

JAMES 2

COMMENTARY

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

2:1 James the Just, having just completed some introductory remarks and observations about the problems his audience was facing, now begins to address some more specific issues, becoming much more direct and forthright. James emphasizes the fact that all are to have faith in Yeshua, demonstrating proper actions and attitudes, admonishing, “My brothers and sisters, do not hold the faith of our glorious Lord *Yeshua* the Messiah while showing favoritism” (TLV). Apparently, for a sector of James’ audience, showing “snobbery” (Phillips New Testament) was an extreme problem, and it was disruptive for others trying to enter in. The NRSV has a unique rendering of v. 1, as it posits the question, “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” Practicing favoritism would be in direct disobedience to the royal Torah law of loving neighbor (v. 8; cf. 1:25), and could demonstrate some level of infidelity to the Lord. Given the tenor of some of the verses following (vs. 15-18), not all of James’ audience was desperately poor, but it did include people who were impressed by the rich. As Leviticus 19:15 would warn: “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.”

James’ emphasis on “faith” (*pistis*, πίστις) regards far more than people having made some sort of affirmation to a series of beliefs. One could be reminded of Paul’s later word in the First Century, on “keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith” (1 Timothy 1:19). Those who keep faith with the Lord Yeshua, and who value their salvation—while surely affirming His supremacy—are also going to *be faithful* to His teachings and example. As Dan G. McCartney so ably describes, “There can be no separation between the trust component of faith and the faithfulness component, because to trust an authority entails a commitment to it. This is not to turn faith into some kind of work, but to point out that faith is a matter of commitment to relationship, not just the acceptance of some intellectual truth.”¹

The object of faith and trust is *tou Kurīou hēmōn Iēsou Christou tēs doxēs* (τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης), “our glorious Lord Yeshua the Messiah.” Associating Yeshua with the description of *doxa* (δόξα), the Septuagint equivalent of the Hebrew *kavod* (כְּבוֹד), is

¹ McCartney, 136.

Christologically important. *Kavod* appears in some critical Torah passages describing the Divine presence of God:

“The glory of the LORD [*kevod-ADONAI*, כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה] 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” (Exodus 24:16).

“Then Moses said, ‘I pray You, show me Your glory [*kevodekha*, כְּבוֹדֶךָ]!’” (Exodus 33:18).

“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD [*kevod ADONAI*, יְהוָה כְּבוֹד] filled the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:34).

The term *kavod* literally means “heavy,” and it has a wide variety of connotations. The most significant of these predominantly regards the presence of God manifested in the Tabernacle in the wilderness. *TWOT* describes the significance of the word *kavod*:

“The bulk of occurrences where God’s glory is a visible manifestation have to do with the tabernacle (Ex 16:10; 40:34; etc.) and with the temple in Ezekiel’s vision of the exile and restoration (9:3; etc.). These manifestations are directly related to God’s self-disclosure and his intent to dwell with men, to have his reality and his splendor known to them. But this is only possible when they take account of the stunning quality of his holiness and set out in faith and obedience to let that character be manifested in them (Num 14:10; Isa 6:3; Ezr 10, 11).”²

When James uses the Greek term *doxa*, *doxa* carries with it the same understanding of *kavod*. While *doxa* is a title of honor to be sure, much more than just appropriate honor and reverence to be issued toward Yeshua was intended. McCartney’s brief estimation is, “In calling Jesus ‘glorious Lord,’ James effectively ascribes the divine attributes and importance to Christ.”³ Peter Davids offers a much fuller thought on the title *doxa* ascribed to Yeshua, detailing how “this is not simply to say that ‘our Lord’ is most honorable or exalted, for to one who knew the LXX the term would immediately recall the OT use of δόξα [*doxa*] to translate the Hebrew *kābôd* [כְּבוֹד], characteristically meaning, ‘the luminous manifestation of God’s person’ particularly in bringing salvation to Israel (Ex. 14:17-18; Psa. 96:3; Isa. 60:1-2; Ezk. 39:21-22; Zc. 2:5-11...). Thus it is a term of exaltation, revelation, and eschatological salvation.”⁴ One important later usage of *doxa*, which need not escape any Bible reader, is how Titus 2:13 exclaims how Believers are to be “looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of **the glory of our great God and Savior, Messiah Yeshua** [*tēs doxēs tou megalou Theou kai Sōtēros hēmōn Iēsou Christou*, τῆς δόξης τοῦ μεγάλου θεοῦ καὶ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ].” Here, the glory in view is obviously the manifestation of God’s greatness at the Second

² John N. Oswalt, “כְּבוֹד,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:427.

³ McCartney, 137.

⁴ Davids, 107.

Coming—but especially not to be overlooked is how Yeshua Himself is labeled with the titles of “God and Savior,” necessarily implying that the Messiah is, Himself, God.⁵

As is seen throughout the contents of ch. 2, James was absolutely concerned about the right demonstration of faith for Messiah followers, expressing a particular consternation for those who would show “partiality” (RSV) or “personal favoritism” (NASU), *prosōlēmpsia* (προσωπολημψία). While the related verb *prosōpolēpteō* (προσωποληπτέω) is commonly defined as “to be a respecter of persons” (LS),⁶ it is often associated with the Hebrew *lo-tisa pnei* (לֹא־תִסֶּה פְּנֵי) from Leviticus 19:15, as God’s people are to “not lift up the face” (YLT; cf. Psalm 82:2; Proverbs 6:35; 18:5; 24:23; 28:21; Malachi 1:8; 2:9; also Sirach 7:6-7; 35:10-18). As Douglas J. Moo concludes, “To ‘receive a face’ means to make judgments about people based on external appearance. James applies this principle to differences in dress that reflect contrasting social/economic situations.”⁷ Discrimination based on outward appearance was a problem for many of James’ readers, and it might be said that much of James’ admonition about partiality is a summation of Deuteronomy 10:17-18:

“For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing.”

Concurrent with this, while demonstrating favoritism toward the rich is something that James finds to be quite deplorable (vs. 2-7), this does not mean that the legitimate spiritual concerns of more well to do people should be ignored, either. This is something which needs to be especially kept in mind, as more modern applications of v. 1 are considered by individual Believers, particularly in congregational environments (vs. 2-3). Ben Witherington III fairly observes,

“[James] is saying that one should *not* show favoritism to the rich, which is then unfair to the poor, nor should one slight the poor and so dishonor them. All persons should be treated fairly regardless of their socioeconomic status. Since there is an imbalance in a fallen world full of self-centered acquisitive persons, one can argue that God is concerned about balancing the scales, about justice for all, and in a fallen world this may appear to be partiality for the poor.”⁸

⁵ Consult the author’s commentary *The Pastoral Epistles for the Practical Messianic*, for a review of Titus 2:13 and the Granville Sharp rule; also consult his publication *Confronting Yeshua’s Divinity and Messiahship*.

⁶ LS, 701.

⁷ Moo, 102.

⁸ Witherington, 454.

2 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, 3 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,” 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?

2:2 Vs. 2-4 describe the serious problem of showing partiality or favoritism inside the assembly, particularly for James’ audience, as the poor were being issued a degree of disgust, even though this is something surely opposed by the Tanach and ancient Jewish literature (Proverbs 14:21; Sirach 10:19-11:6). The thought of 2 Corinthians 8:9 is also useful for consideration: “For you know the grace of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.”

