

8 – If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,” you are doing well.

The opening words of this verse, “If, however,” (Εἰ μέντοι, *Ei men-toi*), make an obvious contrast to the previous paragraph (2:1–7) which describes favoritism toward someone who has the power of wealth or prestige as over against the poor person. For, as noted above, the motive for showing such favoritism is selfishness, that is, hoping to gain something for oneself by treating the rich man with special favors. The strong language James uses to decry such favoritism emphasizes the high priority placed upon unity within the body of Messiah. For such favoritism is identified by James as “blaspheming the fair Name by which all believers have been called” (2:7). In other words, to show such favoritism is to act against the core truth of what Yeshua has accomplished in His death, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly session. For it is by His eternal, saving work that sinners are saved and united together in Him as those who have been granted eternal life. If, in fact, all who are called are justified, and all who are justified are glorified, then to relegate some to a higher class and others to a lower class is to act against the very work of redemption accomplished by Yeshua our Lord and Savior.

The contrast to such favoritism, which degrades the “fair Name” by which we have been saved, is now described by James as “fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’” Here James is quoting from Lev 19:18. It seems clear that James has had this Torah text in mind even in the previous chapter of this epistle when, in 1:25, he describes the “effectual doer” as “abiding by” the “perfect law of liberty.”¹

What does it mean “to fulfill the royal law?” The Greek word chosen by James, here translated by the NASB as “fulfilling,” is *τελέω* (*teleō*), which carries the meanings “to complete an activity or process” as well as “to carry out an obligation or demand, carry out, accomplish, perform, fulfill, keep.”² We find this same word *teleō* used only two other times in the Apostolic Scriptures to describe “fulfilling the law.”

When they had performed (ἐτέλεσαν < τελέω) everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth. (Lk 2:39)

1 See comments above on 1:25, p. 65ff.

2 BDAG, “τελέω,” p. 997f.

And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps (τελοῦσα < τελέω) the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? (Rom 2:27)

James identifies the “law” as “the royal law,” (νόμον... βασιλικόν), and we see similar language used in the Lxx of Esther 1:19.

If it pleases the king, let a royal (βασιλικόν) edict be issued by him and let it be written in the laws (νόμους) of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti may no longer come into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she. (Est 1:19)

James uses this language to emphasize that the “law,” the Torah which he is referencing, is that which is given by the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is the Torah given to Israel by the hands of Moses and is therefore the very foundation upon which subsequent, inspired Scriptures are reckoned and verified.

To the Torah and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn. (Is 8:20)

If he called them gods (i.e., the judges¹) to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God?’ (Jn 10:35-36)

When Yeshua proclaims that “the Scriptures cannot be broken,” He teaches us that the true, inspired Scriptures can never be self-contradictory. Thus, when referring to the “law” as the “royal law,” he is emphasizing that the law to which he refers is none other than that given to Moses by the almighty King Himself. This carries forward the strong language he has employed in the previous verses to describe those whose actions transgress the “royal law” even though they claim to follow Yeshua.

1 The Hebrew **עֲלֵמִים** (*elohim*) is used to designate “judges” in the Torah (e.g., Ex 22:6, 8) since they were given the power of life and death via enacting capital punishment.

...according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF"

It seems quite probable from the broader context that James is aware of Yeshua's words when He quotes Lev 19:18 in connection with Deut 6:5, (Matt 22:35-36) as a succinct summation of the whole Torah. To love God with all of one's heart, soul, and mind (ability), and one's neighbor as oneself, is to demonstrate a true willingness and deep desire to obey all that God has commanded.

We should also remember that when James uses the Greek word νόμος (*nomos*), he is most surely referring to the Torah, that is, the divine truths given to Israel through God's chosen prophets. For in the Tanach, the word תּוֹרָה (*tōrah*) is found 220 times, and is translated in the Lxx by *nōmos* 199 times, i.e., 90% of the time. And since approximately 75% of the quotes from the Tanach in the Apostolic Scriptures are from the Lxx, it is obvious that the Lxx was regularly used by the Apostles and thus by the followers of Yeshua.

It is not uncommon, however, to read Christian commentators who seek to limit the words of James in our text to the command to love God and one's neighbor as the totality of what Christians must keep. Of course, loving God encompasses a broad spectrum of obedience to Him, but many of the commandments in the Tanach are considered no longer necessary unless they are specifically reiterated in the Apostolic Scriptures. Those who hold this understanding of our text, or something akin to it, teach that other aspects of the "law" no longer are binding. Here are two examples of this interpretive style.

This interpretation also chimes with James's view of law as messianic Torah: "The Holy One, blessed be He, interprets to them the grounds of a new Torah which the Holy One, blessed be He, will give to them by the hand of King Messiah."¹

What we find in James does not lead us to think that he believes the messianic community has been set free from the works of the Torah as we see in Pauline theology in Galatians and Romans. What James implies might not be clear, but the significance of the Torah coming to a new expression in Jesus surely sets the groundwork for buildings to be constructed later by (Gentile) Christians.²

James, however, like Yeshua Himself, would have never considered

1 Adamson, *James*, p. 115, quoting W. D. Davies, *Torah in the Messianic Age* (1952), p. 74 and his translation of Yalqut on Is 26 and Gen. Rab. 98.

2 McKnight, *James*, p. 207.

that the Torah given to Moses and Israel, would someday be replaced by a “new, messianic Torah.”

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matt 5:17–18)

Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven. (Ps 119:99)

The sum of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting. (Ps 119:160)

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever. (Is 40:8)

...*you are doing well.* – James emphasizes that to live in obedience to the Scriptures, which for us is now the sixty-six books of inspired Scripture, is to “do well.” The manner in which we care for each other within the body of Messiah, the *ekklesia*, is an expression of our desire to fulfill the royal law, the law of liberty. For when we are known for living in accordance with God’s revealed will, His Torah (that is, His divine teaching in the Scriptures), then we will most surely be doing well in God’s eyes. Loving God with all of one’s being, and loving one’s neighbor as oneself, is the spiritual mark of a life submitted more and more to God. And this will be seen in all aspects of our lives, whether in private or in public. For it is by His having loved us that we are enabled to love Him and one another. Thus, His commandments become our delight as we commit ourselves to Him and put to death the deeds of the flesh.

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the Torah of the LORD, and in His Torah he meditates day and night. (Ps 1:1–2)

I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Torah is within my heart. (Ps 40:8)

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 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)