

13. Favoritism Contravenes God's Law

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.
(James 2:8-11)

The Divine Factor

We are still dealing with James' warning against "forbidden favoritism". I once received an excellent question precisely about favoritism, and it went like this: "Did not the Lord Jesus himself show favoritism among his disciples, especially in his relationship with John? John presents himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved. When Jesus saw his mother at the cross, he committed her into John's care. Is this not favoritism?"

No, it is not. Our Lord may have had a deeper personal relationship with John, but John was not for this reason given an elevated place among the disciples. On the contrary, we do not read of John taking a prominent place at all in the early church, as did Peter and James. I should repeat here the definition of favoritism. It means giving someone a higher place or added benefits on the basis of outward characteristics. The stress is on the qualifier "outward". Such characteristics include wealth, noble birth, influence, or power. Our Lord recognized such distinctions, but did not let them influence what he said and did. The rich and powerful are warned as much as the poor and the oppressed, each in their own situation and needs.

In the previous verses of chapter 2, James has shown how foolish it is to favor those who are rich and powerful, for these are precisely the ones who insult and exploit the poor and slander the name of the Lord Jesus. It is an argument based on reason or common sense. In the text before us now, James goes a step farther. He says that to show favoritism is to act contrary to the law

of God. We see therefore that while there is the human factor of not favoring those who exploit us, there is also the divine factor that favoritism contravenes God's law.

Following this line, James comes to some important statements concerning the law of God and how it should function in the churches. He illustrates the seriousness of the sin of favoritism by directing the church to the law of God. We will note how the law is characterized, how the law is summarized, and how the law is recognized.

The Character of the Law

If we take only the main words of 2:8, we read, "If you really keep the law, you are doing right." What does it mean to really keep the law? The word "really" comes from a root that means to stand fast and firm. Really keeping the law then means that our whole heart and all our effort is involved. Our intent and conviction are clear: not to depart from the law. We really do keep it. James knows that his readers take the law seriously.

He then calls the law "the royal law found in Scripture." Note carefully how he writes, "found in Scripture." This removes any idea of the law being bound to human customs or traditions. There may be good traditions, and there is no need to throw out any beneficial customs, but only the law as found in Scripture has its own authority as the eternal law of God.

Out of this law, James refers to a specific passage: "Love your neighbor as yourself." This is a direct quote from Leviticus 19, a text used also by the Lord Jesus when they asked him what was the greatest commandment. Our Lord said, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matt 22:37-40).

We will get back to the precise quote later, but first let us pay attention to the expression "the royal law". Why does James use this expression? He does so to characterize the law, to show its basic character and special quality. It is not just any law, but the royal law.

The word "royal" can mean various things here. It can mean that the law is of supreme and unparalleled excellence. It is royal, and there is nothing higher. It can also mean that it is given by the King of kings. Whatever comes from the King himself is clearly a royal law. And since the Lord Jesus himself characterized this as the greatest commandment, it is also to be called royal from that angle. Some explainers suggest that the keeping of this law also

places us on the level of kings, Christians who really serve as Christ did. I do not favor this last explanation because the keeping of the law does not place us on a pedestal. It is simply our duty to do so.

The word “royal” indeed has something to do with the whole law as coming from the King, but it also qualifies the specific commandment quoted, the command of love. The most royal decree is the one to *love*. This is the greatest (highest) commandment. If the word “royal” can ever be used, it is here: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” We cannot climb to a higher height than that of love.

In I Corinthians 12, Paul writes about all kinds of spiritual gifts. The Corinthians were seeking the highest, the greatest, and the most excellent gifts. Note how Paul then starts I Corinthians 13, the chapter on love: “And now I will show you the most excellent way.” The most excellent way, the greatest of all God’s gifts, is love. In the rest of chapter 13, Paul explains why love is the most excellent way.

The most excellent way is the royal way, the King’s highway. The way belonging to the king is the way in which the law of love directs us. Then we walk in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ, who loved his own to the very end and even gave his life on the cross.

