

V. The Royal Law

November 4/6/7, 2019

James 2:1-1

OT: Pr. 28:21; Amos 4:1-3

NT: Mt. 18:21-35; 22:34-40

Aim: To abide by the royal law of loving our neighbor even as God through Jesus Christ loves us and avoid the sin of partiality and discrimination.

Morgan: In Chapter 2, James continues his emphasis on being ‘doers’ of the Word. His specific injunctions in 1:126-27 are supplemented now by a command to avoid showing favoritism and partiality when it comes to wealth and possessions. Even in the earliest Christian communities social, financial, and racial distinctions already caused tension.... The Jewish Christians to whom James wrote had received the gospel, been converted, and now needed much help in how to exercise their newfound faith. Their religious thought and temper were still largely controlled by the traditions of their Jewish heritage. Their assemblies for religious worship and teaching were still called synagogues, and probably the customs and structure of the Jewish synagogue were largely preserved at the time James wrote. The great majority of these new Christians were poor, and most of the wealthy Jews were bitterly hostile to the Christian faith. Throughout the epistle the rich as a class are described as enemies of the Christian church. Apparently, James had heard that in the Christian synagogue(s) the poor were being treated with contempt and the wealthy with ostentatious demonstrations of respect. So, he wrote to correct the problem.

Moo: The command not to discriminate in v. 1 is...the main point of the section. In vv. 2-4, a specific example of such discrimination is offered and the conclusion that such action is, indeed, evil is drawn. James then gives three specific reasons why favoritism toward the rich and discrimination against the poor are evil. First, such an attitude stands in contradiction to God’s own evaluation, who honors the poor (vv. 5-6a). Second, favoritism toward the rich betrays a fawning, servile mentality – for rich people are the very ones who are persecuting the Christian community (vv. 6b-7). And, third, discrimination against the poor violates the demand of love for the neighbor, the centerpiece of Jesus’ reinterpretation of the law of God (vv. 8-13).

A. The Portrait of Partiality (James 2:1-4)

1. Principle (2:1)

¹*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*

a) *Brothers (2:1a)*

¹*My brothers...*

Moo: *My brothers* (fellow members of the family of God) again signifies a topic switch (see also 1:2, 16, 19).

MacArthur: James prefaces this command by addressing readers as ‘my brethren,’ indicating that he is speaking out of love and as a fellow believer in Christ.

Morgan: James softens his rebuke with this warm and familiar address, which he uses twelve times in the epistle. Combine this with the more endearing ‘my beloved brothers,’ which he uses three times, and one can sense James’ pastoral heart.

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b) *Partiality (2:1b)*

...*show no partiality*...

Morgan: ‘Prejudiced favoritism’ is one of the most technicolor words in the New Testament. *Prosōpolēmpsias* is a compound word that literally means ‘to receive or lift up the face.’ It is found in Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, and Colossians 3:25; in each case denying any partiality or favoritism with God. The verb form is found in the New Testament only in James 2:9. Such an attitude makes a quick judgment about a newcomer to the congregation. An instant evaluation takes place about the person socially, educationally, and economically.... Jesus practiced just the opposite of this ‘prejudiced favoritism.’ ‘How,’ James asks, ‘can you say you are a follower of Jesus and yet show prejudice and favoritism toward people?’

MacArthur: In the Greek text, the phrase ‘do not...with an attitude of favoritism’ carries the idea of continuation, of *not making a practice* of ‘favoritism,’ which has no place in the life of a faithful Christian. A few verses later (2:9), James makes clear that favoritism is not simply discourteous and disrespectful but is a serious sin. ‘An attitude of personal favoritism’ translates the single Greek word *prosōpolēmpsia*, which has the literal meaning of lifting up someone’s face, with the idea of judging by appearance and on that basis giving special favor without consideration of a person’s true merits, abilities, or character. It is both interesting and significant that this word, along with the related noun *prosōpolēmpētēs* (see Acts 10:34, ‘partiality’) and the verb *prosōpolēmpeteō*, (see James 2:9, ‘show partiality’) are found only in Christian writings. Perhaps that is because favoritism was such an accepted part of most ancient societies that it was assumed and not even identified, as it still is in many cultures today.

