

James is the first to author a letter that became a part of the New Testament. His purpose was to help the churches that were formed outside of Israel know the proper behavior for followers of Jesus. He is telling them this not because it earns them any credit with God, but rather to help them see if their heart is deceiving them. Is their faith real, for a changed heart will result in a changed life (James 2:17)ⁱ. He is telling us that if our faith does not result in actions that align with the heart of God, then we have deceived ourselves.

In the first part of this chapter James has warned us about our tendency to partiality, such as giving preference to the rich over the poor. He tells us that when we do that, we are making distinctions that God does not make. God looks on the heart, not the external things like wealth or ethnicity. We become judges with evil thoughts counting some people more worthy than others. The poor are often the ones who are rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom promised to those who love Him. The rich oppress them and take them to court. But so that we do not take that to the extreme and ostracize the rich, he begins the next passage with the word, “however” in the original Greek.

⁸ *If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well.* James 2:8 James tells us that the royal law in Scripture is loving your neighbors as yourself (Leviticus 19:18ⁱⁱ), whether they are rich or poor. He declares that if we are doing that we are doing well. Equally loving the rich who were oppressing them and the poor who seemed to have nothing to contribute, is to fulfill the royal law.

It is royal because King Jesus called it the second greatest command (Matthew 22:39ⁱⁱⁱ). The first four of the Ten Commandments deal with our relationship to God (Exodus 20:2-11^{iv}). That is why Jesus said to love the Lord with our all is the first and greatest command (Matthew 22:37,38^v). The last six commandments are how we relate to our fellow human beings (Exodus 20:12-17^{vi}). That is why loving our neighbor is the second great command. The commands are royal because Jesus said they are the greatest commandments, and we can see that they sum up the Ten Commandments. In fact, Jesus said the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands (Matthew 22:40^{vii}).

We might ask with the lawyer, *“And who is my neighbor?”* (Luke 10:29^{viii}) The parable says that he asked the question to justify himself. Why? Because we all know we do not live up to this law. So, like a good lawyer, he looks for a loophole in the definition of neighbor. The parable tells us that whoever we meet who is in need is our neighbor. And to drive the point home, the good guy in the parable was of a race that Jews despised, a Samaritan. He was the one who did well, acting as a neighbor should, while the priest and the Levite showed no love to the beaten man. They would surely show partiality against a Samaritan, but they even showed it to the beaten and robbed fellow Jew. Jesus knows how to stick it to us with conviction. **It is His love for us that points out our sin so that we can repent and change.** And here in this passage his half-brother James is by the Spirit’s inspiration doing the same thing with us.

James is pointing to this royal law and saying that we are doing well if we keep it, knowing full well that most of his readers will think, “Ought Oh! I am not doing well!” He is getting around the justifications that would cause us to say, “I do not show partiality! I am doing well.” Oh really? Do you love your neighbor as yourself? How

much do you care about yourself? How much attention do you give yourself? Is that how you love your neighbor? Do you even know your neighbor? Do they have a need? When was the last time you helped them? And I do not mean just the people next door, but even the person you would tend to despise. Are you a Good Samaritan fulfilling the royal law?

Another way to look at it is to ask how much care and attention does God give you? Are you that way toward others? Of course, we cannot invest ourselves like that in everyone all the time, and that is why the parable of the Good Samaritan shows us how to express it to those in need whom God has crossed your path (Luke 10:23^{ix}).

⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. James 2:9 Partiality is in the plural in the previous section. That means that James is not limiting it to rich versus poor. It applies to any reason you might give preference to one individual over another. Now that we are convicted by the royal law, James tightens the screws by clarifying that our partiality is sin and that puts us in the category of transgressors. Motyer describes the contrasts presented in verses 8 and 9. *The opposite of the royal law (8) is partiality (9). They are contrasted as 'doing well' and 'committing sin'. The essence of the royal law is that wherever there is need there is an obligation to extend the sort of love we lavish on ourselves; the essence of partiality is to select the recipients of our care on some ground other than that they are in need.*^x The message is not just for the church that gives preference to the rich, or for any reason. It is for you and me as well. But James is not done. He is going to tighten the screws a little more.

¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for 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. James 2:10,11 Motyer helps again with a great illustration to help us visualize this concept. *The law is not like a heap of stones but like a sheet of glass. We could take one stone from a heap and leave the heap itself still intact; but when we throw a brick through a window, it strikes only one place but it fragments the whole. The law of God is like the glass: a break at one point cannot be contained; the cracking and crazing spreads over the entire area.*^{xi} Robert Johnstone rightly said, "The law is a transcript of divine character." That is why any violation is a violation of the whole character of God.^{xii}

When Mariko and I had a business, we hired someone we knew who had a moral issue in their life that biblically is a violation of God's character. We wanted to give them a chance, as we all have weaknesses. We began to notice inconsistencies with the cash drawer. It was then that it dawned on me that if we will flagrantly violate a command of God, any other compromise of moral issues is a likely next step. Lovingly confronting the person with clear evidence resulted in the person threatening a lawsuit, which of course never materialized.

You might think like the rich young ruler in one of Jesus' parables that you have kept all the commands since you were a child (Matthew 19:20^{xiii}). But James has asked us, "What about the royal law?" And if you have not kept that, then you are guilty of breaking all the laws. For to break one law makes you a transgressor just as if you broke them all. You have decided to rebel against God's nature represented by His laws and behave like you want regardless of what our Creator asks of us.

Regardless of how many times we disobey God, each of us is either a transgressor facing judgment or a redeemed soul because of what Jesus did for us. It does not mean

we are better, but that we are forgiven and being changed. Sometimes the more sinful we are, the sooner we realize how much we need God. The “good” person often has a hard time realizing that in God’s eyes, only perfection is good enough. The only One who lived that kind of life was Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:21^{xiv}). That is why He alone could pay our sin debt. He had no sins of His own to pay for.

The rich ruler was asking what he must do to inherit eternal life? He called Jesus good. Jesus responded by asking him why he called Him good as only God is good. Skeptics say this is Jesus declaring he is not God. But that ignores the many quotations the Gospel authors quote about God and apply them to Jesus. What Jesus was really asking was if the man recognized Him as God? That is the issue. How good is good enough? God’s holiness! The goodness the ruler sought was standing before him. But the ruler was trying to be good enough on his own (Isaiah 64:6^{xv}). Jesus is the door to eternal life (John 10:9^{xvi}). He alone is good and that is why He could take the ruler’s sins upon Himself.

Jesus told the rich ruler he must keep the commandments. Like the lawyer, this man was looking for a loophole, so he asked which ones. He still had the mindset that he could be good enough for God. Jesus named a few commands of relating to one another from the last half of the Ten Commandments, and in the Matthew account He added the royal law (Matthew 19:19^{xvii}). The ruler said he had kept them all. Now either he was justifying his actions with excuses, or his heart had deceived him.

Jesus’ answer addresses this issue the early churches were facing in preferring the rich over the poor. “Go and sell all that you have and give to the poor and come follow me.” The man went away sorrowful because he had great wealth. He neglected the first command that Jesus wisely did not mention. *“You shall have no other gods before me”* Exodus 20:3 The ruler’s god was his money because it was first in his life. I surmise that the early church worried about finances, as we are prone to do. That was surely what was behind their preference for the rich which caused them to violate the royal law.

When we worry about money to the point that we ignore the commands of God, such as the royal law, whether we are rich or poor we are showing we have another god. Jesus said we cannot serve God and money (Matthew 6:24^{xviii}). One is going to prevail, and it is the one in which our hearts place the most trust (Matthew 6:21^{xix}).

James is writing to believers. But if you are hearing this and do not believe, realizing that by breaking one command you have broken all and will stand before the Judge who gave you life and offered you salvation, should put the fear of God in you. That is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10^{xx}). For then you realize what Jesus did for you, that He loves you, which should mean so much. Either we have never sinned, which is impossible (Romans 3:23^{xxi}), or we need Savior. We all need a spiritual Savior.

¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. James 2:12 Speak and act are in the Greek tense that means to keep on speaking and keep on acting. While we will not be judged for our sins, our works will be judged, tested by fire. Some of our deeds will vanish like straw in a fire. Other works will be like a precious metal that comes out even more illustrious after the fire, for they were done at the prompting of the Holy Spirit and with a heart of love (1 Corinthians 3:12-15^{xxii}).

Those who are in Christ are no longer under the laws of the first covenant. We are under the law of liberty. That means Jesus credits us with His life of perfectly living according to all God’s laws. We still have the moral laws, but even the judgment for those

was paid by Jesus on the cross. Remember that James is referring to the royal law of loving our neighbor as ourselves. The marvelous grace that is ours under the law of liberty moves us to want to act in ways that are pleasing to the heavenly Father who loved us so much that He sent a Savior to pay our sin debt. In gratitude and out of love we should speak and act as those who know our debt has been paid.

Someone would say, “Well then, we can live like we want” (Romans 6:1^{xxiii}). Love begets love (1 John 4:19^{xxiv}). If you receive the grace and forgiveness that came from the love of the Father and the Son, how could you not want to live by the Spirit He puts in our hearts? How could you not want to speak and act as those judged under the law of liberty? James is suggesting that if there is no life change there never was a heart change. He is encouraging the early church and all who read his letter to realize what our response to our salvation should be.

We are tempted by the world, our flesh, and the devil to act like this fallen world (1 John 2:15-17^{xxv}). We are reminded of temporary pleasures. How do we stay strong and speak and act as we should? *The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.*- Thomas Chalmers If you are habitually failing in an area of your life because the temptation seems to be too strong, it is probably because you still believe the way to satisfaction is some old temporal pleasure. A lack of mercy means you have not embraced God’s mercy for you. You have yet to fall deeply in love with your Savior and find your soul’s satisfaction in Him.

How many of us know we need to love Jesus more? How many of us need to be more merciful? Thank you for being honest. You get it. You know you need more time in His Word and in His presence in prayer. Experiencing His love will fill your heart with more love for Him. Make a list of all that He has done for you, of all He has seen you through. Thank Him for it all and for what He has promised yet to do, to finish the work He started in you (Philippians 1:6^{xxvi}), to give you an eternal body with an eternal heavenly home (John 14:2,3^{xxvii}). Make a list of the verses that speak to you of how great His love is for you. Meditate on them.

¹³ For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. James 2:13 What is loving one another but having mercy for them the way God has been merciful to you. If you refuse to be merciful do not expect God to show you mercy. The psalmist declared that God would show Himself merciful to the one who shows mercy (Psalm 18:25^{xxviii}). After teaching the Lord’s prayer Jesus said, *¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.* Matthew 6:15 Before we withhold our mercy from someone, we should ask ourselves if that is how we would like God to be toward us. If not, then how do we want God to respond to our behavior that often offends His righteousness? That is how we need to be toward those who offend us. It is usually not our righteousness that is offended, but our ego. Again, from Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount, *³⁶ Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.* Luke 6:36 If we call Him Lord, we need to obey His command. Be merciful like your heavenly Father is a command.

Do you have a right to hold a grudge? Does God hold a grudge over your past behavior? The Apostle Paul said that the more he loved, the less he was loved (2 Corinthians 12:15^{xxix}). So why did he keep on loving? The love of Christ had taken over his heart (Galatians 2:20^{xxx}). He shared God’s mercy for the weak. We need to be so filled

with God's passion for souls that we simply refuse to be offended and persist in loving all people (John 15:12^{xxx}).

