



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

The Royal Law

SEPTEMBER 8, 2011

SHAUN LEWIS / PO BOX 2351, SPRINGFIELD, IL 62705 / SHAUN.LEWIS@CAPITOLCOM.ORG

James 2:8-13. We know playing favorites is wrong and hurtful, but why is it so bad? James has already said that favoritism is ungodly and inconsistent (cf. v. 1-7). If that isn't enough, he adds that favoritism shatters the entire Law of God rendering the guilty a condemned lawbreaker.

In Illinois Law, favoritism isn't always a crime. Yet, in God's Law, playing favorites is as serious as adultery or murder... and who of us hasn't ever shown partiality?

The Preamble of the Illinois Constitution is probably not read often, but it tells what our government was established to do. In 1970 it was revised to say Illinois exists to provide for the general welfare, maintain representation, eliminate poverty, assure justice, provide opportunity, insure tranquility, provide for the common defense and secure freedom.

These purposes may not be perfect, but they're not altogether bad. Our Constitution builds a framework upon them and then gives the legislature authority to create laws in keeping with these purposes. Some of our laws provide for the general welfare while others provide for the common defense or secure freedom.

Now, what happens when one of our laws is broken? Is the accused charged for breaking a specific law, the whole Constitution or even the Preamble? No. He's charged for violating a specific law and no more, which makes sense to us. A litterer and a murderer break laws, but they're not charged alike as Constitution-breakers and given the same penalty.

This is why God's Law confuses us. Every violation carries the exactly same penalty. What might violate one law in Illinois violates the totality of God's Law in Heaven. The punishment in our state is in accordance with the law that's broken. Yet, to stand at the bar of God having violated one of His commands brings the full weight and terror of His entire Law against us.

James teaches in this section that God's Law is a holy and perfect unity. Every command within is linked to every other command like the shards of a stained-glass window. Each piece is an individual command—do not lust, do not steal, do not lie, etc... The mosaic of color formed is what James calls the royal law, an overarching law that encapsulates all the rest.

And what is the royal law? It is to love your neighbor as yourself. Lust, theft, lies, murder—each is a violation of this greater law. Ultimately, however we

might fail to love one another, a breach of the royal law is foremost a failure to love God, and that is a crime of infinite proportion.

LITTLE SINS?

The average first-century Christian didn't have much. Some of this was due to the absence of a middle class. Some of it was the result of persecution. The Roman Empire would not tolerate a religion that worshipped a crucified criminal or refused to worship Caesar. However, at the time of James' epistle (pre-45 A.D.) most of the persecution came from Jewish leaders. To be a Jewish Christian meant excommunication from one's entire community.

Struggling with poverty, Jewish churches were tempted to favor their rich visitors. James, the half-brother of our Lord, confronted the issue in chapter 2 verses 1-7 charging that favoritism is inconsistent with the heart of God and telling of a fool. Harsh words for a sin we're all guilty of committing.

James 2:8-9—"If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

So, why is partiality bad? Because it violates the royal law. The Lord said the two greatest commands are to love God and to love people (cf. Matt 22:37-39). Neither command is explicitly given in the Law, but Jesus said the entire Law rests upon these two commands of love. God's Law with its every rule and precept was the outworking of love. Love God. Love people. Keep these, and you've kept His entire Law.

James 2:10-11—"For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for 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."

When we play favorites, we shatter the royal law. Whether it is murder or favoritism, arson, tax evasion, reckless driving, greed or lust—all of it breaks the royal law, which is not a stand-alone command, but the sum total of all God's commands. James is teaching that God's Law is not fragmented, but a unity of love your neighbor. Shatter this law in any one of ten-thousand ways, and the penalty is beyond reckoning.

BIBLE STUDIES

LEGISLATORS: THURSDAYS AT 7:30AM, CAPITOL CHAPEL

JUSTICES AND STAFF: TUESDAYS AT 7:30AM, SUPREME COURT BUILDING

Illinois

The Royal Law

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

How is that punishment equal to the crime?!!

One small infraction of the royal law, and all is broken. If a man kept the entire Law of God for a lifetime, yet told a single white lie in the end, that alone would be enough to condemn him without parole. It seems so harsh and severe... and yet it's actually just.

A CRIMINAL CANNOT INFINITELY OFFEND THE STATE OF ILLINOIS, AND THE STATE OF ILLINOIS CANNOT IMPOSE AN INFINITE PUNISHMENT.

GOD, HOWEVER, CAN BE INFINITELY OFFENDED AND INFINITELY PUNISH.

When a state law is broken, the violation is against a finite and imperfect institution. It may be serious, but the offense and its punishment are limited. Illinois has had its share of criminals, but no one has ever violated all of our laws all at once in every action every day for the last two centuries. None have even come close.

Though no one has offended our state to this degree, every person who has ever lived has offended God exceedingly more. Our every sin is no small matter, because each is against a God who is holy (cf. Lev 19:2; Hab 1:13).

All of God's attributes, His entire Being, is perfectly and infinitely holy. This means that any man or woman not equally holy falls short infinitely. There is no such thing as being mostly holy or almost holy. Like jumping across the sea, some may leap further than others but every attempt blends with every other as utterly insignificant. Sin of any kind is an infinite offense, and if the punishment fits the crime then an infinite offense is worthy of an infinite sentence.

NO ROOM FOR MERIT

The religion of first-century Judaism viewed God's Law as individual commands, not the perfect unity that James teaches. In their thinking, commands kept merited a measure of righteousness. Commands broken incurred a degree of unrighteous debt. It was thought that a man was made righteous by keeping more of God's commands than he broke.

Works-righteousness had become part of first-century Judaism. Like them, we want to trust in our own abilities to earn the favor of God, and it's hard to accept we can't. We can't keep God's Law. We've offended Him beyond measure and are without hope of ever making things right.

There is no mercy under the Law or a balance of good versus bad deeds in the end. One infraction of God's Law, one failure to love set against even a trillion loving deeds and all is lost. Like a drop of arsenic in a gallon of water, it may seem small, but it turns the whole into poison (cf. Isa 64:6).

Good deeds do not somehow dilute the bad ones. Try as we may, but God will judge and condemn a man on the basis of his works. Our only hope of finding our name in the Book of Life is if God Himself lived and died in our place. No one but God could satisfy His own holiness and then merit it to my account as if I had been the one to keep His Law. He died for my sin and was raised to life. I did nothing but believe, and His righteousness became mine (cf. Rom 3:23-24).

A MERCIFUL SAVIOR

James 2:12-13—"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."

The law of liberty is the gospel. It liberates us from the tyranny of trying to fulfill the royal law on our own. Christ fulfilled it. His righteousness is offered to all, and those who believe receive it freely both now and forevermore.

In light of so much mercy, how should we treat one another as Christians? The same way Christ has treated us—with mercy that's impartial to the rich or any other type of person. Those who know how infinite and free God lavished His mercy upon them should be filled with mercy towards others (cf. Matt 18:23-35).

Unbelievers will be judged by the royal law. Believers will be judged by liberty's law. One law is unmerciful and unyielding. The other is quite the opposite. James asks us to consider these two laws. How mercifully we deal with one another indicates what we know of God's mercy. The one who knows little will be judged by the royal law. Yet, the one who knows much of God's mercy can expect to be judged by the law of liberty and receive reward (cf. 2 Cor 5:10).