

The King's Commandment

The Law of Love . . . Responding to Racism, Classism & Culturalism—Pt 2

James 2:8-13

Introduction

A young Hispanic nurse who attends our church, disciplined by one of the women in our church, grew up in a town inside the country of Mexico. She came up to me after one of the services last Sunday morning as we began our study of James chapter 2 and the command of scripture to not show partiality or favoritism to anyone.

She told me that she had been raised in a small town in Mexico that was literally built around and up the side of a small mountain. The people were divided into an invisible class system and it played out physically in relation to where they lived on that mountain. The people at the bottom of the hill were the poor people—the homes were less expensive and the view less intriguing, of course. In the middle of the mountain another class of Mexicans lived who were literally the middle class and at the top of the mountain, the finest neighborhoods and homes were located, inhabited by the rich and well connected.

She told me that all through her years growing up and in school, even though all the kids came to the same school, they segregated themselves by virtue of their location on the mountain. Someone from the top of the mountain would never socialize or hobnob with those who lived, literally, below them.

She told me that because she lived at the bottom of the mountain, she never fit in with the kids who lived at the top.

Ladies and Gentlemen, that hill is a perfect metaphor for the kind of attitude James is condemning.

It's the attitude of partiality—and you can call it by any number of names.

- **Classism**—that has to do with where you live on the mountain of wealth and power;
- **Racism**—that has to do with which mountain you originally came from—and if you came from a different racial mountain

you don't have any business on my mountain;

- **Culturalism**—that has to do with what it is about your tastes and interests on your mountain that corresponds with what I like on my mountain and maybe we'll get along—because we drive the same car and wear the same clothes and speak the same language and have the same history and like the same stuff.

Then James comes along and calls all of this what it is—evil! Partiality is sinfully motivated pride. And James goes on to say that it is entirely inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Amplified Bible began chapter 2 with the paraphrase, **“Stop holding your faith in our Lord Jesus Christ with snobbery.”**

Literally, don't be a snob!

Get your nose out of the air. Get over who you are and where you came from.

I thought this was classic: *a Chicago Bank once asked a Boston Investment House for a letter of recommendation—they were interested in a young man who had applied to work at the Bank and he currently worked for the Investment House. The Boston group sent their letter of recommendation and they couldn't say enough good things about this young man's pedigree. His father, they wrote, was a Cabot; his mother was a Lowell. And even further back in his lineage was a blend of Saltonstalls, Peabodys and other notables from among Boston's finest families. A few days later, the Chicago Bank sent a brief note in response which said, “The information you supplied is unimportant . . . we are not contemplating using the young man for breeding . . . we just want to know if he can work.”¹*

Frankly, we would expect the world to be impressed with pedigrees. Connection and image are everything. Status, education, race, rank—throw in the right name brands, an attractive face,

politically correct lingo and you've got a man who knows how to get from the bottom of the hill to the top.

That's the DNA of cultural norms, but the gospel comes along and topples the norm.

Jesus Christ did not come down to us from the top of the mountain—it was more than that. He actually *made* the mountain. He lived above the mountain and yet he condescended in joining our human race.

You'd think when He came that He'd land on top of the mountain and show us all how to move up. Instead, He came to the bottom and shows us how to come down.

Jesus Christ descended to the bottom rung of the social order, having planned before the foundation of the world to grow up in a carpenter's home with six younger half-brothers and sisters running around—you'd think that the Messiah in training would have chosen to be someone's only pampered child in a quiet neighborhood.

Not Jesus Christ. He was birthed in a borrowed cow stall and He grew up with splinters in his hands. Origen the late 2nd century church leader said that wooden plows handcrafted by Jesus were still in use 90 years after His resurrection. They were built that carefully.

Then He began His ministry in Galilee among people the Jews considered backward and unimportant.

Jesus only added to the mystery of condescension by choosing some blue collar fishermen to be his future Apostles. He also chose some wealthy well connected men too, by the way—at least one guy who had made a fortune with the tax collection services of his accounting firm—his name was Matthew.

In Matthew's gospel account, Jesus Christ delivered His unconventional message:

- The first shall be last.
- The way to lead is to serve.
- The way to live is to die to self.

You see, Jesus Christ turned that mountain upside down.

James, one of Jesus' half-brothers, now pastoring the church in Jerusalem saw first-hand that Christianity and partiality were being mixed together.

