

The Serious Nature of Sinful Partiality

James 2:8-13

January 28, 2024

Turn in your Bibles to James, chapter 2, James, chapter 2. And this morning we're going to be finishing up this fairly long section of James' instruction when it comes to the sin of partiality. This will be the third sermon that I've done, the third sermon from this section; and if you remember, in the first one we just kind of introduced the issue. We just looked at verse 1. We defined what sinful partiality is a bit, and then looked only at the language that James uses in verse 1 to show just how inconsistent it is for someone who understands and has come to believe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to also display sinful partiality.

We pointed out how the word which is translated in this passage as "partiality," or "favoritism" in some versions, it's a Greek term that's not found in any other Greek documents. It's

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

only found in the New Testament, where it's used several times, and we looked at some of those passages in that first sermon. It's the word *prosopolempsia*, and it refers to showing favor to someone but in an unfair or unjust way. It's essentially coming to a verdict about how you will treat someone or how much you're going to value someone, just based on totally wrong considerations and external factors, which should really have no ultimate bearing on our evaluation of someone, especially for those of us who know the character of God and desire to be conformed to his word.

So it's important that we understand that this is what we mean by "partiality" in this text, sinful partiality. That's the type of partiality James is talking about because there is a good and right type of partiality that we practice all the time in many different relationships, but it is also a partiality that's motivated by obedience to God's word, not disobedience to it. So, for example, I love you all dearly, but I have no problem saying that I prefer my wife over all of you. I do, and when I make decisions about things, how it affects her and what she thinks carries more weight for me than any other individual.

And that preference that I display is actually wrapped up in my God-given responsibilities and priorities as a husband.

Similarly, if Travis or Bill or another elder were to instruct me to begin practicing a certain thing, or to adjust my thinking in a certain way, it carries much more weight than it would from others. I treat it with greater preference than even the best conference speaker or preacher on YouTube, or anyone else for that matter, who were to give me instruction. I will prefer their instruction. I'm going to be partial to it because they have a God-given authority in my life that no one else does. I will be partial towards them and their instruction because I'm commanded by the same God who gives these commands in James 2 to do so.

So the very fact that James is authoritatively commanding the things he does in this letter demonstrates that he assumes that they are going to make right distinctions and right preferences and show a godly partiality to his instruction over some friend who might be standing next to them, who's listening to the letter being read and just saying, "I don't think James

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

really gets us here. I think we should just keep doing what we're doing. He doesn't know what's going on." He's expecting them to take what he's saying with a proper, righteous partiality. "This is the leader of the church: James. So what he has to say to me and his authority he has over me is more than this knucklehead next to me."

So it is important that we remember that what is being commanded here in this really neat Greek word translated as "partiality" is only in reference to the sinful partiality that looks at selfish considerations and selfish, maybe external factors when deciding on how to evaluate or treat someone. And it's not in any way undermining the different types of righteous distinctions that God expects his people to continue making. So make sure we're clear on that.

So we talked a little bit about that in the first sermon, and in the second sermon, which focused on verses 2-7, we saw James giving an example of the type of sinful partiality that he was primarily concerned with among this particular congregation, and that's showing favoritism toward the rich over the poor. So

he gives an example of what this looks like in verses 2-4, and then he goes on in verses 5-7 to point out how this type of sinful partiality just flies in the face of what they claim to know to be true about God.

And it's inconsistent with even logic itself. They know that God loves to use the poor and the weak to shame the wise and the strong in order to bring more glory to himself. They know that about God. And they also know, by the way, that the rich are the ones who are, through their trials and bringing them to court, they're the ones that are responsible for many of the trials that they are facing, so it doesn't make sense to favor them.

And in the passage that we're going to be looking at today, we're going to see James continue on in this repudiation of the idea that sinful partiality can have any place in the life of a Christian by moving past the argument of logic and wisdom into an increasingly powerful argument from what they should know to be true from Scripture. So that is what we're going to be looking at today as James just continues to build the case for

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

the strong condemnation of a sin that, honestly, we are so easily tempted to kind of just brush away as something that we all do. "We, you know, we all do this one, so it's not really that big a deal," kind of brush it away.

