Stop Showing Partiality Now: A James 2:1-13 Reflection on the Royal Law of Love

“Stop showing partiality” is a direct command James urgently delivers in the opening verses of chapter two. The warning that James described in the first seven verses of chapter two is something that has affected almost every single person, every single Christian, at one time or another. That problem, that sin, is giving a level of importance of one person over another simply because they are wealthier, famous, or more powerful. James gives a good example in verses 2-4, but examples can be seen every day. How many famous singers, television or movie stars are mobbed by fans? How many people want to be seen with a powerful political figure? How many try to become acquainted with a wealthier person with the hope that this person will help them with money?

All these reactions are worldly attitudes. Jesus Christ died for EVERY PERSON. Paul wrote in Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” A man or woman drives past in an expensive car. On the side of the road is a poor man working to just make enough to support him and his family. Christ died for both!

Once a person becomes a Christian, financial or social status should be irrelevant. A new Christian should be welcomed as a brother or

sister in Christ. Of course, a new Christian is just starting on the path leading to a Christ-like life; and he/she will probably still retain habits or attitudes from the world. That is where more mature Christians help them to learn and spiritually mature.

The example that James gave is typical to what can happen if a congregation is not focused on the spiritual person. James also wrote that in verse 5, “Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” To show such preference to another dishonors the person. How would anyone feel if he/she went to a worship service and was treated that way? Has anyone ever attended an event or even a worship service where one person was greeted, but you were essentially ignored? Every person has value in God’s eyes, and a Christian MUST recognize that and greet each visitor or member with respect.

In verses 6-7, James wrote, “But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?” God did not take His message of hope to the rich and powerful. That is not to say that a man or woman that has wealth or power cannot be saved. There are several examples in Acts where wealthy and powerful people responded to the Gospel. But the pull of worldly attitudes can be so much stronger for a person in that position.

Afterall, such a person is probably used to being shown preference. It becomes an almost unconscious habit. The Gospel message is

based a person recognizing that he/she is lost. Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, that person's sins can be forgiven, and that person has the hope of eternal life. And then, that new Christian must begin to live a new life, a changed life. But those that live an affluent life are often very comfortable with where they are, and there is a tendency to reject the idea at a person can be wealthy physically and yet spiritually destitute and lost. "Afterall, I am successful because of my efforts; and I want to enjoy what I have because I deserve it."

Jesus told the story of the rich farmer in Luke 12:16-21, "And He told them a parable, saying, 'The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the story of the young rich ruler. Luke 18:18, "A ruler questioned Him, saying, 'Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?'" Jesus and the young man spoke back and forth, and then in Luke 18:22: "When Jesus heard this, He said to him, 'One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.'" It was very clear. The young man asked the question, "what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" with sincerity and was initially willing to do what was necessary, but Luke records his response, "But when he had heard these things, he became very sad, for

he was extremely rich." Matthew 19:22 records, "But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property."

James brought up another point in verses 6-7. The people that were opposed to Jesus and His message were those in positions of authority and were at least well to do. Jesus threatened their position and they opposed Him to the point of orchestrating fake charges against Him and having Him killed of a cross! As the Gospel began to spread, the same thing happened. They opposed Christians to the point of having many executed.

Even today, Christianity is being attacked. In the United States, there are large, well-funded organizations whose sole aim is to eliminate anything that is related to God, Jesus Christ, and the Bible. The same is true in many other countries. In every case, the influence behind such efforts is driven by people with money, power, and influence.

Remember, in some cases in the early church, a slave could have been an elder of a congregation, and a master, or free-born person, could have been a member. But it can be difficult to dismiss the physical trappings to wealth and influence. In Acts 5, a married couple, Ananias and Sapphira, tried to gain undeserved recognition when they sold a piece of property. They gave a portion to the Apostles, but implied that they gave the entire amount. They suffered death for their lies.

Paul severely criticized the church in Corinth concerning how they gathered for the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11:20-22, "Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you." Obviously, a meal was eaten first. Some had plenty, some even became drunk! But other brothers and sisters in Christ and their families did without.

Showing preference between people because of their worldly position is clearly wrong. Jesus Christ did not do that. He was accused of eating with sinners and tax collectors. In Galatians 2, Paul wrote where he confronted Cephas (Peter) for doing exactly that in Antioch when he separated himself from the non-Jewish members and associated with only the Jewish Christians. At the very least, such actions will lead to divisions within a congregation, and can lead to anger, envy, and greed.

The Sin of Personal Favoritism in the Assembly

In James 2:8, James continued his discussion about partiality. "If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well." At first, it would seem that James was going back to the Law of Moses in Leviticus 19:18 where it states, "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord." But James referred to this as the Royal Law. Moses was never a king. Instead, James was

reaffirming in the words spoken by the true king Jesus Christ when He was asked, “What is the Great Commandment?” In Matthew 22:37-40, “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.’ 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.’” That commandment was carried over from the Old Covenant into the New Covenant.

