

Main Idea: According to James 2:1-13, the call to be a good neighbor involves three practical responsibilities.

- I. Being a good neighbor involves overcoming favoritism (1-7).
    - A. We’re given an exhortation regarding favoritism (1).
    - B. We’re given an example of favoritism (2-4).
      1. How we treat visitors matters to the Lord.
      2. How we treat visitors reveals the truth about us.
    - C. We’re given an explanation regarding the folly of favoritism (5-7).
      1. Consider how God views the poor.
      2. Consider how the rich view us.
  - II. Being a good neighbor involves keeping the royal law (8-11).
    - A. Loving our neighbor is the right thing to do (8).
      1. It’s what our King does.
      2. It’s what His Law requires.
    - B. Not loving our neighbor makes us a law-breaker (9-11).
  - III. Being a good neighbor involves living in light of the coming judgment (12-13).
    - A. Make sure you’re trusting in the Law-keeper.
    - B. Make sure you are merciful like Him, too.
- Take Inventory: Let’s consider two important questions...
1. What kind of a neighbor am I?
  2. What kind of a neighbor are we?

Last week we opened the Scriptures together to answer a very important question, “Who is my neighbor?” We’re interested in that question, initially, because we’re considering a proposal to purchase and establish a community center, to show our *neighbors* in practical ways that we care for them, with a view towards presenting the reason we care, which is the good news of Jesus’ atoning work for sinners. And so, we want to know *who that is*. Who is my neighbor?

But I say *initially* because that question points us to a command that appears at least seven times in our Bibles.

Leviticus 19:18, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but *love your neighbor as yourself*. I am the Lord.”

Matthew 22:39 “And the second is like it: ‘*Love your neighbor as yourself*.’”

Mark 12:31–33 “The second is this: ‘*Love your neighbor as yourself*.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to *love your neighbor as yourself* is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Luke 10:27–28 “He answered: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘*Love your neighbor as yourself*.’” ‘You have answered correctly,’ Jesus replied. ‘Do this and you will live.’”

Romans 13:8-9 “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “*Love your neighbor as yourself*.”

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\*\* Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

Galatians 5:14 “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘*Love your neighbor as yourself.*’”

So not once or twice, but *seven* times the Lord tells us that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.

That raises two questions. One, who is my neighbor? We saw Jesus’ shocking answer to that question last time, when He told a lawyer the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and we learned two convicting truths. One, my neighbor is anyone, including my enemy, who has a need. That’s who I’m to love with the same devotion and care that I give to my own needs.

Who does *that*?! No one does. There’s never been a human being on planet earth that does what the Good Samaritan did, that gives sacrificially to meet the needs of every hurting person he ever meets (including enemies). Which means, according to Jesus, in God’s eyes we are all law-breakers.

And that means, truth # 2, we are in desperate need of a Savior. We are *not* good people who just need a little help. We are sinners, breakers of the divine law, who are under the just sentence of a holy God and heading for eternal punishment.

But here’s the good news. God provided a substitute for us, His own Son, the God-man who did keep the command, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and every other command. And after living a perfectly obedient life, He gave that life and died as a substitute in the place of law-breakers on the cross, and then conquered death. And God, on the basis of His free grace, apart from any merit other than His Son’s, gives eternal life to all who will repent and put their faith in His Son.

What’s more, He also gives to that repentant, Christ-trusting sinner a new ability, the ability to obey, specifically, the ability to obey the command and be a *good neighbor*.

That’s amazing news! But it also raises another vital question. *Just what is a good neighbor?* Living these days, if you’re an American who watches much television, you might answer, *State Farm*. As in, *like a good neighbor, State Farm is there*.

Or if you’re in my age range, you may recall something we heard from Fred Rogers, or as we knew him at the time, “Mr. Rogers.”

*It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood,*

*A beautiful day for a neighbor.*

*Would you be mine?*

*Could you be mine?*

*It’s a neighborly day in this beauty wood,*

*A neighborly day for a beauty,*

*Would you be mine?*

*Could you be mine?*

*I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you!*

*I’ve always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.*

*So let’s make the most of this beautiful day,*

*Since we’re together we might as well say,*

*Would you be mine?*

*Could you be mine?*

*Won’t you be my neighbor?*

*Won’t you please,*

*Won't you please?*

*Please won't you be my neighbor?*<sup>1</sup>

Nice little song, but it assumes something. It assumes we know instinctively what a good neighbor is. Which we don't.

