

Chapter Two

commentary

1 – My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Yeshua Messiah with *an attitude of personal favoritism.*

In the final verses of chapter one, James has given us a conclusion to the general topic he emphasized in the previous context, that is, the clear differences between true and spurious religion. True religion is one that flows from the renewed heart of a child of God through faith in Yeshua and the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Spurious religion, which James labels as “worthless” (1:26), is merely “going through the motions” of religious practices without having experienced the genuine redemptive work of God by which the believer is enabled to “put to death the deeds of the flesh” (Rom 8:13).

In the previous context, James likewise identifies the character of “true religion” as conforming to Lev 19:18 and the teaching of Yeshua based upon this Torah text as found in Matt 22:35–40, that the “great commandment” in the “Torah of liberty” is to have a true love for God which inevitably produces a genuine love for one’s neighbor. Then James sums up these two aspects in the final verse of chapter one:

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:27)

For “one’s neighbor” he singles out “orphans” and “widows” to represent those in greatest need and who, without help, will often be impoverished. James expresses “loving God” by “keeping oneself unstained by the world,” that is, living in obedience to God’s commandments with the goal of bringing Him honor and glory. The primary emphasis that James has given us so far is this: genuine, saving faith is inevitably seen in a life that is more and more characterized by obedience to God and His revealed will in the Word incarnate and the written word of Scripture.

Now, in this second chapter of James, he develops this crucial truth by giving us very practical examples of how faith in Yeshua will be lived out by those who profess to be His disciples. In fact, this theme, i.e., what it is that characterizes the integrity of faith in Yeshua, will dominate the remainder of this epistle, and this can be seen when one

collates the use of the word “faith” throughout this epistle. Stulac offers this overview:

- 1:3 The goal: to treat trials as testings of faith in order to develop perseverance and to become mature and complete.
- 1:6 An illustration: that those needing wisdom in their trials should ask God, but ask in faith.
- 2:1 An application of genuine faith: that we are not to hold faith in Christ with favoritism in our treatment of people.
- 2:5 The matter of true value: to be rich in faith, not rich in money.
- 2:14–26 The theological unity: faith and deeds (with the term faith used eleven times in this section).
- 5:15 The concluding emphasis: that we are to pray in faith.¹

My brethren... – James is obviously addressing believers as he uses “family language” to characterize the local assembly, for all who are “in Messiah” are adopted children in the family of God. He has used “brethren” three times in the previous chapter (1:2, 16, 19) and we will encounter the use of “brethren” again in v. 5. When “brethren” (*ἀδελφοί, adelphoi*) is used in this way, it is not identifying gender, but rather is used figuratively of

a person viewed as a brother in terms of a close affinity,
brother, fellow member, member, associate....²

Further, that James used the personal pronoun “my” emphasizes the fact that even though he was physically a brother with Yeshua, such close physical ties did not in any way diminish the reality of his “brotherly” association with all believers in the body of Messiah.

Such language illustrates the very truth James intends for us to learn from this inspired text, namely, that union with Messiah in His death and resurrection necessarily binds all believers to each other in the *ekklesia* Yeshua promised to build. Granted, this close bond is most evident and lived out in one’s local assembly, but it likewise is experienced as believers meet each other in other spheres of life. Once again, this emphasizes the high priority each member should have for maintaining regular attendance in their own local assembly. Here, once again, we are reminded by the language James uses, that life in Yeshua

¹ George Stulac, *James in The IVP NT Commentary* (IVP, 1993), p. 88.

² BDAG, “ἀδελφός,” p. 18.

is not purely or only an individual experience but binds the believer to a community of faith in which serving one another is an essential mark of genuine faith in Yeshua.

... *do not hold your faith* – The NASB uses “hold your faith” to translate the Greek verb ἔχετε (*exete* < ἔχω, *exō*), “to possess or contain, have, own” or “to have, hold, to grip something.” Or another way to understand the language James is using here is that true faith in Yeshua must be expressed by a life that honors Him. To say that one has faith in Yeshua yet lives in a way the dishonors Him, is to prove that person’s profession of faith is false.