But what was the “Royal Law”? It was very simple. Christian lives were to be based upon love – a genuine compassionate love for others. And that love was especially to be observed for other Christians. There is no place in these words for excuses. “I know I am supposed to love this brother or that sister, but……” There ARE NO excuses. Christian love is the “glue” that bonds Christians together. Members of a congregation come from different backgrounds. They may be from different levels of education or affluence, but all of that is immaterial. Christian love WILL form them into a spiritual family, a holy temple of believers.

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Christian love is also the motivator that causes Christians to care for others and bring them the good news of Jesus Christ. Unlike the Law of Moses, the Royal Law was not a mass of very specific requirements that must be met. The Royal Law was a law of love.

Worldly Status Has No Place at the Foot of the Cross

In verses 9-11, James carried that thought even further. “But 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, he has become guilty of all. 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.”

In case there was any confusion, James clearly stated that showing partiality is committing sin. Now there are individuals that should be shown respect because of their position, but only as stated in the New Testament. For example, officials of a government. 1 Peter 2:13-17 states, “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.”

Why God Chooses the Poor to Be Rich in Faith

In verse 9, James also wrote, “and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” At first, it looked like James was referring to the Law of

Moses, but these were Christians. Instead, he was referring to people that showed partiality based on the values of the world. This type of attitude was in violation of the “Royal Law” of love.

A person might try to defend his/her actions by saying, “Yes, I may show partiality to this person, but look what he can do for the church with all his money if we can just get him baptized!” Or a person may say, “Well, I know I show partiality but that is just the way I am. Besides, look at all the other things I do.” From verses 9-11, it is clear that such excuses are just that – excuses.

When the Rich Oppress and the Gospel Offends the Comfortable

Verse 12 states, “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.” Some people have tried to make the “law of liberty” into a replacement for the Law of Moses by imposing additional burdens and requirements that are not found in the inspired record. The Christian life IS so much freer than the Old Testament Law. In Colossians 2:13-14, Paul wrote, “When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” The need for the multiple sacrifices under the old law were eliminated, because Jesus Christ died once for all for the sins of the world.

Stop showing partiality
The Royal Law: Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Unlike the multiple celebrations that were to be observed, the day to day procedures that had to be followed, and the different sacrifices that were required as a Jew, Christian teaching only requires two specific things. First is baptism in obedience to the Gospel. That happens one time in a person's life. The second is the Lord's Supper which is a memorial of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Lord's Supper is to be observed every Lord's Day (Sunday).

Yes, there was freedom and liberty under the Christian life, but some people have focused on the word "liberty". Their attitude is " Well, since I am under liberty, I can now do what I want because my sins are forgiven." In Romans 5 and 6, Paul destroyed that type of thinking. Yes, in many ways a Christian life is much freer, but with greater freedom comes greater responsibility.

Showing Partiality Makes You a Transgressor of the Whole Law

The "liberty" that James was describing was the ability of a person to freely choose to obey the Gospel. A Jew did not have that choice under the old law. He/she was born a Jew. But when a person confesses, or acknowledges, Jesus Christ. He/she is acknowledging that He is now Lord and King. That means that every person will be obedient to the Will of God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. A person

will either be under the law of sin that leads to death, or the law of righteousness that leads to eternal life. There is no third option.

Living Under the Law of Liberty

Verse 12 ends with a warning, “For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.” Christians were shown mercy in that God allowed His Son to die on the cross as the sacrifice for sins. No one had earned or deserved that gift. Because God showed His mercy in His Son Jesus Christ, how could a Christian NOT show mercy to others?

Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment

James 2:1-13 shows us that the Gospel call is a level ground at the foot of the cross. Every soul—rich or poor—stands equal in need of grace, and the church must reflect that equality in love. Stop showing partiality today, and let the Royal Law of love rule your heart and your congregation.

FAQs

What does James 2:1-13 say about showing favoritism?

James 2:1-13 warns believers not to hold their faith in Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. It uses the example of honoring a rich person while shaming a poor person to show that such behavior is sin and violates the Royal Law of loving your neighbor as yourself.

What is the Royal Law in James 2:8?

The Royal Law, as stated in James 2:8, is the command to ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ It is called royal because Jesus Christ reaffirmed it as the second greatest commandment, and it serves as the supreme guide for Christian relationships, overriding all worldly distinctions.

Why is showing partiality a sin?

Showing partiality is a sin because it judges people by worldly standards like wealth or status, which contradicts God’s impartial love. James 2:9-11 explains that even if you keep other commandments, favoritism makes you a lawbreaker, guilty of violating the entire law of love.

How does mercy triumph over judgment in James 2:13?

James 2:13 teaches that judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Because God first showed us mercy through Christ's sacrifice, Christians are called to extend that same mercy to others. A merciful life overcomes the harsh judgment that sin deserves.