

## How Can We Obey the Royal Law?

A sermon by Canon James Robinson

St. Augustine's Anglican Church

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Would you pray with me please. Gracious God, open our hearts and minds to your word, and stir up our wills, that we might learn and obey your Royal Law and love our neighbours as ourselves. Amen.

The letter of James is a practical and bracing message, which instructs Christians to live out their faith in deed as well as word. It is widely agreed that this letter was not written by James the apostle, but by James the brother of Jesus, who we read, in Acts 15, played a significant role in the council of Jerusalem. This council was concerned with clarifying whether Christian believers would be required to adhere to the Jewish law, in particular the law that all males should be circumcised. The New Testament also tells us that James was considered the leader of the Church in Jerusalem.

This morning's appointed reading from James Chapter 2 exhorts the Christian community to follow both the teaching and the example of Jesus and treat the poor with the same honour and hospitality as they would offer the rich. In verse eight, James tells us what is foundational to his teaching: James bases his ethical teaching on what he calls the Royal Law of Scripture. And that is, love your neighbour as yourself.

Now the command to love your neighbour as yourself is first found in Chapter 19 verse 18 of the book of Leviticus it remained a relatively obscure verse of scripture until the time of Christ, as Jesus placed great emphasis on this passage. In Matthew 22, verse 39, in Mark 12, verse 31, Jesus is asked by the religious authorities to tell them what his most important commandment in the law of Moses. On both occasions, Jesus began with what would have been the expected reply as he quoted from Deuteronomy 6 the Shema, the great statement of Jews that is recited by Jews every day, and that passage is, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength." And then Jesus did something unexpected as he added that relatively obscure passage from Leviticus 19:18, implying that they were inextricably linked. "The second is like it," said Jesus, "love your neighbour as yourself."

This command to love our neighbours lay at the heart of Jesus ethical teaching and the early church was well aware of it. St. Paul directly echoes this teaching of the Lord Jesus, when he writes in Galatians 5:14 the entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." And of course, James is also of course repeating the teaching of Jesus when he writes in Chapter 2, verse 8, "If you really keep the Royal Law found in scripture, "Love your neighbour as yourself," you are doing right.

Why, you might wonder, does James call this the "Royal Law"? Well, this command comes from the Messiah, the true king, and we are called to demonstrate that we are faithful subjects of his royal kingdom, by living in faithful adherence to the path of love that he has commanded. It is truly the "Royal Law."

Throughout the past week I have been reflecting on this Royal Law, as I prepared for today's sermon. Events in the world have provided times of bitter juxtaposition to the scripture. Last Monday or Tuesday—I can't remember which, CBC radio was reporting on the enormous crowds of desperate migrants being blocked at the Serbian-Hungarian border. During the report the president of Hungary was quoted as saying that the largely Muslim migrants represented "a threat to Christian Europe, and shouldn't be allowed in."

And yet I know there has been a lot of history there. In the past, Hungary has seen itself as a bulwark, standing against Turkish armies. But these are frightened, desperate, homeless human beings fleeing from terrible violence, and he says, "they are a threat to Christian Europe and shouldn't be allowed in." Well frankly, I'm not sure what kind of Christianity the president was trying to protect, but it evidently didn't include the Royal Law.

And then it was time for me to prepare a homily, that is a short sermon, for our regular Thursday morning communion service. For those who haven't attended a Thursday service, the readings are different from those on Sunday, as we use the Book of Common Prayer lectionary. So imagine my surprise when I found the Gospel reading on Thursday was Luke 10: 25-37, which is the most extensive teaching about the Royal Law that we have in scripture, and it is from Jesus himself.

In this passage, an expert in the Mosaic Law tries to manipulate Jesus. He asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus then asks this expert what he reads in the law. The man throws Jesus' own teaching back at Jesus, by quoting the Shema, "Love the Lord your God with your heart, mind, soul, and strength," and then adding the Royal Law, "And love your neighbour as yourself." Jesus tells him, "You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live."

And then we read that this expert in the law wanted to "justify himself." In other words, he wanted a definition of neighbour that only included those who were just like him. I got to say, it sounds a bit like the president of Hungary. A definition of neighbour that only included those that were just like him, and so he asked, "who is my neighbour? Who is my neighbour?" Jesus responds in effect by saying, "Let me tell you a story."

