

No One is Above the Law of God (James 2:8-13)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on September 13, 2009

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⁸ If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,” you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. ¹¹ For He who said, “DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,” also said, “DO NOT COMMIT MURDER.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

In verses 8-12, the word “law” appears in every verse, marking it as a key word in this section. In verse 13, the word is not used but instead we see the root word for mercy used 3x in the context of salvation and final judgment. The argument is moving from God’s law to God’s grace / mercy, which when truly implanted by the soul-saving gospel (1:21) is manifested in human mercy (2:13ff). There is a clear progression in this text with the words that begin the verses as well: *If* (v. 8), *but* (v. 9), *for* (v. 10, 11), *so* (v. 12, not in NIV but is emphatic in Grk *houtws*). Law leads to mercy/grace.

In our text, God’s law and God’s grace in the gospel are not two contradictory or competing enemies that oppose each other. They actually complement each other as friends that link arms and stand side-by-side together. What God joins together, let no man put asunder, or you will have on the one side *legalism* (technically defined as believing the Law itself gains or maintains salvation by human effort instead of unearned grace). On the other side, you have *antinomians* (literally anti-law, just “accept Jesus” and don’t worry about any demands or commands, easy-believism, cheap grace, as long as you said a little prayer to Jesus as a little kid you can live like the devil now without every worrying about whether or not you’re saved; if anyone brings up the law, call them legalist).

Those who know a little Bible may quote a proof-text “*we’re not under law, we’re under grace.*” But if you read the whole verse of Romans 6:15 it undercuts what many mean by that: *Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!*

We of course aren’t Israelites bound by the OT civil laws for them in the land living under a theocracy. We may not be Levites who are to follow OT sacrificial systems and ceremonies of the temple that was destroyed in 70 A.D. In that sense we are not under Mosaic Law, but as the same book of Romans argues earlier, the *Moral Law* of God applies to all people at all times (ch. 1-2, since creation and after the cross) and law makes all accountable to God. And it has value for believers as well, as Paul explains the chapter right after he says we’re “not under law.” He speaks of the value of the law in: revealing sin (7:7), he calls it holy, righteous (v. 12), spiritual (v. 14), good (v. 16, 12), and he joyfully delights in God’s law in his inner man (7:22, as we sang earlier ‘how I love thy law’)

5 Reasons No One is Above the Law of God:

1. It is the King's Law for all His subjects (v. 8a)
2. The Heart of the Law is love for all people (v. 8b)
3. Law shows God's character and where we all fall short(v.9)
4. Law Convicts all of sin before God (v. 10-11)
5. Law Gives liberty and leads to Mercy (v. 12-13)

1. It is the King's Law for all His subjects (v. 8a)

In v. 8, we find a phrase only used here, "the royal law." It also adds the phrase "according to the Scripture," and at this point in history, the only written Scripture the original readers had was the OT Scriptures. The Jewish Christian readers of James when they heard the word "law" would naturally think of the *Torah*, the first 5 books of the OT (Genesis-Deuteronomy). And by adding the adjective "royal," James seems clearly to be distinguishing from the law of the rabbis or the way the rabbis understood the law.

This is the Law as understood by and through the King ("royal" comes from the Greek root word for king, kingdom). The King's Law is not suggestions, royal=sovereignty and the right of the ruler over all in His Kingdom, regardless of how they feel about him or his law, they must obey. "Royal / kingly" may emphasize the law as supreme, over all law, or the fact that the law is over all people.

The King of Kings of course is Jesus (2:1), and the kingly law in this text probably refers to the OT Law as understood through Christ and as explained by Christ, which was not the same as rabbinic law or ritual law. This is the royal law of Christ the King. To reject the King's law was to reject the King Himself in ancient times. A Roman Emperor may have considered Himself "above the law" but the royal law of King Jesus is actually above him. No one is above the law of the King of Kings; it applies to all His subjects.

2. The Heart of the law is love for all people (v. 8b)

You may not instantly associate "law" and "love" but God does. It's not just the gospel that has love at its heart, the law does too. Many think "Law" was just for *OT Israel* and they had no gospel, while the *NT church* has the gospel and no need for any Law. So some drive a sharp distinction and discontinuity and dispensational difference between the two, many think, and as a result let's just throw out all Law and just *love* each other, they say. But you see, in v. 8, it's not *instead of God's Law* that we love each other, it's *because of God's Law* (direct quote from OT Law) that we are to love our neighbor, and the end of the verse says if we fulfill the Law, we are doing well. No one is above this Law. And besides loving God, there is no higher law than love for your fellow man.