Moo: A person who has faith in this Lord of glory, James insists, should not *show favoritism*. The NIV’s ‘favoritism’ comes from a Greek word that means, literally, ‘receiving the face.’ The word was apparently invented by NT writers (see also Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; related words are found in James 2:9; Acts 10:34; 1 Pe. 1:17) as a literal rendering of a Hebrew word for partiality. To ‘receive the face’ means to make judgments about people based on external appearance.... We are not to make decisions about people based on any external factor – whether it be dress, color of skin, or general physical appearance. The OT repeatedly stresses that God Himself is impartial, looking at the heart rather than at the outside of a person, and God’s people are to imitate Him in this respect (cp. Dt. 10:17-18; Lev. 19:15).

Dorani: James states his theme at once: those who believe in Christ should show no partiality. Indeed, James suggests that faith and favoritism are incompatible.... The word translated ‘favoritism’ is a neologism, a compound word based on an Old Testament phrase. To be hyper-literal, James forbids Christians to ‘receive a face.’ That is, believers should not prefer one person over another because of their appearance—their face, their clothes, or any other aspect of their outward appearance.... Humans play favorites. We judge by appearances, but God does not (1 Sam. 16:7).

Hughes: Literally this reads, ‘don’t receive the face,’ referring to someone with biased judgment based on externals. The Bible repeatedly and categorically condemns such behavior (cp. Pr. 28:21; Lev. 19:15; Mal. 2:9; Pr. 22:2).... Simon Peter’s vision of the large sheet crawling with unclean things and God’s command to eat them taught Peter this lesson in a most impressive way, so that Peter would say, ‘Truly I understand that God shows no partiality’—God does not *receive the face* (Acts 10:34).

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c) Glory (2:1c)

... as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

MacArthur: The phrase ‘our glorious Lord Jesus Christ’ is, more literally, ‘our Lord Jesus Christ of the glory,’ perhaps referring to God’s Shekinah glory (see Ex. 40:34; 1 Kgs. 8:11), the history of which James’s Jewish readers would have been very familiar. The idea is that we cannot hold the faith of Jesus Christ, who is the very presence and glory of God, and be partial.

Morgan: ‘Our glorious Lord Jesus Christ’ is a much-debated phrase. The literal word order in this string of genitive-case words is ‘the Lord our Jesus Christ of glory.’ ... ‘Faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ...is the simplest [interpretation] and it makes the most sense. What is clear is that James attributes to the Lord Jesus the splendor that is peculiar to God Himself.

Moo: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, is, of course, a common combination of titles in the NT; but nowhere else is the word ‘glory’ added to the series.... Commentators attach it to these titles in at least seven ways, but the most important options are: 1) ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious one’; 2) ‘Our glorious Lord Jesus Christ’ (NRSV; NIV; NLT); or 3) ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory’ (KJV; NASB; TEV). With the first rendering, ‘glory’ is understood as an independent title that further qualifies ‘Lord Jesus Christ.’ ... The basis for this interpretation is the common association of ‘glory’ with God in the OT and with both God and Christ in the NT.... However, this interpretation, while theologically unobjectionable, suffers from a key difficulty: never in the OT or in the NT is the word ‘glory’ used by itself as a title of God or of Christ. This makes it unlikely that it has this significance here. On the other hand, the grammatical basis for the second alternative – ‘glorious Lord’ – is very solid, the descriptive genitive being a favorite construction in James. On this view, James is attributing to the Lord Jesus the quality of splendor that is peculiar to God Himself. The third translation is the most ambiguous of three, leaving it unclear just how the word ‘glory’ relates to Lord. And for this reason, it is probably the best alternative.

2. Picture (2:2-4)

²For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in ³and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet”, ⁴have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

MacArthur: To better appreciate James’s emphasis in this passage, it is necessary to understand that the vast majority of early converts to Christianity were Jewish and poor. If they were not already, many suddenly became poor when, because of their faith, they were ostracized from their families and society, so that a husband and father lost his job, or a wife and mother was thrown out of the house without anything but the clothes on her back. There was intense hatred of fellow Jews who converted to Christianity (cp. 1 Cor. 1:26).