While sometimes skewed with the rendering “assembly” (RSV/NASU/ESV) or “meeting” (NRSV), the source text of v. 2 actually does describe how, “if there come into your synagogue a man with a gold ring, in fine clothing, and there come in also a poor man in vile clothing” (American Standard Version). In v. 2, James employs the term *sunagōgē* (συναγωγή) or “synagogue,” which can also mean “gathering.”⁹ This is an indication from the Apostolic Scriptures, that at the very least, the early Believers in the First Century had no problem associating themselves with the common label of a Jewish assemblage of worship, and that being a **synagogue** extended not only to the Believers in the Land of Israel, but also in the Diaspora (cf. 1:1).¹⁰ In the estimation of David H. Stern, from his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, “This is a Messianic synagogue, a congregation of believers in Yeshua, predominantly Jewish, expressing their New Covenant faith in a way retaining most or all of the prayers, customs and style of non-Messianic synagogues.”¹¹ More neutrally, per the content of v. 2 and what is being described, Scot McKnight details,

“[I]t is reasonable to see ‘assembly’ or ‘congregating place’ (*sunagōgē*) in 2:2 as a term referring to the messianic community’s worship and learning center, which for whatever reasons visitors sometimes attended.”¹²

⁹ As noted by *LS*, 166, the term *sunagōgē* has a wide range of meanings, which go beyond a Jewish assembly of worship or teaching:

- a gathering in of harvest, Polyb.
- a drawing together, contracting, ζ. στρατιᾶς [*s. stratias*] a forming an army in column, Plat.; ζ. τοῦ προσώπου [*s. tou prosōpou*] a pursing up or wrinkling of the face, Isocr.
- a collection of writings, Arist.
- a conclusion, inference, Id.

While for the Epistle of James, *sunagōgē* should be rightly understood as a Jewish assembly or house of worship, there are other places where additional meanings of *sunagōgē* need to be considered for appropriate balance (i.e., Revelation 2:9; 3:9). For a further review, consult the sub-section, “What is ‘the Synagogue of Satan’?”, in Chapter 3 of the author’s book *Israel in Future Prophecy*, “Cross-Examining the Two-House Teaching.”

¹⁰ Against: Burdick, in *EXP*, 12:177-178 who simply takes *sunagōgē* in its most neutral sense as some kind of “gathering”; also McCartney, 138, although not as strongly.

¹¹ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 728.

¹² McKnight, 183.

I am personally inclined to think that the reference to the gathering of Messiah followers in v. 2, is labeled as a “synagogue,” rather than an assembly (*ekklēsia*, ἐκκλησία), as being an indication of how early James was composed. The later reference to Believers gathering more as an *ekklēsia* (commonly mistranslated in English Bibles as “church,” but by specialty versions like YLT and LITV as “assembly”), would express commonality and continuance with the assembly of Ancient Israel in the Tanach, per how *ekklēsia* commonly rendered the Hebrew *qahal* (קָהָל), but would allow for some degree of difference with the establishment of the Jewish Synagogue which did not recognize Yeshua as Messiah.¹³

Some expositors, while choosing not to recognize that the early Believers did indeed conduct their worship services and protocol quantitatively similar to the First Century Synagogue, are instead inclined to think that James’ comments might reflect that of a Jewish court of justice (b.*Shevuot* 31a). Ralph P. Martin indicates that the use of *sunagōgē* “could pertain either to a public worship service or a congregational gathering for the purpose of hearing a judicial case.”¹⁴ This could account for James’ appeal to fair rulings and fair treatment of fellow Believers throughout his letter. Moo summarizes some of the different options regarding the gathering in view for v. 2:

“With most commentators in the past, we could assume that [James] is depicting a typical weekly worship gathering of the Christian community. The ‘ushers,’ perhaps with tacit approval from the leaders of the assembly, conduct the splendidly dressed person to a fine seat, while contemptuously ordering a poorly dressed person to sit on the floor. But an alternative suggestion about the scenario James describes has been gaining ground: that the situation is a meeting of the Christian assembly to sit in judgment over a dispute between two of its members.”¹⁵

While it is useful for readers of James’ letter to be aware of v. 2 perhaps pertaining to a Jewish court of justice, with disputes being resolved between people, Moo himself goes on and concludes, “On the whole...the possessive ‘your meeting’ in v. 2 seems to point to a definite, well-known gathering that better fits the worship service than a judicial assembly.”¹⁶ Discrimination toward one group of people in the assembly, either during a worship service, or during other sorts of gatherings, is not limited to James’ letter. Paul chastised the Corinthians for not allowing the poor and needy among them from being among the first to eat at fellowship meals:

“But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as [an assembly], I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you. Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own

¹³ Cf. Tim Hegg, *I Will Build My Ekklesia: An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2009), 14.

Also see the section, “The Term Ekklesia,” in the author’s publication *Are Non-Jewish Believers Really a Part of Israel?*

¹⁴ Martin, 61.

¹⁵ Moo, 99.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 100; also Witherington, pp 454-455.

supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the [assembly] of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you” (1 Corinthians 11:17-22).

James specifically mentions two types of people who may enter into the assembly: one who is dressed in fine clothes, and one who is dressed in dirty clothes. Seemingly, the person dressed in fine clothes and gold is rich, and likewise the one who is dressed in dirty clothes is poor. Typical to the First Century, and even into more modern times, gold rings worn by people can demonstrate a certain high social status.

While the rich and poor being present in a community of Messiah followers, could be the case in any First Century Mediterranean city, Bo Ivar Reicke speculates that the one wearing a gold ring may be a reference to rich Roman nobles. He comments, “In this connection the rich man is said to wear a gold finger ring, which indicates that he was of senatorial rank or a Roman nobleman. During the early years of the empire only such men had the right to wear a gold ring. When it is added that he wears a ‘splendid garment,’ this may indicate that he is seeking political office and adherents.”¹⁷ Some of these observations are likely affected by Reicke’s late dating of the Epistle of James. Yet, regardless of whether or not the rich present were Roman officials, they nevertheless commanded quite a presence. The author could use these sentiments as a slight exaggeration, to point out how even if someone were finely dressed in such a manner, the poor still demanded attention.

Ignoring those who are poorly or shabbily dressed, showing favor and preference to those who are more finely dressed, would run entirely contrary to the Torah-demanded ethical imperative for God’s people to service those in need. Perhaps most important to consider, if some kind of worship or fellowship gathering is indeed in view for v. 2, is whether or not the poor person entering into the assembly/synagogue is even a Believer (in Israel’s God) himself. What testimony would it be to not treat such a person with care and respect? Most of the outside sojourners or *gerim* (גֵּרִים) in the Torah, who would enter into Ancient Israel, were themselves largely poor people. The ancient synagogue, especially for gatherings on *Shabbat*, was supposed to be a place which epitomized all of the great virtues of love, honor, and service unto God. The First Century Jewish philosopher Philo said,

“[I]n accordance with which custom, even to this day, the Jews hold philosophical discussions on the seventh day, disputing about their national philosophy, and devoting that day to the knowledge and consideration of the subjects of natural philosophy; for as for their houses of prayer in the different cities, what are they, but schools of wisdom, and courage, and temperance, and justice, and piety, and holiness, and every virtue, by which human and divine things are appreciated, and placed upon a proper footing?” (*Life of Moses* 2.216).¹⁸

Sadly, these sorts of positive traits were not always present in the gatherings of many among James’ audience. May we, as Twenty-First Century Messianic Believers, see that they are present in our own fellowships and assemblies!

¹⁷ Reicke, 27.

¹⁸ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 510.

2:3 James warns his readers not to give preferential treatment to the rich person, saying, “Here’s a good seat for you,” while telling the poor person, “You stand there’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet” (NIV). The poor person, *ptōchos* (πτωχός), is actually “one who crouches or cringes, a beggar” (LS).¹⁹ Not only is his poor state bad enough, but upon entering the assembly of Believers, this one is forced to remain in his crouched position—when presumably every effort should be made to attend to his physical needs and comfort. Donald W. Burdick explains, “‘the poor man’ is abruptly told to ‘stand there,’ perhaps in the back of the assembly or in some other out-of-the-way place. His other alternative is to ‘sit on the floor.’...The contrast between the speaker who has a stool for his feet and the beggar who must sit on the floor heightens the discrimination.”²⁰ Yeshua’s words in Matthew 23:6-7 to the Pharisaical leaders might be considered: “They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues,” whereas the poor are left off to the side.