So what is a good neighbor? We need God's answer to that question, which He graciously gives to us in James 2. According to James 2:1-13, the call to be a good neighbor involves three practical responsibilities.

### I. Being a good neighbor involves overcoming favoritism (1-7).

Notice verse 1, "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism."

The first readers of this epistle are called "brothers" and "believers." These are first century Christians, people like us who have heard the glorious gospel message of Jesus Christ, and by God's grace, *believed* it.

The gospel, my friend, is good news, and it's been transforming lives for centuries. But there are many potential hindrances to the spread of this glorious gospel, like persecution, trials, even prosperity, and false teaching, and schisms in the church, these can all thwart the church's mission to make the gospel known to the world, and they're all addressed in the New Testament letters.

And here's another potential hindrance, and James goes after it with tenacity. *Favoritism*. James gives believers three things regarding favoritism.

**A. We're given an exhortation regarding favoritism (1).** "Don't show favoritism." That's a command, a non-negotiable. Don't do it? Why not? Because favoritism undermines the gospel of grace. Oh, we can preach that God will accept any sinner on the merit of Christ's work, but when we show favoritism, we're saying that we really believe that some are more worthy of His favor (and ours) than others.

Don't do that, says the half-brother of Jesus to these predominantly Jewish Christians (1:1). Don't show favoritism.

But what exactly is favoritism? So we won't miss the point...

**B. We're given an example of favoritism (2-4).** Notice verse 2, "Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in." So James is describing a church service here, one of your "meetings," as he says it. That's what the church does. What the church *is* is people. What the church *does* is meet. We meet to worship Christ and learn from His Word and fellowship with one another, and then, of course, we scatter to do our mission, to make Him known to the world.

But just about every time we meet, something happens. He sends people to our meetings, people from the outside. They could be other believers who have moved to our area, but James seems to be referring to two non-believers in this scenario.

He says, "Suppose a *man* comes into your meeting." And suppose "a poor man" also "comes in." He doesn't call either a "brother," but a "man." The first man could be a brother, and so could the second, but you don't either well enough to make that determination. All you know is what you can *see*. And what you see is what they are *wearing*.

The rich man is wearing a gold ring and fine clothes. The poor man is basically in rags.

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<sup>1</sup> Written by Fred Rogers, 1967.

Now listen to what James says in verses 3-4, “If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here’s a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man, ‘You stand there’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”

The truth is, I don’t even need to comment on the meaning of this little hypothetical. We get it. We know what James means. It’s transcultural and trans-generational, whether we live in the first century or the twenty-first. We get it. That’s favoritism, no further explanation needed.

But the implications contained call for some attention, namely two.

1. *How we treat visitors matters to the Lord.* “If a man comes to your meeting,” and “if you show special attention.” What if you don’t show any attention at all? What if you don’t reach out to either, you don’t speak to them, and you don’t offer them a place to sit? That’s *another* unacceptable scenario. But *this* scenario makes it very clear that the way we treat outsiders, today we call them “visitors,” people who are not yet in our number yet who comes to us, this matters to our Savior.

2. *How we treat visitors reveals the truth about us.* The truth is, we all respond to every visitor every time they come. The response could be, “I didn’t even see the visitor,” because we were busy serving in the nursery, or talking to our friends about Friday’s ballgame.

Or it could be, as James says, “I saw him, and because he was wearing nice clothing, I talked to him, and invited him to sit in a choice seat.” I did that because I liked the guy, or perhaps, to be more honest about it, I liked what I could foresee might come out of his continued presence in my life, or in this church.”

The same goes with the other guy. “I saw him too, and what I saw produced the reaction of: a) Look the other way; don’t make eye contact; or b) Hi. Thanks for coming. Just sit in the back and keep your kids quiet. This is a holy place.” or c) “Sit in the floor by my feet,” which of course refers to the place of a slave, so the cultural equivalent would be, “You’re welcome in this church as long as you remember who the boss is around here, and it’s not you, so don’t be trying to change anything.”