Moo: James now gives an example of the favoritism that he has condemned in v. 1. Verses 2-4 is one conditional sentence in Greek.... The form of the condition suggests that James is giving a hypothetical example of the kind of behavior that he warns against. But the sequel to the example (vv. 6-7) makes clear that the readers were engaging in discrimination very much like this.

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Hughes: The language of verses 2-3, as well as the context, indicates an actual happening in the early church. James probably witnessed this tragic event himself. But even if the event were hypothetical, subsequent church history has documented that this sin repeats itself in the church.

a) *The Assembly (2:2b)*

...into your assembly...

MacArthur: ‘Assembly’ translates *sunagōgē*, which has the basic meaning of gathering together and is commonly rendered ‘synagogue.’ ... The fact that James uses *sunagōgē* here instead of *ekklēsia*, which has the same meaning and is usually translated ‘church’ (as in 5:14), gives further evidence that the churches to which he wrote were composed primarily of Jews and that the letter was written at an early date in the life of the New Testament church. Also, like *ekklēsia*, the term *sunagōgē* is not a proper noun, as are their English counterparts, *synagogue* and *church*. In the New Testament both terms were used of any sort of gathering, or place of gathering. That is the sense in which *sunagōgē* is used here by James and in which Luke uses *ekklēsia* in Acts 19:32, 39, 41.

Moo: The scenario is a ‘meeting.’ The Greek word is *synagōgē*, used widely by the Jews to denote the place where they met for worship, instruction, and encouragement in their faith. Some think James’s use of the word here indicates that he was writing to Jewish Christians who were still attending Jewish synagogue meetings.... But James’s qualification of this ‘synagogue’ as ‘your synagogue’ implies that Christians had control over the meetings. Another possibility, then is to think that James used the word in its most general sense, a ‘gathering’ or an ‘assembly’ (so most English translations). This assembly might be a gathering of the community to adjudicate a dispute between two of its members or, more likely, the weekly meeting for worship and instruction.... Jewish Christians who had recently embraced Jesus as their Messiah would naturally carry over into their new covenant worship the terms and conventions familiar to them from their past experiences – even as they began using more technical ‘Christian’ terms as well (cp. ‘church’ in 5:14).

Morgan: James pictures two men coming to church; perhaps they were visitors or maybe new converts. They enter the ‘synagogue,’ a common word for early Jewish Christians who gathered for the purpose of worship (see Lk. 12:11)....It may seem odd that a Christian church be termed a synagogue but remember the early date and the Jewish milieu in which these new believers found themselves. Jewish Christians who were new to the faith would naturally carry over into their new worship the terms and symbols with which they were familiar.

b) *The Rich Man (2:2a, 3a)*

(1) Appearance (2:2a)

²For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes...

MacArthur: It is obvious from the present passage that at least some of the churches to which James wrote had wealthy members, or at least an occasional wealthy visitor. Otherwise, it would have been pointless to warn about showing favor to [a rich man].

MacArthur: *Chrusodaktulios* (‘with a gold ring’) literally means ‘gold-fingered,’ and could indicate that person was wearing more than one ring. It was a common practice among well-to-do people of that day, both Jews and Gentiles, to wear numerous rings on their fingers as marks of wealth and social status. The Roman statesman and philosopher Seneca wrote, ‘We adorn our

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fingers with rings and we distribute gems over every joint.’ ... ‘Fine’ translates *lampros*, which literally means ‘bright,’ or ‘brilliant.’ It is used of the ‘gorgeous robe’ that Herod and his soldiers mockingly place on Jesus before they sent Him to Pilate (Lk. 23:11) and of the ‘shining garments’ of the angel who appeared to Cornelius as he was praying (Acts 10:30).