So let's once again look at the entire argument laid out in chapter 2 and read all of verses 1-13 together. "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in; and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing, and say, 'You sit here in a good place,' while you say to the poor man, 'You stand over there or sit down at my feet,' have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

"Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him? You have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones

who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? 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's 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 you 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."

So we can see in this passage, and it is clearly important to James that the reader understand, that this issue is, in fact, a big deal and to not treat it with kind of the "Ho hum, yeah, I know, I shouldn't be like that" type of attitude that we're so prone to do with sins like this one. "I know it's wrong. I got it. But you know, it's not one of the big ones. Look what that guy's doing." That's what we do. But God, through James, wants to show us in this passage that yes, this is, in fact, a big one.

And we see that before we even get into the text, just with the knowledge that the book of James addresses a lot of different subjects with short, pithy teachings. James is sometimes called the "the Proverbs of the New Testament" for that reason. And as the original readers just observed the length of the letter, it might be a little shocking for them just to see the number of words that James devotes to this topic. The book of James is only 108 verses in our English Bibles, and 13 of them are used right here. This is a large amount of precious, divinely inspired real estate that James is giving to this topic.

If we were gathered with this early congregation to hear this letter written from James, the half-brother of Jesus, the one, again, who is at the time probably the most important single figure in the early church, remember, we looked back and we looked at how Paul even answered to him in Acts, you can imagine that as they're listening to this being read, and they're getting into this section, and they hear what's read in verses 1-7, and they kind of know how long maybe the letter is, and being like, "Okay, I got it; that seemed like a pretty

strong rebuke for our seating assignments, but okay, noted. Now what? What's next? Here we go."

Even maybe as they heard verse 8, they might have thought that they were heading into an exposition, now, on a well-recognized section of the Torah that was also famously part of Jesus' teachings. And then they get to verse 8 and then immediately to verse 9, only to be caught off guard as he actually just uses verse 8 to double down and continue to strengthen his argument for the strong condemnation of the sin of partiality.

So we need to see how serious this is. And this morning that's what we're going to do. We're going to follow the argumentation in verses 8-13 that James makes. We're going to do this with three points, three reasons why the sin of partiality is so serious, three reasons why the sin of partiality is so serious. Number one, we'll see the standard in Scripture. Number two, we'll see the significance of the sin. Number three, we'll see the standing of the saved, and I'll go back over them as we get to them.

So first, the standard in Scripture, the standard in Scripture, and we're going to see that throughout this entire passage, but most particularly here as we examine verses 8-9. Here we see kind of the great anchor for this command from the law of God. So look again at verses 8-9. James says, "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scriptures, '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." The word translated as "really" here in our ESV version, the word *mentoi*, is usually translated as "however," which would help us to see a little more clearly that James is actually connecting the two passages.

But the way that he makes this statement, the way that he says this, makes it sound like either the readers believed themselves to be obedient to this command already in some way, or maybe even that James knows that there are, in fact, some there who really are living this command in spite of others. But whatever the case, the definite implication is that James is using his readers' familiarity with this command to make a point. He is referencing a section of the Torah that they no

doubt have a great admiration and appreciation for. It's one that they understand the great significance of.

Remember, this is a Jewish congregation. These are Jewish Christians, Christians converted out of Judaism. So they are very familiar with the Old Testament and its laws, and James wants this familiar command to be kind of front and center in their thinking before he continues on. And so, indeed, this is the context that we need in order to give the proper weight to what we're going to be talking about, especially when we get into our second point. It's worth spending a good amount of our time on now to establish this context.

So flip over in your Bibles to Leviticus 19, Leviticus 19, so that we're able to familiarize ourselves with this passage that the original readers would be thinking of as James is making his point. Leviticus 19, as I've mentioned in some previous sermons, is a central text that kind of stands in the background of this letter from James. It's quoted from or alluded to at least five times in the epistle. But in Leviticus we see God laying out and explaining the laws for his people,

for the nation of Israel. These are laws that are given so that his people might reflect his character.

And that's exactly what we see in the words of God that set up this section in chapter 19. So just quickly look at verses 1 and 2: "And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God am holy."'" So the basis for the commands that he's about to give is grounded in his own holiness and the principle that his people should be holy as he is holy. His desires are that they reflect the character of God, and that these laws are what is intended to set them apart as they do this. And obedience to the law, that's how it's accomplished. And in these first four verses of chapter 19, he kind of summarizes and restates some of the Ten Commandments. And then in verses 5-8 he talks about the proper way that sacrifices are supposed to be offered.

