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## September 27th: 2 Chronicles 14 & James 2:1-13

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### Alastair Roberts

Asa's battle against Zerah and the Ethiopians. Do not show partiality.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

2 Chronicles 14. Abijah slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the city of David. And Asa his son reigned in his place.

In his days the land had rest for ten years. And Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God. He took away the foreign altars and the high places, and broke down the pillars and cut down the Asherim, and commanded Judah to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, and to keep the law and the commandment.

He also took out of all the cities of Judah the high places and the incense altars, and the kingdom had rest under him. He built fortified cities in Judah, for the land had rest. He had no war in those years, for the Lord gave him peace.

And he said to Judah, Let us build these cities and surround them with walls and towers, gates and bars. The land is still ours, because we have sought the Lord our God. We

have sought him, and he has given us peace on every side.

So they built and prospered. And Asa had an army of three hundred thousand from Judah, armed with large shields and spears, and two hundred and eighty thousand men from Benjamin, that carried shields and drew bows. All these were mighty men of valor.

Zerah the Ethiopian came out against them with an army of a million men, and three hundred chariots, and came as far as Moreshia. And Asa went out to meet him, and they drew up their lines of battle in the valley of Zephathah at Moreshia. And Asa cried to the Lord his God, O Lord, there is none like you to help between the mighty and the weak.

Help us, O Lord our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this multitude. O Lord, you are our God. Let not man prevail against you.

So the Lord defeated the Ethiopians before Asa and before Judah, and the Ethiopians fled. Asa and the people who were with him pursued them as far as Gerar, and the Ethiopians fell until none remained alive, for they were broken before the Lord and his army. The men of Judah carried away very much spoil, and they attacked all the cities around Gerar, for the fear of the Lord was upon them.

They plundered all the cities, for there was much plunder in them. And they struck down the tents of those who had livestock, and carried away sheep in abundance and camels. Then they returned to Jerusalem.

In 2nd Chronicles chapter 14, Judah faces a serious threat from the south. Abijah fought against the northern kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam, winning a huge victory. And after their catastrophic defeat at the hands of Judah, Israel was thrown into disarray.

During the reign of Asa, there were four dynasties, not just kings, in the north in Israel. Jeroboam, Beasha, Zimri, and Omri. During this period then, even though it would attack Judah under Beasha, Israel was simply not the same level of threat to Judah that it once was.

The significant threat during the reign of Asa comes from the south, from an immense army of Ethiopians and Libyans under Zerah. While the kingdom of Israel goes through several dynasties during the course of its history, the endurance of the Davidic dynasty in the south is an important contrast to it. After Abijah's victory, Asa had the opportunity to rebuild and to strengthen Judah.

Chronicles gives a great deal more attention to the reign Asa than First Kings does. He is another king with a longer reign, which gives an opportunity for growth and development that they would not have in the north, where they were moving from one king and dynasty to another. Asa is a figure who was complicated by later unfaithfulness, and the initial assessment of his rule in this chapter differs in some ways from the final outcome.

However, he does start very well. He removes foreign altars, high places, pillars, and asherim. The fact that such things need to be removed gives us some retrospective indication of the reigns of Abijah and Rehoboam that preceded him.

They had clearly failed in this regard, this duty of the king to uphold true worship and to ensure that false worship did not take root. Asa also strengthens Judah by fortifying its cities, and the land enjoys peace, which he attributes to the Lord. This rest from war and the taking up of great building projects might remind us of the reign of Solomon in some respects.

In uprooting these false practices, the king is leading the people in reformation. The behaviour of the king was of such importance for the nation when it came to true worship. An unfaithful king could lead the entire nation into unfaithfulness, whereas a faithful king could restore true worship in great measure under his rule.

Both Abijah and Asa his son recognise the importance of faithfulness to the Lord for Judah's fortunes. Asa has a large army of 300,000 men from Judah and 280,000 men from Benjamin. The threat that comes from Ethiopia comes from a man named Zerah, perhaps we should think of the twin of Perez, the father of the line of Judah.

This man is accompanied by a million men, or a thousand thousands. Faced with such a scale of threat, Asa knows that he and the nation of Judah are completely outmatched. He prays to the Lord for deliverance, expressing the people's extreme dependence upon the Lord for deliverance in their situation.

Judah has no strength at all. Whatever hope they have comes from the Lord. And the Lord, in response to the prayers of Judah and Asa, gives them a spectacular victory.

The Ethiopians are routed before them. They pursue them and they plunder their cities. Having gained a very great deal of spoil, they return to Jerusalem.

A question to consider. The victory of Asa and Judah is attributed to the Lord. What are some of the various ways in which we see God's hand in such victories within the stories of scripture? James chapter 2 verses 1 to 13.

Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? 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 ought to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

The first half of James chapter 2 tackles the issue of partiality and the preferential treatment of people according to prevailing cultural standards of power, wealth and influence. This is judgment according to principles contrary to God's own judgment. Opposition to partiality and judgment is found in both Old and New Testaments.

In Deuteronomy 10 verses 17 to 18, In Leviticus chapter 19 verse 15, In Deuteronomy chapter 1 verse 17, The danger of such an attitude of partiality and favouritism in the church is immense. It directly undermines some of the central truths of the faith. And such favouritism can be displayed in the ways that different people are welcomed into a congregation.

When people see the rich man, they see the possibility of a beneficial association for them. The poor man by contrast offers no such beneficial association. Jesus speaks to such attitudes in Luke chapter 14 verses 12 to 14 when he taught concerning invitations to feasts.