Dealing With Each Other in the Church

The royal law is therefore summarized by the Lord Jesus and by James as a law of love, the most excellent way to deal with one another. Why does James here use the second part of the great commandment to love? Why does he not deal with the first part, “love the LORD”? It is because James is dealing with the relationships in the communion of saints. How do we deal with each other in the church?

It is vital to love God. But a second law, like the first in content and character, is to love our neighbor as ourself. That is what counts in the church. That is what edifies individuals and builds up the whole church.

If we love our neighbor as ourself, we do not show favoritism. Then we treat all members of the congregation in an honorable manner. Then, writes James, we are doing right. That is what the law requires. Justice and fairness prevail in the church of Christ.

I was also once asked a second question in connection with favoritism: “May we have friends within the church that we prefer above other members? Is it not a form of favoritism to have friendships in the church?” Friendship is not the same as favoritism, but it can easily lead to favoritism if we are not careful.

I had a minister who once said, “I have many brothers and sisters in the church, but not all of them are my friends.” It is a key matter: we shall treat everybody as a brother and sister, and when it comes to doing justice, we shall not show favoritism, even to a close friend. Yet this does not necessarily mean that every member of the church is or must be a close friend.

The law does not allow favoritism. This is the royal way of our King, Jesus Christ. We shall treat all brothers and sisters as equals before the Lord. We shall honor others in what we say about them and in how we help them, and so we shall look to the interest of all. The same law does not forbid friendships, but it does imply that any earthly relationship may never hinder justice from being done.

The Summary of the Law

It is important to note that James here uses the *summary* of the law. One of the objections against the letter of James is that he is a legalist who stresses works, but when James quotes the law directly, he quotes the summarizing commandment to love one another as Christ has loved us. We can have and do much in the church, but if we do not truly love, it means nothing. The more we study this letter, the more we see that it is not legalistic, but pure Gospel: the transforming love of Jesus Christ, his summary of the law, stands in the center.

It is therefore quite proper to read I Corinthians 13 in connection with James 2:8-11. What is the message of I Corinthians 13? In Corinth, people were in the habit of identifying the real members of the church by certain gifts. Paul does not deny the importance of any gifts, but he does say that if we have not love, we are nothing, we do nothing, and we gain nothing. All the rest is futile, if it does not spring forth from the love of Christ.

Love is the key to the understanding of our Lord Jesus Christ. I Corinthians 13:4-6 is a description of his life and a prescription for our lives: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” Can it be said any more plainly and clearly?

It is this summary of the law that shows forth favoritism for what is really is: sin. James writes in 2:9, “But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.” Note how James writes, “you sin.” Most people probably never would have identified favoritism as a sin. It is so

common, and such a typically human thing to do, that it is hardly seen as a sin but rather as a natural thing that everyone does. Favoritism is everywhere, and who ever thought that it might be *sin*?

The Law in its Totality

God calls it sin. It is a breaking of the law, and we are to be aware of it. The people in James' time may have thought favoritism was a small sin, if at all. It was ingrained in society, so perhaps they thought that while it may not be right, surely it was not a big deal, and definitely not a sin like adultery or murder.

But in the last two verses of our text, James clarifies that sin is sin, and if one commandment is broken, the entire law is broken. This touches on an important matter: how we are to recognize the law in its totality as a law of love. The law is not a sampling or bundling of certain rules or commandments that have no inner connection, but the law is a unity and must always be seen in its totality. We cannot isolate one commandment and say that it is only a minor infraction if that particular commandment is broken.

If we show favoritism, the law convicts us as lawbreakers. When we sin, we are not little sinners, but complete sinners. We should not say, "Well, my sins are nothing compared to what he did. Compared to him, I'm an angel!" Then we abuse the law and do not recognize it as a total way of life. James writes that "whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." Notice how this is put: "and yet stumbles at just one point." It does not matter if the sin committed was a one-time word, thought, or deed. If we stumble, we have broken the whole law.