But notice how in verses 3 and 4, notice how those verses end: ""Everyone of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths. I am the Lord your God. Do not

turn to idols or make for yourselves any gods of cast metal. I am the Lord your God."'" That's how he ends these. It's a gracious reminder. It's a gracious reminder for the sinfully depraved of the gravity of these commands. It keeps us, and it should keep them, from the temptation of just neglecting one as less important than the other.

So with that in mind, now continue looking down as those first eight verses are primarily about how they ought to relate to God or reminders of what we would call the First Table of the Law. And now verses 9-17 are about how his people are to reflect the character of God in how they relate to one another, what we would call the Second Table of the Law. And as we read these, just notice again the repetition of the statement, "I am the Lord." It's a constant reminder that these commands are a big deal, that what lies behind them is the very heart of God, and it's not something that can just be shrugged off.

So starting in verse 9, he says, ""When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge. Neither shall you gather the gleanings after your

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare. Neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the sojourner." Again, that kind of sounds like a command that, "Okay, harvest commands are all right," but to keep you from doing that, to keep you from thinking that, he says, "'I am the Lord your God.'" That's how he ends that, and then goes on: "'You shall not steal. You shall not deal falsely. You shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by my name falsely and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.

"'You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God. I am the Lord. You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor. I am the Lord. You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall

not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."'"

So you can see here that the concern of God for those who are called to be his people, his concern for how his people are to treat others, is made crystal clear in this passage. And he makes it impossible for them to kind of just dismiss these commands as of secondary importance, any of them, dismiss them as secondary, compared to what we might consider the big ones, with the forceful reminder, "I am the Lord." These are all to be thought of as important. And there, at the end of verse 18, you saw the famous summary statement of the law that James quotes in the passage we're looking at this morning: "But you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

And if you just back up a few verses to verse 15, you can see that James clearly has not left the subject of partiality because one of the commands that is summed up in the command to love your neighbor as yourself is the command not to be partial. Look again at verse 15: "You shall do no injustice in court. You

shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor." So you're not to be partial to the poor or the rich. Loving your neighbor as yourself means showing no partiality.

So again, as we might be tempted to say, "This is just a thing that everyone does to one degree or another," and maybe even now you're out there kind of zoning off, like, "I know I'm not supposed to be partial, but come on, everyone does it"; and you're thinking, "Yeah, we shouldn't do it. It's kind of hard to help, though." And to that kind of attitude, God says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." And James not only quotes the law, but he refers to it as "the royal law," so that, you don't have to turn back there yet, but the word that James uses, there, for "royal" is an adjective that does mean something like "kingly," and it's used in other places to describe as an adjective for the royal robes that a king might wear.

So with this terminology, James isn't looking to set this law, "Love your neighbor as yourself," he's not looking to set

that law apart from other laws, as if “love your neighbor as yourself” is in a separate category of laws that's more distinguished than others. Adding the adjective “royal” just reminds us that this is a good law given to us by a kind and merciful sovereign; and it points to the reminder of the Law-Giver that we're going to see in greater detail in a little bit.

What James is doing here by calling it “the royal law” and, and using it kind of in a summary fashion, it's just the same thing that his brother Jesus did, as Jesus used the command as a summary way of speaking of the good and royal law of God, of how we're supposed to act towards others. And we can be almost certain that James has Jesus' use of this passage in mind also as he writes this because allusions to the teaching of Jesus are just everywhere in the book of James, and it is so appropriate, then, this royal law is quoted by Jesus Christ the King.

So as you're making your way back to James, stop off in Mark 12 and let's look there at Jesus' use of this law in Mark 12:28-31. We read this: “One of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

them well, asked him," asked Jesus, "'Which commandment is the most important of all?' Jesus answered, 'The most important is "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." And the second is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'"

So Jesus attaches this commandment, the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, he attaches it to the *Shema*, the "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." He attaches it to it, and he gives these two commands distinction as the two most important commands precisely because they sum up the entirety of the Law. What he's doing here actually battles against our desire to rank the commands in order, saying these commands sum up the entirety of the law. And anytime we sin, we are failing to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. That's what's going on. Anytime you sin, you are violating that law. And then whenever we sin against another person, in addition to failing to love the Lord with all of our heart and mind and strength, we also fail to love our neighbor as ourselves. So these commands are violated all the time. No

matter which particular command we are violating, we're violating these.