*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too a Levite, when he came by the place and saw him he passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was—I've got to interject here, Jesus listeners must have thought, "this man is really in trouble now, a Samaritan—" they were heretics and there was a lot of bad history between Jews and Samaritans. But Jesus tells us: when the Samaritan saw the man, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."*

Remember why Jesus told this parable: it was in answer to the question, “And who, is my neighbour?” When Jesus finished telling the story he looked at the expert in the law and asked which of these three do you think was a neighbour to that man?” And you can almost hear the sulk in the expert’s voice as he replies, “the one who had mercy on him.” And Jesus told him, “Go, and do, likewise.”

Well, that was the passage I prepared to preach on at the Thursday morning eucharist. And Thursday morning dawned, and the front page of the Globe and Mail, and countless websites, showed the heart-breaking picture of three-year old, Aylan Kurdi, in his little red shirt, and blue pants, lying face-down on a Turkish beach. He had drowned along with his brother and mother in a family’s desperate attempt to escape the violence in Syria, and build a better life in the West.

In his parable, Jesus makes it clear that little Aylan Kurdi and his family are my neighbours, whom I am called to love. And Jesus’ parable demands action, for Jesus points us to the good Samaritan, and he tells us, “Go, and do likewise.” If, in the face of human suffering and need, we somehow miss Christ’s command, that we demonstrate our love for our neighbour, through tangible and generous acts of service, James will remind us. In chapter 2 of his letter, beginning at verse 15, he makes it as clear as possible. He writes, “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes, and daily food, if one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well, keep warm, and well fed.’, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?” In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

So what do we do about this? The scripture is unmistakeable. If we are followers of Jesus we are called to live the Royal Law, that calls us to love our neighbour as ourselves. And such love demands action. But what actions are possible when the needs are so great?

One thing we can do is encourage our national authorities to act. The press is full of that particular discussion, especially as we are in the midst of a federal election. We all need to pay attention to that particular debate, so that we can vote wisely, and *Christianly*, loving our neighbour as ourselves, even at the ballot box.

But the response to the Royal Law I am most interested in this morning, is not the response of governments, as important as that is. But rather, the response of us, as individuals, and the response of us, as a church family.

As individuals, there are a number of excellent agencies we can support. I’m a big fan of the Primates World Relief and Development Fund, the PWRDF, which is the official development and relief agency for the Anglican Church of Canada. The PWRDF is currently supporting food aid to Syrian refugees through the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. If you google PWRDF, you can designate an online donation for Syrian response. Another great agency, which I wholeheartedly endorse, is the Mennonite Central Committee. They have several programs going on with migrants, especially with those in refugee camps. And like the PWRDF, you can make donations online, and can be confident that your donations are going to those who are truly in need.

Then there is the trickiest of all these questions: How do we respond as a church family? Perhaps a special fundraiser. Or perhaps we are called to sponsor a refugee family. Anglican parishes across the country have participated actively in Canada’s private sponsorship of refugees program, the CPRSP. And parishes have been

supporting that since that program's inception in 1979, welcoming and settling literally thousands of refugees to Canada, and into their communities and lives. Or perhaps we could join forces with other churches in the community. Again, the Mennonite Central Committee has a lot of experience and expertise in sponsorship programs. This could work in all sorts of *different* ways.

Do you have an idea of something we can do? I mean when we say the Church should do something, it's us, right? It's us. And do you have an idea of something we can do? I'm wondering if there are people in the parish, perhaps some who have been looking for a ministry here at St. Augustine's who are feeling called to look into this. I would welcome the forming of a task force to research into how we might effectively obey Christ's Royal Law and assist our neighbours in Syria or Iraq. This amazing church family is filled with people with knowledge, skills, faith, commitment, and love-- everything we need to get a project like this off the ground. If you think that you just might be called to such a project, please talk to me, or to our Caring and Outreach warden, Pam Mundell.

Please pray that our nation, our church, and that we as individual believers might live by the Royal Law, loving our neighbours as ourselves. We can't do anything about young Aylan. But just perhaps, we can prevent another tragedy, perhaps we can give others a glimpse of Jesus Christ, through our commitment and our love for those in need.

May it be so. Amen.