Friends, we all have these unChristlike tendencies in us. We don’t love our neighbors as we should. And as believers, we too struggle, which is why James gives us this scenario. And our Savior loves us and wants us to see the truth about ourselves, and admit our constant need for Him. So He sends us visitors. Or a Community Center possibly. Why? So we’ll take inventory and see what He sees.

After the exhortation and example...

**C. We’re given an explanation regarding the folly of favoritism (5-7).** James says in verses 5-7, “Listen, 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? But 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? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?”

Favoritism isn’t just disobedience. It’s also foolish, says James here. It’s foolish for two reasons.

1. *Consider how God views the poor.* Look at verse 5 again. Who has God chosen to be the special target of His grace? The *poor of the world*. It’s this group that God has purposed to receive two blessings: a) to be rich in faith, and b) to inherit the kingdom.

In similar terms, Jesus made the stunning announcement in Luke 6:20, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”

Are James and Jesus saying that *all* who are economically poor will enter God’s kingdom? Proponents of *Liberation Theology*, which is basically a mixture of Marxism and Jesus-out-of–context, use texts like these to support mobilizing the poor masses of the world to overthrow governments and establish, in essence, communism. “Yours is the kingdom of God!” the poor are told. “We’ll help you take it in the name of Jesus!”

But that’s not what Jesus said. It’s a wrong view of Jesus’ teaching on both *the poor* and *the kingdom*. In Matthew 5:3 Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” His kingdom is a heavenly one, and the recipients are “the poor *in spirit*,” that is, those who admit their spiritual poverty and receive God’s spiritual treasure in Christ.

James also makes it clear that not all poor people will inherit the kingdom. He spells out it’s the poor “who love Him” who will.

But this fact remains. It *is* hard for the rich to inherit the kingdom. Jesus said so. And Paul said, it’s not the wise, the wealthy, the noble, that God has purposed to save, but He has chosen the weak, the lowly, the poor. Why? So that “no one may boast before Him (1 Cor 1:29).”

Can God save a rich person? Yes, and thankfully He does! But for every rich person He saves, He rescues dozens, even hundreds of the poor of this world.

So if that’s the case, how could we tell a person to sit under our feet when God may well be giving His kingdom to that person?! When you consider how God views the poor, you see that it’s foolish to show favoritism. Here’s another reason.

2. *Consider how the rich view us.* Notice the three questions James asks in verses 6-7, “Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?”

Now, not all rich people do this, granted, but when persecution happens, when exploitation happens, when Jesus-followers are dragged into court, who almost always are the aggressors? Those who have clout and money. The rich.

So why would we go out of our way to show favoritism to the rich? That’s a foolish thing to do, to treat a rich person any differently than we would a poor person, both of them, sinners who deserve what we deserve and need what we need, possess, and can give them, salvation in Christ.

What’s involved in being a good neighbor? First, overcoming favoritism.

## II. Being a good neighbor involves keeping the royal law (8-11).

James isn’t introducing a new subject. He’s now going to show us the Scriptural basis for his charge against favoritism. Why must we not succumb to favoritism in the church? For two reasons rooted in our Old Testaments.

**A. Loving our neighbor is the right thing to do (8).** Notice verse 8, “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right.”

Back in 1:25 James made reference to “the perfect law that gives freedom.” Now he cites the Torah, specifically Leviticus 19:18, and calls it *the royal law*. Why? In essence...

1. *It’s what our King does.* The royal law refers to the law of the King. And our King says to do what He does, to love our neighbor as ourselves. He causes the

sun to shine on crops. He sends rain. He gives good health, and blesses families with children, and on and on. And to whom does He send these blessings? Just to those who love Him? No, to those who despise Him, too.

This is what our King does, and it follows then, it's what we must do.

2. *It's what His Law requires.* "Love your neighbor as yourself." Or consider this New Testament application in Galatians 6:2, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Don't miss James' point here. Why is favoritism wrong? Because loving our neighbor is the *right thing to do*. It's what our King does, and it's what His Law requires. Therefore, and don't miss this implication...

**B. Not loving our neighbor makes us a law-breaker (9-11).** That's James' point (and the Holy Spirit's who gave these words to James) in verses 9-11, "But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For 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."

The point, simply stated, is that God doesn't grade on a curve. You either keep His Law, or you break it. There's no pick and choose. There's no best-out-of-three. You either do what the Law-giver says, or you don't.