So now turn back to James, and in order to kind of further drive home the point that James surely has the command of Christ in mind here, look back up to the very first verse in this section. So he begins this section in chapter 2, verse 1. He says, "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." It's kind of surprising, and I noted this before, that other than the introduction to the letter, this is the only place in the entire letter where Jesus is named. It is here in the command to not hold to a faith in him, the Lord of glory, while still holding on to an attitude of partiality. It's a reminder that this is the royal law of God that has been reiterated by the King, Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

So yes, now back into verse 8, if you're really fulfilling that law, if you're really fulfilling the law to love your neighbor as yourself, then you are doing well. That's what James says. But again, he seems to be appealing to the fact that they

understand the importance of this law, and probably in some way or another they think they're being obedient to it. But James' point is that they, in fact, are not. "If you fulfill this law, you do well." But showing partiality shows that you're not fulfilling the law.

They, like us, probably had lots of relationships that they could point to if anyone ever accused them of failing to love their neighbor as themselves. "Wait, no, I love my neighbor as a myself. Look at this neighbor on the right side of my house. I totally love him, but let's don't talk to the guy on the left side. But this guy over here, I love him as myself for whatever reason." We all have relationships that we can point to, to make ourselves feel like we're being obedient to this law, that kind of gives us a little bit of ground. That's what happened.

But in verse 9, look at what he says. He says, "But if you show partiality, you're committing sin, and you're convicted by the law as transgressors." Essentially, he says it doesn't matter how many positive examples that you can think of to prove your obedience to the royal law. If you're loving some while

showing partiality to others, you are committing sin. You're convicted by the law as a transgressor.

And why is that? What does it mean to love our neighbor as ourself? So we tend to trip ourselves up, and we let ourselves off the hook because even though we know better, a lot of times we drop back into the worldly definition of "love" and deceive ourselves into thinking we're still obeying this command when, when we show partiality. We say, "No, no, no. I still have a general feeling of love to that person. The way I feel towards them is loving. I certainly don't feel hate toward them. You can't get me with that. And I truly do want the best for them. I can say I believe all of those things. I can say that's what I feel, and you can't say anything because only God knows my heart."

But it's in my actions. That's what demonstrates that I actually just prefer to give myself to the people that I'm going to receive something from, whatever it is, whether that something is material blessings from them or just companionship or just some sort of peace, or just, "I'm not going to be

annoyed by this guy, so I'm going to go to him. But it's not that I don't love this other guy." That's what we say. And James is saying, "Ah, but it is. It is that you don't love them."

Because just as always in the Bible, the command to love in the Bible is about action and not emotion. It's not about feelings. It's about action. That's the type of thinking when we start to get in that way, just to find ourselves by the fact that we don't actually have hateful feelings towards someone. That's the same kind of wrong foundational problem as those, you know, the so-called Christian psychologists or Christian life coaches out there who try and say that somehow within this command we see the command to love yourself.

That's not what's going on, here. We're not commanded to love ourselves. Not understanding, not realizing the love that we deserve: That is not our problem. It's actually the exact opposite of our problem. Just think back to, to Bret's sermons from Romans 3, right? That's the beauty of the gospel, that we are totally undeserving of love, and yet God loves us through Christ. We're not commanded to love ourselves. People who say,

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

"You need to learn to love yourself so that you can be obedient to this command" are, are confused either about what the Bible says about humanity or about what love actually is.

There's no imperative in this verse, in James, or when Jesus quotes it, or in Leviticus 19 that's directed toward an action towards ourselves. It is an imperative directed at action towards others. The phrase "as yourself" is Jesus using an example. He's using it as an example for how we are to love others. He's not including us in the category of those whom we need to love. It's "Love others as yourself," not "Love others and yourself." It doesn't matter how you actually feel about yourself.

