

# THE ROYAL LAW

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## How to Love People Fairly | James 2:1-13

### The Law of Favoritism

You might walk by Joseph this week and hardly give him a glance. He is a bit awkward and dweeby-looking. And so, even though he gazes right into your eyes, you move by him without so much as a nod. Or perhaps you'll sit near Alice in coming days -- that is, if there aren't any open seats near someone more attractive. You're not *purposely* rejecting that person with the physical disability, or that guy with the stains on his clothes.

It's not that you would *never* hang out with that individual from another race or culture, who waits on you. It's certainly not beneath you to go over and say hello to that sad-looking soul, sipping coffee alone after church. It's just that much of the time we don't. We just turn our heads slightly to avert their gaze. We just bury ourselves a bit more deeply in our legitimate preoccupations. We avoid the risk, the boredom, the demand, or discomfort of fraternizing with someone who is not *our kind*.

This rule of avoiding certain people, while affiliating with certain others, is not written down anywhere; but it is common practice, isn't it? It's the Law of Favoritism. We tend to pay more attention to those who seem our equals or betters than to those who seem less able or more problem-ridden than we are. We gravitate toward those who can give us a hand up the social ladder. We limit our lingering with those who are a few rungs down down. We move or aspire to move into communities, clubs, cliques and churches filled with the kind of people we are or want to be.

Consciously or unconsciously, we go about sifting and sorting the people around us. What do you look like? Where do you live? Where'd you go to school? What do you do? Who are you married to? What do your kids do? What are you wearing? What's that you drive? *How should I view you?* From the playground to the cocktail party to the halls of our workplace, church, or school, we sense the strata of others, select those who can confer advantage upon us, include or exclude.

### The Royal Law: Love Fairly

It was like this too in the culture to which the Apostle James was writing. First Century Jerusalem was every bit as rife with tribalism, groupishness, and social clubs as ours is -- in fact, even more so. Lines between rich and poor, Greek and Jew, slave and master, righteous and unrighteous were clearly drawn. If you didn't happen to belong to the in-group, you might as well give up the thought of it ever happening. Society played favorites, and that was that.

The wealthy whatever-percent enjoyed an obscene degree of power and privilege over the poor, and outrageous lending rates served to keep the clubs remarkably static. As

James' words suggest, club membership was identified by the sort of clothes one wore, or the kind of jewelry that adorned one's hands (James 2:2). Particularly well-to-do citizens would often wear several rings on each finger, and would actually rent additional rings for occasions when they sought to make an even bigger social splash. Kowtowing to those who had, became a way of life for those who had not. And avoiding involvement with those who seemed to have even less than you became almost second nature.

But, as common as this favoritism was, the Apostle James knew it shouldn't be the rule among Christians. The Church had been created by Christ to be a voice of challenge and hope to a world that had lost its vision for life as the Creator intended it. Yet, the Church in James' time was rapidly becoming a perpetuator of the very attitudes that Jesus had died to destroy. **"My brothers [and sisters]," James writes, "as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism."** He then goes on to specify two critical reasons why Christians, in any age, must avoid showing "favoritism." Are you open to looking seriously at them with me?

### **Favoritism Makes Us Fools**

The FIRST reason, suggests James, is because favoritism makes us fools. Do you know what the biblical definition of a fool is? A fool is someone who fails to perceive the nature of reality. A fool is someone who lives in ignorance of the way things truly are. I once heard the story of a pair of medieval knights who encountered one another coming opposite ways on a country road at dusk. Falling upon their enemy, they fought viciously with sword and club, till finally they both fell mortally wounded. Only then, when struggling for air, did they remove their helmets and learn the truth. By the waning light, each recognized in the other the face of the brother they had not seen for many years. With tears streaming, they embraced. But it was too late and death claimed them.

Once through this world came the ultimate Knight. He was in fact the greatest of all Kings who, in love for his people, had stepped down from his mount, taken off his armor, and walked among them. The King urged all people to take off their helmets while light still remained and recognize their sister, their brother. Where the wealthy of his time exploited the penniless, Jesus gathered paupers round him and shared with them what little he had. Where the religious of his day spurned contact with the sick, the social outcast or the troublesome, Jesus searched them out to welcome them in. Where the poor of Judaea mocked and scorned those who had sold out to the establishment for profit, Jesus drew 'round him wealthy publicans and tax collectors and made them his friends. Where the political zealots of his time cursed the legions of Rome, Jesus praised a centurion for his faith. Where people of any class or clique met, Jesus came offering membership in a vastly greater community whose only dues were the surrender of one's heart to his love.

In her book, *Living Boldly*, author Phyllis Hobe once penned this confession: *"I thought God only loved people who were worth loving, because that is the way we love."* But

it's not true. God loves the introvert and the foreigner you'll meet this week; the social klutz and the abrasive jerk; the homeless man and the rejected girl. He loves them, the way he loves you and me. God loves those who are difficult, different, dangerous and dumb – for that is what ALL of us are when compared to the glory of who He is. He loves us all, with arms stretched out.