He picks up the message as he exhorts the believer to live out the gospel—to bring his faith down to earth—and in chapter 2 of his letter, he

challenges the believer to look past the attraction of face and fame; to not mix Christianity with classism or racism or culturalism.

We will always have many ethnicities in the church—in this church—praise God—and the gospel doesn't stamp all the varieties of ethnic diversities. But the church does become one new race—one united priesthood—*one holy nation unto God, that we together might show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9)*

We are the demonstration of the gospel of Christ who came down—all the way down to the bottom of the hill.

If you remember, the believers were having the same problem in the 1st Century that Christians have in the 21st Century.

James illustrated the problem of prejudice and partiality by taking us inside a church service already under way.

A rich man came in late—you remember Mr. Bling Bling? Well, he got the red carpet treatment all the way down to the front where the best seats were located. Which indicates this was *not* a Baptist church . . . after all.

Then the poor man came in late—probably hoping he wouldn't create a scene—and was told to sit on the floor out of the way or stand over by the wall.

James went on to tell us several reasons why this small response was actually a huge indicator that how the world acted outside the church had gotten inside the church.

By the way, James does not pity the poor man and he does not condemn the rich man; nor does God. Money is not the root of all evil, the *love* of money is (1 Timothy 6:10).

That isn't James' issue here . . . he's focusing on the response of the congregation—and it was nothing less than a show and tell on how the church had become a collection of snobs.

At the heart of this issue is nothing less than pride. The attention they paid the man of rank included covetousness, as we've already learned. The saints were actually fawning over him with envy—they actually wanted his life. Which is especially ironic given the fact that most Greek scholars believe the implication here is that both the rich man and the poor man are unbelievers. They have simply visited the assembly to find out what's going on. And they would leave the church

believing the life wasn't any different *in* there than it was *out* there.

They were chasing each other up the mountain in there *too*.

Think about the fact that Jesus Christ was exactly the kind of young man they would have asked to sit on the floor, had he shown up.

No wonder Jesus Christ to this day uses uniquely those who are not so noble or very powerful or well connected to demonstrate the calling of the gospel of grace.

As I studied this text I couldn't help but think of Charles Spurgeon, the pastor in England in the 1800s who played a significant role in his generation and ours. He was raised for a period of time by his grandparents because his own parents were at one point too poor to adequately care for him. Spurgeon's father was what we would call today a bi-vocational pastor—he pastored and worked to make a living. Spurgeon's grandfather was also a pastor. Charles Spurgeon didn't have a college education—for the most part he had been trained in the common manner of village children. However, his grandmother paid him a penny for every hymn text he memorized and it is little surprise that you cannot read one sermon by Spurgeon without encountering at least one hymn text.

Charles began preaching at the age of 17 to a handful of villagers who met in a makeshift barn—within two years it had grown to over 400 people. Then, at the age of 19 he was invited to preach in London at the well known New Park Street Chapel—a once great church that had been dying for several years, now with only a handful of people gathering on Sunday, although it seated a thousand people.

Spurgeon thought the invitation was a mistake and tried to decline. Eventually he accepted the invitation and arrived to preach. When he arrived to preach to less than 100 people, history records that his clothing didn't fit him, his hair didn't lay down obediently and he simply didn't fit the London scene. His father would even tell him he was making a mistake to go.

A teenage girl in the small congregation that Sunday happened to recall how Spurgeon's appearance was distracting—if not comical. She wrote that his “long, badly trimmed hair, oversized black satin coat and his [mismatched] blue handkerchief with white spots, which he graphically described [as an illustration] in his sermon, called

all the more attention to it—which awakened in me feelings of amusement.”ⁱⁱ

She would later become his wife . . . and probably helped him pick out his handkerchiefs!

Within two years, the church would be overflowing and several years later they built the Metropolitan Tabernacle which seated 5,000 people and Spurgeon would preach there for a little more than 35 years.

That recalls again to mind the words of Paul to the Corinthians, “*Not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble—but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong. (1 Corinthians 1:25-27)*

God chooses nobodies to confound the somebodies! You see, God turns the mountain upside down! It's time the church got it right! So what's the solution, James . . . how do you get it right?

Well, in verses 8-13 James delivers the answer. For the sake of our study this morning . . . over the course of the next hour—I mean the remainder of the hour—I didn't mean to startle you . . . let me deliver James' solution in the form of three statements. I had as many as five in my study, but have condensed them down to three.