The fact is, you practice love toward yourself every day, and the proof is in the fact that you are existing and here right now and listening to me. Every day, you make sure that you are fed. You make sure that you are clothed. You make sure that you are provided for to the best of your ability. It comes naturally to us. When you're hungry, you eat. When you see that something needs fixed in the mirror, you fix it. We get hurt.

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

You don't just roll over and die. You go to the doctor. You take care of it.

So you can't argue with this. The fact that you're here and that you're clothed and alive proves that you've done this consistently on a day-to-day basis throughout your life, and it's something that just comes naturally to us. That's the point of the command. It just comes naturally to you to look after yourself, to take care of yourself. That's what it means to "love others as yourself," to look out for them and their needs, and to do it as naturally as you do your own.

So when we show sinful partiality, we fail at this. The actions of these people in the example that James gave, it shows that they preferred one over the other. The whole problem was that they weren't loving others as themselves, but actually they were using others to love themselves. That's what we do when we show partiality, no matter how we might cover it up, as, "No, I am being totally loving towards this person who, yes, I get along with better and makes me feel better and can help me with more things." Using others to love yourself. You can even see in

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

that example from verses 2 and 3, where the person is offering the good seat to the rich person, you can even see a place where that person might have pointed to such an action as that example of loving my neighbor. "Look, look what I did, Pastor. This new guy came in, I sat him down in the best seat. That's loving. That's a loving thing for me to do. Look how I offered up the very best seat to this visitor. If I were coming in, that's how I'd want to be treated. And that is what I did."

And actually, the problem, as we mentioned last time, wasn't that they were kind to the rich man. It's not that you see a rich person and you all scatter. No, the problem wasn't that they were kind to the rich man; it's that they preferred him over the poor man based entirely on selfish, external factors. "If I have to pick one for the good seat, I'm going to pick the one that benefits me the most."

So you might feel like you're doing well, as James says, but in actuality, you're loving yourself through your so-called love of others. That's what we do in sinful partiality. We try and skirt the issue. It's funny. We try and skirt the issue in

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

another way by defining our neighbor how we want to, right, when we show partiality, and we actually show ourselves to be no different than the lawyer who questions Jesus in Luke 10.

Remember in Luke 10, in verses 25-29, "Behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? How do you read it?' And he answered, the lawyer answers, "You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.'" And Jesus said to him, 'You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live.'"

So, look how the lawyer knows the command, he understands the significance, but then what does the next verse say? "But he," but the lawyer, "desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" and try and get around it that way. And then, of course, Jesus goes on to give the parable of the Good Samaritan to point out how your neighbor can be the person who you would most despise and who has absolutely no ability to ever give you anything in return. So we can easily be like this lawyer. We excuse our sinful partiality, not necessarily by refusing to obey the command to love our neighbor

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

as ourselves, but by quibbling, at least in our hearts, with who qualifies as our neighbor, trying to make an excuse, comforting ourselves with the areas that we have been obedient to in the law.

So when I was in seminary, one of my professors in his tests would give us these tests where he'd give us six essay questions at the end of the year, and we had the blue book to fill out the essay questions, and he would tell us, "You have to answer three of them." So answer three questions out of the six, and if you get three of the six questions, and you're like, "Oh yeah, I got those, those are good," and you get a good grade on the test and you get an A, you can fool yourself into thinking that you have mastered the material when in reality you've just answered and focused on the three that you're good with. You think you've mastered; in fact, the degree is a Master of Divinity, and it kind of makes you think that you've mastered it when in reality it's just because there's no, you know, probably half a Master, at best, degree that they give you.

So we can treat the law like that. We can get excited about it, "I got this stuff down," and just kind of ignore and think that we're doing well. "I'm doing well. I've got these, and I've got them good." What about number five? "No, no, got an A on the test." That's what we can do. We make an excuse, and we like to look at the law that way.

But notice the language, there, again in verse 9. He just says plainly, doesn't mince words. You're not "kind of" being obedient. You are committing sin, *hamartia*, where we get the word *hamartiology*, the word that means "missing the mark." We don't think of sinful partiality this way. We make excuses because there are certain people, maybe, we just don't click with or they just struggle with things that we don't. We just can't relate to them at all, or maybe they even just bother us from a physical standpoint. And even if there are other relationships that we can point to and say, "But look here, I am loving this person as myself." The word that's used here isn't one that says, "Oh, okay, you're close to the mark." No, it's "You're missing the mark," committing sin.