The more I study and teach from both the OT and the NT, the more continuity and connectedness I see and the more I see the gospel in the OT and the more I see Christ there as well. And more and more I see the NT speak of the value of God's Law for us today, and this law in particular is the heart of what God's Law requires of us to our fellow man.

“Love your neighbor” appears 10x in the NT. Not all of the Ten Commandments are repeated verbatim in the NT, but this one commandment is repeated 10x as a summary of moral law.

Galatians 5:14: *For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”*

6:2 *Bear one another’s burdens and thereby fulfill the law of Christ*

Romans 13:8-10 ... *he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.* ⁹ *For this, “YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET,” and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”* ¹⁰ *Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

I’m deliberately using the phrase in this 2nd point “love for all the people” because that’s the point of James 2 in context as well. It’s not just the people who look better or more our type or those who can benefit us like in v. 2-3, it’s also those in the same verses who we would have no natural inclination toward based on externals, but we must show them love because of an internal love of Christ. It’s those in 1:27 in need like the fatherless and husbandless, and by implication, others in need we may tend to neglect outside our circles and comfort zones and company preferences. When Jesus was asked “who is my neighbor?” about this command, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan to prove neighbor = others who are in our view whether or not they’re in our circles. Rather than ask “Who is my neighbor?” ask “To whom can I be a neighbor?”

The original law “love your neighbor as yourself” comes from Leviticus 19, which in context has the same point as James that the problem with partiality and failure to treat the needy properly is ultimately a failure to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said it’s the 2nd greatest commandment, like the first. One good way to understand what James means by quoting Leviticus 19:18 “*you shall love your neighbor as yourself*” is to see how Jews who only had OT would read it. The heart of God’s law is love for all people

Leviticus 19 ⁹ *Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest.* ¹⁰ *Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them **for the needy and for the stranger** [this would include non-Jews, aliens, Samaritans, etc.]. *I am the LORD your God.* ¹¹ ***You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another.*** ¹² *You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as **to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD.*** [Sounds like Ten Commandments He’s about to sum up] ¹³ ***You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you*** [James 5 said some of the rich were holding back wages from their hired help] ... ¹⁵ ***You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly*** ...*

What if I’ve been treated unfairly, is it ok for me to bear a grudge?

¹⁸ *You shall not take vengeance, **nor bear any grudge** against the sons of your people, but **you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.***

If you are harboring a grudge against one of God's people here this morning, the LORD of the universe says that is sin you must repent of, and instead of looking down on or bitterly upon that person, you must love that person as yourself. The second greatest command forbids all your resentful sinful feelings towards others and commands you not only to get over it and forgive and forbear in love, but also to show love to them instead. Thus says the Lord.

Is it ever appropriate to pay special honor to certain people?

... ³² *'You shall rise up before the grayheaded and honor the aged, and you shall revere your God; I am the LORD.* ³³ *'When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong.* ³⁴ *'The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.* ³⁵ *'You shall do no wrong in judgment ... [and the chapter ends with the repeated phrase that God began His Law with]; I am the LORD.'* "

3. It shows God's character and where we all fall short(Jas 2:9)

Keep a finger here in the OT Law for a little longer and turn to Dt. 10. While you're turning, listen as I read how Romans 3 explains why no one is above God's law: ¹⁹ *Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God;* ²⁰ *because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin ...* ²³ *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

James 2:9 says *if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.* The Law shows us where we fall short of God's standard, which most Christians are familiar with, but I wonder if we hear enough about the fact that the Law also reflects not only *commands from God* but the very *character of God*. James had already talked in James 1:25 about how God's perfect Law is like a mirror, and those who look intently at it and abide by it, not forgetting what they see that is wrong with their natural face, but doing what the Word calls them to, those are the ones who will be blessed by God, James 1:25 says. We also discussed that the mirror not only shows us our sin, it shows us our Savior if we have eyes to see Him. It shows His face and His nature and where we need to become more like Him.

Why am I emphasizing that the Law reflects God's character? I'm sure all of us at times have looked at the Law as restricting rules, but it makes a difference if we think of them as from a person Who we love and Who has given us laws for our good because He loves us. Each Law reflects His loving character to all people. And our Lord practices what He preaches, and what He expects He enables.

Deut 10:17-19 *"For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe.* ¹⁸ *"He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing.* ¹⁹ *"So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.*

Sounds kind of like the NT: "we love because God first loved us." It's like the OT Law said repeatedly, "Be holy for I am holy."

This dynamic is present from the time the Law was first given. Before “thou shalt,” God says “I AM.” The Law doesn’t just reveal His commands, but also His character.

