

Are You a Lawbreaker?

[James 2:8-13](#)

James, Day 12

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

- James 2:8-13, ESV

"Don't smoke, don't drink, don't chew, and don't go out with girls that do." That's the old Southern Fundamentalist credo. An old Rich Mullins song puts the idea somewhat differently: "I don't cheat on my taxes, I don't cheat on my girl. I got values that would make the White House jealous." Perhaps it makes you smile to think that the occupant of the White House could ever be jealous of someone else's values. But what do both of these thoughts have in common? It's the idea that if we keep some brief list of basic rules, that makes us righteous.

It's not without reason that Christians have sometimes had a reputation as self-righteous, narrow-minded prudes. It's not just that we have a moral code we are striving to follow, but we too often have had a very short list that we think we're keeping pretty well and which we think makes us pretty righteous. Meanwhile, we can have huge blind spots to the grievous sin in our lives.

James is confronting this kind of self-righteous blindness in today's passage. He had just addressed the fact that it was wrong to show partiality toward those in the church who had more money. He then says that if you truly love your neighbor as yourself, you're keeping the law and doing well. The problem is, of course, that none of us actually does that, do we? I mean, can you honestly say you care about your neighbor as much as you care about yourself? Of course not.

So, here comes the zinger: If you're keeping certain aspects of the law but not others, that still makes you a lawbreaker. Keep nine of the ten commandments and break only one, and guess what that makes you? A lawbreaker.

Do you think that's unfair? Do you think keeping 6 or 7 of 10 should be good enough. That's not how the law works. The next time you get pulled over for speeding or running a red light, try telling the police officer he should let you go and not give you a ticket because you weren't drinking and driving and you were wearing your seat belt. See what he says about that! Or imagine a bank robber arguing with the judge that he shouldn't have to do any jail time because he never killed anybody while he was robbing the banks - in fact, he never ever hit or kicked anyone; he just pointed a gun at them.

We know that's absurd, right? The law doesn't work that way. Many criminals serving long sentences could make impressive lists of all the laws they didn't break. What got them in jail are the laws they did break.

Okay, so we know we're lawbreakers, what difference does that make? Well, James says it should make a big difference in how we treat other people. We should show mercy, forgiving others as those who know how much we've been forgiven. We shouldn't be harsh and judgmental, acting like we've never broken the law.

The world doesn't need more self-righteous, proud rule-keepers. It needs more mercy, from those who humbly know how much mercy they've received themselves.

