes! And, yes! It is true in the classroom, and it is true in life. There is a final exam, and we will all sit for it. You folks who have test anxiety need not fear failing this exam. The GREAT news for the follower of Jesus is that how we score on that final exam will have absolutely no bearing on our entrance into heaven. The exam that determined THAT was taken by Jesus on the cross, and He secured for each one who believes in Him what we could never have secured for ourselves.
- BIG NEWS! We will be examined, which is why James said in verse 12, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty." Paul talked about this final exam in **2 Corinthians 5:6-10**. And in **1 Cor. 3:11-15**
- So speak and so act, James says, as those who will be judged. Our words will be judged. Every word we speak, type, text, and tweet will be held up to the royal law of liberty to see whether by

those words we loved our neighbor as ourselves. As Vic said a few weeks ago, don't put anything in an email you wouldn't want as a headline in the NY Times. Or on heaven's video screen! Our actions will also be tested by fire.

- News you can use. We will receive mercy as we have given it.
Verse 13: "For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment." Before we take communion, is there anyone from whom you are withholding mercy? Now is the time to give it, freely, just as it was given to you.
- Thank you, Jesus, for the cross. For the mercy you gave to us. Would you teach us to love like that?