1. The first statement is simply this, “Let's get acquainted with the heart of God”.

Notice verse 8. If, however, you are fulfilling—literally, keeping—the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well.

A lot of ink has been spilled over defining what exactly James was referring to here. The phrase, “the royal law” appears nowhere else in scripture.

However, we're given a clue based on his own quotation; James is repeating the words of Christ from *Matthew 22 where the Lord said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”*

Later on, Jesus broadened the definition of “neighbor” to include any needy human that God gives you the opportunity to help.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is the King’s commandment and it reflects His heart. This is the law of the sovereign King which flows out of His perfect nature, and when He delivers his law it is binding on all his subjects . . . there is no court of appeal.^{iv}

This is called the royal law because it is the supreme law and that is because it demonstrates the supremacy of the gospel of God.

By the way, all the law can easily be broken down into two relationships: **a relationship with God and a relationship with man.**

Jesus Christ summarized all the ingredients of the law in Matthew and in that summary said it all—here it is: love God and love people.

So then, the law is both vertical (love toward God) and horizontal (love toward others) and every other law connects to them. They hang together because they together reflect the nature and character of God.^v

During the early years of the church—in James’ generation—the Jewish scholars believed the law was a series of detached commands. In other words, to keep one law was to gain credit; to break one law was to incur debt. So a man could add up the ones he kept and subtract the ones he broke and come out with money in the bank, so to speak.^{vi}

That of course has developed into something the Enemy of the gospel absolutely loves to encourage—this vision of God sitting in heaven beside a scale with your name on it, and every good deed goes on one side and every evil deed goes on the other, and if you can get enough good deeds to weigh down the scale in your favor you will gain God’s favor, but the law isn’t that at all.

James describes it as a chain all linked together and to break any part of the law is to become a complete transgressor of the law.

In fact, look down at *verse 10 where James writes, For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.*

In other words, we are considered lawbreakers if we violate one law alone. If you break one link of the law you break the chain and become a lawbreaker.

By the way, if you’re hanging over the side of a cliff by a chain with ten links, which link is really important to you? Number 3 doesn’t really matter to me . . . number 9 is no big deal either . . .

you can break them off . . . I’ll be fine.^{vii} I don’t think so . . . it’s all connected.

There’s another way to understand the unity of the law that James is describing.

If you take the sin of partiality or prejudice and connect it to the Ten Commandments, you discover that in some way—either directly or indirectly, every commandment is broken.

- The first and second commandments are broken simply because God commands us to not show partiality, and to do so is to deny His will and place ours above His thus idolizing our own opinion and not God’s alone;
- The third commandment is broken because to favor someone over another is to misrepresent the name of God.
- The fourth commandment is broken as we show favoritism in church, thus defiling our sacred worship.
- The fifth commandment dishonors the poor and we should dishonor no one, especially those whom we should give our care and concern.
- Prejudice and favoritism effectively kills the spirit and the hopes of the poor by demeaning them and thus violates the sixth commandment.
- The seventh commandment is violated as we favor the rich and powerful and in so doing show infidelity and unfaithfulness to our Lord and to the bond of Christian fellowship.
- The eighth commandment is broken as we steal from the poor the dignity they own as a creation of God.
- The ninth commandment bears false witness because prejudice implies they have less worth than others, and that is a lie.
- The tenth commandment is broken because favoring the rich is a form of covetousness which values possessions over and above the value of a human being.^{viii}

And the people in this assembly might try to say, “Okay, we broke the law, but we showed this guy love—in fact, we actually love that poor guy too . . . we just show it differently.”

Listen, love doesn’t avoid the law—it fulfills the law. It is actually supreme—over and above the law.

The royal law is the law of love. But just because you love, doesn't mean you're not accountable to keep the law.

If I get pulled over today on my way home—you'll have to really use your imagination—and that state trooper pulls me over because the speed limit is 45 miles an hour and I'm going 47 (I hate it when they do that) . . . and he says, "Mr. Davey, I'm going to write you a ticket" . . . what if I said, "But I love you, officer." He'd come back to my window and look in and ask me, "What did you say?" "I just love you and all the policeman of the world." He would make me get out of my truck and breathe into this little plastic thing . . .

Listen, if I promise to love all the state troopers, can I speed? And the answer is—no. Love doesn't set aside the law. In fact, love would make me a more careful, law abiding citizen.

James is saying, if you really want to love—keep the law—and the greatest law happens to be love.