Perhaps even more important to be considered might be how the verb *epiblepō* (ἐπιβλέπω), rendered in v. 3 as “pay special attention,” also is used in Luke 9:38: “Teacher, I beg You to look at [*epiblepō*] my son, for he is my only *boy*.” Just as Yeshua the Messiah reached out with compassion to the demon possessed boy (Luke 9:39-45), who the Disciples themselves were powerless to help—surely those in James’ audience could take notice of the poor and destitute among them, expelling some degree of effort. McKnight chooses to observe in his commentary,

“The messianic community gazes upon the rich man but, whether star-struck, envious, manipulative, or hoping to gain something, it chooses to break down its essential commitment to showing mercy to the poor. Instead of treating a person according to his or her God-given eikonic status, the community chooses to honor the wealthy man for what his ostentatious attire represents.”²¹

The Messianic community can do this today in various other forms, not necessarily based on wealth, but instead on other kinds of prestige. Usually, but not always, showing preference to a particular group or clique of people is based on their perceived positions of power and influence—while others, who are accomplishing more genuine work of the Kingdom, are widely shuffled away or ignored.

2:4 James rebukes those in his audience who receive those into their assembly with financial means and wealth and show them preferential treatment, versus poor people who are treated as though they are not there or unimportant. He asks them, “have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?” The Phillips New Testament paraphrases v. 4 with, “doesn’t that prove that you are making class distinctions in your mind, and setting yourselves up to assess a man’s quality from wrong motives?” Inequity is something regularly condemned in the Tanach (Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 16:19; 27:19, 25; Psalm 82:2; Malachi 2:9), and evil thoughts are regularly condemned in the Apostolic Scriptures (Matthew 15:19; Luke 2:35; 5:22; 9:47; 24:38; Romans 1:21; 14:1; 1 Corinthians 3:20; Philippians 2:14; 1 Timothy 2:8). While a worship service or some other

¹⁹ LS, 709.

²⁰ Burdick, in *EXP*, 12:178.

²¹ McKnight, 187.

fellowship gathering is most probably being targeted, it is not out of the realm of possibilities to think that the distinctions being criticized against could also involve the kinds of deliberations that the assembly of Believers would make, when presented with various disputes that needed resolution.

James' admonition to treat others equally, without discrimination for their physical appearance, social status, or economic benefit—remains true for us today every bit as much as it did in the First Century. *IVPBBC* validly remarks, “Biblical law, most Jewish law and traditional Greek philosophers had always rejected such distinctions as immoral.”²² James is not writing something that was unique only to the Jews of his time, nor is he writing something unique to us today. The laws which govern a country like the United States, in particular, are intended to guarantee that all will be treated equally in court, regardless of financial or social status. This is also true of most places in the West, which have been significantly influenced by a Biblical ethic. Fair and equal treatment in the assembly, where a distinct group which needs the help and service of the faith community—and is consequently ignored—is noticeably different, though, than expressing honor to those who genuinely deserve it, such as deferring to the elderly, or those who serve well in a position of political leadership. J. Alec Motyer provides us with some worthwhile thoughts that we need not overlook:

“It is in this matter of ‘looks’ which must be stressed if we are to be faithful to James’ teaching and at the same time keep within the balance of Scripture. The Bible is too courteous a book to allow us to lack proper respect for people to whom it is due. It does not reduce all to a common level in all things or refuse to take note of worldly distinctions; certainly it does not sanction rudeness or unconcern for what people are. It would not be showing *partiality*, for example, to offer the last remaining seat to an elderly person and to invite a younger person arriving to simultaneously stand or to sit on the floor. The elderly command respect and considerate attention (Lv. 19:32). Or again, were Her Majesty the Queen or the President of a country to come to worship, we would consider it both right and indeed our privilege to stand when they entered and to have the best seat held in readiness. Again, we would be obeying Scripture (*e.g.* Pr. 24:21a; 1 Pet. 2:17). But it is one thing thus to acknowledge inherent dignity, whether of age or position; it is another thing altogether to be swayed by the mere chance that one possess worldly advantages such as money and the other does not.

“James’ illustration is timeless. It speaks as loudly today as when he penned it. It is still not always easy to know how to accommodate a tramp in a worship-service and it is still easy to assume that wealth gives a commanding voice in church affairs. The sin of *partiality* is the sin of judging by accidentals and externals and, as James noted, it always bears down on the poor and disadvantaged.”²³

As Believers in Messiah Yeshua, how many of us have made a conscious effort to get along—and express some degree of honor and respect—toward others who are not exactly

²² Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 694.

²³ Motyer, pp 81-82.

“like us”? Even I will admit, that in various contemporary situations and settings, I have not always honored the thrust of James 2:4.

5 Listen, my beloved brethren: 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? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court?

2:5 James goes further in his rebuke to those who are favoring the wealthy in their midst, admonishing, “Listen, my dearly loved brothers and sisters. Didn’t God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the Kingdom that He promised to those who love Him?” (TLV). He says that God has chosen the poor to be rich and be heirs of His Kingdom, but that they have obviously been dishonored by not being cared for in the congregation (vs. 2-4, 15-16). A great deal of James’ audience is thought to have been made up of agricultural workers, who earned their living by tending crops or processing them in some way (5:4). The vast majority of all the early Believers, be they Jewish or non-Jewish, were drawn from the poorer classes of First Century Mediterranean society.

Throughout the Holy Scriptures, we definitely see a concern to be demonstrated toward the poor, destitute, and lonely (Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 68:5; Proverbs 17:5; 14:31; Amos 2:6-7; Matthew 5:3; Luke 1:51-53; 6:20; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26). The Prophets were especially direct in their condemnation of the rich, who oppressed the poor:

“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring now, that we may drink!’ The Lord GOD has sworn by His holiness, ‘Behold, the days are coming upon you when they will take you away with meat hooks, and the last of you with fish hooks’” (Amos 4:1-2).

“They have treated father and mother lightly within you. The alien they have oppressed in your midst; the fatherless and the widow they have wronged in you” (Ezekiel 22:7).

“‘Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien and do not fear Me,’ says the LORD of hosts” (Malachi 3:5).

The Torah itself says that God “executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing” (Deuteronomy 10:18). Psalm 68:5 repeats this, saying that the Lord is “A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows.” Yeshua was likewise concerned for the poor, saying, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). Also not to be overlooked, is how Deuteronomy 7:7 communicates of God’s selection of Israel, “The LORD did not set His love on you nor

choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.”

In the very early, First Century community of faith, there was a definite urge to see that all of the Believers had what they needed for daily care. Acts 4:34 attests, “For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales.” Everyone who needed food, clothing, and shelter (should have) had it. Among some of James’ targeted audience, however, these basic needs were not being met. The rich were being given preferential treatment to those who really needed to be cared for physically. Witherington is keen to note for us, though, how “James is not saying that poverty is the way of salvation or even salvation itself. He is rather warning about the dangers of the other extreme.”²⁴ God choosing the poor of the world in v. 5 is an observation of how God takes special care of those who are without—and will especially reward them in the world to come.

2:6 James makes the further point, “But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?” (NIV). He makes the inquiry, asking his audience what would really be achieved in showing favoritism to rich people in the assembly. The verb of note in v. 6, *katadunesteuō* (καταδυναστεύω), means “to exercise power over” (LS),²⁵ but is often rendered as “oppress” or “exploit.” The verb *katadunesteuō* is used in the Septuagint, to represent oppression of the poor:

“That sorely oppress the people of the land with injustice, and commit robbery; oppressing [*katadunesteuō*] the poor and needy, and not dealing justly with the stranger” (Ezekiel 22:29, LXE).

“[A]nd oppress [*katadunesteuō*] not the widow, or the fatherless, or the stranger, or the poor; and let not one of you remember in his heart the injury of his brother” (Zechariah 7:10, LXE).

It has also been suggested that there might be some parallel between the rich dragging the poor into court, and the actions of Saul in persecuting many of the early Believers (Acts 9:1-2).

The intention of v. 6 is not to say that all rich people are of poor spiritual character, or that all poor people are of high spiritual character. The rich people in these assemblies were the same ones who would be the oppressive landowners, overseers, or merchants, with their main concern being their self-interest. McKnight points out, “Those using force against the poor messianists to prosecute are the *plousioi* [πλούσιοι], and this alone should give them pause about showing deference to preference to the rich.”²⁶ The logic of trying to curry favor with the rich here, given their actions, is a bit confounding to James.