Morgan: One man appeared looking as though he had stepped out of a fashion magazine, with gold rings and an expensive suit. Literally, the text reads *having gold rings on his fingers (chrusodaktulios) and in a bright toga (en esthēti lamprai)*. In ancient times, gold rings were a quintessential symbol of affluence.... The word used for ‘splendid or fine’ clothing is used of the apparel of heavenly beings (cp. Acts 10:30; Rev. 15:6). He was an impressive figure indeed!

Hughes: The first is regal, to say the least. His hands are, as we say in Greek, *chrusodaktulios*—that is, ‘gold-fingered.’ ... This chic display is of Roman origin and is the culture’s way of indicating one’s wealth. I have been told that in Rome they have shops where rings can be rented for special occasions. The Roman philosopher Seneca has written, ‘we adorn our fingers with rings; a gem is fitted to every joint.’ This visitor, though a Jew, clearly likes the Roman custom and is obviously into ‘big bucks’! And his clothing is something else! It is *lampra*—‘bright’ or ‘shining.’ He is decked out totally in white, as our wealthy countrymen like to do. The man almost glows! (cp. Acts 10:30).

Moo: The ‘gold ring’ was an emblem of the upper-level Roman ‘equestrian’ class, although James may not intend quite so specific an indication. ‘Fine’ translates a Greek word that means ‘bright, shining’ and is applied, for instance, to the clothing of heavenly beings (Acts 10:30; Rev. 15:6).

(2) Attention (2:3a)

³...and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place” ...

Moo: Since both these people have to be told where to go after entering the meeting, they may be visitors. That visitors sometimes attended early Christian worship services is implied by 1 Cor. 14:23. But it may be more likely that we are to think of these two people as new converts. Those greeting the well-dressed person show ‘special attention’ by conducting him to a good seat. The verb translated ‘show attention’ can mean simply ‘look at,’ but often has the connotation of ‘look at with favor,’ have regard for’ (cp. Lk. 1:48; 9:38).

Morgan: Those greeting the well-dressed individual show ‘special regard’ for him. The word is *epiblepō*, ‘to gaze upon,’ and is found elsewhere only in Luke 1:48 and 9:36. The man is invited to occupy what would have been well recognized as a seat of honor in the synagogue setting (as in Mt. 23:6).

MacArthur: In most synagogues of that day, there were only a few benches to sit on, perhaps one or two in the front—the ‘chief seats in the synagogues’ that the scribes and Pharisees coveted (Mt. 23:6)—and possibly some others placed around the walls.... From the context, it seems likely that the imaginary man in James’s illustration is a visiting unbeliever. In any case, the sin was not in the man’s wearing a ‘gold ring and ‘fine clothes’ or in his being given ‘a good place’ to sit.

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c) *The Poor Man (2:2c, 3b)*

(1) Appearance (2:2c)

...and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in...

Morgan: In sharp contrast ‘a poor man also enters’ the same worship assembly in ‘filthy clothes.’ The ‘poor’ man (*ptōchos*) was one who barely lived at the subsistence level, one who needed help just to get enough food and clothing to survive. The text does not indicate that the two entered simultaneously, though that would have made the incident more dramatic. This poor person wore dirty, shabby clothes (*ruparai*).

Hughes: The other man’s robe is *rhupara*—‘shabby.’ It apparently is the only thing he has to wear because it is so tattered and grimy. But frankly, no one really notices him because all eyes are fixed on the dazzle of the first visitor.

Moo: In stark contrast is *a poor man in shabby clothes*. ‘Shabby’ translates a word from the same root as the word James used in 1:21 to characterize the sinful ‘filth’ that Christians must put off. The image James conjures up is of the typical homeless person of our day, dressed in mismatched, stained, and smelly rags.

MacArthur: Nor was the sin in the ‘poor man,’ also perhaps a visitor, being dressed in ‘dirty clothes,’ which would have looked and smelled terrible.

(2) Disdain (2:3b)

...while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet” ...

Morgan: The poor person, on the other hand, is treated with disdain and even contempt: ‘You, stand there or sit under my feet.’ ‘You’ is emphatic in the Greek, conveying an attitude of pointing out the poor man and telling him to stand ‘over there’ (*ekei*), away from the speaker’s location or to sit at his feet. The latter relegated the undesirable visitor to the rank of servants, people of submission and social disgrace.