So you worship Him on the Lord's Day—that's good; He commands us to do so. You give Him the first part of your income—that's good, also commanded. You don't steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill people—all good, as commanded. But you *don't* care about people you don't care about. You're selective. You're hold back from those who hurt you, or may become a burden to you. That's *not* good. That's a violation of the King's royal law. Which makes you... a law-breaker.

Which brings us back to where we started. Who is a law-breaker? Every one is. Except Jesus. That's why we need Him, first to save us from the penalty of our sin, but now to save us from its constant, seek-first-my-kingdom-to-the-neglect-of-my-neighbor power.

What a King we have! He does not condemn us for our Law-breaking. But neither will He let us continue in it. He says, "No favoritism." And He says, "I've given you the power to love your neighbor," now let's do it.

And that's what a good neighbor will do. Being a good neighbor involves, first, not showing favoritism; secondly, keeping the royal law, like our King does. Thirdly...

### III. Being a good neighbor involves living in light of the coming judgment (12-13).

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

Notice the commands, "Speak and act." That takes us back to the scenario, to the church that speaks to a rich man and says, "Here's a special seat for you," and to a poor man and says, "You sit over here on the floor by me," and to the church that *acts* in ways that discriminate based on externals. James says, *no!* Be a church filled with people who *speak and act* like you truly believe you're going to be judged one day.

We are, beloved. Just like we make judgments of people, we too will be judged. By whom? By The Judge, God Himself. On what basis? On the basis of "the Law that gives freedom."

What's that? It's God's Law, written in the Torah, summarized in the Ten Commandments, fully summarized in the two greatest commandments, "Love God and love neighbor," and fulfilled ultimately by the perfect Law-keeper, Jesus the Christ (Matt 5:17).

Paul talked about the believer's judgment in 2 Corinthians 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

Jesus talked about the judgment in these terms, in Matthew 25. "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was a stranger and you invited me in." When? "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Yes, it matters how we treat the least of these, and He is going to reveal how we did on the day we stand before Him.

"But we all fall short, right?" Yes, we do. "So how can we approach that coming judgment day in confidence?" Here's how. I'll say it again...

**A. Make sure you're trusting in the Law-keeper.** If you think you're doing a good enough job to stand before the Almighty on the basis of your own law-keeping, you're deceiving yourself. He's already revealed that our righteous deeds are as filthy rags in His sight (Isa 64:6). There's only One whose righteousness satisfies His just demands. Make sure you're trusting fully in Him.

But something else is needed, not to endure the judgment day, but to experience reward in it. It's this. Don't just trust in the Law-keeper.

**B. Make sure you are merciful like Him, too.** James says, "Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!"

Those who have trusted in the Law-keeper, not just in word but in fact, demonstrate their trust by treating other people as they have been treated, with mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. It's because of God's mercy, extended to us in Christ, that we can joyfully anticipate the Judgment Day. And we'll show our joyful anticipation by our willingness to share what we've received. Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy (Matt 5:7)."

Those are the marks of a good neighbor. Being a good neighbor involves overcoming favoritism, keeping the royal law, and living in light of the coming judgment, all on the basis of God's mercy extended in Christ.

That brings us to two important questions.

Take Inventory: Let's consider two important questions...

1. *What kind of a neighbor am I?* To speak rather bluntly, if our inclination is to say, "Okay, I guess. Better than most," or, "Missing the mark and in serious trouble!" in either case we're thinking wrongly, if we're in Christ. Why? Because we're thinking in terms of merit, not mercy.

Friends, if we know Christ as Savior, we have nothing to fear as we anticipate judgment day. We have received mercy! And mercy triumphs over judgment!

But it doesn't stop there. It gets even better. As recipients of mercy, we're now receiving from our merciful King opportunity after opportunity to share what He has given us with the neighbors He has placed around us.

So we don't operate from a platform of guilt, but freedom. We've been set free...to serve. Now question 2...

2. *What kind of a neighbor are we?* The first question is personal, for you and me. The second question is congregational, for us. First, how am I doing? Second, how are we doing as a church when it comes to being a neighbor?

That, in essence, is what the Community Center proposal is all about.

A little over two months ago our neighbors, the township trustees, came to us and said, “We’re going to sell our Senior and Civic Center building across from your church. Since you own the parking lot next to it, we wanted you to know first. Are you interested? The sale price is \$120,000.”

