

Loyalty in the Law
James 3:8-13

Brothers and sisters, you may have heard me tell this story before but it's a good one so bear with me, plus... there's no law against reusing sermon illustrations, so here goes...

Many years ago, there was a little boy at Valleyview who kept challenging his mother by asking "why?" whenever she had to correct him and bring his behavior in line. If you're a parent you know how this goes; "finish your dinner! Why?... because there are kids starving somewhere else!" "Pick up your toys! Why?... because otherwise they will get broken when I walk on them!" "Sit still and pay attention in church! Why?... because you need to learn about God!"

And one particular time this little boy was being exceptionally difficult, continuing to challenge his mom and asking why? Eventually his mom ran out of reasons and so she said "because I'm your mom and I said so!" There was a short pause and then he said "Why?"

Now, having been pushed to the end of her patience, his mother decided to go with the nuclear option and pull out the God card and she blurted out "Because that's the way God made it - ok!"

There was another short pause and then he asked "So God is the one who gets to make all the rules?" "Yes, so you have to do what He says" his mother answered. The little boy took a moment to process this, and then responded with "Well...then... I think I would like to be God!"

Brothers and sisters, its cute but... it's also a great example that of how we struggle with obedience and rules. In fact, the minute someone says that you **must** do something – even if you've already been doing it – just because it's now a rule or a law, you are going to buck against it and say no I won't! "you're not the boss of me!"

And If you remember back a few years now, when we had those two-week lock-downs at the start of the pandemic, there were a lot of people pushing back against that and

suggesting that we didn't need to restrict our movements, just mask up instead and go about our normal routines. But when the health authorities eventually decided to go with that, and - they made it a rule... a law... that you had to put on a mask – well... you remember how well that went over, right!?

And speaking of health authorities and health inspectors, there's a good example of why we don't appreciate so many rules and laws.

If you've ever had a visit from a health inspector you know that they don't come all the way out to do an inspection at your facility just to give you a clean inspection report. They are going to make it worth their time, and make it look like they are doing their job, by finding some obscure rule or law that you are violating and write you up for it. No one appreciates that kind of nitpicking and fault-finding.

So, we have our own internal aversion to rules; that says "you're not gonna tell me what to do!" and we have a natural external resentment for litigiousness and over-regulation

because gets in the way, wastes time, and makes life more difficult and onerous than it ought to be...

And this is why, brothers and sisters, we have a difficult time understanding the concept of the Law when it shows up in the scriptures. Not to mention that the term "Law" can be used in different ways and mean different things.

For instance, if I said "my word is law" that means I expect to be obeyed when I tell you to do something. It doesn't mean that what I say automatically shows up in the Canadian criminal code, that would be another version of the term "law." Something that is proposed, debated and created by the elected Members of Parliament, passed by Senators, and stamped by the Governor General, in order to become "law"

And if we refer to the various rules, policies, prohibitions or directives that govern our nation or province then we might say something "this is the law" or "that's against the law."

We would also have to further clarify if we are referring to federal law, provincial law, civil law or criminal law, especially if we told someone that we were going to school to study “law” and eventually practice “law” – that means we intend to become a lawyer.

Of course, if you broke “the law” – then you might be worried about having “the law” show up and arrest you, by which we mean the police.

So, you can see how we use the term “law” in a number of different ways, and how it means different things – and its no different from how James is using the term “law” in our scripture passage this morning brothers and sisters. In this passage James makes reference to “the law” in five out of these six verses, and he uses it in four different ways.

So, let’s take a closer look at that – because when we see references to the “the law” in scripture, especially in the New Testament, we typically think about that pharisaical legalism, scrupulously adhering to all those obscure and weird Old

Testament laws - which tends to activate our aversions and reactions to laws and rules... right?

And as a result, this passage gets a bit confusing and we might think its simply suggesting that Christianity isn’t about rules - but treating our neighbors well. But just being nice to our neighbors can seems a bit too arbitrary and vague for being a Christian, so we’re left wondering what exactly is it that defines Christian living and behavior if its not about the rules? So, it’s definitely worth a closer look to help us understand what’s going on with the Law here.

So, in vs. 8 James mentions “the royal law.” Now the technical translation in the Greek is “the kingdom law” or it could also be translated as “the noble or honorable law” as it is something befitting a person of high honor – like a king, so yes - royal does fit. But if we have that sense of noble and honorable then it ties back to what James was talking about last week with the glory of Jesus Christ in vs. 1, and the honorable name of Jesus in vs. 7, and the whole issue of not

dishonoring the poor and giving unwarranted honor to the rich in vs. 4 and 6.

So having referenced this honorable law James then identifies it as Leviticus 19:18 – which the teacher of the Law in our reading of the Good Samaritan from Luke quoted as well. So the honorable law comes from the O.T. scripture Leviticus 19:18 *“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, **but love your neighbor as yourself.** I am Yahweh.”*

Now important to know – you won’t find the command from Deut 6:5 to *“love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength”* AND the command from Lev 19:18 *“love your neighbor as yourself”* connected together anywhere in the Old Testament, that is a New Testament combination.