Do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just. Partiality to the rich over the poor compromises judgment and the truth of God in order to please men.

The assembly of the Lord's people is not a place where rich people should be receiving special attention and treatment over the poor, yet it seems that this is precisely what is happening in various situations. This is the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. He should be the one exalted.

Giving glory to other human beings in the presence of Christ is entirely inappropriate. And James makes his point by giving an illustration of the form that this can take. Two people walk into an assembly.

The assembly is described here using the language of a synagogue, perhaps suggesting a gathering of Jewish Christians. The rich man is treated with great honour and respect, he is given special attention, whereas the poor man is dishonoured, treated as an inconvenience and an embarrassment. Such different treatment of the visitors reveals the hearts of those showing such discrimination and the hold that non-Christian values still have over them.

They have become judges with evil thoughts. What James does here is recognise the deeper significance of what they are doing. They are exhibiting the fundamental forms of injustice that are condemned in judges within the Old Testament law.

By speaking of them as judges with evil thoughts, perhaps he wants to alert them that they are held to a higher standard as the people of Christ. A task of judgment has been committed to them, and it is imperative that they fulfil it justly. Such standards of judgment are utterly opposed to God's own standards, as James now makes very clear.

James' arguments here are reminiscent of Paul's points in 1 Corinthians 1, verses 26-31. God's action in salvation challenges and overturns human values, the Beatitudes is a good example of God's favouring of people dishonoured or marginalised in the world. However, the people that James is writing to here dishonour the poor while honouring the rich, the very people who dishonour Christ and his people.

Behind this is the question of the true source of honour. If you are looking merely to human appearances, it would seem that the rich and the powerful and the influential are the source of honour, but if you truly live by faith, you see that God is the true source of honour, and if we truly want to be honoured, we must act towards God rather than merely to get the glory of other human beings. Christ is the patron of the poor.

The one who gives to the poor lends to the Lord. Throughout the New Testament we see special concern given to the poor. Partiality either to the rich or to the poor is condemned, but partiality to the rich is generally much more of an immediate problem.

While people typically seek to associate with the rich, the powerful and the influential, this is much less likely to happen in the case of the poor. However, God is a God who does associate with the weak and the poor and the despised. Christ came in the form of a servant, the one who was rich associated with us in our poverty, so that we might become rich in him.

As Christians we should be fulfilling the royal law of Christ. The royal law is, love your neighbour as yourself. This refers back to Leviticus 19, verse 18.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord. This is part of a section that also, in verse 15, condemns partiality.

Partiality to the rich over the poor is a fundamental failure of love to neighbour. It renders a person guilty as a transgressor, and it is a far more fundamental sin than many might think. The very golden rule, or royal law, of loving our neighbour as ourselves tackles that partiality at his very heart, the way in which we naturally prefer ourselves and those associated with us over others.

If we truly love our neighbour as ourselves, partiality will be one of the first things to go.

The royal law here is similar to what James has spoken of in chapter 1, verse 25, the perfect law or the law of liberty. Why is it called the royal law? Perhaps it is because it is the pre-eminent law.

It's the law that sums up and comes at the head of a great many other laws. It's a law that gives unity and focus to much of the body of the commandments. Perhaps it is also called the royal law as it is the law of Christ our King, a law that expresses his commandment that we love one another.

It's the law of the principle of love that should be operative within the life of the people of Christ. Jesus spoke of the importance of this law in Matthew chapter 22, verses 35 to 40, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment, and a second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

While God may not be an egalitarian, he has formed people in many different stations in life, given them different abilities and skills and powers that will lead to very different outcomes, there is a concern for a sort of equality throughout the whole of the scripture. This concern for equality is not about wealth per se. Inequality in possessions is not treated as an injustice as such.

It is not necessarily a result of the fool or of sin that some people have more wealth than others, any more than some people being stronger, or more attractive, or more intelligent. However, God is very concerned about the dignity that should be accorded to every human being, a dignity that is recognised in their standing before the law, a dignity that is seen in such things as the protection of their lives, and a dignity that should be seen in society's honouring and protecting their part in its life. This is one of the places where we most see concern for the poor.

The poor are those who are most commonly frozen out of society's life, not seen as having the same dignity as those who have wealth. It is very easy to overlook the humanity of the poor, to deny them face in society, to deny them agency, and a standing and a part that is recognised and protected by their neighbours. God routinely speaks of himself as the patron of such persons, charging his people to be concerned for the stranger, for the widow, for the orphan, and for the person who is poor.

Of all the people in the land, these are by far the most vulnerable. God also challenges his people to see themselves in the shoes of such persons. While we all like to associate with the rich, there's in the condition of the poor something that is truer to our condition as human beings relative to God.

As we as Christians recognise our spiritual affinity with the poor, we should be a lot more concerned for their material conditions and a lot less awed by the rich. We can't pick and choose commandments. God's will for his people is indivisible.

This is one of the things that Jesus highlights in his teaching. The law hangs together. One of the points of the royal law is that it sums up a larger body of the law.

The entirety of the law ultimately comes from the one lawgiver, and our treatment of the law expresses our attitude towards that lawgiver. If we're accepting certain things and neglecting others, we're treating the laws as if they were isolated from each other and not ultimately related back to the one source. We will be judged under the law of liberty.

Therefore we must take care with our own judgments. We must measure with the measure that we would be measured by and be wary of judgments that are according to standards that we would not be judged by. A question to consider.

Why do you think that James so singles out this issue of partiality?