

Rich Nathan
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Growing Into Maturity
James 2:1-13

The Favoritism Free Zone

We have been doing a study through the book of James. And for those of you who have been here, you will recall that the theme of our study concerns becoming mature Christians. James is not just concerned with the moment of birth in a Christian's life, making sure that people step over the line. James is concerned about the next 99 years. What that person does with their decision to become a devoted follower of Jesus Christ. There are many people who never grow up. Too many folks continue to be 20-year old babies; 40-year old babies, who persist in spiritual immaturity. The book of James is designed to deal with that.

Now, in the section that we are going to study today, James takes up the subject of favoritism, partiality. The situation in which the church treats people different based on their wealth or their power or their position and not based on their relationship with Jesus. You see this in churches all the time – people appointed to boards and committees not based on their spirituality or maturity, but based on their professional resumes and degrees and money. Favoritism. You know, children have a highly developed sense of perceived injustice. You can't have more than one child without one of them alleging unfair treatment and favoritism toward their sibling, right? It's not fair. Have any of you ever had a child who does not say to you, "It's not fair?" I wish I had a dollar for every time that was said to me.

But, it is often in the context of alleged favoritism. It is not fair. You let Susie stay up until 10:00 and you make me go to bed at 8:30. It doesn't matter that Susie is 4 years older. It is still not fair.

It is not fair that Billy got two new pairs of shoes and I only got one. Even though Billy's one pair shoes was football cleats used to play football. And little Janie got more clothes than Billy. Kids focus on the disparity. So do we – the point in which someone else has received more than us. Children have a highly developed sense of being able to hone in on the point of disparity.

Now, often times it is just perceived favoritism in the mind of a child. Many of the so-called injustices in life are only perceived injustice. But every once in a while, you meet a person who is still, as an adult, struggling with and recovering from the very real sting of favoritism that was practiced against them in their homes. It is the case that in many families there really is one child who is favored, one child who can do no wrong. They are the family hero. They get complimented. They get talked to and affirmed continually. Maybe they are prettier than their siblings. Maybe they are more athletic or smarter. Often the ground of favoritism is that they are more like their parents than the other children. They are not necessarily better than, they are just more similar to their parents than the other children and, therefore, easier to get along with and easier to understand.

In many families there is one child who is compliant and easy and another child who is strong-willed. And so the favorite's faults are overlooked or re-explained in terms of childish behavior or "they are so cute" or "they are so funny"—their childish little pranks. But then there is another child who simply can do no right. They are often criticized and their faults are magnified. Their appearance, their grades, their behavior, their performance is put under a microscope. Maybe they are often compared with their favored sibling, if not

directly (if the parents are smart enough to not compare their children. And by the way, parents, I hope you are smart enough to virtually never compare your children to each other in their presence.) Well, you know, your brother Billy does this. If you want to build resentment between your kids, if you want to insure them of a lifetime of sibling rivalry, just compare them. So many of the problems of hostility between brothers, between brothers and sisters and sisters and sisters is the direct result of parental comparison and favoritism.

We see this in the Bible, by the way, in the story of Jacob and Esau, where Jacob was his mother Rebekah's favorite and Esau was his father Isaac's favorite. Both of them seem to have temperaments like one or the other of their parents. Jacob was a deceiver like his mother Rebekah. And Esau has certain manly qualities like his father, Isaac. But the favoritism of the parents drove them to extreme rivalry.

But even if you are smart enough to never do that, you might be implicitly comparing your children if you hand out a compliment to one without being sensitive to the feelings of the other. If one child is always praised as being brilliant, having phenomenal grades, great academic performance, you can bet that your other children are going to feel like failures in comparison. If one child is always complimented on her looks or on athletic ability, and the other child is not similarly praised, the only conclusion is "I guess I am the ugly one. The dumb one."

You see the sting of favoritism carrying on for decades after people leave their homes. They still suffer from feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem and exaggerated sensitivity to criticism and an inability to ever be corrected without feeling incredible pain because all of the person's choices have been criticized. Their romantic choices are stupid. Their friends are unacceptable.

