

James 2:8-13

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[0:00] Good morning, CFC. Go ahead and take your copy of God's Word and turn to James chapter 2. James chapter 2, we're going to be looking at verses 8 through 13 this morning.

And as a way of introduction, I thought I would remind you all of what we have covered so far in our text. So James is writing to Jewish Christians who are dispersed from Israel by Herod Agrippa's persecution.

You can read about that in Acts 12, and he opens with an encouraging word about trials that these Christians are facing. These dispersed Christians are forming a new community, not only as the church, which was a very new thing at the time, but also as a dispersed people group.

You can imagine the complexity of all the people gathered who are new to one another, people who are getting to know one another, getting to know how to be Christians in the church body, what it means to be the church, and who is actually in the church, who is actually saved.

All these things they are wondering, they are asking, they are working through. And we've entered a new section in James that began in chapter 1, verse 26. Starting in that text, James is beginning to lay out a series of tests.

[1:19] Tests that will demonstrate to his audience who is truly in the kingdom and who is not. Who is truly in the faith of our Lord and who is opposed.

Who is pretending. Who is not truly saved. And this kind of thing was necessary in James' mind because apparently there are rich people who are oppressing the poor in the church, which we read about last week.

So James gives some tests to weed out these false believers. Tests to see who is corrupting the flock and leading them away. And one such test is the test of partiality that Nathan began preaching on last week in chapter 2, verse 1.

So today we're going to see James' final and main argument against the sin of partiality. This argument is the most important and most weighty, indicated by the length James gives to it and the fact that it's at the end of his argument, a common place for the main argument in Jewish rhetoric.

So let's begin then reading our text, James chapter 2, verse 8. We'll read this together and see James' main argument against the sin of partiality. So James writes in verse 8, If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

[2:46] You are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.

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.

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. So right at the outset of our text, we see that partiality is not loving, which is our first point for this morning.

Point number one, showing partiality is not loving. And we see this in verses 8 through 9. He says, What does James mean by royal law?

[3:56] And the Greek word for royal here in this context likely is James' way of referring not only to the Old Testament law, but also to Jesus' teachings, clarifications, and expositions of the law that he gave in his earthly ministry, his teachings that we see in the gospel accounts.

In other words, James is expanding to include both the Old Testament law, but also the instructions given to the disciples for the church, which is part of the kingdom of God.

Notice that from last week's text in verse 5, James refers to God choosing those who love him to be heirs of the kingdom, a word that in the Greek language would often be associated with the term royal, just like in English, royal kingdom.

It is interesting because James references the first great commandment, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. This is what it looks like to love God in verse 5.

But in our text, in verse 9, James references the second great commandment, you shall love your neighbor. So James is picking up on the great commandment teaching and situating it in the kingdom of God through the church.

[5 : 19] And this would be a clear allusion to Jesus' teaching, which we have recorded in Matthew 22, verses 35 through 40, a teaching that James' audience would be familiar with.

Matthew records, And one of them, a lawyer, asked Jesus a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?

And Jesus said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And a second is like it.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. So notice the lawyer asked, What is the great commandment?

He's expecting to hear one commandment in response. Yet Jesus responds with two commandments. This tells us how imperative both of these are.

[6 : 17] But we'll return to this passage in a moment. For now, suffice it to say that James is citing both the second and the first great commandments as a part of his case against partiality.

The sin of partiality is neither loving towards God or towards neighbor. Now, in your English translations, verses 8 and 9 likely begin with the word if.

And this gives you the impression that James is talking about a hypothetical. In other words, it is as if these two verses are reading as a warning. Like James is saying, Hey, I don't know if you're showing partiality or not, but here's what I think about it if you are.

Right? Kind of this preparatory gotcha type statement. If you really fulfill the royal law, you're doing well. But, you know, if you show partiality, you're not doing so well. And while the English might allow for this kind of reading, the Greek does not.

In both cases where if is used, you'd have what's called a first-class conditional, which simply means it is actually happening. That means you could translate if with the word since or because.

[7 : 27] And that changes the reading dramatically for us. Because you really fulfill the royal law. Because you show partiality.

Who is James talking to? How can they both be fulfilling the royal law and yet showing partiality? Are they obeying or are they not? And this is where we recall, as I said in the intro, that James is writing a series of tests for the church.

Tests to use to determine if someone is truly a brother in the faith or not. In other words, James is saying, I know some of you are obeying the royal law.

That you are truly loving your neighbor. That you are doing well. But I also know some of you are not. And you should know that you stand guilty before God.

Throughout the book of James, there are moments where James is addressing these false believers. And if that is a new idea for you, here are just a few examples. In James chapter 1 verse 22, Apparently there are those in James' audience who are hearers of the word, but not doers.