A Difference Between Sins?

Is there a difference between sins? Showing favoritism—to remain with the context—is sinful, but is it as serious as adultery or murder, for example? Favoritism does not break marriages or end lives. I suppose it can lead to that, but not necessarily. Is there not a distinction between types of sin? Is it not true that if we keep all the commandments and stumble only at one (small) point, we should be credited rather than called lawbreakers?

The Roman Catholic church teaches that there are mortal sins and forgivable sins. I believe they even have a list of seven deadly or mortal sins. This is based, in part, on the distinction that is found in I John 5:16-17 about a sin that leads to death and a sin that does not lead to death. John writes, "All wrongdoing

is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.” While a sin is a sin -all wrongdoing is sin- one sin appears to be more serious than another. Does this contradict what James writes in our text?

The context of both quotes is important. John teaches us that we should not easily give up on (fellow) sinners, unless they deny the Scriptures and lead shameless lives. But James warns us not to take any sin lightly, as if any sin is excusable or acceptable. James does this by asking recognition for the unity of the law.

The command to love permeates every commandment. Every sin has to do with a lack of love. This is what unifies the law and makes it one law. The same God of love who said that we shall not commit adultery also said that we shall not murder. Behind both commandments lies the one command to love. We shall not commit adultery, but if we murder, we are still guilty of breaking all the law because we have acted without love.

If we break just one law, we are lawbreakers in God’s eyes. We have acted against every commandment for the law is inherently a unity. We cannot look at one sin and say that it is not so serious, for all sins are equally serious because they have the same character: lack of love.

All Sins Are Not the Same

Now we have to be very careful with what James writes. We can come to two possible conclusions that would be wrong. The first is saying, “Okay, I have committed one sin, so I may as well commit more since I am already a complete lawbreaker in God’s eyes.” Sometimes we do use one sin as a stepping stone to another, whereas we should repent altogether. So James’ words should not be taken wrongly in a self-serving manner.

The other wrong conclusion is no longer distinguishing between sins in their seriousness and effects. The law is one, and in breaking a single command, we break all of the commands, yet every sin is not the same. One sin does more damage than the other. The effects of some sins are irreversible in this life. This must lead us to avoid the most serious and grievous sins. Yes, we must flee from all evil, but our focus must be to remain free from “great” transgressions, not because they are deadly as such but because they do so much damage to ourselves and others.

Look at Psalm 19:13, where we read, “Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression.” Willful sins, doing things which we know are wrong, are very serious and if there is no repentance, lead to excommunication.

Great transgression is very obvious and serious breaking of the law with scorn for God. All sins are not the same.

If we transgress one command, we break the whole law, for the law must be recognized in its unity as a law of love. We must distinguish properly, but not separate the commandments from their root, the command to love. We must never say, "Well, this sin is not so serious because all sin is wrong and each one is deadly in itself." We may never downplay any sin in our life or in the church, as if it means little or nothing, for all sin is a transgression of the law and we shall not be lawbreakers.

There is a distinction between sins, as the one is more serious than another, but this may never allow us to condone "smaller" sins, like the practice of favoritism. The law never convicts us partly, but it does so totally. "Here I stand, Lord, with all my sins, great and small, and I know that I am in every respect a lawbreaker."

James does not write these things to discourage us. It is a matter of openness and honesty. We are so sinful that we tend to cover up not only great transgressions, but also the less obvious ones. Favoritism? That is normal to us. It is a social thing. Class distinctions have always been with us. Let us be careful, however, for it is a very serious breaking of the law. This may not take place in the church of Christ.

The theme of James' letter is the maturity of faith. We have to grow, also in our understanding of sin, so that we may have a proper outlook and a mature understanding in this matter. The poor shall not cater to the rich; the rich shall not have contempt for the poor. Favoritism is sin. Mercy and grace always transcend above favoritism. In the church, we must experience the triumph of God's grace, for ourselves and for all members.