I recently read a tragic story of the effects of favoritism on one particular family. A girl named Josie was talking about her brother, a kid by the name of Rex. She said, "It just seemed like my brother, Rex, could never do anything right." He was forced to move back home in his early 20's. And dad, who was a real go-getter, very successful in business, used to look at his son, who was at home in his 20's and call him "the bum." The Bum. He said, "Josie, go call the bum to dinner." "Hey, you, bum, move your melon, I can't see the TV."

The sister reports that one day right around Christmas time, there was a big family argument. Mom was getting on her brother, Rex, for being so sloppy calling him a slob. You could see Rex becoming more and more depressed and withdrawn. Dad was yelling at him because he was such a bum. And mom was yelling because he was such a slob.

Josie said it was so much hypocrisy. She felt so awful to go out to the mall with her parents to buy Christmas presents in which they were supposed to be celebrating peace on earth and good will toward men when they treated Rex so poorly. Josie and her parents walked into the house. Josie was putting her packages down. All of a sudden she heard a scream. It was her mother. She said, "Josie, call 911. Call someone." Josie said that she knew something had happened to Rex, but that she couldn't go into his room. She waited for the police to come and later found out that Rex had taken his Daddy's shotgun into his bedroom. He sat down on the bed and put the barrel under his chin and blew his head off trying to make as big a mess as possible.

Josie concludes her story this way: "I think Rex did it to get even with them. It was a revenge thing." He left a note to twist the knife. This is what the note said, "Mom, sorry I left the room in such a mess. I left my shirt untucked, too. And Dad, remember how you were always telling me to move my melon? Well, I blew my melon away! Ha-Ha. Have a nice life." And he signed it, "Your son, The Bum."

Obviously, we are talking about an extreme situation in which the warning signs of a child's depression and withdrawal were just being consistently ignored by his parents. Obviously, we are talking about a situation of extreme verbal abuse where a child is regularly called a bum.

But as James, in his letter, proceeds to describe what mature Christians look like, he essentially says that mature Christians are people who do not show partiality to the lovely. Mature Christians go out of their way to treat everyone with fairness and kindness. Mature Christians do not relate to others based on their worldly power or their looks or their dress.

You know, a lot of schools now post big signs outside saying, "This is a drug-free zone," "This is a gun-free zone," "Weapon-free zone." In this section of scripture, James is telling us that the church is to be a favoritism-free zone. That the moment you come into the church, there ought to be an absence of tipping the scales toward the powerful and the wealthy.

I have called today's talk, "The Favoritism Free Zone." Let's pray.

James 2:1-13 says, *"My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there,' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"*

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? but you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?"

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbors 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.

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

Now, James gives us a simple illustration of what he is opposed to. The illustration is found in vv. 2-3. *"Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes saying, 'here is a good seat for you' but say to the poor man, 'you stand there' or 'sit on the floor by my feet.'"*

He is talking about the way we make distinctions between people based on their looks, based on their position, based on their dress. Where we incline ourselves toward the lovely, the powerful, the rich and beautiful people. And even our tone of voice may be a bit different toward one person than toward another. We kindly say, "Here is a good seat for you." And we very harshly and very critically say to the poor man, "You sit over there."

What is James talking about? He is talking about our human tendency, our sinful human tendency to communicate somehow to individuals that you don't belong. You are not part of our circle. You are not one of us. I don't have anything in common with you. He is talking about the little cliques that exist in women's groups where a few women with a lot in common just pull together and communicate loudly that the rest of the group are not really part of the lovely people. He is talking about cliques in teen groups where certain kids are excluded because of their looks, because of their dress. They are not part of the lovely people.

You are not like me, therefore, you are excluded. You are out of the circle.

I recently finished the autobiography of Nelson Mandela called, *The Long Walk to Freedom*. If you want to read the story of a good and great man, one of the true heroes of this century, pick up the autobiography of Nelson Mandela. Here is a man who was thrown in prison for 30 years simply for opposing a radically unjust system called apartheid in South Africa. He never got to watch his children grow up. He never got to enjoy being married. Just because he spoke up and said, “It is unjust for you to exclude me and exclude people like me simply based on our skin color.” And this was all justified by the South African Dutch Reformed Church.

In the U.S. recently some people had to speak up because Southern churches would not bury African Americans along side of white church members. It is not right to exclude us simply based on our skin color.