And then verse 9 goes on to make it even stronger, saying not only are you committing sin, but you are convicted as a transgressor, as a transgressor. This is one who willfully goes beyond the law, one who sees the line and steps over it. And contrary to what they might have believed, according to the standard set forth in Scripture, not only are they not really fulfilling the law, but they are in fact standing convicted by it. Showing partiality toward the rich over the poor, showing any type of sinful partiality in our lives, it's not merely a matter of personal preference. It's a matter of committing sin and becoming convicted as a transgressor.

And that leads us to point number two, point number two, the significance of sin. The next two take less time. So verses 8 and 9 make the case that sinful partiality is no small matter. It's not something to be blown off, but according to the clear teaching of the law, the clear teaching of Jesus Christ, it is committing sin. You've been convicted as a transgressor for your favoritism, and just in case the readers are even after that tempted to try and qualify it as a lesser sin, "Okay, fine, it's a sin, but it's a lesser sin," James won't let them. Look at verses 10 and 11: "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 you can actually hear in that echoes, right, of Paul's teaching that we heard from Bret on Romans 3. Those who have broken the law at any point stand as guilty transgressors of it. This is not James saying that all sins are equally bad. This is just a truism. If you break the law, you are a law-breaker. That's how we speak today. When someone goes to prison, we don't say, "They broke a law." We say, "Oh, they broke the law." It's a recognition that the law stands as a unified whole.

The example of thinking of the law as a piece of glass was used in almost every commentary I looked at. But thinking of it as a piece of glass, the idea that if you take a hammer to a sheet of glass, you might only hit one place but the entire piece is shattered. There is no going back. You don't say, "I broke part of the glass." You've broken the glass. It's not that

you now have mostly good glass that's partially broken. It's broken. You've broken useless glass.

The reason this is so, the reason that it has to be seen, the law has to be seen as a unified whole and not a bunch of parts, is because of the truth expressed at the beginning of verse 11. It's critical. "For he who said, 'Don't commit adultery also said, "Don't murder.'" The commands to not murder and to not commit adultery, and every other command, they all come from the same God. That which is of the most fundamental importance of every individual law, the thing that's most important about them, is that they come from God. James doesn't just say, "Scripture says," but he makes it personal with God. He said, "He who said," and he does this to, to cut off any objection that might be made by someone who is maybe put off by this statement in verse 10 that "Whoever keeps the law but fails in one point has become guilty of it all."

Someone might say, "Well, that's crazy! I obey most of the laws most of the time. I'm doing pretty good. Just because I show partiality to someone shouldn't cast me in the category of

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

guilty of breaking the whole law!" And beloved, this is why what James says here in verse 11 is so crucial. It cuts to our hearts because it absolutely kills any excuse I've had in my life for just kind of passively accepting the slow pace at which I am mortifying some certain sinful habit in my life while pointing to the places where I've really changed, as evidence of my love for God and my love for his word.

Because to hold one commandment with more reverence, to deem it more worthy of my effort while momentarily kind of excusing myself from the slow obedience or, frankly, passive attitude to another of those lesser sins, that's an indication that it is not the law of God that I'm honoring, but rather my own evaluation of his law. That's what I'm honoring. What has actually made the law of importance to my life is not that the Creator-God of the universe, the God whose gospel has saved me from an eternal hell that I deserve, it's not that this God said it and therefore it's important, but rather what's important is that I've come to agree with him about it, about it's seriousness. Even though it's a law given by God, it's really just my evaluation of its importance that I'm honoring.

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

So if you tell your child to sit at the table and be quiet until they finish their dinner, and then they do remain seated and they finish their dinner, but they scream the whole time; or if they silently sneak under the table and finish their dinner, have they honored you by obeying two of your three instructions? No. They've done what they felt like. They've gone as far as they wanted to in their obedience. They decided which of your instructions was worth giving effort to, and which ones worked in conjunction with their own desires; and then they made their decision on that basis.

And we're no different when we make the decision to put off the "little things" in our obedience because there are no "little things" when it comes to sin. There are only those things that deserve eternal damnation. Brothers and sisters, if we pick and choose commands to focus on, make excuses for putting off the difficult ones while taking comfort in the ones that we do observe to maybe alleviate the conviction a little bit, well, we might be able to say in some way that we're being obedient to God's laws. Maybe other people will confirm that in us.