[8 : 37] In James chapter 1 verse 26, There are those who have not bridled their tongue, And their religion is, quote, worthless. In James chapter 2 verse 14, There are those who claim faith, but do not have works.

Which demonstrates that their faith is false. In James 4 verses 1 through 6, There are those who have fights and quarrels because of ongoing sinful passions, Which cause them to murder.

And more so, they lack the humility to ask or pray for wisdom and grace from God. In James chapter 4 verses 13 through 17, There are those who boast about worldly gains to come tomorrow.

And the most blatant example is James chapter 5 verse 1. James tells the rich who are oppressing his audience, These rich people are within the church, oppressing the poor within the church.

And he says to them, Come now you rich, Weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Meaning, future judgment awaits you. And I could go on to argue for this idea, But I'll wrap this argument up for now with this simple question.

[9 : 48] Do any of these people in these texts that James is addressing, Sound like true believers? Believers who have repented of their sin. Believers who are bearing fruit.

Believers who are following Christ. Believers who are praying for Christ. These men and women who oppress the poor. Who talk loosely and foolishly. Who don't even pray to God. And they constantly desire to murder because they do not have.

Is this the kingdom of God? And the apostle John says in 1 John 2.9 That one of the chief marks of the true church of God is our love for one another.

And James is saying in verse 9. That there are those who are practicing partiality. And the tense of the verb indicates this is ongoing sin in their life.

It's not just that they've shown partiality once on Monday and repented on Tuesday. But Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. On and on. Week to week. Year to year. They practice this.

[10 : 46] They get better at it. It's a craft for them. A masterpiece. They're very good at it. And they only get better. It's the direction of their life. And that person is not in the kingdom of God.

But rather, verse 9 is, quote, committing sin and is convicted by the law as a transgressor. So part of James' argument against the sin of partiality is that at its core it is unloving.

According to Jesus, one of the most basic confessions and laws of our faith is that we are to love God and love neighbor. Yet here are those who practice the opposite.

And they are guilty before God. These wolves are not in Christ, but they serve their father, the devil. Now, some might object and say, is partiality really all that big a deal?

After all, what if I treat everybody well, but just pick some to treat better for whatever reason? In James, he anticipates this kind of objection.

[11 : 55] An objection that belittles the sin of partiality. And this leads us to the other part of James' argument against the sin, which is our second point for this morning.

Point number two. Showing partiality is breaking the whole law. So point number two. Showing partiality is breaking the whole law.

So looking at verse 10, he writes, For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. Now that's an oxymoron of a statement.

Has someone truly kept the whole law if at one point they have broken it? And the answer is, of course not, which is James' point. It's the other part of his argument.

That person has broken the law. And James adds the terrifying reality that that person has, quote, become guilty of all of the law. How can that be?

[12 : 57] And again, recall Christ's teaching from Matthew 22, 35 through 40, which James has alluded to. In that text, Jesus says of the first and second commandments, that on these two commandments, quote, depend all the law and the prophets.

The entire word of God, the Old Testament, and the New, the royal law, all of it depends on these two commandments. One disobeys all the law and the prophets if their action is not a result of loving God and loving neighbor.

Every sin falls under that category, including a so-called, quote, small sin like partiality. And James, he builds this argument in verse 11.

He writes, For he who said, quote, Do not commit adultery, also said, Do not murder. If you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

So he is directly citing Exodus 20, 13 through 14, as well as Deuteronomy 5, 17 through 18. The law, the Old Testament law. But why these two laws specifically?

[14 : 11] And some pastors and scholars think it is because both laws demanded the death penalty if broken. So their explanation of this text would go something like this.

James is picking two separate sins that were, quote, unquote, taken seriously. So seriously that both demanded the death penalty. So he's doing this to show, this interpretation will go, they're doing this to show that partiality is just as deserving of death as adultery or murder.

That they should all be equally serious in the minds of James' hearers. And this view of this text wouldn't be wrong. As Paul says in Romans 6, 23, The wages of sin, all sin, is death.

All sin, meaning covetousness, greed, idolatry, pride, a loose tongue, a lack of financial integrity. All these sins will land you in the same place as murder, adultery, theft, homosexuality, and blasphemy.

The so-called small and the so-called big, they all land you in the same place. Judgment. And I think the pastors and scholars are correct to see these two laws picked because of the death

penalty and because of the public perception of murder and adultery as being more damning, quote, unquote.

[15 : 32] However, I also think James has another intention with these two laws. Given how much James cites the Sermon on the Mount and given how familiar the Sermon on the Mount must have been to his audience, I think James intends for us to consider Christ's teaching on these two laws in relation to partiality.

So Jesus says in Matthew 5, 21 through 22, he says, You have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. Later on in Matthew 5, 27 through 28, Jesus says, You have heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery.

But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. So Jesus, quoting the same text that James has quoted, is providing a clear teaching that external works alone are not the whole picture, but internally as well, in the heart, as Jesus says.