James’ comments about the rich should not be viewed that he is condemning of all wealthy people. God desires to see that all come to the knowledge of salvation. Moo astutely

²⁴ Witherington, 458.

²⁵ LS, 25.

²⁶ McKnight, 199.

comments, “James writes to a...community that is made up largely of poor people; and...for them it was evident on every side that God was choosing poor people to be saved. But to infer from James’s positive assertion about poor people a negative verdict on rich people—God does not choose rich people to have faith—is unwarranted. Balance is perilously difficult to maintain on this issue.”²⁷

Money, like all Earthly things, is a tool. It can be used as a tool for good or a tool for evil. In far too many cases, it can be a tool for evil. Paul wrote Timothy, “For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:10). Likewise, money can be used to further the Kingdom of God. *It all depends on how one uses it.* But being wealthy cannot be the goal of a person’s life. Qohelet was forced to say, “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance *with its income.* This too is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 5:10). Being wealthy will not bring a person salvation or happiness. James was forced to observe that many of his readers were impressed by its appearance to cater to its demands, rather than equally serving all in the community of faith. James’ audience too often forgot the Torah’s admonitions to care for those who needed extra physical help.

7 Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?

2:7 In v. 7 James observes, “Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?” (ESV). The NIV renders this with, “Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?”, although the verb *blasphēmeō* (βλασφημέω) is what is actually employed. The rich who oppressed James’ audience—were bringing some kind of disrepute, dishonor, slander, or ridicule upon them, hence, blasphemy—because of their dedicated faith in Yeshua. These were the same rich who were being given preferential treatment in the assembly. This problem is by no means something that was unique to the Jewish members of James’ audience, but is something that is equally a First Century non-Jewish problem. It was, however—especially if these rich people regarded themselves as members of the faith community in some way—absolutely a travesty for James to conclude that **they were blasphemers of Lord.** Davids further explains,

“The good name called upon you’ is certainly the name of Jesus...The phrase ‘to call a name upon one’ is a septuagintalism, indicating possession or relationship, particularly relationship to God...Thus the blasphemy referred to indicates the reviling of the name of Jesus...By siding with the rich the [assembly] was siding with blasphemers!”²⁸

James’ audience is to be most aware of *to kalon onoma to epiklēthen ep’ humas* (τὸ καλὸν ὄνομα τὸ ἐπικληθὲν ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς), “that noble name by which you are called” (NKJV). Being called of the Lord into His salvation in Yeshua, reflecting it in the world, is quite serious (Romans 10:13; 1 Peter 4:14-16). Also to be considered is God’s calling upon Israel, representing Him in the world (Deuteronomy 28:10), calling upon Him for national healing or deliverance (2

²⁷ Moo, 107.

²⁸ Davids, 113.

Chronicles 7:14), and how the nations are called by God's name into the final restoration of Israel's Kingdom (Amos 9:11-12)—something James himself acknowledged at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:15-18). Having the noble name of the Messiah invoked over the audience is something that incorporates many important concepts from the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures, *and which is not limiting to Jews, Greeks, or Romans*. Ronald A. Ward especially observes, "The citation of Am. 9:12 in Acts 15:17, from the LXX, by James himself shows that he was of broader vision than some have supposed: Gentiles have civic rights in the [assembly] of Christ. Over them the name is invoked"²⁹ as well.

Why did these rich in v. 7 blaspheme? Was defaming the Lord Yeshua something simply in their nature? Whatever the specific negative motives, these rich were the product of a very poor spiritual condition. They thought that their wealth must have been sufficient for their security and salvation, and did not care too much about the needs of others.

8 If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF" [Leviticus 19:18], you are doing well.

2:8 Even with James having just issued some firm admonitions to his audience about the problem of partiality (vs. 2-7), he gives an answer to their problems: "Supposing, however, you keep the royal law, as it is written, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'; if you do this, you will do well" (Kingdom New Testament). James makes light of "fulfilling the royal law," *nomon teleite basilikon* (νόμον τελέετε βασιλικόν), which the CJB extrapolates as "truly attain[ing] the goal of Kingdom Torah." The emphasis here is how the Torah is to be kept in a mature and complete context for Believers. The foremost of all the commandments of Scripture is that God's people love Him and make Him the first priority in their lives. Out of that love for God will come a love for others. James partially quotes from Leviticus 19:18, "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD." The Torah is fully brought to its goal when Messiah followers love other people—and not only love other people regardless of their status—but leave the judgment of other people to the Lord alone. The Leviticus 19:18 commandment has a very important place in the teachings of Yeshua (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27).

Various Christian interpreters have had to (significantly) struggle with what "the royal law" actually composes,³⁰ with some thinking that "law" in James 2:8 should only be regarded as a single commandment, perhaps as a so-called "law of Christ" widely, if not entirely, independent from the Mosaic Torah (often based on a mis-interpretation of Galatians 6:2).³¹ Others see the commandment to love neighbor as summarizing the whole of the Torah itself. It is important that we review some perspectives. Richard Bauckham draws our attention to

²⁹ Ronald A. Ward, "James," in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1227.

³⁰ Cf. McKnight, pp 206-207.

³¹ Witherington, pp 459-460.

how very rarely in either the Greek Septuagint or Apostolic Scriptures does the term *nomos* (νόμος) represent a single piece of instruction, but rather the whole of the Torah (תּוֹרָה). He favors v. 8 regarding a summation of the principle thrust of the Torah's code of conduct:

“Since in the LXX and NT ‘law’ (*nomos*) only very rarely refers to an individual commandment, it is unlikely that ‘the royal law’ (2:8) is the commandment to love the neighbor (Lev 19:18b) as one commandment among others (and ‘royal’ as sovereign over others). It must be understood as the commandment which summarizes the whole law...The law is ‘royal’ in that it pertains to the kingdom (2:5), and perhaps as interpreted by Jesus (with emphasis on the love commandment) in his preaching of the kingdom. James’s point is that the law is a whole, summed up in Lev 19:18b, in which the prohibition of partiality is a necessary part. One cannot love one’s neighbor while dishonoring the poor. One cannot pick and choose which commandments to obey and be judged by.”³²

Dauids also has to note how “the use of νόμος [*nomos*] instead of ἐντολή [*entolē*] makes it appear decisive that the whole law rather than a single command is intended.”³³ While he does believe that the Torah or Moses’ Teaching has been abolished for the post-resurrection era, noting 1:25, “the perfect law, the *law* of liberty,” we should not find fault with the basic thrust of Moo: “the ‘royal law’ may well extend beyond the Mosaic law as fulfilled and reinterpreted by Jesus to include the teaching of Jesus.”³⁴ McCartney might have the best approach, first asserting how “It is better to say that Lev. 19:18 gives expression to a controlling and central principle of God’s ethical imperative for human conduct (cf. Gal. 5:14) and serves as a framework for understanding its parts.”³⁵ He further observes, on the verb *teleō* (τελέω):

“[G]iven James’s frequent use of the τελε- [*tele-*] stem (1:4 [2x], 17, 25; 2:8, 22; 3:2), its use here may be a deliberate emphasis of the comprehensive nature of Biblical ethics (2:10-11). For James, ‘fulfilling’ or carrying out the royal law is a piece with fulfilling or carrying through on faith by works in 2:22, where law is not set over against faith, but rather law and faith together are fulfilled or made complete by obedient action. Further, 2:8 connects with the fact that the law is a complete and perfect (τέλειος, *teleios*) law (1:25), and it therefore does not admit of partial obedience (2:10), because all parts of the law come from one source (2:11).”³⁶

Loving other people is one of the most important things that born again Believers should certainly be doing. It requires the redeemed in Yeshua, regardless of who they might be, to put aside any prejudice or preconceptions that they might have, serving the world at large so that others might be given a glimpse of God’s Kingdom. *It is the essence of the Torah.* J. Ronald

³² Bauckham, in *ECB*, 1487.

³³ Dauids, 114; cf. McCartney, 147.

³⁴ Moo, 112.