We might be able to say we're being obedient to God's laws, but in what sense can we say that we're being obedient to God himself? To willfully break one of the laws is to rebel against the authority upon which the law is founded. To allow ourselves to make a type of peace with our sinful partiality or any other sin that we may deem as less significant is to make ourselves the final authority over what is actually the word of God and to relegate God to really nothing more than a consultant in our lives. This is the implication when you understand the divine authority behind every law.

So if that's the case, why does James use two of what we would consider to be the more serious laws to make this point? Wouldn't it be stronger if he said adultery and coveting, or murder and partiality? Why does he pick two what were capital crimes from the law? But when you think about it, it actually makes the point stronger because these are two of the sins that we find to be the most egregious violations of the command to love our neighbor. And so he's saying to show favoritism is to violate the same basic commandment of loving your neighbor that is at the heart of the commands to not murder and to not commit adultery.

So when you understand that God is the authority behind every command, then you will come to understand that saying something like, "I just showed partiality to the rich, I didn't murder anyone," should sound just as foolish as "I just committed murder; I didn't commit adultery" because such a statement gives weight only to our evaluation of the law with no regard to the authority behind it. It's essentially saying, "I didn't violate the law given by God not to commit adultery. I just violated a different law given by the same holy God who gave that law." That's what it's like. So in the end, to willingly break one commandment shows the same rebellion against the lawgiver that a murderer does. The sin of partiality, showing a self-serving preference for one person over another, is to entirely undercut the intention of the Second Table of the Law. And that is very significant.

And that leads us to our third point, a third way in which James shows us the seriousness of the sin of partiality, and that is in the reminder of the standing of the saved, the standing of the saved. Look at verses 12 and 13. So in light of all this, "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.”

Essentially, he is saying, here, that if you recognize yourself to be one who will be judged by the law of liberty, then act like it.

There are a few parts to this, but first is the reminder of judgment. The words “so” that you see there, “So speak and so act,” those aren't there necessarily to connect it to the previous verse, but they're there for emphasis: “So speak, and so act as those who will be judged.” When we make judgments about the value and worth of others based on our own sinful partiality, we can only do it while at the same time forgetting that we, too, will be judged. It's the only way we can do that and feel okay about it.

We are to be judged under the law, and under the law of liberty, the law of liberty. James is using this term again that we talked about, that he used already in verse 25, and it reminds us of the purpose of the law for the Christian, for the believer. It's no longer that which stands over us, condemning

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

us because we don't measure up to its standard. No, Christ has obeyed the law perfectly in our place, as Travis prayed this morning, and those who have believed in him and have now been given the perfect righteousness of Christ. And so with that alien righteousness applied to us, we now see the law as the law of liberty. We are free to live obediently to it, now understanding that, just like we saw in verse 25, it's now something that we long to look into, to persevere in, so that we can be a doer who acts upon it. This same law in which, apart from Christ, our only relationship to it is as a transgressor, for the believer is now a law of liberty.

One commentator put it this way: "God's gracious acceptance of us does not end our obligation to obey him. Rather, it sets it on a new footing. No longer is God's law a threatening, confining burden, for the will of God now confronts us as a law of liberty, an obligation we discharge in the joyful knowledge that God has both liberated us from the penalty of sin and given us in his Spirit the power to obey his will." To use James' own description, this law is "an implanted word written on the heart" that has the power to save us. And because it is something that we now love to do and that we now desire to obey,

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

the judgment of believers that we see in Matthew 25:31-40, you can write that down, you don't have to turn to it, but it makes sense to us.

So listen to that passage: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he placed the sheep on his right but the goats on the left. And then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me.' And then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you, or thirsty, and give you drink? And when did we see you, a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick, or in prison, and visit you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'"

So the evidence in this passage that is given to identify the righteous is connected with their obedience to the command to love their neighbor as themselves. And you get the sense from reading that passage that this is just how they lived. They're not trying to obey a law in order to save themselves so they can force the garment of a sheep over themselves. They're not trying to say they're just living out the law of liberty, because when you understand that all you could ever need has been freely given to you by God through Christ, and you are free to love others totally selflessly, knowing that you need nothing in return from them, what do they have that you could ever actually really need in light of eternity?

