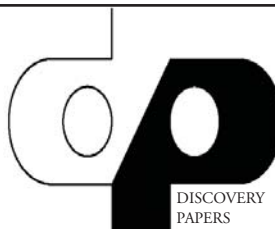


THE LAW OF LIBERTY

SERIES: WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN



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James 2:5-13
7th Message
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Mark Twain's celebrated novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,¹ was first published in 1885. Now, 125 years later, it is being reprinted amidst controversy regarding racial terms. In the story, we meet Huck as a 13 year old boy, a survivor and outcast who flees from an abusive father. He teams up with Jim, a runaway slave, and together they make their escape floating down the Mississippi on a raft. The crisis moment for Huck comes when he realizes that his friendship with Jim is more important than skin color or social acceptability. He discovered Jim to be a man of generosity, courage, and deep feeling. He wasn't just "one of those kind," not merely the inhabitant of a caste. He was a man. And Huck chose outlaw status for himself, famously declaring, "All right then, I'll go to hell!" rather than betray his friend.

Last week we began a study of the second chapter of James in which some themes similar to these are before us. Are we willing to suffer rejection in order to choose love rather than manmade status? Class, wealth, beauty, titles, degrees, and style all threaten to keep us from realizing that everyone on the raft is a unique masterpiece of God's making.

The word James uses to issue his warning is translated in the NIV as 'favoritism.' It means to judge something on how it appears—judging a book by its cover. In verse one of chapter two we face the command, "Do not show favoritism." In verse nine, the same word is used, "If you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers."

In the last study, we concluded that we cannot play favorites, fawning over the rich and dismissing the poor, without robbing Jesus of his glory. Jesus walks with the poor—he said of himself, "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." And yet, too often, we are impressed with gold rings and fine clothes, externals that are inconsequential.

The final phrase of verse four is an indictment and that's

where we turn to begin this study:

James 2:4b-7

[Have you not] ⁴become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my dear brothers: 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? ⁶But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

Failed judges who have no business being judges at all, have substituted their opinion for God's and look down on those he approves.

In verses 6-7 James mentions persecution and blasphemy—evidently a particular lawsuit known to the community which first received this letter (and a circumstance repeated at various times over the centuries). But the greater problem is challenging what matters to God. "You insult the poor and God chooses the poor." However, before we consider this problem, we need to answer a question: is God 'showing favoritism' by choosing the poor?

Leviticus 19:15 declares: *Do not pervert justice. Do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.* What does James mean by saying that God chooses the poor? I think simply it is this: from God's perspective, there are none but poor people. From his perspective, your portfolio means nothing. When he looks at us, all he sees is the needy and the broken and the lost and the inadequate. And it is those who recognize their poverty who are in a position to say yes to his choosing love. He isn't saying that God favors one class of people over others. God chooses the poor because there is nothing but the poor. Recall Jesus' words, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." All

are poor. Those who know their condition are blessed.

James 2:8-11

⁸If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. ⁹But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

Being judges with evil motives, we mistreat those God loves and deny Jesus the glory due him in favor of money. What then, is the alternative to favoritism?

Most of the first readers of James were Jews. They were used to consulting scripture and applying the Law of Moses even as followers of Christ. James directs his readers away from prejudice with the great commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). This is now the royal law because its authority was further established by King Jesus who said that all law was founded on love for God and love for one’s neighbor. Love is strong enough to overcome the allure of money and power of prejudice.

Verses ten and eleven are further evidence that James is making his case to those who are familiar with rabbinic discussions of the law. We learn that transgression of one commandment equals transgression of the whole, “Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” Simply, he is denouncing the search for loopholes. All prejudice is forbidden. ‘Love your neighbor’ has no exceptions for people you especially dislike.

What can we learn by focusing on the sentence, “Love your neighbor as yourself”? First, we should dismiss the notion that we are being taught to love ourselves more, to pamper and promote ourselves.

from the East to the West coast this week. In the seats behind me, a soft spoken guy introduced himself to his seat mate—a woman with a very penetrating voice. Given the opening of this introduction she launched into one of the most remarkable efforts to persuade that I have ever heard (if only more Christians shared the gospel with similar passion). It began with the statement, ‘you need to learn to love yourself.’ I put on a headset at one point, took it off an hour later and she was still going strong.

The parts I heard (couldn’t help but hear) included the importance of exercise (the best kinds of exercise and circumstances in which one should or should not exercise), a discussion of sleep habits, skin care, how to shop at a health food store, when and how to reward yourself, having boundaries in relationships, and using your imagination to create a better self. I don’t think the guy said one word after introducing himself.

Unlike the woman in the seat behind me, James has no interest (nor did Moses or Jesus before him) in teaching to focus on oneself. In fact, if we’re honest, we look in the mirror and come away distressed. We know our own failures and weaknesses better than anybody else. So when James begins with the assumption that we already love ourselves, he means that we will almost always act to protect ourselves. We readily accept the precept, “take care of number one.”

My cross country flight was full, with no assigned seats. Most passengers had the maximum number of carry-on items and good many of them were quite large. The first passengers aboard filled up the overhead bins. Nobody sat in a middle seat until the aisle and window seats were taken. The people who boarded last were given the least. Nobody had taken a lesson on ‘putting my interests before others’—we were all acting naturally.

All of us are probably aware of the phrase NIMBY, “Not in my back yard.” We will vote for a new sewage treatment plant as long it’s located across town. We are outraged by government red ink—but we want programs that benefit us to be saved and believe that taxes which apply mostly to others should be raised.

I was on a completely full Southwest Airlines flight

James’ directive is: love (take actions that benefit) your

neighbors as you naturally do yourselves. This first requires an expanded imagination—working to understand our neighbor's hopes and fears, their world as they experience it. Walking awhile in the shoes of another, we then apply the golden rule—treating them as we would like to be treated. Understanding coupled with kindness is the alternative to factions and selfishness in the believing community. It is the King's law.

The third step is to realize that some day we are going to be judged. We begin as judges with an attitude of superiority, mature as we come to see others as equal to ourselves, and finally discover that we are subordinate, standing before God who will judge us.

James 2:12-13:

¹²Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

Love is powerful. The law of love is the law that 'gives freedom.' It adds what is lacking, breaks chains, heals sickness, lifts up the down trodden, and it opens doors to new possibility. It liberates the one who chooses to love and the one who receives the gift of another's love.

The showing of favoritism is the pastime of the insecure. We want somebody to look down on so we can feel better about ourselves because we are filled with self doubt. The ability to love other people and to receive love from them, to prefer love to favoritism replaces insecurity with boldness. Love expands as it is given away.

Mercy triumphs over judgment—here judgment means a judgmental attitude. Instead of looking for evidence of guilt or enjoying the 'just desserts' of painful consequences for sin in the life of others, we look for a way to help—extending mercy.

Huck Finn bravely chose to love an outcast, break the law and live with the consequences. He made the right choice, even in the context of the story. During the days of their adventures on the raft, Jim's owner died and emancipated him in her will. Huck was traveling with a free man and in the end he was not a criminal. In this story Mark Twain tipped his cap to greater truths—courageous care for others is worth what it costs; the law of love is the law that gives freedom; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Our hope has a sure foundation—not because of the stories we tell, the leaders we elect or the laws we pass. Selfless love will triumph because the Lord God is sovereign. Love pleases him and he will declare his delight in those who obey him, 'well done good and faithful servant.'

NOTES

¹Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Chatto & Windus / Charles L. Webster And Company, 1885).