The law is meant to shape not just the external, but the internal. James intentionally seems to inform us that we are called to not show partiality, but also to not even have it in our hearts.

[17 : 05] You don't give the seat of honor to the rich over the poor in your church, that's good. But in your heart, in your mind, you find yourself giving unfair treatment to someone over another, based on arbitrary things, whether it be education, class, race, gender, whatever it is.

Is it something that you find yourself thinking, desiring at time? If so, that's a heart problem, not a societal problem, but a heart problem, as the law clearly indicates, as Jesus clearly expounded. In light of everything we've just covered, I just want to look at verses 10 through 11 as a unit for a moment, to wrap up this point.

In verse 10, the word whole is used to describe the law, the whole law. And it's interesting, recall that this word, when I preached the first sermon on James, the Greek word for this is teleon, a word that we looked at closely before, so I'll be brief here.

But this is James tipping of the hat to the theme of wholeness that runs throughout his entire letter. The careful reader would already know what James intends, to tell his readers that God demands their total devotion in heart, mind, and soul.

[18 : 28] Hence, this is why James references the great commandments, why he mentions the whole law, and why he takes the time to show that the one who doesn't commit adultery but does murder is guilty.

Because those people lack entire, complete, or whole devotion to God. God wants all of us, our entire being, to worship him, with our eyes, with our hands, and our feet, and our mouths.

And James brings this wholeness idea back into focus to remind his readers how, then, they should live.

Which leads us to our final point, point number three. So speak and so act as God's chosen. Point number three. So speak and so act as God's chosen.

In verse five from last week, we are reminded that God has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.

[19 : 31] But back in our text, in verse 12, James tells us that as heirs of this kingdom, we are to so speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

James is essentially saying, act like Christians. Don't be known by partiality. The world is known for its hate for one another.

But those who are in the kingdom of God are known by their love for one another. And love for God. Our speech and actions should be such that they are rooted in love.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, 1-8, he says, If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

[20 : 36] If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful.

It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

Love never ends. So I quote this larger text simply to show that love is foundational to everything we ought to be and everything we ought to do as believers.

So act and so speak as those who are known by their love for God and neighbor. This is our guiding principle in all that we do, and that is why Jesus calls these the two great commandments.

[21 : 45] Now James gives us two motivations to so act and so speak as believers. The first motivation is the fact that the law is liberating. What a unique phrase, this law of liberty.

What is James referring to? And in short, I would say James is referring to the full gospel. So often in churches today, you will hear people mock God's law as though it were a burden.

But biblically, it is our sin that is a burden, not the law. The law exposes our sin. But more than that, the law is liberating.

Earlier in James 1, verse 25, James says, the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets, but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. Now I've talked about this word, blessed ad nauseum. Every chance I get up here, I talk about it. But it's worth reminding you all, again, this word carries the idea of one who is flourishing, happy, doing very well.

[22 : 52] It sometimes even carries the specific connotation of one who is in an envious position in life. Think about that. His family, his work, his friendships, all these things, his whole life, is envious for others to see.

That man is blessed. Now, this law that this blessed man obeys sounds like a burden. Where did so many pastors in their churches get this idea that would make them want to unhitch a portion of the good news?

And make no mistake, the law is a part of the good news. This is why I say the law of liberty is referring to the full gospel. This is another way for James to refer to the Old Testament law with New Testament qualifiers and New Testament connotations.

And just to drive the point further, here's a hypothetical for you. Let's say God's gospel stops where some of these churches seemingly believe it does.

In other words, let's say the gospel is merely that we are saved from the wrath of God. Well, that would not be good news because while we might get to go to heaven in that world, there would be murder, adultery, theft, and so on in heaven because we would be there.

[24 : 11] Because we are sinners. Because left to ourselves, we are murderers, adulterers, and thieves, and so on and so on. And this is not the eternity that you want to live in.

But here is the full gospel. The full gospel, yes, God sent his son to die on a cross and bear our sins, to bear God's wrath for our sins so that we might be holy and blameless before him.

It's Christ's righteousness imputed to us that saves us from the wrath we deserve. But it doesn't stop there. The full gospel is the good news that God, after saving us from judgment, is changing our hearts so that we desire to obey, which results in obedience.

And this great work of God will be brought, quote, to completion at the day of Jesus Christ, as Paul says in Philippians 1, 6. Yes, we still sin now, but when the kingdom of heaven is fully consummated, we will be without sin.

And our creator God, who knows our deepest needs, our God, who is love, this God, who is the law giver, he has given us a royal law, a law of liberty that we will abide by and enjoy for eternity with him, obedient from the heart.

[25 : 35] No strife, no pain, no anger. What a glorious, beautiful picture. What a gospel to place our hope in. So the first motivation to not show partiality is that we are under a law of liberty as believers.