So classism and racism and culturalism and favoritism aren't little misdemeanors—they violate the greatest law there is.

Partiality, prejudice, pigeon holing, whatever you want to call it—violates both the vertical and horizontal law of God and is nothing less than a violation of the heart of God who is no respecter of persons. God does not play favorites!

God hasn't targeted any culture or income level or race above another. He isn't mass marketing the gospel to attract a certain segment of society, like the church is doing today. Aren't you glad He doesn't?

Aren't you glad the gospel isn't just for people who live in the middle of the mountain or only for those who live at the top of the mountain? It is for everyone, from top to bottom! We need to get reacquainted with the Father's heart.

2. Secondly, we need to get real about lame excuses

Now James is anticipating somebody in the assembly trying to wiggle out of this by saying, "Okay, we could have been nicer to the poor guy, but look, we were nice to the rich guy so that's one out of two . . . that's 50/50 . . . in baseball we'd be batting 500—any baseball player who can hit the ball every other time he steps up to the plate is heading for the hall of fame.

James says we aren't even getting to first base when we show partiality. He writes in *verse 9 of this chapter, if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, has become guilty of all.*

James anticipates an argument of self-defense because he's dealing with human nature—and human nature is brilliant at coming up with loopholes.

Somebody said we have several million laws to deal with all the excuses created by people who won't keep 10 commandments! So James is anticipating push-back.

Notice *verse 11. For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not commit murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.* Again, the law is a unit.

We are all lawbreakers, not because we've broken every law, but because we broken the law.

James is saying, "You don't stand before the judge, guilty of murder and say, 'But Your Honor, I've never committed adultery, so you ought to let me go.'"^{ix}

This is the nature of man. Tell someone they're a sinner and they'll rarely say, "You're right, I've done this and this and this and that." No, they'll say, "No I'm not; I've never done this and this and this and that."

James uses courtroom language here. A system of justice would not say to a guilty thief, "You know, it comes to mind that there are a hundred crimes you've never committed and so we'll let this one crime slide."

The problem with the human heart is that we would look at classism and racism and say, "But I've never done bigger crimes against God like murder or adultery." And James says, "There you go again with your human nature, loophole loving, self-defending, culture imitating attitude.

If you notice, James is proving how sinful partiality is by putting it in the company of adultery and murder—frankly, his point is that sin is sin and any sin is as sinful as any other sin. Some sins have greater consequences than others, but all sin makes us transgressors.

The word transgressor which James uses at *the end of verse 11* is a compound word which means to walk beside—to step over.

The word is used of someone who has a course they are supposed to follow and they instead deviate from the course. They walk off the path—they step over the line.^x

Sin is stepping out of line—it is failing to walk the line in the illustration of James. What James calls transgression—the world and our own fallen nature will excuse. We're not that bad!

I pulled off the internet a news article about Hunter Rountree, known to his friends as "Red" Rountree. For most of his life he was a successful business man and family man. But at the age of 91 he became as the oldest known bank robber in U.S. history. When interviewed, he said, "You know why I rob banks? Because it's fun. I feel good, awful good. I feel good for hours . . . sometimes days."

In 1998 a week before his 87th birthday, he entered the South Trust Bank in Biloxi, Mississippi and told the gal behind the counter to give him her money. He was caught and put in jail for three months. His cellmate was a bank robber who taught him how to rob banks successfully. When he got out of prison he attempted again and was caught. This time he spent three years in prison and at the age of 87 became the oldest inmate in the Florida prison system. When he got out, he eventually got a car from his nephew and attempted to rob another bank but was caught again.

I followed up this story to find out that Red Rountree died in prison eight months after his last bank robbery.

He was interviewed during his final incarceration—he had become a news item of interest. During the interview he said, "I've led a good life and I have no regrets."^{xii}

I've lived a good life . . . for much of it he evidently did. But he also attempted to steal someone else's money; he cost the taxpayer money to support his legal fees and incarceration; he became a convicted felon as a bank robber and yet he sat in the prison and said, "I've lived a good life . . . there's nothing about my life that I should regret."

What's he saying? I haven't done that or that or this or that. And that's all I'm going to focus on. I'm a good man and I've led a good life . . . never mind where I'm sitting right now.

James says, "Don't buy into that kind of fallen, corrupt self-defense when it comes to partiality and prejudice." They happen to be crimes against the heart of God—stop excusing them!"