³⁵ McCartney, 147.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Blue validly indicates that it is called the “royal law” because “The law is royal or regal...because it is decreed by the King of kings, is fit for a king, and is considered the king of laws.”³⁷ *TDNT* explains that the word *basilikos* (βασιλικός) “is fairly common in the NT...the reference is to law as it is given by the king, and thus having royal dignity, rather than to preeminent law.”³⁸ To properly keep the command to love one’s neighbor is to be a representative or ambassador of God’s Kingdom in the world.

For many of Yeshua’s generation, loving one’s neighbor was something that may not have always been something easy to do. First Century Israel was under Roman occupation, and the Jewish people, except for a brief period of independence following the Maccabean crisis of the Second Century B.C.E. with the Hasmoneans, had been dominated by foreign powers since the Babylonian dispersion. Loving others outside the community of Israel was admittedly something very difficult to do. Is this why Yeshua had to refer to this as a “new commandment” in John 13:34-35? “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Yeshua does not refer to this as a “new commandment” in the sense that it was something brand new. It was likely, rather, something that had been forgotten by many of His generation. *CGEDNT* defines the word *kainos* (καινός) as “new; of new quality; unused; unknown, unheard of.”³⁹ To many of Yeshua’s generation, and sadly many today, the Scriptural admonition to love one’s neighbor has become “an unused commandment.” It is a reflection on our fallen human nature that we can only overcome with the Holy Spirit resident inside of us. Paul A. Cedar, reflecting from an evangelical Christian pastor’s point of view, says, “Jesus understands that we cannot keep God’s moral law. However, the problem was not with His law. In fact, His law is good. The problem is with us because we are too sinful to obey it (Rom. 8:1-4).”⁴⁰ How much more is this important for Messianic Believers who endeavor to keep *both* the moral and the outward aspects of the Torah? How much more do we have to ask for God’s forgiveness when we fall, and not succumb to the temptations of the flesh which want us to do anything but love others?

In First Century Jewish thought, the Torah was thought of as being a royal road. This is based on Numbers 20:17, “Please let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or through vineyard; we will not even drink water from a well. We will go along the king’s highway, not turning to the right or left, until we pass through your territory.” The Torah was to keep the traveler on the correct path, within defined boundaries during his Earthly sojourn. The philosopher Philo observed,

“[T]his royal road, which we have stated to be true and genuine philosophy, the law calls the word and reason of God; for it is written, ‘Thou shalt not turn aside from the word which I command thee this day, to the right hand nor to the left,’ So that it is shown most manifestly

³⁷ J. Ronald Blue, “James,” in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: The New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 825.

³⁸ K.L. Schmidt, “*basilikós*,” in *TDNT*, 102.

³⁹ *CGEDNT*, 90.

⁴⁰ Cedar, 68.

that the word of God is identical with the royal road, since Moses' words are not to depart either from the royal road, or from this word, as if the two were synonymous, but to proceed with an upright mind along the middle and level road, which leads one aright" (*The Posterity and Exile of Cain* 102).⁴¹

The Torah is likened unto a royal road, and the principal law which governs that road is that God's people love their neighbors. This is because as God's people travel the road of life, keeping the Torah's instructions, their testimony to other people should be indicated by how they love them. We have to treat them as Yeshua did, and we demonstrate ourselves to be citizens of God's Kingdom, reflecting His goodness, grace, and salvation to those in need.

Many well-meaning Christians think that loving God and one's neighbor is all that matters, and that various areas of outward conduct in other things are widely unimportant. These are often the ones who, unfortunately, look down upon Messianic Believers, be they Jewish or non-Jewish, who are convicted to keep the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, the appointed times of Leviticus 23, and eat kosher. While loving God and one's neighbor are absolutely imperative, it does not stop there; in fact, that is where it begins. Our obedience to God comes as a natural outworking of the Spirit because we love Him. Martin is forced to conclude, "Though James is not limiting his thinking to the OT law with his use of 'supreme law,' neither is he advocating an abandoning of it."⁴²

Nowhere in James' writing is he supposing that the outward observances of the Torah are nullified by the command to love others. On the contrary, James is trying to expand the depths of the Mosaic Torah in his words, to people who already were to know that they need to be loving others. From true love, fulfilling the "Kingdom Torah" as it were, people will not be prone to judge with evil motives (v. 4), and they will want to reach out to help those in need (v. 15). James is commenting on concepts that are by no means foreign to his predominantly Jewish audience, which would have been aware of the high regard for the Torah's morality that they should have been adhering to. The Talmud records the story of an outsider to Judaism who was told by Rabbi Hillel not to do hateful things to one's neighbor:

"There was another case of a gentile who came before Shammai. He said to him, 'Convert me on the stipulation that you teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot.' He drove him off with the building cubit that he had in his hand. He came before Hillel: 'Convert me.' He said to him, "*What is hateful to you, to your fellow don't do.*" That's the entirety of the Torah; *everything else is elaboration. So go, study*" (b.*Shabbat* 31a).⁴³

According to this Jewish tradition, the Torah begins with loving one's neighbor. Every part of one's Torah obedience is to involve edifying other people, which as Believers ***equates to us having a living and active testimony***. By loving others, we show them what God's Kingdom is all about, and our outward obedience to the Torah's commandments—especially via good works of mercy (vs. 13-14), is a part of that testimony. By others in the world seeing how God is able to bless us because of our obedience to Him, we will be able to share the message of salvation in Messiah Yeshua.

⁴¹ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 142.

⁴² Martin, 67.

⁴³ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

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

2:9 James admonishes his audience, “But if you show favoritism, you are committing sin and are convicted by the *Torah* as transgressors” (TLV). Disobedience to God’s *Torah* can come in some of the least likeliest of ways for various people, as showing partiality or favoritism toward sectors of people—which hence means that other people are not being issued a level of honor or respect in the assembly (vs. 2-3, 6)—is a certain violation of the command to love neighbor (v. 8). Love toward neighbor is to be impartial, as ***all are to be loved***, not just those people of one’s own choosing or preference. This can be, admittedly, very difficult for anyone to do, as human beings prefer to give attention to those whom they know will give them attention back. In the case of James’ audience, preference was being shown toward the rich, at the expense of the poor.

2:10 The gravity of those who violate the commandment to love others (v. 8) is intensified by James, as he says, “For a person who keeps the whole *Torah*, yet stumbles at one point, has become guilty of breaking them all” (CJB). The NLT paraphrases his words, “the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as the person who has broken all of God’s laws.” Martin makes the keen observation, “it is this commandment in particular that transcends all others, and so to break it in essence casts one as intentionally rejecting the heart and soul of God’s will, namely the love of one’s neighbor.”⁴⁴ Those who fail to love other people, no matter how much they may think they are keeping “all” of the *Torah* or Law of Moses, are found to not only be violators of such Instruction—but they may be said to quantitatively be contemptuous of it, because they have disregarded one of its most sacred principles. That the violation of a single commandment of the *Torah*, may be classified as a violation of the *Torah*’s code as a whole (and likely a rejection of God Himself as well), is a sentiment detectable in Moses’ Teaching itself, ancient Jewish literature, as well as by Yeshua the Messiah:

“‘Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen’” (Deuteronomy 27:26).

“[T]o transgress the law in matters either small or great is of equal seriousness, for in either case the law is equally despised” (4 Maccabees 5:20-21).

“And who, some one perhaps, may say, ever escapes in-doors? Do not many do so? Or have not some people, avoiding the guilt of sacrilege, committed robberies in private houses, or though not beating their own fathers, have not they insulted the fathers of others? Now these men do escape from one class of offenses, but they run into others. But a man who is perfectly temperate, ought to avoid every description of offense,

⁴⁴ Martin, 69.

whether greater or less, and never to be detected in any sin whatever” (Philo *Allegorical Interpretation* 3.241).⁴⁵

“One time R. Reuben spent the Sabbath in Tiberias, and a certain philosopher came across him. He said to him, ‘What is most hateful in the world?’ He said to him, ‘This is one who denies the One who created it.’ He said to him, ‘How is it possible that [God] then said to [Moses], *Honor your father and your mother...; You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet* (Ex. 20:12-17)?’ [He said to him,] ‘Lo, a person does not deny a matter of detail before he already has denied the main Principle, and a person does not turn to a matter of transgression unless he already has denied the One who gave a command concerning it’” (t.*Shevuot* 3:6).⁴⁶

“Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19).