And its quite well known by us – two thousand years later with easy access to the scriptures – but for the early church who did not have a “New Testament” this combination would not have been quite so well known. The first part would have

been well known and familiar to the Jews as it was part of their daily prayer – the Shema. But adding in the second part about the neighbor, as we heard in our reading from Luke - was a new development, but... and this is where it gets important, Jesus endorsed it when the Teacher of the Law answered with it.

So, James takes Lev 19:18 and labels it “the royal, or honorable law” to remind the early church that the glorious Lord Jesus himself had endorsed it as the required counterpart to the O.T. law to *“Loving the Lord God with all your heart, soul and strength.”* Now according to Jesus, you must also *“love your neighbor as yourself.”* So that’s the first way “the law” gets used in this passage, in this summary capacity in how we treat others.

Ok, next one – in vs. 9, and again in vs. 11 James uses “the law” as a reference to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the bible; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, which were the authoritative source, the

complete and full body of instruction on God's will and laws for human beings, also known as the Torah.

It functioned as the overall benchmark for determining obedience and loyalty to God. So, as James uses it in these verses, it is to identify and indict those who are transgressors – or more aptly put “lawbreakers” in a broad sense. Much like we would use the term criminals as a specific category for people who are generally breaking “the law” and like to do so. This is the second way which James uses the term “the law.”

Now we don't like to call people criminals, or law breakers if the infraction is just a parking ticket, because a minor offence doesn't indicate that their moral character is that of a criminal, even though they have technically violated part of “the law.” And that's the sense in which James qualifies “the law” in vs 10 by calling it “the whole law.”

In this third usage James wants to highlight how the Law; the Pentateuch, Torah, Law of Moses, is made up of 613 specific

commandments – so as to call our attention to how many trees make up the whole forest.

And his point is that even if you keep all 613 laws, the entirety of the law, to the letter... but the spirit of your obedience is about earning your righteousness and God's favor, justifying yourself - like the Teacher of the Law wanted to do in Luke - that will be the point on which you stumble and it is the equivalent to breaking all the laws.

And we'll know if we have that spirit of self-righteous obedience if we feel the need to defend ourselves against the indictment of “criminal” or “lawbreakers” since we've only committed minor infractions. We're not guilty of anything major like murder or adultery, right!? But James seems to suggest that we have committed murder and perhaps adultery as well, and of course these charges ought to bring to mind Jesus' sermon on the mount in Matt 5.

In Mat 5:22 Jesus clarifies murder by saying *“but I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be subject to*

judgment.” And in vs. 28 Jesus addresses adultery saying “but I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

So Jesus’ point, reiterated by James, is that you can technically keep the letter of these laws, but still violate them in spirit, and thus be indicted as a “lawbreaker” - the same as someone who shows profligate disregard for the entire body of the law.

Now if that doesn’t sit well with you, I understand. Being called a criminal, and compared to a drunk driver guilty of vehicular homicide when all you have is a parking violation doesn’t seem fair or just.

And in the same way, the early Jewish Christians did not appreciate being called “lawbreakers” for their “minor violation” of showing partiality in favoring their widows over the Greek widows in the distribution of food. They felt justified in doing so because they were simply better at keeping the law and living a righteous life, they were morally superior.

So, this relationship between the early Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians was a bit similar to the relationship between the Jews and Samaritans in that way.

The Samaritans were from the kingdom of Isreal and the Jews were from the tribe of Judah. The Samaritans built their own temple at Mt. Gerizim, while the Jews continued to worship in Jerusalem as God had commanded - and they felt it made them morally superior.

So Jesus rebukes the Jewish Teacher of the Law for his moral superiority by using the parable of the Good Samaritan, showing him that Leviticus 19:18 was to be applied to his Samaritan brothers as well, even though they were breaking the law by worshiping at Mt. Gerizim.

In the same way brothers and sisters, James has to correct the moral superiority of the Jewish Christians towards their Gentile brothers and sisters. He must show them that their spirit of partiality was breaking the very law they believed

gave them superior status, and that their status is in fact, the same as that of the Gentile Christians, lawbreakers.

So, I pray this explanation of the different ways which “the law” is used in this passage makes what it clearer and more applicable for us.

But, before we move on to the fourth way that James refers to the law, there are two very important key biblical insights about “the law” that I have to make you aware of.

First, regardless of what aspect of “the law” is being referred to, the law is always, always, always, first and foremost an expression and gift of God’s grace. Why?

Because they are all given after the people have received the undeserved blessing. Remember brothers and sisters – God is a giving God, giving generously to all without finding fault. He gives first we don’t do anything to make Him give to us.

So, after delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt, and covenanting Himself to be their God and they His people – God gives them the ten commandments and the Law of Moses, to instruct them how to be His chosen nation and His holy people and live in gratitude.

There is nothing to earn by keeping the law, God has already given that blessing prior to the giving of His laws. So, the law is always an expression and gift of God’s grace.

