

Faith Works: The Book of James

Love Your Neighbor

James 2:8-13

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If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. 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. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:8–13,).

If you are in the medical field, especially emergency medicine, you are probably familiar with something called a METTAG. For those of you who don't know what I'm talking about, it's a card that you don't want to see hanging around your neck.

METTAG stands for Medical Emergency Triage Tag. It's used in emergencies that involve a lot of people with varying levels of medical needs. METTAG is a quick way to assess and prioritize life-saving patient care based upon the seriousness of an injury. Patients are categorized based on four levels: Green/Minor, Yellow/Delayed, Red/Immediate, and Black/Deceased.¹

Before the development of this card and concept, patients died because they were being treated chronologically—first come, first served. The METTAG saved people's lives because it elevated the concept of triage—the determination of priorities.²

Medical professionals, especially those in emergency medicine, have to be skilled not only in knowing the science of medicine but also in the determination of priorities. You have to know the content, but you also have to know how to triage—how to determine what's most important.

What's true when it comes to saving lives is also true in other areas. Every day, we make triage decisions. Parents have to decide which issues to address with their kids. Business leaders make decisions about priorities that affect the bottom-line. Teachers decide what content is most essential

¹ <https://www.fastcompany.com/3028492/a-design-history-of-the-life-saving-triage-tag>

² <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/triage>

and should appear on tests. Law enforcement officers decide which crimes need to be investigated and prosecuted. Marriage counselors decide which issues to tackle first.

Triage is a part of life. It's also an important part of what it means to be a Christian.

Spiritual maturity relates not merely to what you know, but also to what's important. To be a faithful follower of Jesus you have to make triage decisions. You have to determine which doctrinal issues are essential and which issues are preferences. Knowing the difference is important because you may have heard it said, "There's no doctrine a fundamentalist *won't* fight over, and no doctrine a liberal *will* fight over."³ Some of the most contentious conflicts have come not from the substance of an issue but the seriousness of the issue. And that's not always clear.

This is also true in our personal relationships. Following Jesus faithfully, balancing faith and works, requires sanctified triage. It involves wrestling with the order of importance.

Our text in James concludes an important section on partiality by focusing on the calling underneath the issue. If partiality is "unfair judgments leading to unjust treatment", what's the foundational problem and solution?

Three Reasons True Obedience Prioritizes Love

James's answer: not loving our neighbor. Or to say it positively: true obedience prioritizes love.

This text (2:8-13) helps us to see the priority of love that should fight against any form of partiality. And today we'll look at three reasons:

1. Love is the essence of obedience
2. Not loving others is serious
3. Love is a gospel-implication issue

Let's examine each of these to learn how loving our neighbor and spiritual triage are connected.

1. Love Is the Essence of Obedience

Knowing the "why" behind the "what" is important. And verse 8 starts an important section of teaching that flows from what is good (v. 8), what is not good (vv. 9-11), and what should we conclude (vv. 12-13).

After an amount of instruction regarding what was wrong with partiality in verses 1-7, James turns positive. If you were tracking with the sermons the last two weeks, I'm sure you felt the heaviness of the subject matter. There are some loaded words and phrases:

- "show no partiality" (v. 1)
- "become judges with evil thoughts" (v. 4)

³ Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On – The Case for Theological Triage*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 17.

- “have dishonored the poor man” (v. 6)

James identifies what we should be doing. In verses 1-7, he shared warnings about what we should stop doing. Verse 8 invites us to a different way to live:

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).

When James says that they would be “doing well,” he’s referring to the right way to live. In chapter one, it sounded like this as James connected the actions of believers to the law of liberty:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing (James 1:22–25).

The entire book of James is concerned about the connection between faith and obedience. The goal for the Christian is to be so transformed by the gospel that it directly affects how we live. Next week, we’ll see this further in 2:14. The Bible doesn’t imagine a faith in Jesus that doesn’t work. “Doing well” is more than just an affirmation; it’s a statement of authenticity.

This is confirmed when we look at the phrase—“If you really fulfil the royal law. . .” When James talks about the royal law, he’s connecting it to a king and a kingdom. And of course, he’s referring to Jesus who was called “our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory” (v. 1). The title “Lord” had both spiritual and political connotations. In the Roman Empire, Caesar was “Lord.” He was to be followed and worshipped.

So when the apostles declared that Jesus is Lord, they were making a powerful statement about their allegiance and what kingdom they belong to. It was also a risky statement that resulted in persecution and their death.

The royal law, therefore, is what it means to live for the kingdom of Jesus. You could think of it as a summary of the primary ethic. It’s a statement that captures the essence of what faithfulness to Jesus looks like.

Perhaps you can think of other summary statements:

- SPQR – “The Senate and the Roman People” was etched on many Roman arches
- E Pluribus Unum – “Out of many, one” – the motto for the United States
- Semper Fidelis – “Always faithful” – the motto for the Marines
- “My pleasure” – the customer service motto for Chick-fil-A

But Jesus’s kingdom is to be marked by this statement: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This ethic was central to what obedience to Jesus’s teaching was all about. Love was not one thing among many things. Love of others is the essence of obedience. Jesus not only taught this, he expanded it in shocking ways.