MacArthur: Most of the people either stood or sat cross-legged on the floor. Occasionally someone would also have a footstool. To ask another person, especially a visitor or guest, to ‘sit down by my footstool’ was therefore a double show of disrespect. The person on a bench or in a chair not only would give that seat to the visitor but would not even allow him to sit on his ‘footstool.’

Moo: The poor person, on the other hand, is treated with disdain and even contempt, and told to *stand there* or *sit on the floor by my feet*.... The situation is clear enough: Christians in positions of some authority in the community (the verb ‘show special attention to’ is in the plural) are fawning over the rich and treating the poor with disdain and contempt.

d) *The Obvious Conclusion (2:4)*

Moo: In the second part of his conditional sentence, James now characterizes the conduct he has described in vv. 2-3. He gives his verdict in two clauses, each in the form of a question that expects a ‘yes’ answer.... Logically, then, the questions are equivalent to assertions.

Morgan: In posing the question in verse 4, James gives us the principle he seeks to drive home. If we are guilty of the behavior described in verses 2 and 3, then the only way we can answer verse 4 is in the affirmative.

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(1) Made Distinctions (2:4a)

⁴...*have you not then made distinctions among yourselves...*

Moo: James' first accusation uses a form of the verb *diakrinō*, which has two meanings that would make sense in this context: 'separate, make distinctions' and 'doubt, waver.' The NIV, along with most other modern translations and commentators adopts the former meaning: *have you not discriminated among yourselves?* ... This meaning...does not advance James's argument very far, since this conclusion was obvious on the face of the matter. The second interpretation might then be the better option. The verb frequently refers to an internal attitude of doubt in the NT (e.g., Mt. 21:21; Mk. 11:23; Acts 10:20; Rom. 4:20; 14:23; Jude 22). More importantly, James has already used the verb with just this meaning (1:6) to introduce a key motif in his letter: the warning to Christians not to have a divided heart in their relationship to God and to one another. 'Among yourselves' would then be translated 'in yourselves.' James's point being that the discrimination exhibited in the community is another manifestation of a wavering, divided attitude toward God. The improper 'division' being made between rich and poor reflects the improper 'divisions' harbored in the minds of the believers. Consistently *Christian* conduct comes only from a consistently *Christian* heart and mind.

Morgan: The Lord Jesus never looked at people's outward appearance and assessed their worth by it. Rather, Jesus looked at everyone with love and saw them as those whom He longed to serve.... Obedience to the Word of God produces a determination to have the same attitude toward people as that of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that attitude rules out all favoritism and snobbishness.

MacArthur: In both instances, the sin is partiality, making 'distinctions among yourselves,' by showing special favor to the well-dressed man and showing discourtesy, if not contempt, for the poor man. To do either is a serious sin, and those who are guilty of it 'become judges with evil motives.' In each case, the treatment of the visitor was based on superficial, self-interested, and worldly 'motives.'

(2) Become Judges (2:4b)

...and become judges with evil thoughts?

MacArthur: Among Christians such discrimination is much more than poor hospitality; it is plainly 'evil.' Of the three words James uses for 'evil' (see 1:21, *kakia*, 'wickedness'; and 3:16, *phaulos* 'evil'), the one used here and in 4:16 (*ponēros*) is the strongest, carrying the idea of vicious intentions that have a destructive and injurious effect.

Moo: When Christians show favoritism toward people in the assembly, they implicitly claim God's own right to stand in judgment over other people. But James's addition of the phrase *with evil thoughts* leaves no doubt about the negative nature of this 'judging.' ... The Greek word involved (*dialogismos*) often refers to 'thoughts' in the NT (Mt. 15:19; Mk. 7:21; Lk. 2:35; 5:22; Rom. 1:21; 1 Cor. 3:20). But the 'thought' would refer more definitively to the sinful standards that the judges are using to make their decisions.

