

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“THE ROYAL LAW”

James 2:1-13

- ‡ How much are you worth?
- ‡ What is the value of your life in dollars and cents?

Yuck! It is an ugly question, intended to expose an ugly reality: we live in a world – and a culture – in which human beings are treated as economic commodities.

☑ {Measuring Worth.Com} This isn't new. In the southern states, a healthy slave cost up to \$75,000 in 1850. By 1860 that price had doubled to \$150,000.

☑ Slavery still exists in this country. Pimps buy and sell tens of thousands of victims, and Johns rent them. The worldwide market for nonsexual slave labor is even larger.

☑ Have you heard of for-profit prisons? They are owned by private companies that contract their services to the government. Their earnings are in direct proportion to the number of prisoners they incarcerate.

It turns out that these companies donate money to help judges get elected – some of whom impose longer terms than required. Their accountants know the value of a convict to the penny.

I feel like taking a shower, don't you?!

Even legitimate systems evaluate us largely on the basis of money. Do you have life insurance? The insurance company would say you are worth the amount of money they will pay out when you die.

If you die as a result of someone else's negligence, the courts will decide. Your worth will equal the compensation awarded to your survivors.

If that's too morbid for your tastes, combine the value of your real estate, personal property, investments, checking, and savings, and subtract your debts. That is your “net worth.”

We *know* that human significance is not measured by money. We *know* that a person's worth is not determined by their material assets.

‡ But do we believe it in our hearts? Are our actions consistent with our knowledge and beliefs?

■ Please turn with me to James 2:1: **“My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.”**

• James might well be echoing the Law of Moses in Leviticus 19:15: **“Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.”**

Partiality is a sin regardless of the intended beneficiary. But who is more likely to get preferential treatment: the rich and powerful, or the poor and weak? More often than not **“the great”** are pandered to in politics, finance, education, and community life.

■ Sometimes in the Church, too. In the scenario in verses 2-4 a rich person comes in and we bow and scrape. Then a poor one comes in, and we put them in their place. What's going on? We are assigning greater

value to the one **“wearing a gold ring and fine clothes”** and less to the one **“in filthy old clothes.”**

After all, a wealthy member might move the budget from the red into the black. A needy one won't.

A wealthy member networks with other potential rich members. A needy one probably doesn't.

A wealthy member is likely to have well-developed leadership skills. A needy one isn't.

A wealthy church member will add a patina of success to the congregation. A needy one won't.

Favoring the rich might seem to make 'good business sense.' And yet it is wrong.

■ This is not just a 'mistake' or a 'faux pas'; it is evil. Verse 4: **“Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”**

■ Discrimination puts us at odds with God, and it undermines the work of the Gospel! Verses 5-7:

⁵ Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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 those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

☑ {Global Rich List} From a global perspective, no one in this room is poor. If your annual income totals \$32,425, you are in the top one percent worldwide.

☑ Some of us aren't that affluent – but if your after-tax income adds up to a measly \$13,745, you are still in the top ten percent. Nine out of ten humans alive today fall into a lower economic bracket than you!

The good news is that, by the grace of God, some of us who are rich in things are also rich in faith. We will inherit the kingdom despite our wealth!

{Mt 19:12} This gift is not to be taken for granted. Messiah warns us in no uncertain terms that **“it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

But favoritism is not limited to rich versus poor. It is also spawned by pride of race, ethnicity, politics, marital status, denomination, and worship style. It wounds individuals and tears apart congregations.

✈ The antidote to partiality is *αγαπη* [agapē] love.

■ Verses 8-9: ⁸ **“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.”**

❓ Why is this **“the royal law”**?

★ The Love Command is **“the royal law”** in that it is preeminent above all other laws established by God.

In Mark 12 {27-31} a rabbi asks, **“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”** God the Son answers, **“The most important”** are **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart ... soul ... mind and ... strength”** and **“Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”**

No other law is nobler or weightier.

★ And the Love Command is “**the royal law**” in that it is the foundation and fulfillment of the whole law.

In Matthew 22 {34-40} the Son answers the question with the same directive to love God and neighbor, only this time his concluding statement is somewhat different: “**All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.**” That is to say, they *depend on* them, *are contingent on* them, *are determined by* them.

Some people pit Christ against Paul in this matter of love. They are dead wrong. Hear the apostle’s teaching:

... **whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal.” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” love is the fulfillment of the law.**
(Romans 13:8-10)

Galatians 5:13-14: “**serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’**”

Love is the crux of God’s entire law. Every other commandment in Scripture is application.

★ And the Love Command is the “royal law” in that it is the substance of the Kingdom of God. *Αγαπη* **love** is the kingdom’s official policy, actual practice, and essential character.

In John 13:34-35, the Son announces: “**A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.**”

This is not at all arbitrary: love is the soul of the kingdom, because love is the soul of the King. “**This is how we know what love is**” (1 John 3:16, 18): “**Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.**”

{1 Jn 4:16, 19} “**God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them We love because he first loved us.**”

Isn’t this pouring it on thick? Is James exaggerating just to get his point across? By no means! It would be impossible to overemphasize how important this is.

■ Verses 10-11: ¹⁰ “**Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.** ¹¹ For he who said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘You shall not murder.’ **If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.**”

{1 Co 13:1-4} In context, the point of the illustration is this: it is not sufficient to keep the rest of the law, if you do not fulfill the law of love. To this, Paul adds: and

it is also not sufficient to speak in tongues, prophesy truly, achieve perfect knowledge, attain absolute faith, serve the poor, and sacrifice yourself as a martyr – all for God! – if you do not love.

■ Hence, verses 12-13 call us to: ¹² **“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”**

“**The law that gives freedom**” is God’s law, concentrated in the Love Command. (If you wonder how the law “**gives freedom**,” I invite you to read my manuscript from last week.)

Since this is “**the royal law**”, it is the rule by which the King will judge us. And we will be judged!

{Mt 7:21} The Savior himself has said, “**Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven.**”

? How much is a person worth? What is the monetary value of a human life? The world treats human beings as economic commodities. Sometimes, this satanic way of thinking worms its way into the Church and we “**become judges with evil thoughts.**”

We have other problems, of course. But the basic antidote is the same for all: “**really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’**”

James 2:1-13 is the word of the Lord.