Listen to what God Himself said from heaven when the Law was first given – this is how the Ten Commandments begin:

Ex 20 ¹ *Then God spoke all these words, saying,* ² **“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, *out of the house of slavery.*”** ³ *“You shall have no other gods before Me*

God ‘is speaking to those whom he has brought out of bondage (Ex. 20:2b): not to those whom he is bringing into bondage by imposing his law upon them, but to those who are now (for the first time) enjoying liberty, and to whom he gives his perfect law in order to safeguard the freedom he has secured for them.’¹ Even as Americans, laws in our country are foundational to our freedoms.

We’ll come back a little later to that idea that the Law gives liberty

But for now notice: disobedience violates the commands of God as well as God’s character. We shouldn’t lie because God is generous. We shouldn’t covet because God is generous. We must make no image of God, because every graven image misrepresents Him. His very character is revealed in His Law, not just commands in cold print on a page. If you love the Lawgiver and know He loves you and is there to help you, the “thou shall not” can be transformed from a mere prohibition (*not*) to a promise (*shall* – God’s power).

4. The Law Convicts all of sin before God (James 2:10-11)

I was right at this point in my study Wed. afternoon when a couple young guys in white shirts and ties and name tags that identified them as Elders came by and wanted to talk to me about the plan of salvation. I told them I was an Elder at our church, too, and that there are a number of differences we have, but most notable is the gospel and who Christ is. So they politely asked if I would share what we believe about Christ and the gospel and so I did, and I went right to James 2:10 to emphasize that even if we do all our Bible commands and all the Book of Mormon says, and if we go and evangelize hundreds but if there’s just one part or one command we stumble in one time, we are guilty before God.

¹⁰ *For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.*

How many crimes do you have to commit to be considered by the law a guilty criminal?
Thousands? No, just one.

How many broken links in a chain are needed before the guy hanging by it will fall off the cliff?
Only one.

How many pieces of fence need to be missing before dog gets out?

How many different parts of an electric wire do you need to touch to get the full force of all?

I tried to help them see their sin and state before God because of His Law in Galatians 3:10 *“Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”* (NIV). I tried to help them see that not only that, but the best things we do are not good enough (Isaiah 64:6) and are even offensive in God’s sight, man’s righteousness. God cannot tolerate anything unholy or imperfect in His sight (Hab. 1:13). God requires perfection, and in His love there was One who fulfilled the Law and all its demands for us. That’s why Jesus came, not just to die, but to live a perfect righteous life, and the One and Only True God of the universe in justice and mercy transfers man’s sin onto Jesus on the cross, to those who truly believe in the true Jesus of Scripture as their Lord, the perfect righteousness of Jesus can be transferred to the sinner! It is by grace *alone* through faith *alone* in Christ *alone*, as Lord and God -- not one of many gods, but the One and Only True God.

They were very nice and sincere guys, but part of the problem I wanted them to see is that no one is nice enough, and no amount of human works can change the force of what James 2:10 is saying: God’s Law convicts all of us as guilty sinners before God, and it is once we grasp the Law and our need that we understand God’s love and why we so desperately need Christ’s mercy and grace.

God’s Law in James 1:25 is compared to a perfect mirror we look into. If you just throw one little brick into a big mirror, what will happen? It shatters, and it’s no good. That’s what one sin does to the mirror of God’s Law in the analogy. One breaks the whole (ex: shower door I stepped on once that shattered to little pieces). When we fall, all the King’s horses and all the King’s men can’t put us back together again ... only the King Himself can by taking away our fallenness and replacing it with His perfect righteousness.

Spurgeon said it only takes ‘but one crack in the lantern, and the wind found it and blew out the candle. How great a mischief one unguarded point of character may cause us! One spark blew up the ammunition and shook the whole country for miles around. One leak sank the vessel and drowned all on board. One wound may kill the body, one sin destroy the soul.’²

¹¹ *For He who said, “DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,” also said, “DO NOT COMMIT MURDER.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.*

“But James, I’m a good person, it’s not like I ever killed anyone.” Well, remember v. 9 also said partiality or favoritism is a sin that makes you guilty, not just what you define as “big ones.” But the point of v. 10-11 is any violation of the Law makes guilty. When you find out someone told you a lie, what do you call them? A liar.

How many times do you have to commit adultery to be considered an adulterer? 2, 3, or 4 other people’s spouses? One. How many nights did David spend w\ Bathsheba before he was an adulterer?

How many murders do you have to commit and be convicted of before the court considers you guilty as a murderer? Just one.