... *in our glorious Lord Yeshua Messiah* – The object of true saving faith is that of the Lord Yeshua Messiah, for it is in Him and in Him alone that salvation is to be obtained. Yeshua proclaimed this Himself when He stated to Thomas:

Yeshua said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life;
no one comes to the Father but through Me.” (Jn 14:6)

The phrase “our glorious Lord Yeshua Messiah” (τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης) is a bit ambiguous as to how the word “glorious” is to be understood. This is because in the Greek, the word order is this way: “not in favoritism you are to hold your faith in our Lord Yeshua Messiah of glory” (μὴ ἐν προσωποληψίαις ἔχετε τὴν πίστιν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης). The genitive (possessive) “of glory” could therefore be taken either to mean “our glorious Lord Yeshua Messiah,” as an adjective expressing the greatness of our Savior, or as “our Lord Yeshua Messiah of glory” meaning “our Lord Yeshua Messiah Who now dwells in the glory of heaven.”

Similar phrases are found in Acts 7:2 and 1Cor 2:8.

And he said, “Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, (Acts 7:2)

... the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; (1Cor 2:8)

It seems very likely that James has in mind the visible glory of God spoken of in the Tanach, especially in connection with the glory that was manifested at Sinai, in the Tabernacle, and that filled Solomon’s temple, referred to in later rabbinic literature as the *Shekinah*.

The glory of the LORD rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; and on the seventh day He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud. And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the mountain top. (Ex 24:16–17)

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Ex 40:34)

Now when Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the house. The priests could not enter into the house of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD's house. (2Chron 7:1–2)

Given the fact that “glory” is so often used to denote the visible presence of the Almighty, it seems certain that when James refers to Yeshua as “the Lord of glory,” he is making an emphatic reference to Yeshua’s deity and thus to the fact that Yeshua manifests the very presence of the eternal, uncreated God. To be in the presence of Yeshua is to be in the very presence of יהוה, *Adonai*. Moreover, we are to be constantly reminded that Yeshua is the eschatological Judge before Whom all will stand. One commentator, having pointed out that Yeshua’s glory will be seen when He returns to judge mankind (cf. Matt 16:27; 24:30; James 5:9), writes:

These meanings are also common in the NT usage of the term, especially the eschatological sense... The idea in James, then, is probably related to this area of the term’s meaning, for James clearly thinks about the exalted Christ and his return to judge (e.g. 5:7ff.). Thus those who hold “the faith of our glorious Lord” with partiality are not debasing just any belief, but rather a faith-commitment in the one exalted Lord Jesus whose glory will be fully revealed in eschatological judgment. As the tone implies, this is no matter for casualness or trifling; final judgment is at stake.¹

... *with an attitude of personal favoritism*. – Having emphasized that the very object of our faith is Yeshua Messiah, the Lord of glory, James reminds us once again that if the goal of our faith is to be like Him, then surely we cannot express proper faith by engaging in “personal favor-

¹ Peter H. Davids, *James* in *NIGTC* (Eerdmans, 1982), p. 107.

itism," that is, considering any fellow believer as less important simply because of their station in life. For after all, did not Yeshua Himself leave the glory of heaven to dwell in this fallen world so that He could save those who were unworthy of His grace? Yes, of course He did!

For you know the grace of our Lord Yeshua Messiah, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich. (2Cor 8:9)

The "*an attitude of personal favoritism*" in the NASB actually translates just one word in the Greek, *προσωποληψία* (*prosōpolēpsia*), a compound word made up of *πρόσωπον* (*prosōpon*, "face") and *λήμψις* (*lēmpsis*, "to receive something"). This answers to the Hebrew idiom *נָסַף פָּנָי* (*nāsā' pen*), "to lift up the face," which means "to accept someone." Note, as an example," Gen 32:20.

...and you shall say, 'Behold, your servant Jacob also is behind us.'" For he said, "I will appease him with the present that goes before me. Then afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me [literally "he will lift up my face"]. (Gen 32:20)¹

Thus, the idiom itself, both in the Hebrew as well as the Greek, describes treating someone on the basis of their appearance (their "face") rather than on the greater reality that all people are created in the image of God. And the example James uses in the next verses is that of economic status or one's general station in life.