We, by God's grace, are liberated from our sinful nature so that, by grace, we can resist temptation to show partiality. The other motivation is that we will be judged according to our works under this law.

So James goes on in verse 13, for judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

So remember, James is laying out a series of tests to help his audience determine who is truly a believer and who is truly saved, opposed to who is deceived into thinking they are saved.

According to verse 13, if anyone professing Christ refuses to show mercy, that person has proven to not be in Christ. Jesus himself taught this in the Sermon on the Mount.

[26 : 48] Again, it's a quotation, Matthew 5, 7. Jesus said, blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. And notice, it is the flourishing, happy person who is merciful.

It is good for us to be merciful for our own sake and for God's glory. So on the Day of Judgment, there will be many charges of sin against us.

Our defense in that courtroom will be that our sins are paid for by Christ's death and resurrection, that he satisfied the wrath that we deserve. And God, who is all-knowing, will know we are in Christ not only because he chose us before the foundation of the world, but because we will bear the fruit of repentance, such as mercy.

Our fruit is our evidence that we were saved. Only he who has been shown mercy is capable of being merciful. Salvation, the root, obedience, the fruit.

That we still not be perfect, this is our trajectory in life as believers by God's grace alone. But for the false believer, he will enter the Day of Judgment and claim Christ as his Lord, yet God's response will be, depart from me, you worker of lawlessness, for I never knew you.

[28 : 08] This person, this false believer, according to James, is one who never showed mercy, but he did show partiality. Along with a whole bunch of other ungodly desires and actions.

And woe to that person, God's wrath, will consume that person for eternity as a just judgment. But there is still hope for the unbeliever, for the false believer.

And if any of them are here today, I want you to know that mercy triumphs over judgment. Because of this glorious gospel we have talked about today, that God in Christ is able to wash away all your sins.

Though you be crimson red, God is able to purge you white as snow. And he desires to show mercy. He is a Savior who delights in saving his people.

Flee to him as your refuge from the judgment to come, and he will be glad and rejoice in showing you great mercy. Zephaniah 3.17 says, The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save.

[29 : 20] And he will rejoice over you with gladness. He will quiet you by his love. He will exalt over you with loud singing. I love that James, while giving a dire warning to these false believers, he ends his argument that mercy triumphs over judgment.

an exclamation point of mercy. And let us who have faith never forget God's desire to save. Let that hope drive us to share the gospel with others, the unbelievers and the hypocrites who think they are saved.

They are not beyond the reach of God. He is mighty to save. He is desirous to save. He loves to save. Now, before we pray, I want to offer a few closing applications in light of our text.

Application number one, love your neighbor. James says in verse eight, If you do this, you are doing well. Now, to be real with you all, I don't always do a great job of this.

There are extra grace required people in this world. And I've had to, quote, deal with them, right? And as many have had to deal with me. But I am constantly convicted when I read that God loves us and delights to forgive us.

[30 : 44] I am so thankful that his attitude was not, quote, time to deal with Zach Skilling. But that he lifts his robes with joy to run toward a prodigal child like me and like all of you.

Let that be our attitude. That we would desire mercy for others. That we would not merely deal with people but embrace them with joyous love. And a powerful picture of that, go and read sometime about the early church martyrs and how they prayed for their executor's salvation while burning at the stake.

Or better yet, go and read the gospel accounts of Jesus praying for the Romans and Jews who crucified him as he said, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

He's moved to compassion and mercy even for his enemies. And there's so many ways to love your neighbor well, whether it be mercy, maybe it's helping them with their needs, serving them in unexpected ways.

But this is a work we have to be intentional about, a work that we must be diligent about, mindful of, considering. And so to do that, I'd say consider and ask God, Lord, who can I love well today?

[32 : 00] Make me aware of the people around me and their needs. And if it please you, use me to love them and serve those needs. And I promise you he'll answer that prayer every time.

And the second application, the last one, commit yourself wholly, with a W, wholly to Christ's lordship. Now to be clear, none of us have ever done this perfectly, nor will we in this life. That is why it is so important that we remember Christ's teaching to his disciples in Luke 9, 23. If anyone would come after me, Christ says, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

Daily. Daily we have to remind ourselves we are not our own, but we've been bought with a price. We no longer belong to ourselves or this world, but we belong to our Lord and Savior, our Redeemer, Kinsman, Jesus Christ.

Daily. Yes, there will be bad days, there will be moments of great sin, yet day to day we are recommitting ourselves to the Lord by working to deny ourselves, deny our wishes, deny our preferences, and learning to love the Lord, learning to love our neighbors.

[33 : 17] finish the race set before you by grace. This is our calling as the church to live and die for Christ, to give ourselves wholly to him.

Let's pray. Let's pray.