All throughout my ministry I have had individuals tell me they do not want to fellowship where I minister because of certain people who worship there that they got crosswise with. **May we all get cross wise.** The cross says it is paid in full, and if Jesus is not holding their spiritual immaturity against them, who are we to do so? And who made us the judge of who should be in the body? Or as the Apostle said, *⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.* Romans 14:4

Mercy triumphs over judgment! Thank you Jesus! You should be shouting, "Hallelujah!" We were all guilty of not loving our neighbor and showing mercy, but mercy triumphed over judgment on the cross. It is not just for you or not just for those who came before you or others who will come to Christ. It is for today and tomorrow and every day here on out! **The Lord is able to make you stand. The Lord is able to make the one you are offended with stand.** That is the Word of the Lord! That is the message of the cross. That is why we want to let the Spirit help us be loving and merciful. We live in that paradox of the law of liberty. We can be loving and merciful, it is a law to us, but it is so because God has changed our hearts to be like His.

This is that upside-down way of the kingdom of God. The world says get even or get away. Hold a grudge and tell people how bad that person is. God says be merciful like your heavenly Father. Speak and act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. If you are in Christ, you are to let His love and mercy flow through you. Mercy triumphs over judgment can be literally translated as boasting against judgment. You can know your works will survive the fire of judgment and that your sin debt was paid by your Savior.

If you do not know liberty from the ways of the world and you are tired of the negativity that fills your soul, come to Jesus. Know His forgiveness. Experience His love. Let Him teach you how to forgive and be merciful. And for us who have been in Christ, let us go back to chapter one verse twenty-two^{xxx}. *Be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deceiving ourselves.* Yield to the power of Christ in you and be merciful as your Father in heaven has been merciful toward you.

(For further Scripture on mercy being evidence of salvation see Mt.25:31-46.)

Questions:

- 1 Is James partial toward the poor?
- 2 What law does James cite and why is it royal?
- 3 Why does Jesus point out our sins?
- 4 Who is our neighbor?
- 5 Why is "partiality" plural? Implications?
- 6 Why does one law broken break all?
- 7 How should we speak and act?
- 8 How can we dispossess our hearts of an old affection?
- 9 What does mercy triumphs over judgment mean to you?
- 10 What action has the Spirit prompted you to take?

ⁱ **James 2:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

ⁱⁱ **Leviticus 19:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Matthew 22:39 (ESV)**

³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

^{iv} **Exodus 20:2-11 (ESV)**

² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ "You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷ "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. ⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

^v **Matthew 22:37-38 (ESV)**

³⁷ And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment.

^{vi} **Exodus 20:12-17 (ESV)**

¹² "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³ "You shall not murder. ¹⁴ "You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ "You shall not steal. ¹⁶ "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷ "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

^{vii} **Matthew 22:40 (ESV)**

⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

^{viii} **Luke 10:29 (ESV)**

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

^{ix} **Luke 10:33 (ESV)**

³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.

^x J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James, The Test of Faith*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 97.

^{xi} J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James, The Test of Faith*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 99.

^{xii} R. Kent Hughes, *James, Faith That Works*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 100

^{xiii} **Matthew 19:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?"

^{xiv} **2 Corinthians 5:21 (ESV)**

²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

^{xv} **Isaiah 64:6 (ESV)**

⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

^{xvi} **John 10:9 (ESV)**

⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

^{xvii} **Matthew 19:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

^{xviii} **Matthew 6:24 (ESV)**

²⁴ "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

^{xix} **Matthew 6:21 (ESV)**

²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

^{xx} **Psalm 111:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!

^{xxi} **Romans 3:23 (ESV)**

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

^{xxii} **1 Corinthians 3:12-15 (ESV)**

¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

^{xxiii} **Romans 6:1 (ESV)**

¹ What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?

^{xxiv} **1 John 4:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.

^{xxv} **1 John 2:15-17 (ESV)**

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

^{xxvi} **Philippians 1:6 (ESV)**

⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

^{xxvii} **John 14:2-3 (ESV)**

² In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

^{xxviii} **Psalm 18:25 (ESV)**

²⁵ With the merciful you show yourself merciful; with the blameless man you show yourself blameless;

^{xxix} **2 Corinthians 12:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?

^{xxx} **Galatians 2:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

^{xxxi} **John 15:12 (ESV)**

¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

^{xxxii} **James 1:22 (ESV)**

²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.