James said that partiality and favoritism, first of all, contradicts our faith. Listen to his statements:

“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism.” To be partial toward people on any ground other than their relationship with Jesus contradicts your Christian faith. We say, “I just don’t have anything in common with this other person.” James says that we are family. We are family. He calls us brothers. The most fundamental relationship between a Christian and another Christian is a family relationship.

I can tell a lot about how a person thinks about church and their relationship to this church by the words they use to qualify the church. When someone says, “I like your church, Rich.” I know they don’t see themselves as a part of it. When someone says, “I like the church”, they still are not really seeing themselves as included in. When they say, “I love

our church” and they begin to refer to the Vineyard or whatever church they attend as “our church,” “my church,” they step inside the circle.

How do you refer to the church? Is it us? We? My spiritual family? Or some foreign institution? Some group of people providing spiritual services? And how do you look at others in the church? Do you see that we are spiritual family? Brothers and sisters? Or do you say, “I don’t have very much in common with this other person, therefore, I have a right to draw a circle and exclude.”

Folks, I want to underline one point here on exclusions and drawing circles. It is not just the wealthy and the powerful who judge the poor and the weak. The poor also judge the wealthy. Favoritism runs right through the sinful human heart. It knows no boundaries. It is not just the Pharisee that judges the tax collector. The tax collector also judges the Pharisee. He says, “I am glad I am not like him – self righteous, stuck up.”

It is not just the preppy that judges the kid who is dressed in grunge. Look at him. He looks so sloppy. Look at those thrift store clothes. Look at that earring. The person who is dressed in grunge judges the preppy. Look at that guy. He is such a prep. I hate him. He is so conservative. He is so stuck up. I have nothing in common with him.

And it is not just older people who exclude younger people. “This is our church; we own it and paid for it.” The fact is this church was bought and paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ. No one owns it other than Christ. Let me say a word to those of you who are younger. Occasionally, young people complain, “We are not welcome. There is no room for us. Older people exclude us.” I have been to lots of meetings in which young people have led and are gathered. And in talking with young people, very often I find a welcoming spirit in which the young person communicates to me, “I am not going to shut you out

because of your age. You are welcome in my life. I have something in common with you. I see you as my brother.”

But every so often, I pickup the same kind of stinging rebuke by way of behavior that I hear complained about in reverse. What do you have to offer us? You are not like us. We don’t want you or older people like you.

James says favoritism in whatever direction it comes—up to down; down to up; young to old; old to young; black to white; white to black—contradicts faith because we are family; we are brothers and sisters. We have something else in common. We all worship the Lord of Glory.

“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism.”

What does it mean, “the glorious Lord Jesus Christ” or in other translations, “the Lord of Glory?” What is glory?

Glory is the summation of the Lord’s attributes. Glory is the sum of all that God is in his person and presence. You know, Moses prayed to see the Lord’s glory. And what he was essentially saying was, “Lord, I catch glimpses of you. I get bits and pieces of you, but I want to see you in your fullness. I want to have a vision of your entire person. Show me your true self with all of your attributes and all of your character. I want to get the full view.”

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, what you are saying is that you are connected to the Lord in all of his glory. Friends, one of the things that God continually says about himself in the Bible that he is impartial. That he is no respecter of persons. He doesn’t turn his back on the unpopular when they are speaking and give a listening ear to the popular and the lovely.

In Acts 10:34, Peter says, *“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and who do what is right.”*

Favoritism contradicts faith. Favoritism contradicts right judgment. James says that when we separate people based on dress and looks...v. 4: “Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” Literally, James says, “Are you not being inconsistent in yourself? Not just among yourself, but in yourself? You're claiming to love an impartial Lord and being partial toward the lovely. Your distinctions are based on wrong reasoning.” The Pharisees always measured people by externals. Always by their conformity to certain little behaviors and their dress and who they could quote and how much they knew. Always externals.

And even spiritual people are given to judge people based on externals. Back in the Old Testament God calls the prophet Samuel to go to a man named Jesse's house and anoint a new King over Israel. So Samuel looks over Jesse's sons for the one that God would choose. He thinks that it surely must be the oldest son who is the tallest and most mature and the most handsome. Even spiritual people like Samuel make distinctions based on accent, grammar and dress, professional degrees.