Second point, the law does its best work as it reveals our need for Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul goes to great pains to point this out in Romans 7 explaining that he “*would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.”*”

It is in this sense that the law functions to reveal what we look like before God.

We don’t think it fair to be called a lawbreaker for a minor infractions, but when we look into the mirror of the law (remember how James uses that example in chapter 1) we see

that minor infraction is actually revealing the worst infraction of all – believing that we can earn our righteousness through our obedience.

You see our hearts are so deceitful that they will twist what ought to be an expression of gratitude into the means by which we declare ourselves to be entitled to what we've received from God – and that is the worst sin against God that we can commit brothers and sisters. That is twisting God's good law of grace into something it was never meant to be.

This is why we need Jesus Christ to forgive us, not just for our disobedience and twisting of the law, and our inability to keep the law, but to keep the law for us in place of our own arrogant and entitled self-righteous obedience.

So, brothers and sisters whenever we read about the law, look at the law, contemplate the law, or try to obey the law, we ought to be aware that this is God's grace. This is just how we are responding to God's grace in faith.

And if we're not seeing it as grace – and the law just making aware that we resent of it, showing us our inability to keep it – then it has done its other job to help us realize we need Jesus. As Paul explains in Galatians 3:24 *"The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith."*

Brothers and sisters, the law **was** always meant to be an *instrument* to reveal our specific need for Jesus Christ's forgiveness and righteousness. So with that in mind – why let's read through this passage again and see how it hits us

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 breaking the law and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 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 breaker of the law. Its less confusing - and its more clear now, isn't it.

Now, we have been prepared to understand what James means in vs. 12 when he says *“speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law of liberty!”*

And its quite simple really, the law – God’s good gift of His commands and rules – brings us freedom when we let it do its job and point us to how we need Jesus Christ. Then we are freed from the indictment of being lawbreakers and we are freed from our inability to keep it, because of Christ’s sacrifice of forgiveness and His righteous substitutionary obedience.

Of course this is just the basic gospel message isn’t it – this law of liberty. And to be judged by the gospel is to be evaluated on whether we’re presenting our own obedience for God review or whether we are putting our faith in Christ’s obedience. If we present our own – we’ll be in trouble. James says *“judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy.”*

Which is to say, how can you hold other people accountable in how they have kept the law, or how they have broken the law and show partiality in how you are treating them - if you

yourself are benefitting from Christ’s forgiveness and obedience? You who have received great mercy – can you not show mercy to your fellow gentile Christians – your neighbors in this matter? Because as James says, ultimately in Jesus Christ mercy has triumphed over justice.

So how does this land for us brothers and sisters? What do we do with this royal law and this law of liberty?

Well brothers and sisters, in addition to those two important biblical points about the law, I think what James says in this passage to the Jewish and Gentile believers speaks to us today about moral superiority.

What is it that makes you better than someone else? Now I know we’re not going to answer this out loud because that’s not polite conversation to have at church. But the truth is we all have something that we feel makes us better than certain other people, even as Christians.

Is it our biblical knowledge, doctrine, morals? Or maybe we go out, witnessing and helping the poor? Or maybe we hear from the Lord, our prayers get answered, God blesses us.

And this is just church stuff, brothers and sisters we haven't even touched other issues, like politics, finances or ethics. But each of us has that one thing that we feel a sense of moral superiority about.

And the Lord wants to make us aware of it, and then remind us that we are to love those to whom we are morally superior – love “agape” them as ourselves. Which is to say, that in spite of whatever they may be doing wrong and you are doing better... do not let this prevent you from showing them sacrificial care and concern that seeks their best interests in how we speak and act towards them.

Let me give you three ways in which we can do that.

First, regularly remind yourself that whatever you're “good” at is because of God's grace and His blessings that He has freely given to you *before* you were “good” at anything. Meditate

on 1 Cor 4:7 from the Contemporary English Version translation *“What is so special about you? What do you have that you were not given? And if it was given to you, how can you brag?”*

Secondly, allow the faults and failings of others to remind you of your own faults and failings – even if it's just your own arrogance - and how you've needed and still need Christ's forgiveness, mercy and grace. You'll discover an unexpected common ground with others where that sense of superiority is replaced with a shared experience of mercy and grace.

Reflect and meditate upon Gal 3:28 *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

And thirdly show agape love to your neighbor by using what you are good at to serve them, encourage them, and be an example to them, point them to Jesus, build up their faith in Christ.

And use what you are not good at to show them how you trust in Jesus' substitutionary obedience instead of your own.

So reflect and meditate on Gal 5:13-14 *"you were called to be free, but do not use your freedom to sin, but through agape love serve each other. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall agape love your neighbor as yourself!"*

So brothers and sisters, these are three ways in which we can speak and act as those who will be judged by the law of liberty – may the Holy Spirit use them to help you think of more ways in which we can imitate our Heavenly Father in caring for others, and showing our loyalty to Him in the Law. Amen.