Keeping all of the Torah or Law of Moses, for James the Just, given the tenor of what he has been describing in his letter, pertains to being in observance of its extremely high, moral and ethical statutes such as the Ten Commandments (vs. 11-12). This is ultimately epitomized in how one follows and implements, *or fails to follow and implement*, the instruction to love neighbor (Leviticus 19:18). In McKnight’s estimation,

“The person who does not love others, as the community has failed to love the poor (2:2-4), has broken the law of love from Leviticus. This infraction of the Law makes them not observant but *transgressors*. If one keeps the whole Law (2:10a) but breaks just one commandment (2:10b), one is assigned to the category of a transgressor who has, in effect, broken the whole (2:10c). Why? Because there are only two options: one is either observant or a transgressor.”⁴⁷

Many readers and examiners of the Epistle of James have been acclimated to think that this letter, in widely addressing a Jewish audience, perhaps only addressed First Century Jewish concerns, as v. 10 could be taken as only regarding Messianic Jewish observance of God’s Torah. It is useful for us to keep in mind the sentiment of Isaiah 24:5: “The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant.” The violation of God’s *torot* (תורות) is one which is universal to all of humanity, which means that it is every bit as much a problem for those of the nations as for Jewish people.⁴⁸ If those from the nations fail to love neighbor, or follow gross sins such as idolatry or sexual immorality (Romans 1:22-32), it is as though they have violated all of the Torah or Law of Moses. **The only definite solution available, for such violation, is the sacrifice of Yeshua the Messiah at Golgotha (Calvary) for all human beings!**

⁴⁵ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 78.

⁴⁶ Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew With a New Introduction*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 2:1232.

⁴⁷ McKnight, 214.

⁴⁸ For a further review, consult the FAQ, “Isaiah 24:5.”

Frequently, various Torah-positive Christian examiners have compared James' statement of v. 10, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (RSV), as though God's Law may be compared to a broken sheet of glass. As Motyer observes,

"There is no way in which we can pick and choose between the commandments, because to break one is to break 'the law'....[T]he whole law of God is represented in every individual precept. Or, to put it another way, the law is not like a heap of stones but like a sheet of glass. We could take one stone from a heap and leave the heap itself still intact; but when we throw a brick through a window, it strikes only one place but it fragments the whole. The law of God is like the glass: a break at one point cannot be contained; the cracking and crazing spreads over the entire area."⁴⁹

Obviously, there is specificity in the commandments of the Torah when one begins to classify them. Yet for the most part, all of the groups within Ancient Israel were expected to observe the same core series of commandments, and a daily observance of God's Law would be essentially the same for all (cf. Numbers 15:22-23; Deuteronomy 31:12).⁵⁰ One of the most critical aspects, of expressing fidelity to God's Torah, is heeding its instruction, regarding it as holy, authoritative, and the One who gave it as the Supreme Deity. If a command as rudimentary as loving neighbor can be broken, what is that to say about the rest of the commandments?

Motyer is a Christian examiner who recognizes the value of God's Law for those who intend to live a life like Jesus. He further states, "To take away a precept from the law is to damage the revelation of God which he has given us in his law. To say that one of the commands does not apply to me is to say that there is some aspect of the nature of God which does not matter, as far as I am concerned."⁵¹ Obviously, there are commandments which do not apply to some people based on their station in life or gender/anatomy—but the point made is that willful omission of commandments, and/or remaining deliberately ignorant of Moses' Teaching, is tantamount to saying that God's holiness and righteousness cannot be learned by studying it. Surely, if born again Believers have been spiritually regenerated and have a new heart, then the Lord has written His commandments upon their hearts by His Spirit so that they might not only respect them, **but keep them** (Jeremiah 31:32-33; cf. Hebrews 8:10)!

Because we are human beings with fleshly limitations, it is going to be impossible for us to keep God's Torah perfectly. In the context of James' epistle, James is reflecting on the fact that many of his readers have failed to follow the ethical guidelines of the Torah, and have demonstrated favoritism in dealing with diverse members of the assembly. As it relates to us as Messianic Believers today, who should be endeavoring to obey God—even though we should be striving to observe the Torah—we will still disobey it unintentionally. The Apostle Paul's steadfast word is, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

⁴⁹ Motyer, 99.

⁵⁰ For a further discussion, consult the relevant sections of the *Messianic Torah Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

⁵¹ Motyer, 100.

Thankfully, God has provided a way of salvation in Yeshua so we can be redeemed from the penalty of sin, eternal separation from Him.

Some contemporary Christians may choose to claim that since as human beings it is inevitable that we will falter, that we should not expel any effort as Believers to really keep God's Torah. *Is this an attitude of maturity?* Would not such a mentality merit a condition of least-ness in God's Kingdom (among other things)? As born again Believers who have the grace of God covering us, when we fall short, Messiah Yeshua's sacrifice is there to provide us with the assurance of our salvation, and that we have permanent forgiveness. Should we not be doing the best that we can, entreating the Lord every day to be guided by His Spirit and a course of obedience, rather than be (completely) ignoring the Instruction of God? If we do not strive for godly obedience, then we could find ourselves in the state of many people who think they will enter into Heaven because they are just "good people," and fooling themselves in the process.

There are many people in Western society, who believe in God and believe themselves to be "Christian," namely because they were raised in a cultural Christianity, who think they will enter into Heaven because they have done more good deeds than they have done bad deeds. Unfortunately, the person who has violated the smallest principle of the Torah has become a lawbreaker. This person is condemned by the Torah as a sinner. By Yeshua's sacrifice on the cross at Golgotha (Calvary), that sentence has been commuted. But we have to ask God to forgive us of our sin and we must repent. When we receive the new birth, we are enabled to obey the Father through the empowerment of His Holy Spirit, and the penalty of eternal punishment has been lifted.⁵²

11 For He who said, "DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY" [Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18], also said, "DO NOT COMMIT MURDER" [Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17]. Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by *the* law of liberty. 13 For judgment *will be* merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

2:11 James provides some further specification to what he means concerning those who might claim to keep the whole Torah, but then violates one of its commandments. Rather than focus on smaller ordinances or regulations of the Torah—which might be violated out of ignorance or unintentional human omission—statutes from the Ten Commandments themselves are instead highlighted. James states, "For the one 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 *Torah*" (TLV). James says that it is inconsistent for a person not to commit adultery, but to commit murder—hence meaning that

⁵² For a further discussion, consult the author's article "The Assurance of Our Salvation," appearing in his book *Introduction to Things Messianic*.

if a person keeps one command of the Torah, but breaks another command, this person is still guilty in the eyes of God.

Readers are rightly led to consider the thought of Yeshua in His Sermon on the Mount, where He says that if a person intends to murder or commit adultery in the heart, or perform particular acts which could lead to these sins, then the person is already guilty of breaking the commandment:

“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...You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:21-23, 27-28).

Aside from the fact that the Torah prohibitions against murder and adultery, highlighted by James in v. 11, are not only quite serious but were engraved in stone upon the tablets of the Ten Commandments—might there be any additional reason as to why an avoidance of adultery, but a committal of murder, is highlighted here? As it specifically concerns the material James is communicating to his audience, there are references in Jeremiah, which associate murder with mistreatment of the poor, the very group of people that various members of James’ audience have been accused of ignoring (vs. 5-6):

“*[I]f* you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your own ruin” (Jeremiah 7:6).

“Thus says the LORD, ‘Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of *his* oppressor. Also do not mistreat *or* do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place” (Jeremiah 22:2).

Perhaps there were members of James’ audience who prided themselves on being sexually chaste and virtuous. What would this mean if they dishonored the poor, not providing them with the essentials of life (v. 15)? Could it be regarded as a kind of murder? Because favoritism or showing partiality was a serious problem that James has to address, by failing to give the poor in the congregation required support, which would include seeing that they were properly fed, those violating the Torah would be, in essence, guilty of “murder via starvation.”