Hughes: Those who discriminate are possessed of wicked thoughts! They place more value on the soul of the rich man. The cavalier disregard for the poor man was an implicit devaluation of his soul.... The evident assumption in this favoritism was that the rich man was considered to be morally superior, or obviously smarter, more disciplined, more hard-working, and thus a 'better man'—more fit for the kingdom. James detests such thinking. In fact, he sees this matter of

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partiality as a test of real faith. Favoritism is an indication of a heart that at best is in need of spiritual help and at worst is a heart without grace.

B. The Problem with Partiality (James 2:5-7)

MacArthur: In this passage, James is pointing out the inconsistency between God's Character and the attitude of a believer who is disrespectful of poor people.

1. The Poor (2:5-6a)

a) Beloved Brothers (2:5a)

⁵*Listen, my beloved brothers...*

Morgan: The command is from *akouō* – 'hear this and listen well!' The use of beloved (*agapētoi*) underscores again James' affection for this congregation.

MacArthur: His first admonition is for his readers, his 'beloved brethren,' simple to 'listen.' It is a warm admonition aimed at the heart as well as the mind, given not only from the standpoint of truth but also from the standpoint of affection. As direct, practical, and incisive as this letter is, James is not a hard-hearted or disinterested purveyor of God's truth. He clearly has a pastor's heart, a passion not only for correcting but also for building up his fellow believers.

Moo: *Listen my dear brothers* signals a shift in focus and emphasizes the importance of what James is about to say.... Having illustrated and condemned in vv. 2-4 the discrimination he prohibits in v. 1, James now explains why such favoritism is wrong.

b) God Chooses the Poor (2:5b)

...has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?

Moo: First, favoritism toward the rich is wrong because it contradicts God's own attitude, as revealed in his gracious election to salvation.

Hughes: In case his hearers were not yet convinced, James now presents them with some formidable logic in the form of spiritual paradox.... James, contrary to some liberation theologians, does *not* say only the poor are saved. Sadly, there are many poor who are spiritually poor, though there are also rich who are spiritually rich. James' point is that in general the poor are spiritually advantaged.... The fact is, the materially poor are so much more likely to truly realize their spiritual need—and to entrust themselves to the grace of God (cp. 1 Cor. 1:26-29).

Morgan: James said that these chosen ones who respond to God's gracious offer of salvation are privileged in three ways.

(1) Chosen by God

Morgan: First, they are *chosen* by God. Though rejected by the world in so many ways, they are of supreme worth in God's sight.... 'Choose' is from *ekgelesthai* and is in the middle voice, denoting that God's choice is of special significance to Himself. The poor are not chosen simply because of their financial condition, no more than the rich rejected because of their wealth. All have the same invitation and are called in precisely the same way – the gospel is God's means of calling (2 Th. 2:14). But the poor often experience a special sense of needing God, while the rich are often complacent and independent.

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MacArthur: James is not talking about those who are humble, the ‘poor in spirit’ (Mt. 5:3), but the economically poor, those who are in financial poverty and therefore considered by the world to be inferior. Throughout redemptive history God has shown special concern for calling the economically deprived and downtrodden to Himself (cp. Dt. 7:7-8).

Dorani: When James says that God has ‘chosen those who are poor in the world,’ he means those who are physically and financially poor, not just the ‘poor in spirit.’ This does not mean God refuses to save the rich. There are many wealthy believers in Scripture. Yet, as Paul says, not many of the first Christians were powerful or nobly born (1 Cor. 1:26-29). Most of the Corinthians were poor, because most ancient people were poor—slaves, serfs, farmers, artisans, and petty merchants abounded. Earlier, God chose Israel and delivered her, as a slave nation from Egypt. To this day, on a global scale most people could justly be called poor. If God has bestowed His kingdom upon poor believers, we must respect them.

(2) Rich in Faith

Morgan: *Second*, despite being virtually bankrupt in this materialistic age, they are *rich in faith*. We should not judge individuals based on what they have, but on who they are.

Moo: James assumes that his readers are well-aware of the many poor people who have embraced Jesus as their Messiah. In a stark reversal of status, poor people have become *rich in faith*.

