

9–10 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.

James returns to the subject of 2:4–6 and the divisive consequences of showing favoritism or partiality. The Greek word translated “partiality” by the NASB is *προσωπολημπτέω* (*prosōpolēmpṭeō*) and is found only here in the Apostolic Scriptures.¹ Here the verb is a present active indicative, and thus may specify a person who has a regular habit of accepting some who are believers but rejecting others, shown by outward and obvious favoritism.

James comes right to the point: to practice favoritism with the community of believers is to “commit sin” and thus to be convicted by the Torah as a “transgressor” (*παραβάτης*, *parabatēs*).² Here, once again, we see that the Torah (*νόμος*) is that by which a person is convicted as a transgressor. Far from being “decommissioned” or “updated” with a new set of laws, the Torah, the whole of God’s revealed “teaching,” remains the standard defining what is righteous in His eyes and what is not. As Adamson puts it:

James sternly refuses to condone this grave sin as if it were a trivial peccadillo: the plain and unambiguous Greek word, once only in Classical Greek and never in the LXX, “transgressor,” explicitly condemns it as an offense against God’s law.³

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. – Here we are confronted with the reality of God’s infinite and eternal holiness. Being infinitely holy, no sin or transgression is small or negligible in His eyes.

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Messiah Yeshua our Lord. (Rom 6:23)

Once again, we learn from James’ inspired words that no one could ever think to “gain favor with God” on his or her own strength, for

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- 1 The cognate nouns used once each: *προσωπολήμπτης* (“one who shows partiality,” Acts 10:34) and *προσωπολημπσία* (“partiality,” James 2:1).
 - 2 *παραβάτης* is found four other times in the Apostolic Scriptures: Rom 2:25, 27; Gal 2:18; James 2:11.
 - 3 Adamson, *James*, p. 116.

“...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom 3:23)

James uses the word “stumble” (*πταίω, ptaiō*) to indicate one who “falls into sin.” The word could also indicate “to trip” over something.¹ Paul likewise uses this verb to picture the fact that some of the Jewish people rejected Yeshua during His life upon the earth, but this did not mean God had rejected Israel as a whole.

I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous.

It is possible, then, that James chose this verb to emphasize that though someone may currently be known as engaging in partiality, this does not mean that they are beyond repentance which God may grant. They “trip” but have not yet fallen away.

Since no one who is related to Adam is able to keep the whole Torah, it is clear that all of mankind is in need of a Savior, for apart from God’s bountiful love in sending His Son, Yeshua, there would be no means of salvation from the just punishment God would render.

Yet it is our goal as believers in Yeshua to honor God by being obedient children. We recognize that when we sin, we must seek repentance and forgiveness, which are promised to us by God Himself when we confess our sins to Him and gain strength from Him to live in obedience (1Jn 1:9). No believer in Yeshua is entirely without sin. But the goal of our sanctification is that we would be more and more characterized by our obedience to Him and less prone to giving in to the flesh, i.e., the sinful nature.

Once again, what James is describing is someone who regularly shows partiality and continues to do so even though they know this is sin. The emphasis James desires for us to understand is that as confessed believers in Yeshua, we cannot condone, either in ourselves or in others, the rejection of any whom God has accepted, that is, who have confessed Yeshua and are striving to honor Him by their obedience to Him. To engage in such partiality, that is, treat some within the body of Messiah as less important, or less valuable, or less needed, than others, is to engage in sinful behavior which God hates.

In the so-called “Messianic movement,” we recognize that we are

1 BDAG, “πταίω,” p. 894.

not exempt from this problem. We can imagine that in the first century there were those who considered the Synagogue to be for Jews and that if Gentiles wanted to attend, they could do so if they went through a man-made ceremony that gave them so-called “Jewish status,” that is, they became “proselytes.” Or they could be welcomed in if they were wealthy and gave significant funds to the synagogue, etc. But for the common Gentile believer, it may well have been that they were considered “second-class” members and treated accordingly. Even in our day, there is a movement among some Messianic groups to limit attendance by non-Jewish believers, and to keep the “Messianic Synagogue” for Jews only. This seems to be precisely the very kind of thing that James strongly teaches against and that which is surely a transgression of the very Torah God has given us.

Since we know that the goal of the covenant given to Abraham is that “in you all the families/nations of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14), we, in our communities, must be a witness to the watching world of God’s faithfulness to His covenant promises. We all, believing Jews and Gentiles, are “one new person” in Yeshua and thus we are evidence that God has chosen people from every nation, family, tribe, and language (Rev 5:9) to be His people to whom He has given life eternal.

11 – For He who said, “DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,” also said, “DO NOT COMMIT MURDER.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

The order in which James lists these two commandments is reversed from that which we find in Ex 20:13–14. For in the listing of the Ten Words there, the order is “You shall not murder,” “You shall not commit adultery.” Interestingly, the Lxx has “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not murder” and Luke in Lk 18:20 and Paul in Rom 13:9 likewise follow the order of the Lxx.