2:12 Rather than see his audience overlooking and breaking some of the Torah’s most significant directions for God’s people, James’ admonition is “So speak and so act as those who will be judged according to a *Torah* that gives freedom” (TLV). Many Christians have struggled with James’ emphasis on Messiah followers being judged “by *the* law of liberty” (NASU), or “by the law that treats them as free” (Williams New Testament), because it is a very clear example of how positive a figure like James viewed God’s Torah for born again Believers. A Reformer like John Calvin notably took “the law of liberty” to represent how

sinners who are forgiven by God, have been remitted from the curse or condemnation of the Torah:

“The law of liberty...is equivalent to God’s clemency, which frees us from the curse of the Law. So we must take this, and what follows, in the one context of being tolerant towards weakness. This line of argument flows very well: since none of us would stand in God’s presence if we were not absolved and made free from the rigorous application of the Law, our actions should follow like a course, and not exclude God’s generosity by over-severity; in the end, we all need the same.”⁵³

What James has previously referred to as *nomon basilikon* (νόμον βασιλικόν), “the royal law” (2:8), is further detailed to be *nomou eleutherias* (νόμου ἐλευθερίας), “the law of liberty” (2:12). Such a “law that gives freedom” (NIV) is widely considered to be the summation of the Torah to the high principle of loving one’s neighbor: “Do not take revenge, nor bear a grudge against the children of your people. You shall love your fellow as [you love] yourself, I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:18, Keter Crown Bible). This can be undoubtedly connected to Yeshua’s imperatives “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7), “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).⁵⁴

Interpreters of the Epistle of James are divided as to whether or not there is really a major break intended between “the royal law” of love for God and neighbor, and the Torah of Moses. Is *nomon basilikon* something which is contrary to the Torah of Moses? Martin thinks, “The antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:21-48 make the same point, namely, that the new law of love sets a higher standard than Torah obedience can demand and produce.”⁵⁵ But is the command to love one’s neighbor, Leviticus 19:18, really totally “new” to the First Century—or simply something that needed to be reemphasized and would be viewed as “new” by many in Yeshua’s and James’ audiences?⁵⁶

The issue of the Torah needing to be obeyed by Messiah followers—emphasized by James as “the royal law” focused around the directive to love others—is something that makes various commentators feel a bit uncomfortable. Moo has to still conclude, though, “the law in question here is not the OT law as such, but the OT as reinterpreted and imposed by Christ on his followers.”⁵⁷ No Bible reader can honestly disagree with the claim that the Messiah’s interpretation and application of Moses’ Teaching, as is principally seen in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chs. 5-7) and commented on by figures such as James, needs to be steadfastly remembered. Such an obedience with the Messiah’s self-sacrificial example of service, and kindness to others as prime, is something that none of us should ever be found dismissing. McCartney’s words are well taken here:

⁵³ Calvin, 281.

⁵⁴ Witherington, 462 also notes how “The theme of mercy is common in wisdom literature (Sirach 27.30-28.7).”

⁵⁵ Martin, 71.

⁵⁶ The term *kainos* (καινός), appearing in John 13:34, can “**pert. to being not previously present, unknown, strange, remarkable**” (BDAG, 496) or simply “*unknown, unheard of*” (CGEDNT, 90). Yeshua’s reference to *entolēn kainēn* (Ἐντολὴν καινὴν) or “a new commandment” could very easily relate to how *properly embodying* the Torah command to love had gone out of favor.

⁵⁷ Moo, *James*, 117.

“[T]he law of the kingdom of God is complete, kingly, and liberating. The liberating law of the kingdom (i.e., Jesus’s view of the law), by which believers are to reckon that they will be judged, is also the law into which the godly gaze (1:25) and remember to do....[T]o behave as those about to be judged by the law of freedom is to remember mercy and justice and thereby to proclaim liberty. God is merciful and just; therefore, Christians must be merciful and just.”⁵⁸

That all born again Believers should be committed to following “the law of liberty,” whereby the ways of the Creator can be known and enacted to all human beings—the true thrust of Micah 6:8, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”—**is paramount to a healthy and active faith in Messiah Yeshua**. James has stated earlier, “But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does” (1:25).

It cannot go overlooked how the RSV has rendered v. 12 with, “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.” The clause in question is *dia nomou eleutherias* (διὰ νόμου ἐλευθερίας), with the preposition *dia* (διὰ). When used with a genitive case noun (indicating possession), *dia* should be viewed as “through, by means of, with; during, throughout” (CGEDNT).⁵⁹ The NRSV correctly changed the rendering of *dia nomou eleutherias* to “by the law of liberty,” following the KJV before it. The HCSB has the similar, “by the law of freedom.” Even a significantly paraphrased version like The Message has, “by the Rule that sets us free.”

Why a version like the RSV⁶⁰ chose to render *dia nomou eleutherias*—which would be best translated as either “by *the* law of liberty” (NASU) or “through the law of liberty”—with “under the law of liberty,” has to be because of theological reasons. A clause correctly rendered as “under [the] law of liberty” would be *hupo [ton] nomon tēs eleutherias* (ὑπὸ [τὸν] νόμον τῆς ἐλευθερίας). One can only speculate that those who render *dia nomou eleutherias*, “through/by the law of liberty,” as “under the law of liberty,” want such a law of liberty to be viewed as independent from the Torah of Moses *and* to supplant and replace the rightful position of the Torah of Moses in the hearts and minds of born again Believers. Such people are thought to not be “under the Law of Moses,” but instead “under {a separate} law of liberty.” (It is the author’s position that the correct view of “under the Law,” in contrast to “under grace,” actually regards its condemnation pronounced upon sinners.)⁶¹ Yet what the Greek of James 2:12 says is that people are to be judged “through/by the law of liberty,” which is correctly concluded to be the Torah of Moses as interpreted through the ministry and actions of Yeshua the Messiah, and early Messianic leaders like James the Just. Davids rightly confirms,

⁵⁸ McCartney, pp 149, 150.

⁵⁹ CGEDNT, 41.

⁶⁰ The ESV, which is part of the same translation family, follows the same rendering of James 2:12 as does the RSV: “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.”

⁶¹ Consult the author’s article “What Does ‘Under the Law’ Really Mean?—A Further Study” (appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*). The following passages are addressed: Galatians 3:23; 4:4-5, 21; 5:18; 1 Corinthians 9:20-22; Romans 6:14-15; James 2:12; Romans 2:12; 3:19; 3:6; Hebrews 7:11; 9:22; Luke 2:27.

“‘[T]he law of liberty,’ which, as has already been observed (cf. 1:25), is nothing less than the law of Moses as interpreted (and to some extent altered) by Jesus and the early church, which took its cues from Jesus. This standard, which focuses on the example of Jesus and thus the command of love, should cause all to examine their lives and channel them into obedience to Jesus’ commands (cf. Mt. 7:15-23; Lk. 6:43-45).”⁶²

Yeshua the Messiah surely upheld the Torah principle of love for God and one’s neighbor being primary, the same as various Rabbis like Hillel contemporary to His time (b.*Shabbat* 31a).⁶³ In fact, Yeshua requires that the righteousness of His followers exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20), whose human standard was fairly high. Given how adherence to their strict regulations can be impossible for many of us, entry into God’s Kingdom must be ultimately reliant upon His magnificent grace and mercy! Obedience to His Instruction, though, is still expected of the faithful who love Him and who want to please Him. Motyer’s observations on what the royal law involves, and how obedience is expected of the redeemed, are quite excellent:

“First, because it is *the royal law*, the law that in a special sense belongs to the king, we would *wish* to obey it—simply because he would specially desire us to do so. Secondly, because it is a command of the law of God, we *must* obey it. To dismiss it is to dismiss the facet of the Glory of God which it represents; to leave it to others is to say that it is immaterial whether this part of the Lord’s likeness is seen in me. It comes to us as a revelation of God, and with his authority, therefore we must obey it. But, thirdly, it is part of *the law of liberty*, and therefore we can obey it.”⁶⁴

The freedom or liberty James talks about in v. 12 relates to the fact that born again Believers have experienced a remission from the penalties of condemnation, which originates from violating the Torah’s commandments. *Those, who have liberty or freedom, have the forgiveness of sins accessible via the gospel.* Consequent obedience to God’s commandments comes as an outworking of the love that the redeemed are to have for Him, concurrent with the supernatural compulsion to obey present in the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27). As the Psalmist has said, “I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts” (Psalm 119:45, NIV). When the redeemed in Yeshua keep the Torah through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, they should indeed find themselves to be free and blessed people.