You know how God judges people? It is always based on their hearts. He told his prophet Samuel, “Man looks on external appearance, but God looks at the heart.” He is always looking for a person whose heart is after his and who is pursuing God.

Again, we care so much about dress. I have heard some people say that they are very upset that a lot of our teens dress from thrift stores and have a grunge look. It is a sign of rebellion, they say. And it may be. The problem is, we just don't know their heart, do we?

And you know, dressing out of an L.L. Bean catalog or from Eddie Bauer or any other preppie store does not necessarily mean that you are more filled with kingdom values

than the teen that dresses from a thrift store. It simply may mean that you are more filled with suburban conformity than this other person. You see, we just don't know because we don't know your heart.

God looks past dress, degrees and accents. Listen to whom God chooses. He says: "Listen, my dear brothers, has God not chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world?" We choose the beautiful; God chooses the unlovely, the poor.

Now, we must understand what James is saying here. I don't believe that God eternally elects people because they are impoverished or that every poor person has gained favor in the sight of God. Do you know what the word "poor" means in the Bible? It literally means, "soft, pliant, willing." Poor people, as God looks at their hearts, are generally softer, more pliable, more willing to go God's way. Because they are softer and more pliable, poor people in the Bible are more likely to be pushed around, to be shoved around by the powerful and the wealthy.

See, I think that God loves poor people not because they don't have a lot of stuff, but in looking at their hearts, God loves a softness, a willingness to go along with him and his program. God loves people who he can get through to.

You know, friends, that quality of being soft and pliable is not the exclusive domain of the poor. The Bible describes some wealthy people who also had this softness in their hearts. Matthew the Tax Collector and Zechias the Tax Collector. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus and Abraham. These were men who could be gotten through to.

Let me get personal here. A lot of people who are down and out are very open to what God thinks and to what God says. But I watch new people coming in here all of the time who are down on their luck, who have been broken as a result of a divorce or a

separation, or an addiction or some major life problem and that just opens them up to God. They become soft and pliable, like the poor people God loves.

What I see here in this church is there are not just some down and outers, there are some of you who are up and outers. That if you look real close, and if they let you get in to their suburban homes, they have some gaping holes inside. They have taken some major hits. Maybe from their kids. Their spouse. Their ex-spouse. In business. Up and outers can be like Matthew the Tax Collector and Zechias and so on. They may be pliable and soft. That is what God is looking for.

God values the pliable. And God gives faith and a kingdom. It says, “Listen my dear brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith?” God doesn’t elect people, by the way, because of their faith. Faith is always seen as a gift of God, not the ground of God’s choice, but the result of God’s choice. Ephesians 2:8 says, “By grace you have been saved through faith. And that [meaning that faith] is not of yourself. It is a gift of God.”

Isn’t it interesting what God gives to poor people? Soft pliable people who are willing to go along with him? God makes them rich in faith. God doesn’t necessarily make poor people rich in things. Apparently, God values something and gives something more important than stuff and gives something more important than stuff. He gives trust in him to people that he especially favors.

You know, I would draw a contrast to America’s poverty programs and the biblical value system. America’s poverty programs gives lots of bread for people’s stomachs, but no bread for their souls. We think that people’s only need is to get more stuff. We sometimes treat people like they are animals in a cage. That the only thing they need to have is a steak thrown into their cage and that will satisfy their deep human needs. America’s poverty

programs have no regard for people as spiritual beings. That is why the government can never successfully run a poverty program because they don't know that what folks fundamentally need is to become wealthy in trust. That people fundamentally need a relationship with God and warm relationships with others.

Let me tell you a couple of stories here. I read a story of a man who dressed as a homeless man. He put on an old sweater and dirty coat. He got his hands all dirty and went unshaven. He assumed that little shuffle of the homeless as he walked down the street. He said people came to him and offered him food and offered him clothes and medicine. He went to a shelter where he said he could have eaten until he busted. There was plate after plate of food put in front of him. As if his only need was bread for his stomach.

He finally looked up at this young pretty hostess who was serving him food. She said, "Would you like another plate of food?" He mumbled, "I would like a Bible." To which she replied, "What's that? You want a bagel? You want to beg? What do you want?"

He mumbled, "I want a Bible."

She said very firmly, "I am sorry. We don't hand out bibles here."