MacArthur: Although most of His people will never be wealthy in material possessions, God assures them that they will be ‘rich in faith’; that is, they would have the necessary abundance of faith to believe the gospel and be saved, as well as to persevere to eternal life. Everyone who belongs to Christ has been blessed with ‘every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ’ (Eph. 1:3).

(3) Heirs of the Kingdom

Morgan: *Third*, God’s poor are ‘heirs of the kingdom promised to those who love Him.’ ... The Christian, though poor by this world’s standards, realizes he is indeed spiritually rich. God’s ‘down payment’ of the indwelling Holy Spirit is the promise of greater things to come (Eph. 4:30). The poor of this world can become rich in faith by God’s grace. When we become children of God, we also become heirs (*klēronomous*) of His Kingdom.

MacArthur: ‘Kingdom’ represents the entire sphere of salvation all that it includes and implies. Here James describes the kingdom in its presence sense of the sphere of salvation, those over whom Christ rules, as well as its...eternal glory. It is a basic biblical truth that calling someone into the kingdom is calling them to salvation and vice versa.

Moo: Expanding on the meaning of this spiritual wealth, James adds that they will also *inherit the kingdom that he promised to those who love him*. ... James...has in mind Jesus’ beatitude: ‘Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God’ (Lk. 6:20; cp. Mt. 5:3)... NT writers followed Jesus’ lead, often using the language of ‘inheriting the kingdom’ to describe this final establishment of God’s kingly power in the lives of His people (1 Cor. 6:9-10; 15:50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5). Christians, however poor in material possessions they may be, possess spiritual wealth presently and anticipate greater blessing in the future. It is from this spiritual vantage-point not the material, that Christians should judge others.

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(4) Application

Moo: Is James condemning one form of discrimination by replacing it with another? That is, does James picture God here as one who discriminates in His election in favor of the poor, and, therefore, implicitly, against the rich? ... How broadly are we to take James' claim that *God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith*? Some interpreters, particularly advocates of liberation theology, suggest a very broad interpretation: God chooses only poor people for salvation, while wealthy people are excluded. But this interpretation is possible only if we ignore the many NT passages – including one...in James itself (1:10-11) – that include wealthy people in the church. It also reads into the text a word – ‘only’ – that James simply does not use.

Hughes: As James drives home the poor rich/rich poor paradox, he is powerfully asserting that *the ground is level at the foot of the cross*. This being so, it is absurd to be partial toward anyone. All should be treated equally—as beings created in the image of God. Rich and poor should be accorded equal honor and cordiality. Discrimination or favoritism is spiritually irrational.

Dorani: The little things reveal whether our religion is true or false. And trivial as it seems, favoritism touches all phases of true religion. Recall, first, that true religion helps the poor. Favoritism insults and dishonors them though God loved them and chose them for Himself.... True religion helps the poor, but favoritism insults them.... If there is one community in this world where all should get equal treatment, it is the church. As the saying goes, the ground is level at the foot of the cross. And everyone who is seated in Christ has a prime seat. Rich and poor, young and old, male and female: all come as sinners in need of Christ and by His grace.... Second, true religion is unstained by the world, but favoritism is utterly worldly. It continues the world's inclination to prefer the rich over the poor. Favoritism rejects God's decision to grant equal honor to the poor and the rich. Third, true religion controls the tongue. But favoritism uses the tongue to hurt the poor. It may be unintentional, but verbal snubs can wound. So, then favoritism fails every test of true religion: it abuses the tongue, is stained by the world, and insults the poor.

MacArthur: There will be no poor in heaven in any sense, no second-class citizens. Everyone will be rich in the things that matter eternally. Every believer will receive the same eternal life, the same heavenly citizenship in the kingdom of God and the same perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to them by the Father.

c) *You Dishonor the Poor (2:6a)*

6But you have dishonored the poor man.

MacArthur: ‘How,’ he asks in effect, ‘can you claim to be God's child and yet think and act so differently from Him?’

Moo: ‘Insulted’ could also be translated ‘dishonored’ (NASB; NRSV; TEV), which provides in some ways a better contrast with v. 5. Those who God ‘honors’ the church ‘dishonors.’