It's impossible, this is James' point, for those who have been treated so kindly in the gospel and understand the mercy that has been shown them, to be willfully hard-hearted toward others and to balk at the command to love others as yourself and not show partiality. It is impossible for someone who truly understands the gospel to do that. That's what we see in verse 13: "For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy."

The word "For," there, that begins that verse, it shows that verse 13 is the ground for what was just said in verse 12. The beginning of verse 13 is essentially, when when you look at it, it's essentially the negative way of stating the fifth beatitude from Matthew 5:7: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." James is kind of referencing that same thinking but from the opposite way, essentially saying, "Cursed is the one who's not merciful, for they won't receive mercy."

In Matthew 5:7, in that beatitude, Jesus isn't saying, "If you want to receive mercy, boy, you'd better do the work of being merciful." No, he's pointing to a quality that's possessed by those in the category of the "blessed." Those who will one day receive mercy are right now marked by the fact that they are merciful because in light of the gospel, how could they not be? So James is just following in this teaching. He's just following the often-repeated teaching of Jesus about how the way that you treat others in this life is the reflection of how you will be treated by God in the end.

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

So we saw this in the teaching of Jesus, even in the Lord's Prayer that we read earlier. In the Lord's Prayer, we asked to be forgiven by God as we have forgiven our debtors. And in verses 14-15 of Matthew 6, which we also read, immediately following the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." And again, the teaching pops up, it's just the main point in the parable of the unmerciful servant when the master summons him and says in Matthew 18:32-34, "'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

And in that, it's not necessarily the command to do that so that you can be forgiven. It's if one has really understood the forgiveness they've received in Christ, the mercy they've received in Christ, how could they not be that way? So here James is just echoing that same thing. He's pushing his readers

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

to really think about how comfortable they are, knowing that the mercy that they show to others is the mercy that they can expect from God.

It's a good test for us as we think about our treatment of others, isn't it, our sinful partiality. "Is this how I'm treating this person? Is this how I'm hoping God will treat me?" So think of the way you might think about, or act toward, or maybe ignore that person who you struggle with loving the most, the least of these, as it were. As you think about that, is it a pleasant or unpleasant thought for you to have God to think and act toward you in that same way?

Christians who have been shown such mercy ought to have the easiest time extending mercy to others. The inability to have a merciful attitude toward others is a demonstration that someone doesn't have a true understanding of the gravity of their own sin before a holy God. And if that's you, it should cause you to seriously question why on earth would you expect to receive mercy from God.

GRACE CHURCH

But those whose lives are marked by mercy will stand in the day of judgment. That's what that last phrase means. It's not that mercy is greater than judgment. Biblically, we know that true judgments and mercy work together. Zechariah 7:9: "Thus says the Lord of Hosts, 'Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, and work together.'" The mercy we show to others, it's just the evidence that we will be those who receive mercy on the day of judgment. And the question for us to ponder in application is, is that truth a comfort to you or a concern, that the mercy you show to others is the mercy you can expect to receive?

So, beloved, let's be careful to mortify every vestige of sinful partiality within ourselves. Let's be diligent to truly conform ourselves to the character of our impartial God, joyfully obey the royal law, the law of liberty, loving others as ourselves. Let's continually remind ourselves of the gospel, the unbelievable mercy of God toward those who deserve eternal punishment. And then let's let the joy of that truth overflow out of us into lives, and show the same mercy to everyone around us. Let's pray.

GRACE CHURCH

Father, we thank you so much for your strong word to a weak people, Lord, that you don't let us off the hook, and it's for our good. You keep us from our sinful inclination to brush certain things aside, to put certain commands into a minor category, even though you gave them to us for our joy. You are kind to remind us that these are commands, and that you are the Lord who authored them.

Lord God, I pray that Grace Church would be a church that is marked by mercy, and it's a real mercy that's just pouring out of the people who are so overjoyed with the mercy that they have received from a holy God through a perfect Savior and his propitiating death on the cross and victorious resurrection from the grave; that these gospel truths, that we would just keep driving deeper and deeper and deeper into them, causing us, forcing us, to be a people that more and more reflect the image of our glorious God. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.