That question began what has turned out to be a very stretching, purpose-clarifying process for us. Along the way it’s led to some confusion and misunderstandings, and has opened up some wonderful God-exalting blessings.

For instance, one person said, “I think this sounds like a good idea,” and authorized \$48,000 towards this Community Center proposal. A tremendous blessing from our merciful Savior!

Others have helped by asking very important, at times, *hard* questions, which we’ve tried to answer for the congregation in at least four public church business meetings. We’ve been praying and researching and meeting and developing...and now today, we’re going to vote.

In a moment, we’ll sing a closing hymn, have prayer, and then allow those non-members who want to leave (although you’re welcome to observe if you like) the opportunity to do so. If you’re a member of this church over the age of 18, you’re going to receive a ballot on which you’ll see four proposals, presented to you as a congregation by the recommendation of the deacons, trustees, and pastors, the Combined Board, of our church.

I want to clarify these four proposals now, so we can pray about them in our closing prayer. Later you’ll have opportunity to ask questions so we can vote with full understanding on each of the matters.

### **1. We will not go into debt to acquire this property.**

Your leadership team does not believe that debt in this venture is wise. We don’t want to be strapped by ongoing mortgage payments that would affect our ability to do other ministries that show we love our neighbors, including our CE programs, and the support of local and international missionaries. Thankfully, however, we don’t believe that debt is necessary in light of, one, the \$48,000 that’s been given to this venture, and this second proposal.

### **2. The Board recommends that the church sell the church-owned parsonage to its senior pastor and use the income to pay the remainder of the Community Center purchase price, as well as to use the money currently budgeted for parsonage utilities, insurance, and maintenance, to cover the Community Center’s utilities, insurance, and maintenance.**

You’ll be hearing a little more detail about this second proposal during our business meeting discussion in a moment.

### **3. The third proposal is to purchase the building across the street for the price of \$120,000 and develop a WBC Community Center.**

The mission of the WBC Community Center is to provide a facility/ministry that exists to show in tangible ways that we care about our community, with a view towards communicating the gospel.

Last week our Trustee Chairman, Dennis DeCamp, and I met with our township trustees. I asked them, “If there was meeting space and volunteer labor, what are the needs you see in our community that we as a church could help meet?” They talked about grandparents raising grandkids, a huge issue in our community. They talked about a church that’s run out of space for its food pantry that serves 200 people each month. And other things. And it all reinforced what we’d already been thinking. There are needs in our community that we can meet, and in so doing, create gospel-presenting opportunities.

Here’s a sampling of four initiatives we’re presently considering to fulfill this mission, although others will certainly be considered.

- a. Programs for *Community Assistance* (such as community Bible studies, including parenting classes, strengthening your marriage classes, empty-nesters classes; other community assistance ministries, such as CPR classes, blood drives, tutoring, a community Thanksgiving dinner, etc)
- b. Providing space for *Community Events and Community Partners* (such as space for other non-profits who are seeking to meet practical needs of hurting people in our community, such as CRADLE and Gideons and other churches that need space).
- c. To develop a ministry to *Senior Citizens* in our community
- d. To develop a ministry to the Young Adults in our community

Which brings us to a fourth proposal. In order that the Community Center venture reach its maximum potential, we believe it is vital to provide a leader for this effort.

#### **4. The fourth proposal states that within 30 days there will be a specific proposal dealing with the administration of the Community Center.**

A month ago I suggested that this would involve increasing Pastor Matt’s position from one-third time status to one-half time, so he could provide administrative leadership for the Community Center. At that point in the process, that seemed like a feasible solution. However, as we’ve discussed with Matt the implications of that change, we’ve learned that this may not be the best time for him to cut back his other employment income. We’ve also been considering other ways to provide the necessary leadership for this venture, which we’ll prayerfully be exploring, fine-tuning, and then presenting to the congregation within the next month.

Do we need another building to fulfill the royal law and love our neighbors as ourselves? No. We can use what we currently have, and should. But has the Lord opened an opportunity for us to display His mercy in even greater ways? You’ll be given the opportunity to respond to that question in a few moments.

First, I want to lead us in prayer, and then we’re going to sing a prayer (“I Need Thee Every Hour”).