Why does James 2:11 single out murder and adultery? Look at 4:2-4 where they recur, and are associated with heart attitudes such as envy, and he says worldliness is a type of spiritual adultery. James 5:4-5 suggest the rich of that day actually unjustly were putting the poor to death, but in the context of chapter 2 he's saying how you view and treat them wrongly is also serious sin.

Matthew 5 makes this same point with the same two sins of murder and adultery. Religion usually misses this point in ignoring the heart and assuming outward actions please God, or elevating ritual or certain rules above others that they neglect.

History tells us 'more frequently the rabbis reversed this teaching and held that obedience to certain specific laws was as good as obedience to the whole, usually in connection with the observance of the Sabbath. "The Sabbath weighs against all the precepts; if they keep it, they were reckoned as having done all." There was a constant tendency among the rabbis to make the ceremonial cover up moral and spiritual lapses. But Scripture does not allow us ...'³

Matthew 5:17 *Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.*

Christ fulfilled perfectly God's perfect law by obeying it and He went on to teach how we must fulfill the full intent of God's law which Jesus filled out and expounded in its fullness in this chapter.

¹⁸ *"For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished."* ¹⁹ *"Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."*

²⁰ *"For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."* ²¹ *"You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'"* ²² *"But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell ..."*

²⁷ *"You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY';"* ²⁸ *but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."* ²⁹ *"If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."*

Mere physical mutilation will not save us, of course; if we lost our right eye our left eye would still sin, or if both eyes were gone that wouldn't stop our hearts and minds from sinning. But the graphic point being made is that even a sin like lust or how we speak ill of others is enough to make us guilty and hell-bound. You say, "Well, what are you saying, Jesus, we have to be perfect?"

⁴⁸ *"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

You say, “But I can’t. If that’s what the Law and the Lord require, if what Jesus saying in Matt. 5 is true, I have nothing to bring and nothing I can do to meet that standard, no resources to reverse my bankruptcy, I’m spiritually destitute, broke, no hope for heaven!”

That’s exactly where there is hope! It is those who recognize the bad news who can experience the glorious good news – it’s those who recognize they fall short of God’s Law who get God’s love:

¹ *When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him.* ² *He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying,* ³ **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** ⁴ **“Blessed are those who mourn [i.e., over sin], for they shall be comforted.** ⁵ **“Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.** ⁶ **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.** ⁷ **“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.**

5. Law Gives liberty and leads to Mercy (James 2:12-13)

Mankind has always thought that as long as we don’t commit the major sins as we define them, and if we think of ourselves as basically good people who do enough good things or the right good things, God will grade on a curve, and our good works will gain us eternal life.

Matthew 19:16 *And someone came to Him and said, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?”* ¹⁷ *And He said to him, “Why are you asking Me about what is good? **There is only One who is good** [the Lord]; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.”* ¹⁸ *Then he said to Him, “Which ones?”* *And Jesus said, “**YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER; YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY; YOU SHALL NOT STEAL; YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS;** ¹⁹ **HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER; and YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.**”* ²⁰ *The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?”* [doesn’t sound like a beatitude humility!] ²¹ *Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”* [Mark 12:21 adds that when Jesus was “looking at him, he felt a love {agape} for him” when he said this to him] ²² *But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.*

Jesus wanted him to see that he wasn’t good, only God is, and to recognize he doesn’t and can’t keep the commandments and earn life that way. The man should have said in response in v. 20: “I can’t keep God’s Law as God intends in the fullness of what the commands require, I love myself more than my neighbor, and I’ve tried, but I keep sinning -- how then can I or anyone be saved?!” That’s what the disciples said (v. 25b): “*Then who can be saved?*” ²⁶ *And looking at them Jesus said to them, “**With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.**”*

In verse 18, Jesus quotes 5 of the 10 Commandments in order and adds what James calls the “royal law ... *love your neighbor as yourself*” (Lev. 19:18). That one command alone none of us can keep consistently, but let’s consider these commands in the context of the story James told about two visitors who come into church, one well-to-do who gets special treatment, and one poor who’s dishonored. How does one sin of partiality make us guilty of all?

The way they treated the poor one who walked into church was violating the royal law to love him as you love yourself. What about the rest of the 10 Commandments? Look at Matt. 19:18:

“*You shall not murder* – their disdain for the poor man revealed heart attitudes that treated the lowly as basically better off dead

“*You shall not commit adultery* – James 4 refers to their worldliness as making them spiritual adulteresses

“*You shall not steal* – they had wrongfully taken from the poor the honor they were due, robbing the poor, giving to the rich honor

“*You shall not bear false witness* – they were living a lie, as James will confront them on, deceiving themselves if not others

“*Honor your father and mother*” – James says they dishonored the poor man. He might have been old enough to be a father, and the NT talks about treating the elderly with honor as a father, and honoring widows – especially those in your spiritual family.