The main point, however, is that while the first half of the Ten Words is specifically directed God-ward, the second half relates to how one treats one’s neighbor. It is interesting that Yeshua combined “murder” with ill treatment of one’s brother.

You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever

says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. (Matt 5:21–22)

Once again, the behavior that Yeshua singles out is undoubtedly that which characterizes a person who has never repented of their sin but has lived a life of “hating their neighbor.” But the severity of Yeshua’s words here should well remind us how important it is to treat one another within the body of Messiah with love, caring, and compassion. Obviously, such compassion may also involve confrontation and seeking to turn someone from a wayward path in life back to living in a way that truly honors Yeshua.

As those who have been drawn by the Lord to honor Him by obeying His Torah, we must take these admonitions seriously. Let us commit ourselves to loving one another in spirit and in truth, that our Messiah Yeshua would be honored and that the world would know that we are His disciples.

By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (Jn 13:35)

12–13 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

These verses offer the conclusion to James’ teaching in this pericope, encompassing the entire first section of the chapter, i.e., 2:1–11. The main subject is that of favoritism which ought never to characterize the *ekklesia* of Yeshua, and for obvious reasons. First is the fact that the eternal gift of salvation granted by faith to every believer, is in fact, entirely of God’s own abundant grace. The salvation He grants is not something anyone can earn or be awarded on the basis of their station in life or expected as guaranteed by way of their inheritance. For God, in His sovereign mercy, has chosen people from every nation, every family, every language-group, and all who by their relationship to Adam equally have nothing of their own by which to claim or purchase the gift of God’s forgiveness and His granting of an eternal relationship with Him as adopted children in His family.

In vv. 1–4 James has warned us against discrimination, something that is based upon Lev 19:15.

You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly. (Lev 19:15)

Our communities of faith are to be characterized by a full acceptance of those who evidence a true faith in Yeshua and who desire to grow in that faith. This means that we must be always willing to come alongside of those in need and to encourage each other in our life of faith. When one is struggling in their faith, they need the support and care of other believers within their community, not to be shunned as unworthy. The local *ekklesia* is not a “country club” for the affluent segment of society nor is it to be identified on the basis of ethnicity.

At least in James’s churches, the possibility of destitute people entering was real; in many middle or upper-class suburban congregations they would never dare!¹

In verses 5–11 James elucidates this important truth, that every sinner, whether rich or impoverished in worldly goods is, in fact, “poor” when it comes to spiritual wealth, that is, that which pleases God and secures an eternal relationship with Him. To have a true saving relationship with God is true riches indeed! This is James’ point in 2:5.

...did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? (James 2:5)

Obviously God did not choose *only* the poor of this world to be His own adopted children, but He did chose those who were poor, and the point James is making is clear. If God chose those who were poor in terms of this world’s goods, then surely they should be equally received within the body of Messiah. To shun the poor is to deny God’s sovereign grace and election of all whom He would save. And what is more, as v. 11 teaches us, one cannot claim to live in obedience to the Torah while constantly disregarding any of its divinely given precepts. To shun the believer who is impoverished in this world’s goods is to transgress the commandment of the Torah which states clearly “you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great” (Lev 19:15).

Now, in vs. 12–13 James brings this opening pericope of our chapter

1 Blomberg, Craig; Kamell, Mariam. *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James* (Zondervan, 2008), p. 121.

to a clear and fitting conclusion.

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. – The repeated “so” (οὕτως, *houtōs*) in the phrase “so speak and so act...” is constructed to give emphasis, for this makes it clear that the standard by which believers in Yeshua are to live is that of the Torah (God’s instructions), which itself is God’s revelation of what He considers to be righteous or unrighteous.

James chooses “speak” and “act” (λαλέω, *laleō* and ποιέω, *poieō*) as terms that encompass one’s whole life. It is out of the heart (inward thought processes) that the reality of one’s true character is made evident, being evident in one’s speech and one’s actions. Indeed, James will teach us that the use of the tongue, i.e., one’s speech, is a significant “litmus” test of one’s true faith and one’s spiritual maturing to guard the tongue so that Yeshua would be honored and one’s fellow believers be cared for and encouraged (cf. 3:5–12).

...as those who are to be judged – The Greek which stands behind the English “are to be judged” (μέλλοντες κρίνεσθαι) utilizes the verb μέλλω, *mellō*, which can carry the sense of immanency, i.e., “as those who are about to be judged.” James’ emphasis in using this language may well be to put an emphasis upon the relative transitory nature of human existence. But the Greek *mellō* can also carry the sense of “inevitability,” thus emphasizing that all will stand before the Lord and give account, as Paul teaches.

But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. (Rom 14:10)

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Messiah, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad [or worthless]. (2Cor 5:10)

Clearly James is not teaching us here that believers in Yeshua will be judged by way of punishment for their sins. The Scriptures are clear that all who are in Messiah Yeshua have had their sins paid for by the very death of Yeshua on their behalf.