Jesus said that love would be the way the world would identify the disciples of Jesus (Jn. 13:35). He commanded his followers to love their enemies (Matt. 5:44), and in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus made a Jewish priest and a Levite the uncaring people while using a socially marginalized person (the Samaritan) as the prime example of mercy and concern for neighbors.

Love is the reason why partiality in all of its forms doesn't fit with the kingdom. Love for others is supposed to be the hallmark characteristic of the kingdom of Jesus.

No wonder the apostle Paul said:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. . .” (Phil. 2:3–5).

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing (1 Cor. 13:1–3).

So where does love fit on your obedience list? Think of the conversations you've had this week. Think of the texts you've sent and the emails you've written. Think of the ways you've interacted with others. Think of things that grabbed your attention. Think of the news feeds that you've read. Think of the things that have troubled or angered you.

How much of it related to loving your neighbor? How much of it is connected to being concerned about the interests of others? Love for others is the essence of obedience.

Quite frankly, it so important that it would seem impossible. We'll talk about that in the final point. But sometimes, our response is to hear the call to love our neighbors and find ways to justify our lack of love. We tend to be defensive or minimize the issue.

That leads us to the second reason why true obedience prioritizes love.

2. Not loving others is serious

We've spent the last two Sundays trying to highlight what partiality is and why it's sinful. So, we've already covered this ground at some level. However, there are few things that we need to highlight from verses 9-11.

Remember that I said in an earlier message that partiality is what we use to get something else? In the example of the rich man, he would be given preferential treatment because of what his wealth could do for others. So much of our world has been and continues to be infected by it. Just think of all the ways people leverage their influence, position, money, or status to get what they want. Or think of all the ways we are tempted to marginalize or demonize people based upon something along the lines of wealth, status, ethnicity, or some other classification. Partiality is easy to justify.

And, it's often hard to see in yourself. The line is often murky, and it's remarkable how quickly our defenses go up. How many times have you heard: "I'm not showing favoritism! I'm not biased! I'm not prejudiced!" That may be true. But it's telling how quickly our guard goes up.

I think this is one of the reasons why James addresses the issue the way that he does.

In verse 9, James wants us to see that partiality should not be tolerated. It's sinful. And it makes us transgressors of the law. He's elevating the seriousness of the issue here. For a Jewish audience, this would have landed on them heavily. A lack of love for your neighbor violates the law of God.

Some might protest, "Wait, it's that big of an issue?" To that point, James 2:10 connects the breaking of one part of the law with breaking the entire law. This was true in two ways. First, a person could not ignore partiality because of a claim of other areas of obedience. There have been far-too-many "religious" people who hid their partiality behind their religion. Secondly, love of neighbor is the law-behind-the-law. It's the point behind the commands. To miss this is to miss everything.

Finally, sometimes we are guilty of faulty triage. Verse 11 addresses this. James uses the commands regarding not committing adultery or murder as illustrations. If a person commits murder, he's not able to justify himself because he hasn't committed adultery. He violates the whole law because he violates the heart of the law.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus equated lust with adultery and anger with murder (Matt. 5:21-30). In 1 John 3:15, we read that "anyone who hates his brother is a murderer." Jesus is echoing something from the prophets. Namely that it's too easy to pick and choose our obedience badges.

Here's what Isaiah said:

Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey! (Isa. 10:1-2)

It's possible to make it legal to rob the poor, take advantage of widows, and prey upon the fatherless. And it's possible to use spiritual activity to inoculate ourselves from what it looks like to love our neighbors.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isa. 58:6-7)

The standard was not merely if you broke the law or not. The question was whether or not you loved your neighbor. And to not love your neighbor was serious. True obedience prioritizes love.

3. Love Is a Gospel-Implication Issue

James now draws his argument to a conclusion by making a connection between loving our neighbors, mercy, and the law of liberty. Love for others is connected to the gospel.

The law of liberty is the new kind of obedience secured by Christ. Galatians 5:1 says, “For freedom Christ has set us free.” Romans 8:2 says, “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus. . .” Galatians 6:2 says, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.”

The law of liberty is the gospel—the life-transforming grace of God applied to the hearts of sinners such that they live differently. God is holy. I am not. Jesus saves. Christ is my life. And our obedience and love should reflect the way that God has loved us.

This is what the gospel does. It radically transforms people from the inside out such that they live in light of the gospel. They don’t just live in light of the law. They live in light of grace.

As a result, if people are not characterized by grace and mercy, there’s a legitimate question as to whether or not they have received God’s grace.

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother (1 John 4:19–21).

That’s why verse 13 connects judgment and mercy. And it’s also why the concluding statement is “mercy triumphs over judgment.” It’s not that judgment is wrong. Believers are called to make judgments (see 1 Cor. 5:9-13). But when it comes to our relationships with one another and in the world, we must prioritize love.

If you are right but not loving, you are wrong. If you are truthful but not loving, you don’t know the truth. If you are doctrinally correct but not marked by love, you aren’t doctrinally correct. Do you see the point?

And then let me ask you when it comes to partiality, has the church been more characterized by concern for the poor or the rich? Has the church been more concerned about ethnic partiality or defending the status quo? Has the church been more characterized by identifying with the marginalized or the “movers and shakers”?

I ask these questions not to indict everything about the church. Rather, I offer these questions to raise the issue of triage. When it comes to how we treat one another, what does love look like? What does love look like in your life? It’s an important question because true obedience prioritizes love.

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