2-4 For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?

When James writes of "a man" coming into "your assembly," he obviously has the local community of believers in view. Moreover, since he writes "your assembly," he gives us an insight into the manner in which local assemblies are defined, i.e., those who have made a

1 For other examples, cf. Deut 10:17; Job 32:21; Prov 18:5.

commitment to be part of a given faith community and thereby have ownership as regards the community's needs, viability, and progress.

It is important to note that the NASB "assembly" translates the Greek συναγωγή (*sunagōgē*, "synagogue; a place of assembly; an assembly") and not, as one might expect, the Greek word ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*). While the Greek word *sunagōgē* can have a general meaning of a "gathering," in the Apostolic Scriptures it is the word most often used to denote the common place where people gathered to read and study the Tanach.¹ That James uses it here reminds us that the early followers of Yeshua, whether Jew or Gentile, met together in their communities in a synagogue fashion.

James speaks of "a man" who comes into the synagogue. While James uses "a man" where Greek has ἀνὴρ (*anēr*, "an adult human male"), the word can also carry the sense of "someone" or "a person."² In fact, here James is giving us an illustration and no doubt describing a common situation in the first century communities of believers, albeit with a certain amount of hyperbole. For first he describes a person who dresses well and has golden jewelry, both of which indicate that he is financially well off. He compares such a person with someone who comes to the gathering in "dirty clothes" which would likely indicate that the person does not own an abundance of clothes and therefore may often wear the same clothes for work as well as for public gatherings, giving us a picture of someone who is not financially wealthy.

What takes place in the illustration James gives is that the one who appears wealthy is given priority in terms of seating while the more impoverished person must stand or sit on the floor. While we might consider this to have been a problem in the ancient society of James' day, we should immediately recognize that a similar problem may well exist in our own times.

Taking this parable to heart is a spiritual exercise that leads to self-indictment for many Americans. The parable requires little modification to fit in contemporary culture.³

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- 1 The word συναγωγή, *sunagōgē* is found 56 times in the Gospels (34x), Acts (19x), James (1x), and Revelation (2x).
 - 2 *BDAG*, "ἀνὴρ," p. 79.
 - 3 Kurt A. Richardson, *James in New American Commentary* (Broadman & Holman Pub., 1997), p. 113.

...have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? – In the time of James, it may well be that a significant distinction was that of Jewish or non-Jewish “status” within the assembly of believers. It seems very possible that there were Jewish believers who had a very difficult time accepting non-Jewish believers on equal ground with other Jewish believers. Surely James uses an illustration of economic diversity, but this too may have been the case when comparing Jewish members and non-Jewish members of the believing community.

James therefore rightly decries the “distinctions” that are made when such distinctions go contrary to the Scriptures. For in the Tanach itself, the “foreigner” (גֵר, *ger*) and the “native born” are governed by the same “Torah.”

As for the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the alien who sojourns with you, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; as you are, so shall the alien be before the LORD. There is to be one torah and one ordinance for you and for the *ger* who sojourns with you. (Num 15:15-16)

There shall be one standard for you; it shall be for the stranger as well as the native, for I am the LORD your God. (Lev 24:22)

Note carefully that James spells out the source of the problem. Those who make such distinctions do so as self-appointed “judges with evil motives.” The Greek διακρίνω (*diakrinō*) which the NASB translates “made distinctions” may also carry the sense of “to elevate” and may therefore indicate that by judging others as less worthy, the evil motives are that of self-elevation.

The antidote for such evil actions is to set our hearts and minds upon Yeshua, always considering what He has done for us, and who and what we would be apart from His saving life. For if He left the glories of heaven to redeem those who were “dead in trespasses and sin” (Eph 2:1), then surely we must receive one another, not on the basis of our own position, but on the basis of our position in Yeshua. All who are His are seated with Him in the heavenlies (Eph 2:6).