

November 9, 2025

Group Study: The Royal Law (James 2:1-13)

1. What does it mean for the church to live by “the Royal Law”, to love our neighbors as ourselves?
2. How does showing favoritism undermine the presence of God in the community?
3. Where might subtle or passive favoritism show up in our churches today?
4. How do we reconcile James’ hard words to the wealthy with the grace of the gospel?
5. What would radical, Christ-like welcome look like in our congregation?

Good Faith Bible Study

Kathy and Nathan Maxwell

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“The Royal Law”

Focal Text: James 2:1-13

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Today, we’re going to explore a short phrase that occurs in the book of James. In James 2:8, the author writes: “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

The phrase “royal law” appears only once in the New Testament. It’s always interesting to me to find these phrases that only occur one time, but they do leave us in a bit of a quandary. Without other New Testament examples or contexts to lean on, it can be hard to understand just what the author means to say! This phrase is no different. Why does James use the descriptor royal? And what makes this law royal rather than simply “the law”? In the Bible lesson this week, we dig into the text of James 2 and the context of partiality, favoritism and Christian action. In this podcast I want to take a minute to complement that study by exploring several possible meanings of “royal law,” and what that might mean for our lives and for our communities.

So think for a moment: If you were to list the world’s most powerful laws, what would you include? Maybe constitutional law or international law? Or maybe the laws of nature? If we were to ask James this question, though, he might point to something different, and maybe something that would be a little surprising. What is the most powerful law? James would say it’s the law of

neighbor-love. What is it that makes this law “royal,” and what would it look like if we were to live under its reign?

Let’s begin by unpacking the word “royal.” “Royal law” literally might mean “the king’s law” or “the law of the king’s realm.” In other words, this isn’t just another rule. It’s a rule that belongs to the sovereign.

One interpretation of this phrase is that the law is “of the King,” that is to say, of God or of Christ. In this view, James is saying: The law given by the King (the royal law) is one of loving your neighbor as yourself. Of course, that would mean that love is not optional. It’s binding, it’s authoritative, it’s central to everything that we do. New Testament scholar Douglas Moo argues that in James’ mind, the “royal law” extends beyond the Mosaic law to include the life and teachings of Jesus (Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC, 2019, 70).

Another way to hear it is that this law “governs the kingdom.” The royal law is not just something we obey; it’s something that shapes the kind of community that we are. Luke Timothy Johnson says that James presents the “royal law” as the foundational ethic of the messianic kingdom that was inaugurated by Jesus (Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, 1995, p. 230). So, when we live by love of neighbor, we are living under the reign of God’s kingdom, in which justice and mercy and neighbor-love define the order of the day.

Or, here’s a third nuance. We might understand the “royal law” to be the supreme or the highest law. Jesus himself says in Matthew 22:37-40 that love of God and love of neighbor are the “greatest commandments,” and that all the law and the prophets depend on them. Scot McKnight notes that for James, the focus of the “royal law” is that this law of neighbor-love is preeminent, not just in the Mosaic Law, as we see in Leviticus 19, but also in Jesus’ own teachings. So for Dr. McKnight, the royal law is not one law among many; it is the law that sits at the top (McKnight, *The Letter of James*, NICNT, 2011, 195).

Now each of these options has its own particular focus, but there are certainly similarities, too. And without more New Testament examples, or more context from James, it can be hard to definitively land on a definition of the “royal law.” And with these options in mind, it’s also helpful to consider how we hear and understand each of these interpretations in our context today. So think about these questions. What comes to mind when you hear “the king’s law”? How does that make you feel? What images come to your mind? In what ways might the love of neighbor feel more like a moral suggestion than an actual law? And lastly, what happens if we treat the command to love our neighbors as the law of the realm of God? What would that be like?

When I was in graduate school, one of my colleagues started a new ministry. It wasn’t in a church building or a non-profit, and it didn’t involve overseas travel. This family started a Bologna Ministry. Now I can’t recall if that’s actually what they called it, but it is how I remember it. The family settled into a house in one of the most economically depressed zip

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codes in the county. After school, of course, kids would play at one house or another—most of them empty because parents had to work second or third jobs to keep food on the table. My friends welcomed every kid into their yard and every kid to their table. They served up safety and fun, right alongside bologna sandwiches and Kool-Aid.

What I like about the Bologna Ministry is how ordinary it is—and how powerful. My friends didn't make headlines. But their steady, relational love is exactly what James pictures when he says love-of-neighbor is the royal law. It shows that the measure of Christian faith isn't about a program; it's not about a sermon. It's the everyday way that we treat others.

Do you know someone like this—someone that quietly lives out neighbor-love? In your community, in your neighborhood, what would it take for more people to live in that kind of relational, sustained “living-next-door” love?

Now let's shift now to what it means for the Christian community when we accept that neighbor-love is the law. Now this aligns with our overarching theme for this issue: “Community and the Presence of God.”

This means that wherever love moves, we find the presence of God. The “royal law” announces that the kingdom of God is visible in how we love one another. It's not about perfect performance; it's about living under a rule of grace and mercy and equity.

I would say that this aspect of the royal law is challenging to most of us. Because James is critiquing the practice of favoritism toward the wealthy and the practice of ignoring the poor. This phrase becomes a call to structural inclusion. In her book *The Scandalous Message of James*, scholar Elsa Tamez interprets the royal law to mean that Christian communities must actively avoid accommodating “the institutions, structures, and value system that promote injustice or who are indifferent toward it.” Instead, the response of the Christian community must be, Tamez says, to “demonstrate new values of justice” and to assist “the oppressed who are outcast from society” (*The Scandalous Message of James*, 1990, p 51).

In practical terms: In a church that lives by the royal law, the poor are not just attended to. They are welcomed, they are included as equal members. The outsider becomes the insider. Hierarchies are tempered by neighborly honor. This is the ethic of God's reign.

In your church or community, how do you see the “royal law” at work? If the answer is, “I'm not sure”—spend a little time here. Why is it hard to see this work? When you gather with your Bible study group this week, share ideas about one thing that you did this week to treat neighbor-love as a law rather than an abstract and lofty moral ideal.

This leaves us with one final angle to explore. The royal law also speaks to how Christ fulfills the law. In Pauline terms, love “is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10).

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So when James says “royal law,” it’s not about returning to a burdensome system. Paul is imagining life under the reign of a King who embodied that law. Jesus didn’t abolish love-of-neighbor—he embodied it. And now the people of Jesus living in that freedom and responsibility are called to do the same thing.

Regardless of where we land on the interpretation details, it’s clear that the “royal law” isn’t optional or peripheral. It’s the main thing. It shapes how we see Scripture, how we act in our communities, how we embody God’s presence among us.

Here’s one last thought experiment for you—I hope that you’re sharing these thoughts with friends and family throughout the week, and also with your Bible study group. Think of one “unwritten rule” in your church culture that competes with neighbor-love. Some examples might be: “We don’t ask for help” or “We stick to our own social circle” or “Everything needs to be fair.” And then imagine: How could treating the royal law as supreme law reshape that rule?

As we wrap up our time together, I’ll end with this. James isn’t giving us a new, obscure law. He’s pointing us back to the law that Jesus quoted: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But by calling it “royal law,” James invites us into maybe a richer vision, a vision of community that is ruled by love and not power; and the presence of God is seen in neighborliness, not status.

So here’s the question I want to leave you with: What would it look like for your community to live under the royal law, not just obeying it, but being shaped by it? What changes when neighbor-love becomes the whole framework for how we do church?

This week, may you go and love your neighbor as yourself, under the reign of the King whose law is love.