America's poverty programs. Let me underline the point of what people really need. I don't know how many of you saw the movie, *The Princess Bride*. But in that film a character named Inigo Montoya has chased for over 20 years a six-fingered man who killed his father. Finally, as the six-fingered man is at sword point, Montoya says to him in words that he has long rehearsed, "My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

The murderer begins to plead for mercy. Inigo Montoya says, "Offer me money." The six-fingered man says, "Yes." Montoya says, "Power, too, promise me that." The six-fingered man says, "All I have and more." Montoya says, "Offer me everything I ask for."

The six-finger man says, “Ask anything you want.” Montoya runs him through with his sword and says, “I want my father back.” He kills him.

You know, one of the things that we are trying to do in our ministry to the poor is to bring people’s fathers back. One of the things that I have asked Brian Detwiler to work on and to look into is how can we reunite fathers with families, especially in the inner city? Because the predictor of poverty in America, as you might know, is not race. It is not sex. It is not ethnicity. There is one predictor of poverty in America. Is there a dad in the home? In two parent families, where mom and dad are both married and have a child in the U.S. today, there is virtually no poverty. That is what the Commerce Bureau tells us. Almost all poverty is the result of an absence of dad and an absence of husband. Single moms trying to make it on their own. And James says to such people God gives something deeper than just money. He gives faith. He gives the kingdom, which involves relationships and righteousness and peace and joy.

We further see that favoritism contradicts our experience. James says in vv. 6-7 that you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are not they the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

James asks us what has your experience been with the lovely, the beautiful people? You care so much about the opinions of the beautiful people and try so hard to impress them. You make sure the beautiful people at work think you are intelligent and respectable. Tell me, what was your experience of the most popular people in high school? Would you say that the most popular people in high school were the nicest people? The most humble? The most generous in their compliments and encouragements toward the weak? How did the most popular people treat the homely? The non-athletes? The obese?

James is saying that these beautiful people are the very source of your problem. They and people like them. Why do you always care about the opinions of the lovely people? They and people like them are often exploiters. “Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?” Literally, the word “exploit” means to oppress, to dominate.

There is one spiritual being in the Bible that oppresses and rips off and dominates. Satan. One of the commentators very wisely said that to join sides with the oppressor, to stand with the lovely against the unlovely is to join sides with Satan against God. God hates oppression. He hates domination. He hates abuse. He hates it when people are beaten down and victimized. God always stands on the side of the underdog. His heart goes out to those who are abused verbally and physically and sexually. Who are abused by systems and structures in which you can never get ahead? Never ask which side is God on. He always takes the side of the underdog, the beaten down person. Isn't he the one who chose the slave people for himself in choosing Israel? The cries of the slaves got to his heart.

The wealthy not only exploit, they sue. Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Who hires most of the lawyers in this country? The poor? Who brings most of the lawsuits to prohibit school prayer at graduation? Or to bar a nativity scene in public places or to keep peaceful protesters away from abortion clinics? Who does this stuff? The poor? Or the well off?

You know, what is so noticeable about circles of respectability in our country is almost the complete exclusion of God as a serious subject of inquiry. Well, I enjoy gardening, doing things with flowers. And you enjoy God. That is your little hobby. But you better not bring God around here. Who is it that blasphemes the name of God? That is literally what James is saying. Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name? Literally, they blaspheme the noble name of him to whom you belong.

Who fills college classrooms with anti-Christian rhetoric? The poor? Who attacks marriages as outdated? Who portrays God as this patriarchal white, dead European? The poor? If you were to take a look at the 50 most influential people in Hollywood and in one of those entertainment magazines, or I was reading not too long ago in Life Magazine, the 50 Most Influential Baby Boomers, how many of them have any regard for the person you Christians say you love? Jesus. Who is on the side of your Lord? The lovely people? What is your experience?

I was reading the remarks of an inner city pastor who said that a lot of his friends in the ministry in the inner city have been trained at very liberal seminaries in what is called liberation theology. That is kind of a blend of Marxism, Socialism and Christianity. And he said they were very frustrated in their preaching to the poor in the inner city because a lot poor folks don't want to listen to liberation theology. They tend to gravitate toward Pentecostal churches and charismatic churches, and Baptist churches. He learned what the problem was in talking to a poor woman, she said, "We don't come to church to hear what you are preaching. We come to church to meet Jesus." We come to church to meet Jesus.

