

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to a clear and fitting conclusion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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1 In 1:25 the Greek has νόμον τέλειον τὸν τῆς ἐλευθερίας, which is "the perfect law of liberty" which is essentially equivalent with

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 BDAG, "ὠφελέω," p. 1107.

*Can that faith save Him?* – The final line of our verse is constructed so as to expect a “no” answer: “That kind of faith cannot save anyone, can it?”<sup>1</sup> The point is that faith without works is not saving faith at all. It is merely “religion” without the very substance of God’s saving grace in Yeshua.

**15–16 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 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?**

Here James gives us a good analogy of what he taught us in the previous verse about someone who “says” he has faith but his life (words and actions) shows no evidence to support his words. He sets forth the analogy by using “brother or sister,” which sets the story within the context of the gathered, believing community. This does not limit it to the believing community, but makes the point all that more clear. For such a brother or sister is “without clothing” (γυμνός, *gymnos*), which can carry the sense of “inadequately clothed” but most often is used in the Apostolic Scriptures to denote “naked” or “uncovered.” James thus uses a “worst-case scenario” to emphasize his point.

Seeing a fellow believer in such dire straights calls for action, not simply words. For when one says to such a person, “Goodbye, I hope you have a good day” and turns away, that person’s words are not only worthless, but even worse. They indicate a total rejection of the person who is impoverished and no doubt of low social standing.

Then James uses exactly the same phrase as he did in the opening of v. 14, “what use is that?” τί τὸ ὄφελος (*ti to ophelos*). In other words, such “niceties” are worthless because they do nothing to aid the person who is in need. Once again, if the one who professes “faith” in God is supposed to emulate God’s ways, then does he realize that God demonstrated His love by giving His own Son, Yeshua? The one who has faith without works does not at all understand or accept what God Himself has revealed about the salvation He has accomplished in Yeshua.

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1 See Chris A. Vlachos, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: James* (B & H Pub., 2013), p. 87. The use of the Greek negative μή gives this sense.