There is no loophole . . . it makes transgressors of us all.

So what are we going to do about it . . . Here's my third and final paraphrase of James' answer to partiality and prejudice:

3. Let's get resolved to show love and mercy

James writes in verse 12. *So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.*

The antidote to racism and classism is to remember we are creatures who are accountable. We will give an account to the One who saved us—the One who redeemed us and gave us the freedom to be His slaves and demonstrate His very own nature to others. When we do we follow the law of liberty.

Listen, the believer who lives as a slave to the will of God will know the greatest measure of freedom.

Submission to the will of God brings the slave of God the greatest measure of joy.

There is no greater fulfillment; there is no greater freedom than saying, "Lord, I will obey whatever it is You want me to do; and here you are telling me it is Your will to topple the prejudice and partiality in my own heart toward others . . . I'm willing! I will do it, for I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!"

By the way, this is in the context of what James began in *chapter 1 and verse 26*. In other words, don't stop looking for opportunities to love and serve the orphan, the widow and the poor.

James writes in *verse 12, So speak and so act . . .* The verb tense is present active imperative—keep on speaking and keep on doing . . . don't stop . . . keep it going.

These are imperatives . . . this is James' favorite way of talking—just do it!

I love the way D. L. Moody simplified it by saying, "Every Christian's Bible should be bound in shoe leather."^{xii} Just do it!

Let's admit that there's something about commands we resist. There's something about responsibility that we resent; there's something about pressure to be kind or polite that we seem to recoil from it.

Have you ever been at the mall or at a restaurant and waited on someone to get into their car and pull out so you could pull in—and you're convinced they are taking their sweet time?

Guess what? It turns out that your imagination was reality. *A recent study of 400 drivers in a shopping mall found that drivers took longer to pull out of a space if someone was waiting than if nobody was waiting there to claim the space. I knew it!*

On average, this study discovered, if nobody was waiting for the space, drivers took 32 seconds to open their door, get in and pull out of their spot. If they saw that someone was waiting for them, they took an average of nearly 10 more seconds to pull out. And if that waiting driver honked—they took another 5 seconds.

The secret is to not let them know you're waiting. Isn't that human nature? Don't push me . . . don't hurry me up . . . you can't make me . . . don't rush me . . . I'll get moving when I'm good and ready.

James would say to the believer—hurry!—the world is effectively waiting for you to speak and act in love—and you need to get with it. Not just to the people who live on top of the hill, but those who live at the bottom of the hill and everywhere in between.

James ends this discussion that began 14 verses earlier by saying here in **chapter 2 and verse 13. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.**

Don't misunderstand. James isn't saying mercy is earned. If it's earned it isn't mercy. James is simply giving us in this verse two aphorisms—two wisdom sayings. There are two statements joined together without a conjunction—a technique that categorizes in axiom form two general truths.^{xiii}

The first truth is this—the world, known for its lack of mercy will be judged without mercy. There is no mercy at the Great White Throne of Revelation 20. It's forever too late.

The world, which has divided itself into classes and categories with relish and pride; the world which has ruled itself by prejudice and partiality and connections and power and who's who and who's not; the world which has drawn a circle around themselves and left Christ out—will one day be judged in the same manner and found to

belong to one and the same class after all—namely, the condemned ones forever.

But for the believer who has come to know the Savior we will be delivered for, as James delivers the wisdom saying in verse 13, we have found it true that God's mercy will triumph over judgment.

Christ saved us according to His mercy (Titus 3:5).

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ, by grace you have been saved. (Ephesians 2:4-5)

In us, His mercy has triumphed over judgment and we will one day be found in one class of people—namely the redeemed ones, forever. The hymn writer put it this way:

*By God's Word at last my sin I learned:
Then I trembled at the law I'd spurned;
Til my guilty soul imploring turned,
To Calvary.*

*Mercy there was great and grace was free,
Pardon there was multiplied to me;
There my burdened soul found liberty
At Calvary.*

The challenge of James to you dear unbelieving friend is this—run to the mercy of Christ alone . . . run to Christ and find in Him perfect forgiveness and complete acceptance.

The challenge dear servant of Christ is this: since we are people who have received and will forever receive the mercy of God; can we do anything less than demonstrate the same?

- **Let's get reacquainted with the heart of the Father;**
- **Let's get real about our lame excuses;**
- **Let's get resolved to showing mercy and love to our world.**

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