

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

It's been said that there are two types of people: those who divide the world into groups and those who don't. Or it's been said that there are two types of people: those who can infer things....

In a real sense, there are situations where there are either/or situations. A woman is either pregnant or she isn't. There isn't an in-between. A baseball is either fair or foul. A politician either wins or loses an election.

When it comes to the Bible, most of us would say that the Bible acknowledges that there are degrees of obedience. You can be growing in holiness. But James suggests that there is an all or nothing category – you either obey the whole law or you don't. This surprises us, because as people we want to partition out obedience because we like the sense that we can make progress. And that isn't wrong. But there are times where we need to understand that partitioning out obedience is only a way to excuse disobedience, and James won't allow us to excuse wrong behaviours. Why does James call for a radical obedience?

Aim for Love Because it Fulfills the Whole Law (2:8-11)

James starts us off by going back to the Old Testament law and shows that it was actually a complete unit, not something that could be partitioned out. "If you really fulfill the royal law according to Scripture, ...you are doing well."

What is the summary of the law? "You shall love your neighbour as you love yourself." James goes back to Leviticus 19:18 and now makes the case that to love God is to love your neighbour, and he goes back to this command because of the sufferings that these Christians were facing. Worldly political power wants everyone to play by the same rules and accept the current social climate. It controls social classes, power structures, and seeks to hold on to power. When people don't follow the unwritten political rules of the day, these groups are often ostracized, alienated, or at worse persecuted.

Christians have often stood as those who challenge governmental structures, but they have done it not by being belligerent or actively protesting, but by living by a superior law – the royal law of love. When Christians have refused to be bullied into the political system, they have become the ones who the world hates and at the same time the challenge to a system that demands absolute unquestioning submission to the system.

But Christians are ruled by a different law, a law that is defined and not just airy-fairy: "Love your neighbour as you love yourself." From Leviticus, God had defined what loving neighbour looks like. It is a royal law because it is the rule of King Jesus and it is the way of the kingdom. When James says that we "fulfill" the law, he uses the verbal form of the word that means "mature" back in 1:4, and this suggests that the way of maturity as Christians is by loving as defined by God.

The way that James says we love is by not showing favouritism. If we are treating people who are in an upper class differently than those who aren't, we are breaking the whole law. The word "transgress" means to willingly break one part of the law, and James says to break one part is to break the whole. There are several reasons for this.

First, remember what true religion is. We need to go back to the definition of true religion in 1:26-27. True religion, James said, was to care for widows and orphans in their distress. The most vulnerable of society need people who will not only "visit" them, but also advocate for them. Just as God "visited" his people in Egypt and delivered them from bondage and slavery, so Christians are to love in a way that "visits" with the intention of bringing relief to suffering.

Second, we remember what true obedience is. Obedience isn't a partial thing. James makes the point that keeping one point of the law while disobeying another part is to transgress the whole law. Just consider how favouritism breaks all of the ten commandments:

First & Second Commands – God gave these commands; to break them is to not follow him

Third command – favouring the rich is to misrepresent God

Fourth command – favouring the rich defiles worship

Fifth command – favouritism dishonours people

Sixth command – favouritism kills the spirit of the poor and demeans them

Seventh command – favouritism is unfaithfulness

Eighth command – this robs the poor of dignity

Ninth command – favouritism treats the poor like they have less worth and lies about their value

Tenth command – preferring the rich covets what a rich man can give – in money or influence

God's law of the kingdom is royal because it holds all things together. And this is why he calls for total obedience.

This is James's point in vv. 10-11. We can't think that we could ever appeal to a judge and say, "I know I killed this man, but look at what a good marriage I have!" we would think that this thinking is unjust.

But when it comes to favouritism, we don't think it's a problem. We think that having people of influence on our side isn't all that bad. We can't pick and choose the commands of God. God has given them for our good, and to fail to follow one intentionally is to break all of them.

Speak and Act In Light of Judgment (vv. 12-13)

The reason we obey the royal law of love is that our whole lives will be examined by God. The reason we are to speak and act is because we are to be doers of the word, not just hearers (1:22-25).

The principle here that James wants to remind us of is the issue that people who have been shown mercy show mercy. Jesus taught us at the end of the Lord's prayer that anyone who has been shown mercy will show mercy. And he taught in Matthew 18:21-35 the story of two men who had debts. The one man owed millions and was forgiven, only to treat a man who owed him thousands with contempt. How often should we forgive, Peter asked? We should forgive like those who have been forgiven. Over and over and over and over.

But the point isn't that we should forgive out of fear, but because we have been forgiven by a gracious God who gives us a law of freedom. The law isn't meant to destroy us, but it is meant to free us. It's meant to give us joy and peace and a clear conscience before God. It's meant to free us from the fear of condemnation. God doesn't give us his commands to burden us as Christians. If his commands are a burden, he is revealing to us an area that needs maturing. His goal isn't to make obedience something that crushes you, but frees you.

So the purpose of God's commands is that we would speak and act as people who have been shown mercy. This is what makes the Christian message and life so unique. In our world, we write people off. We are done with relationships with people. We give up. But in the kingdom of God, what does love look like? Forgiveness. Kindness. Restraining our mouths. Speaking good, not ill. Building up. Not playing favourites but considering those in need. Doing good to one another. Why? Because our lives will be examined by how we treated the people we found most difficult.

Do you want to know how much you love God? Who is a difficult person that you know? How do you interact with them? That is how much you love God. Loving God isn't measured by how much you pray or read your Bible or how long your quiet time is. It's measured by how you speak and act to those that you find difficult.

There's a problem. Which one of us can say, "I've kept the law perfectly?" None of us. And here is where James brings the hope of the gospel. By my own honest confession, I can say that there are those that I prefer to talk to and those I don't. There are those who I find easy to be around and those who I find difficult. The point isn't that I find everyone easy. The point is this: do I treat people differently because they are easy or difficult?

And when I've blown it, I come back to the last sentence in this passage: Mercy triumphs over judgment. I don't have to fear God's judgment. Why? Because the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, died and was raised again for my sin. He took my sins to the cross, he had them nailed through his hands and feet. He wore the crown of thorns that causes my work to have thorns and thistles. He took the curse of the punishment to show me mercy. And why did he show me mercy? So that I could show mercy. He loved me so that I could love others. When I was at my worst, when I was the most despicable, when I was unkind and treated people differently, when I spent all my time on Sunday mornings talking to the same people who feel safe and who are my favourites, Christ died for me.

And the result of his mercy is that I can push past my safety zone. I can remember that faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ means that someone who broke the law (me) can receive mercy so that I can show mercy to someone who I feel doesn't deserve it. Because when I was undeserving of mercy, God showed his love for me by sending his own Son to die for me. So if Christ can die for me, I don't have to try and get the favour of the influencer and the power broker and curry favour with the world. The power brokers of this world want power, and they will use me to keep their power and dispose of me when it's of no political or social advantage. But God loves in a way that cares nothing about his power – and the cross is proof of that. He sent his Son to experience shame and disgrace so that you and I might be raised from dishonour to honour, from shame to grace, from bondage to freedom, from death to life, from despair to hope.

And that is reason enough to follow him.