It broke the heart of James to see the Church, so early in its life, beginning to lose the ability to see others as God sees them. He was seeing money or popularity, physical beauty or clothing, becoming the criteria by which *Christians* were assessing the worth of the people next to them in *church* and how they would treat them. **"Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith, and to inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him?"** James wrote. Please, don't return to the foolishness by which too many already live.

So let us, at Christ Church, never be fools. Let's resolve together that we among all people will never be deceived by outward appearances – that we will never stop trying to look beneath the armor of anyone we meet here. Let's make sure that every person of whatever age, color, clothing, hairstyle, or history who passes through our doors gets the warm welcome, the searching inquiry, the strong embrace befitting someone whom God already views as our precious sister or brother.

### **Favoritism Makes Us Fall**

It's crucial that we do that, because favoritism not only has the power to make us fools; favoritism also has the power to make us fall. We are always in danger of forgetting that there really is a GOD and that his character is the ultimate law. GOD's way is the final standard by which all conceptions of goodness will be measured. The prophet Job tells us that: **"God shows no partiality to princes<sup>[[SEP]]</sup> and does not favor the rich over the poor, for they are all the work of his hands"** (Job 34:19). In other words, when Jesus says: "Love people as I have loved you," he really expects us to do it. He expects that we will love people fairly, without partiality, and with a huge dose of mercy, as he shows toward us.

AND, it's crucial to remember that there *are* consequences if we don't. Listen again to the words of James: **"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged because judgment without mercy to anyone who has not been merciful."** When we love only the lovely, or attack or dismiss people on the basis of superficial social appearances, we FALL. If we have given our lives to Christ, we aren't going to fall out of God's eternal grace, but we CAN fall from the graciousness of life God wants to give us here and now. And that's a terrible judgment in itself. We run the risk of missing out on some of the most fabulous exchanges of wisdom and respect between human beings... and the discovery of people who are truly our brothers and sisters.

Don't wait to get as close to death as Tom Kelley did before learning this. An Irishman from Brooklyn, Thomas Kelley received the Medal of Honor for his work long ago as a medic in World War II. I recognize that illustrations from old world wars feel irrelevant

to a lot of us but, in the trenches of warfare, the always-relevant issue of character gets revealed. On one occasion, Tom Kelley crawled for hours through the mud, from one broken body to the next, administering what aid and comfort he could to dozens of soldiers, many of whom were beyond help. Some of them were G.I.'s, some of them Germans, but the distinctions blurred in the pain of that place.

For the last ten minutes, Kelley had watched out of the corner of his eye, as a huge Panzer tank made its way in his direction. The tank had finally stopped, thirty yards away, and now its lethal turret just kept playing back and forth, as Kelley crawled from soldier to soldier. It seemed as though its inhabitants were trying to make up their mind which ditch would be Kelley's grave. When a sound of clanking metal suddenly broke the trance, Kelley huddled over the soldier he was caring for, clenched his teeth and prepared to die. Endless seconds passed, before Kelley opened his eyes and looked at the tank. Out of the top of the tank rose a German officer. For a moment the steely-eyed man stared the American down. And then, with an air of command, the officer raised his hand, in salute.

From time to time, and down through the ages, there have been people who lived by a higher allegiance than the boundaries of social and political convention. They have lived by the Law of a King who called his subjects to find in the face of even the most unlikely of strangers, the eyes of a brother or sister unknown. These have been those to whom Christ has bequeathed the richness of life, a love that fills the heart the more it is poured out to a neighbor, and the joy of service in that kingdom without walls.

As you meet people in *this* place, and then go forth to travel the dark roads and muddy fields of our world, which law will you love people by? Will it be the Law of Favoritism? Or will you seek the fairer way? The Word of God says: **"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'... you are doing right."** Let's do right.

Please pray with me...

*Lord our God, as much as we don't want to be Pollyanna people naive to the wolves and leeches of life, neither do we want to be fools of the other kind. Therefore, we pray, prevent us from battling this week, or from passing by unnoticed, someone who may in fact be a secret sibling. Bar us from falling as well, to the sin of allowing superficial colors and facades to raise up in us a judging instead of a merciful spirit. Rather give us eyes like Jesus' Lord, that we might perceive in the people round about us today and tomorrow, precious individuals whom you regard with kindness. Make of this your church not a club of favorites but a community of faith where all will find welcome. For the sake of the Savior we pray. Amen.*

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. Where do you see the Law of Favoritism at work in the world today?

2. In what ways do you avoid or affiliate with certain people based on the social advantages or disadvantages of connecting with them?
3. What are the downsides to favoritism?
4. What are the potential benefits of living by the Royal Law of Fairness instead?
5. Which of the following action steps might you take this week?
  - ☐ Pay attention to who I tend to favor in my social affiliations and think about why that it is
  - ☐ Celebrate that our church is a place that is hospitable to an expanding variety of people who might not be found together in other social settings
  - ☐ Extend personal hospitality to strangers at the church and in my comings and goings elsewhere
  - ☐ Deliberately establish conversation with someone with whom I would not naturally tend to affiliate, seeking to understand their story