

The unfolding of your words gives light.

Faith That Works

An Exposition of the Book of James

⁸If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well^a. ⁹But if you show partiality, you are committing sin^b and are convicted by the law as transgressors^c. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all^d. ¹¹For 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^e. ¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty^f. ¹³For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy^g; mercy triumphs over judgment^h.^a

^a 2:8 **If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture...you are doing well.** What is this law and why is it called "royal"? The word translated "royal" means "kingly" or "belonging to the king." The royal law is the law of the King. He alone, as sovereign, has the right to tell us how to live. It is possible to embrace God's sovereignty over our salvation and the events in the universe and overlook his sovereignty over our moral lives. The God who chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world takes those he chose and makes them like his Son. Are you "doing well" at living under his authority?

^b 2:9 **if you show partiality, you are committing sin.** Notice the contrast: "you are doing well...you are committing sin." These verses are connected to the exhortation of first seven verses of this chapter to show love impartially.

^c 2:9 **and are convicted by the law as transgressors.** James is doing what Paul did in Romans and what Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount. He is revealing that we are all under the weight of sin. In this context James is saying we should welcome messed up people because we are messed up people. You cannot read this letter (or Romans or the Sermon on the Mount) without seeing how short you fall.

^d 2:10 **For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.** This statement shows the unity of God's law. Consider each of the Ten Commandments as they relate to mistreatment of the poor man in the synagogue. When we encounter people who say they are seeking to live by the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount we might ask, "And how are you doing on them so far?" Remember that the Bible puts you under a curse if you have broken any of them.

^e 2:11 **if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.** When we favorably compare ourselves to others we set the laws we break as of less importance than the one others break.

^f 2:12 **So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.** Here again is the law of liberty (1:25) that we have been urged to *do* as well as listen to. I do not think James is suggesting that this law is distinct from the whole of Scripture. This royal law that calls us to love neighbors rather than judge them was revealed in Leviticus 19. It is the truth that sets us free.

^g 2:13 **For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy.** Compare this to Matthew 7:1-2. Not only do the merciless face the wrath of God, they have to live life being treated like they treat other people.

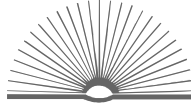
^h 2:13 **mercy triumphs over judgment.** This sounds like a headline from the sports page. The word "triumphs" is the common word for "boasts" or "exults." Like a sports team might dominate another, the power of God is shown in his mercy. Picture Israel looking down from the safe side of the Red Sea at all the Egyptian bodies washing up on shore. Crushing the Egyptian army was

James 2.8-13

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a powerful act of judgment, but what about the powerful act of mercy in bring a nation through a sea bed on dry ground? That's triumph.

We can look at this statement either as a challenge to believers to show mercy or a statement about God's mercy. Either view fits the context. Perhaps both are what James has in mind. We who have no future hope apart from the mercy of God have no business behaving toward outsiders in any other way. One who shows mercy displays a change of heart that the Old Testament Law had no power to bring. Refusal to show mercy is evidence of an unchanged heart. There will be a judgment, but the judgment will reveal the hidden depths of the human heart.

^a 2:8-13 You cannot study texts like this without seeing yourself in need of mercy. What should you conclude following an honest look at this text?

1. Following Christ is an "all-or-nothing" proposition. The Master had a way of discouraging halfhearted disciples. All of the Law must be obeyed to avoid becoming accursed.
2. Seeing yourself as you really are leaves you pleading for mercy. When you see that you have not measured up—that you have "stumbled in one point"—there is no hope apart from someone else bearing your curse.
3. Obtaining mercy must lead to showing it. If you have received much mercy it follows that you have no right to be merciless.

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