It is interesting that many Messianic people will quote Matthew 7:22-23, in reference to Yeshua telling those who performed miracles in His name, “DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS” (cf. Psalm 6:8), and apply it to many Christians. However, we have to keep in mind that “lawlessness” (*anomia*, ἀνομία) entails much more than just failing to keep the seventh-day Sabbath, appointed times, or kosher dietary laws. It also applies every bit as much to our ethics, and whether or not we have hatred, adultery, theft, or covetousness in our

⁶² Peter Davids, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 118.

⁶³ “‘What is hateful to you, to your fellow don’t do.’ That’s the entirety of the Torah; *everything else is elaboration. So go, study*” (b.*Shabbat* 31a; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

⁶⁴ Motyer, pp 100-101.

hearts. Are there going to be some who say to Yeshua, “But didn’t we keep the Sabbath and the feasts?” when they had an improper attitude toward others? **May it not be so!** If this indeed happens, then such people would be found committing lawlessness because they failed to have love for their fellow human beings, which James has stated is the quintessential proof of keeping God’s Torah (v. 8). *People definitely transgress the Torah when they fail to love others...*

2:13 If a man or woman has been redeemed by Yeshua the Messiah, and can thusly be judged via the Torah/Law of liberty/freedom (v. 12)—then James understandably communicates, “judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (NIV). Mercy (Heb. *racham*, רָחַם; Grk. *eleos*, ἐλεός) doubtlessly involves a person having the right attitudes and approach toward other people, in the value that we place on one another, and in the case of James’ audience, treating those in the assembly with a wide degree of equity. In James’ specific situation, there would be those who discriminated against others in the assembly based on their appearance, and could very well be in danger of being judged by God without any mercy. Mercy is a Divine characteristic of the Lord that can only be properly exercised by those who have received it from Him, and have been spiritually regenerated. The importance of mercy is highlighted in the Tanach, Pseudepigrapha, Apocrypha, and the teaching of Yeshua:

“He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. You will give truth to Jacob *and* unchanging love to Abraham, which You swore to our forefathers from the days of old” (Micah 7:19-20).

“Thus has the LORD of hosts said, ‘Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another’” (Zechariah 7:9-10).

“You also, my children, have compassion toward every person with mercy, in order that the Lord may be compassionate and merciful to you” (*Testament of Zebulun* 8:1).⁶⁵

“He that takes vengeance will suffer vengeance from the Lord, and he will firmly establish his sins. Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Does a man harbor anger against another, and yet seek for healing from the Lord? Does he have no mercy toward a man like himself, and yet pray for his own sins? If he himself, being flesh, maintains wrath, who will make expiation for his sins? Remember the end of your life, and cease from enmity, remember destruction and death, and be true to the commandments. Remember the commandments, and do not be angry with your neighbor; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook ignorance. Refrain from strife, and you will lessen sins; for a man given to anger will

⁶⁵ H.C. Kee, trans., “Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 807.

kindle strife, and a sinful man will disturb friends and inject enmity among those who are at peace” (Sirach 28:1-9).

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7).

Human beings, with a fallen sin nature, often have a serious challenge in restraining themselves from judging others, without a degree of fairness and temperance. Yet for those of us who claim to know Yeshua the Messiah as our Personal Savior, the requirement to act with mercy and kindness to others, *should* come as second nature. Even if this comes more easily for some, and more difficult for others, demonstrating grace to all we encounter is a character trait which is to be steadily inculcated into us as we mature in faith. This involves treating other people with respect, decency, and above all, love. James surely relied on his audience to understand these critical concepts, especially for the Jewish members of his audience who would have been exposed to the concept of “mercy” from a variety of potential, ancient sources.

One of the most critical parts of showing mercy to other people is forgiveness. Yeshua Himself said, “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Matthew 6:14-15). In some places, it can appear as though Yeshua made forgiving other people for wrongs done a prerequisite to be forgiven by the Father. Certainly, anyone who has been truly forgiven by God should be willing to forgive other people for wrongs done to them. This forgiveness is not only required once, but is continually required to be given of true followers of the Lord. As is further stated in Matthew 18:21-22

“Then Peter came and said to Him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Yeshua said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’”

Out of a true forgiveness that we receive from God, is able to come His Divine mercy that we may show toward others when we are wronged. When matters come before us in life that require that we make judgments, evaluations, or various types of decisions, these must originate from a merciful and fair-minded spirit which considers the needs of others. When we exercise this mercy, God is able to bless us. Specifically referenced by James in v. 13 are those who have never shown mercy. Because true mercy is something that can only be produced by God’s Holy Spirit, was James subtly admonishing his readers to see whether they truly have that salvation? It is probably fair to assess that much of James’ audience had simply relapsed into old patterns of behavior, and that they were people who had truly been shown mercy and had demonstrated genuine mercy—the same as many of us today needing to be admonished to show mercy, when old, pre-salvation attitudes briefly try to influence us.

There may also be a warning issued in James’ words for Messianic Believers today. How many people in the Messianic community today believe themselves to be Torah observant, but do not show a great amount of mercy, grace, love, or forbearance? How many demonstrate that they are harboring unforgiveness toward their Christian brothers and sisters who do not practice their faith exactly the same way? James’ word for us as Messianics is that if you consider yourself a Torah observant Messianic Believer, you are to always show

mercy and grace to other people, especially those other Believers who need to see our example of faith, and be properly led by a positive example which exudes God's mercy *par excellence*. The consequence of us not doing this could be a merciless judgment by God, finding ourselves judged by the full letter of the Law and its condemnation, indicating that someone may never have truly partaken of His mercy available in Messiah Yeshua.

14 What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? 17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself.

2:14-26 James 2:14-26 has been a very difficult section of this letter for many Christians to read, contemplate, and interpret throughout history, as it can be improperly approached from the perspective that human actions merit eternal salvation. Sometimes this has been caused by various lay readers only pulling out a verse, or clause or two, here or there—and not expelling a huge amount of consideration or attention for the issue(s) actually being discussed by James, *or* for that matter some more involved approaches to the topics of righteousness and justification, which might not involve a remission of sins at all. In 2:14-26, it is most important to be aware of how James posits the position of a person who purports to have faith, yet such a self-claimed faith is not one which has been followed by the proper works or actions. This particularly regarded the works and actions of kindness, mercy, and service toward those in need, rooted within the high ethical and moral imperatives of God's Torah.

2:14 James remarks how it is impossible to have a faith without works, stating, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them?" (TNIV). While rendered as "What use is it" (NASU) or "What good is it" (NIV), *ophelos* (ὄφελος), can also allow for a translation such as, "What does it profit" (RSV). It means "to heap up. Increase, profit, meaning furtherance, advantage" (AMG).⁶⁶ The NLT has a good paraphrase of this verse: "Dear brothers and sisters, what's the use of saying you have faith if you don't prove it by your actions? That kind of faith can't save anyone." V. 14 has been a cause of considerable confusion because James asks his audience how a faith without works can actually be demonstrated to have the value or capacity, of being able to save a person. Faith not evidenced by the appropriate works, actions, or deeds will not do anyone any good—because such a faith really does not have any substantial profit. **Faith without an incumbent supernatural impetus to perform actions reflective of the Holy God who saves sinners, is something with no real value.**

When James made these remarks, he was trying to instill in his readers a desire to obey God fully, and have them realize that they have a great responsibility as representatives of His

⁶⁶ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 1081.