What about others from the 10 Commandments He didn't quote?

“*You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol* – but in James 2 they were mentally idolizing the rich and putting materialism and man's image above God's

“*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain* – James 2:7 says they were blaspheming the Lord's fair name

“*Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy* – in James 2 they had made unholy their synagogue worship by their sinful partiality

“*You shall not covet your neighbor's ...* - in James 2 they were coveting everything about the rich visitor who rolled into church

Let me encourage you to use God's Law when talking to those who don't know the biblical gospel, whether they're religious or not, because that's what Jesus did in talking to all types of people.

Luke 10 ²⁵ *And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”* ²⁶ *And He said to him, [“just repeat after me, say a simple prayer, and ask Me into your heart, and you've definitely got it.” Is that what He said? He and the NT never says anything like that] “What is written **in the Law?** How does it read to you?”* ²⁷ *And he answered, “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 [LOVE] YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”* ²⁸ *And He said to him, “You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE.”* ²⁹ *But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”*

³⁰ Jesus replied and said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. ³¹ “And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² “Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ “But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt **compassion**, ³⁴ and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and **took care of him**. ³⁵ “On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.’ ³⁶ “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” ³⁷ And he said, “**The one who showed mercy toward him.**” Then Jesus said to him, “**Go and do the same.**”

In James 2, they may have thought their partiality and lack of mercy was no big deal, minor misdemeanors, a little thing in just one point, but the Law pronounces them guilty of all, in need of God’s mercy. When you know the truth, the truth can set you free. But you’re not going to be interested in being set free if you don’t think you’re in bondage and in need of liberty. That’s where God’s Law comes in. v. 12 calls it *the law of liberty*, i.e., it brings liberty.

¹² *So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.* ¹³ *For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.*

We are not under the law of Moses as a legalistic yoke (Acts 15) but the Law of liberty does apply. We are under law to show grace.

“As believers, you are no longer under the law of bondage [bound by sin] but you are under **the law of liberty—liberty** to do what is right. The Law of Moses required you to love your neighbor but did not give you the power ... Under grace, you are given the power to love your neighbor and are rewarded when you do it. You don’t do it in order to be saved but because you are saved. You do it, not through fear of punishment, but through love for Him who died for you and rose again ... [the judgment of v. 12] will not be a question of salvation but of reward.”⁴

In v. 12 what we say and what we do (our total conduct) should be in light of the fact that we will one day stand before Christ whose Law of Love will judge and reward good and faithful servants.

‘God’s gracious acceptance of us does not end our obligation to obey him; 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 [in 1:21], this law is an “implanted word,” “written on the heart,” that has the power to save us’⁵

1 John 5:3 *For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.*

Some say “Let’s not talk about Law and commands, let’s just love Jesus.” Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commands.”

Verse 13 is another way to say what Jesus said: *Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy*. James says it negatively, those who are not merciful will not obtain mercy on judgment day. The point is not that human acts somehow earn God’s mercy (by definition mercy must be unearned and undeserved!) but outward mercy manifests what is on the inside. If God’s mercy has been truly received in the heart, it will show up in the life (v. 14-17) and so they need not fear judgment – mercy conquers judgment.

It’s not by our works, but Christ’s work in us, that enables us to be more than conquerors through Him who loved us so. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, the One who put Himself under the law to bring us under His saving mercy. *Mercy and justice met, and mercy triumphed over judgment at the cross!*

Mercy there was great, and grace was free;
 Pardon there was multiplied to me;
 There my burdened soul found **liberty** at Calvary.
By God’s Word at last my sin I learned;
Then I trembled at the law I’d spurned,
Till my guilty soul imploring turned to Calvary.
 Oh, the love that drew salvation’s plan!
 Oh, the grace that brought it down to man!
 Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary!
 Mercy there was great, and grace was free;
 Pardon there was multiplied to me;
 There my burdened soul found **liberty** at Calvary.

¹Motyer, J. A. (1985). *The message of James : The tests of faith*. The Bible speaks today (71). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., U.S.A.: Inter-Varsity Press.

² Charles Haddon Spurgeon, {The Quotable Spurgeon}, (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, Inc, 1990)

³ Hiebert, p. 149, citing Shemot Rabb. 25.

⁴MacDonald, W., & Farstad, A. (1997, c1995). *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments* (Jas 2:12). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁵ Douglas Moo, PNTC, p. 117.