What is your experience? Is that the heart of the lovely? We go to church to meet Jesus? Or to put on a fashion show? To maintain respectability? To meet clients? We go to church to meet Jesus.

James finally says that favoritism contradicts the law of love. Look at v. 8: "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 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 is saying that favoritism is not just a mistake. It is not just a preference. It is not just a human weakness or something that is defensible because we all do it. James says that it is a sin. If you show favoritism, you sin. Showing preference to people who are like us or showing preference to the lovely is sin.

Now, why is it a sin? Because James goes on and says, “Because you are breaking the law.”

I went down to the Ohio State University this week on Wednesday to do some open air preaching on the oval, along with other folks from the church. Andy Saperstein and a few others went. We were with the IV group down at OSU. I had a wonderful opportunity to speak to some students. I sat down next to a student there that said to me, “You know, I am really not so bad. I mean I don’t kill anyone. I don’t steal. I do lie occasionally and I do have premarital sex. So, I do break a few commandments.”

James is saying that if you break one commandment, this commandment regarding favoritism and love, you have broken the whole law. You can never say to God, “God, all I have done is have a little premarital sex. That is all I have done. I am otherwise a good person. All I have done is lie. I don’t steal. I don’t commit adultery. I don’t kill. All I have done is lie a little bit. Therefore I am an OK person and not a sinner!”

According the Bible and the apostle James, breaking one of the commandments breaks the whole law. If you show favoritism and preference, you are a lawbreaker against the entire law of God. Why? Because James tells us that the law of God is an indivisible whole.

You need to picture this. The commandments of God are not like a heap of rocks. So that you can take one rock away and the heap still remains intact. The rest of the rocks are undisturbed. The commandments are more like a sheet of glass in a window. If you

were to take one stone and throw it against that sheet of glass in the window, you would break the whole. The commands are an indivisible whole because they reflect the character and revelation of God. That is why James says, “The same God who says, ‘do not commit adultery’ also says ‘do not murder.’” We are talking about the same God who prohibits favoritism, also prohibits killing. Since God stands behind the commandments, every time we punch at one of the commandments, we punch at God.

Now, I can hear some people say, “I don’t really like to think of God that way. I prefer to think that I can pick and choose. I should be able to have a smorgasbord approach to the commandments of God. I pick certain commands to obey and others I don’t obey. We, all of us, like to remake God in our image.

You know, we never have to be embarrassed about the commandments of God. We never have to be apologetic to someone who says, “Well, why this?” or “Why that?” James says, “Speak and act like those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.”

Why this? Why that? Because the commands of God are designed to provide health and freedom to people who are sin sick. So many people these days say, “You don’t have any right to impose your standards on me. Why should I listen to this thing about favoritism or adultery or anyone of the other commandments? You have no right to impose your standards on me. I am no Christian.”

Frankly, I think that it is appropriate for us to remind people that it is not our standards concerning adultery or killing or protecting the unborn or elderly or anyone else, it is not our standards we are pushing, but God’s standards. I think we might be able to analogize to a patient who is given a prescription by a doctor in order to improve the patient’s health and who says to the doctor, “You have no right to give me a prescription like this. After all, I am no doctor and I don’t have to listen to you.”

We must understand that everything that God commands in his Bible is designed to provide life and freedom. You don't ever have to apologize for one of the commands. They are all important because they are all backed up by the character of God. We can't pick and choose. And they are all there to give us life and freedom.

Now, specifically, what commandment is James calling us to keep? The commandment regarding love and mercy. James says, "If you really keep the royal law found in scripture, 'love your neighbor as yourself' you are doing right." And then he goes on and says, "Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who is not merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

Why does James call the law of love and mercy the royal law? Well, it may be that James is referring to the law of love and mercy as the king or chief of all laws. That is why it is the royal law. You know, like Budweiser is the king of beers. Love is the king of laws. Jesus gave it special dignity, by the way, when he selected the law of love out from the mass of all the laws and said, "This is the most important law." Love is also the reigning principle for the heirs of the kingdom. And it is the opposite of partiality, which is loving unlovely people.