But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed. (Is 53:5)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Messiah Yeshua. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Messiah Yeshua from the law of sin and death. (Rom 8:1–2)

and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. (1Pet 2:24)

The judgment or assessment James refers to in our text must therefore be understood to be the time when the redeemed people are brought into God's very presence and are commended by the Lord Himself for their service to Him while upon the earth. We are reminded of the words of John in Revelation which describe the beginning of eternity with Yeshua for all whom He has redeemed.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." (Rev 21:3–4)

...judged by the law of liberty. – We have already seen James use the phrases "law of liberty" (1:25)¹ and "royal law" (2:8), which, when combined, carries the sense of "the King's law which, when obeyed, brings freedom." When citizens of an earthly government obey the laws of that government, they mark themselves as true citizens. Likewise, a life of obedience to God's righteous ways is that which characterizes those who have been redeemed by the precious blood of Messiah, and who therefore are endowed with the abiding presence and work of God's Ruach. We may use the illustration of the Olympic games in which the athletes are judged as to their ability to run the race. The athlete that comes in third place is not punished but also does not receive the gold medal. Yet all who finish the race, regardless of whether they finish first or last, are commended for finishing the race.

What James is pressing upon us here is to remember that we are "in the race" and we must strive toward the finish-line by running well,

1 In 1:25 the Greek has νόμον τέλειον τὸν τῆς ἐλευθερίας, which is "the perfect law of liberty" and is essentially equivalent with νόμου ἐλευθερίας in 2:12.

that is, in conformity to how our Lord has instructed us to run. The “law of liberty” teaches us how to “run the race” so that we might finish it with His approval. And what is more, He has given us His very Spirit to guide, strengthen, and enable us to run well as we submit to His leading and guidance. How well we are running is seen in how we “speak” and how we “act.” It seems quite clear that the author of Hebrews had this same metaphor in mind, of the Olympic athletes competing in the race, as an illustration of how we are to honor our Savior in the “race” in which we are engaged.

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Yeshua, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:1–2)

For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; – The honest judge who stands to recognize the winners of a race in the Olympic games will not be persuaded by those who finished last to give them a place in the top three finishers, no matter how much they plead that he would do so. This illustrates the fact that genuine mercy is never contrary to justice. Yet what James is emphasizing here is that all who are truly “in Messiah” have been awakened to the glory of God’s mercy in giving His Son. If, then, all who are truly believers know and have experienced God’s bountiful mercy toward them, then certainly they should likewise be ready to show mercy to those who are in need. The one who discriminates does so out of evil motives (James 2:4) and in such self-centeredness, forfeits the “good” commendation of Yeshua when appearing before the judgment seat of God. If we have received mercy, then we most surely ought to be the people of God who are able to show others mercy.

...mercy triumphs over judgment. – Here it seems quite clear that James is speaking about God’s mercy, for by His infinite mercy and grace in sending Yeshua to be our propitiation, His judgment fell upon our Savior and thus all those for whom He died see judgment gone. Indeed, God’s mercy in Yeshua triumphs over judgment for all who are His. But it also is true that in this last phrase, James once again reminds us that “mercy” is a characteristic of all who are truly born from above and who have therefore experienced God’s mercy toward them. Thus, those who have been given God’s mercy in Yeshua have, by His grace,

overcome judgment. The final judgment day, then, will be the greatest display of God's mercy, for the redemption obtained by the nail-scarred hands and feet of Yeshua will be seen as applied to a host of people that no man can number, from "every family and nation of the earth." Surely this will demonstrate what James reminds us of here: "mercy triumphs over judgment," for God's infinite holiness has been completely satisfied by the payment for sin obtained by Yeshua and applied to all the elect by the work of God's Spirit.

14 – What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?

James asks an obvious question now. If someone says they have faith, but it's only words without actions, what value is there in such "faith?" In fact, such a scenario does not identify biblical, saving faith at all. The opening words, "What use is it" translates the Greek τί τὸ ὄφελος (*ti to ophelos*), where the noun *ophelos* is cognate to the verb ὠφελέω (*ōphēleō*), which may carry the sense of "to accomplish something."¹

It is plain to see what James is teaching us here. The Bible defines faith in Yeshua as that which accomplishes eternal salvation, that brings the believer from death to newness of life, and that gives a "new birth" by the work of the Spirit in regeneration so that the child of God is enabled to grow in righteousness by putting to death the deeds of the flesh and thus becoming more and more set apart to God in thought, word, and actions.

Thus, someone who claims to have saving and redeeming faith but whose life shows no evidence of progress in sanctification, such "faith" is not the saving faith described in the Scriptures, and is therefore worthless. What is more, it is clear that what James is describing is someone who thinks their "religious words" are all that are required to obtain true salvation. An outward "confession" that is never accompanied by a life-change that is evident by one's deeds is of no value whatsoever. As Yeshua Himself taught:

Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' (Matt 7:22-23, quoting Ps 6:8)

1 BDAG, "ὠφελέω," p. 1107.