What would it mean for you to keep the law of love and to keep the law of mercy? What would it mean for you?

Well, to keep the law of love would mean that you would treat people the way that you would want to be treated. And I sat down with a blank sheet of paper and wrote down a few ways that are important to me to be treated and I thought well, this is the way I am supposed to treat someone else.

What is important to you in terms of the way that someone relates to you? What is important? Let me share with you a few things that I wrote down.

To me it is important to be trusted. Love for me means being trusted. If someone trusts my motives, which they trust my heart, that they don't think that I am trying to do them dirty or that I have this manipulative agenda. For me to treat someone the way I want to be treated means that unless there is significant evidence to the contrary, I need to trust their heart and give them the benefit of the doubt. Believe them when they say something.

To me, love means expressing encouragement and affirmation. I know the way that I want to be treated is that I enjoy it when someone says something nice to me and encourages me. They say "good job" and recognize something that I have done. They are affectionate.

To me, love means being accepted. To not have someone look at me as if I don't fit into his or her circle, but instead to invite me into the circle. To roll out the carpet and say, "Welcome." If I am going to show love to someone, that means I am going to welcome them. To invite them in.

Here in the Vineyard, one of our highest values and the way we show love to each other is that you are allowed to be real. You don't have to put on a mask. Love for me means that I can be accepted and received for who I am. That I don't have to pretend to be some super spiritual person or a perfect pastor. I can just be me – saved by God's grace and excited that I get the privilege to do this stuff.

Ken Medema, who is a blind songwriter, wrote a wonderful song about us just being real around each other in the church. It is called, "If This is not a Place." Let me read this to you because I think it tell us what it means to practice the law of love in a favoritism free zone. He says:

"If this is not a place where tears are understood, then where shall I go to cry?

And if this is not a place where my spirit can take wings, then where shall I go to fly?

I don't need another place for trying to impress you with just how good and virtuous I am. No. No. No. I don't need another place for always being on top of things, everybody knows that that's a sham, it's a sham.

I don't need another place for always wearing smiles, even when that's not the way I feel.

I don't need another place to mouth the same old platitudes; everyone knows that it is not real.

So, if this is not a place where my questions can be asked, then where shall I go to seek?

And if this is not a place where my heart cry can be heard, where tell me, where shall I go to speak?

So, if this is not a place where tears are understood, where shall I go? Where shall I go to fly?"

Friends, this is the place where tears are understood. Where questions can be asked. Where we can love each other. And if it can't happen here in our church, where is it going to happen? Where are we going to go to for that?

James says, "Keep the law of love and practice the law of mercy." You know what mercy means? Mercy means showing kindness and pity toward those who don't deserve it. Look at his statement, "Speak and act like as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

The opposite of favoritism is love and mercy. You know, we all fail. When you start putting the standards of God up like loving the lovely, not just reaching out to those who are

like us, loving people like we want to be loved. We all fall short. We all fail. Therefore, we all need mercy. What can we do? We can show mercy.

Let me finish with a few thoughts. Is there anyone who has failed you who you have refused to show mercy to? Someone who doesn't deserve it? That you just feel like you have a right to continue to be hostile toward? Is there anyone that has failed you that you have refused to show mercy to?

Your parents. Are you merciful toward your parents? Your mother and your father?

Your ex-spouse who does not deserve kindness from you. Kind speech. Gentleness.

Your present spouse.

Former business partner who has ripped you off?

Your boss?

Former pastor or church leader?

Is there anyone in your life that you have refused to show mercy to? You know, people all around us are saying, "You say that God is merciful, kind and loving. But the world that I live in is so miserable and so hard. Where is the evidence that God is loving and merciful?"

I heard from a woman whose daughter is working in an emergency room at a big city hospital. Seeing what she sees, she is beginning to doubt whether there is a good God in heaven. It is when we Christians show mercy, when we care for the undeserving, when we reach out to someone who can't repay in mercy rather than judgment, we evidence that there is a power greater than the force of condemnation, the force of hatred, the force of prejudice in this world.

You know the cross that Jesus died on is the place most of all in which mercy triumphs over judgment. Because of our sins, you and I deserve God's judgment and condemnation. But because of Christ's death as our substitute and sin-bearer, God gives us mercy instead.