Morgan: First, to discriminate against people based merely on social wealth or status *disgraces* those to whom God has granted grace. In effect, we place our standard of estimation higher than God's! ‘You’ (*humeis*) is emphatic and is the ‘dear brother or sister’ of verse 5. The word translated ‘disgraced’ or ‘despised’ (*ētimasate*) means more than to ignore. The idea is that of degradation and shame.

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2. The Rich (2:6b-7)

Moo: James' first reason, then, for prohibiting discrimination against the poor is that it manifests an attitude contrary to that of God. His second reason, found in vv. 6b-7, takes the form of three parallel questions, each expecting a positive answer.... James is not counseling the Christians not to be kind to these rich people; he is simply arguing that they should not give undue deference to them at the expense of the poor.

Morgan: His *second* reason for avoiding partiality, found in 6b-7, comes in the form of three parallel questions, each expecting a positive answer. James fumes at his readers for their contradictory behavior. He is not suggesting a favor for a favor (like a *quid pro quo*) argument. He stresses that showing the rich flattery and favoritism to 'get ahead' is wrong. These three questions leveled a three-fold charge against the non-believing rich.

Dorani: Conversely, James adds, it is senseless to bestow special honors upon the rich.... We should resist the temptation of favoring the rich and powerful in the hope of getting something back. Don't bother, James says. The rich may take your favors but may not return them. Therefore let no one be dazzled by wealth. Let us neither curry their favor. Using three rhetorical questions, James charges rich unbelievers (as a class) with three sins: exploiting poor Christians, dragging them into court, and slandering the name of God.

a) *Oppressors (2:6b)*

Are not the rich the ones who oppress you...

MacArthur: 'Oppress' is from the Greek term *katadunasteuō*, which means to tyrannize to exercise inordinate power over others.

Morgan: 'Oppress' is from a rare compound word (*katadunasteuō*). It is used in Acts 10:38 when the devil oppressed Jesus. The Old Testament contains many references to wealthy people who exploited the poor, and in every case, God condemned it (see, for example, Amos 4:1; 8:4-6). Just as Amos did, James rebuked the Christian who favored the wealthy.

Moo: James, as we have seen, treats the majority of the Christians to whom he writes as poor. Contributing to this poverty, he now suggests, are the immoral and perhaps illegal practices of rich people. The strongly marked socioeconomic class distinction presupposed here corresponds closely to what we know of conditions in the first-century Middle East. A small group of wealthy landowners and merchants accumulated more and more power, while large numbers of people were forced from their land and grew even poorer. Most of James' readers probably belonged to this class of poor agricultural laborers. The scenario is one that would be very familiar to readers of the OT. The prophets frequently denounce (even using the same verb James uses here *katadynasteuō*) rich people who 'oppress' the poor (Amos 4:1), including orphans and widows (Ez. 22:7).

Hughes: James is not saying that *all* the rich oppressed them, for some did not, but this was the general *historic* experience of the Jews, as well as their *present* experience in the Jewish-Christian dispersion. The Jewish Christians of James' day were disenfranchised by both Jews and Gentiles. And being debtor-poor, they were further exploited by those rich entrepreneurial classes.... To fawn over one's oppressors is strangely irrational.

b) *Litigators (2:6c)*

...and the ones who drag you into court?

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Moo: The second accusation James makes against the rich – *they...are dragging you into court* – is closely related to the first. These rich people were undoubtedly using their wealth and influence with the courts to secure favorable verdicts against the poor.

MacArthur: Aren't the rich the ones who take advantage of you financially and 'drag you into' civil 'court' to sue you and take all you have? Aren't they the ones who belittle you and depreciate your human value.

Morgan: Those to whom James' readers gave the best seats at the synagogue returned the favor by dragging Christians into court, likely having already 'bought off' the judgment. 'Drag' is a vigorous word for violent treatment. This brutal treatment is the kind found in Luke 12:8 and Acts 8:3, where the same word is used. On the pretext of some trumped-up civil or criminal charges, the secular rich exploited the poor in this way. James probably had in mind cases involving debt, rent, property disputes, and the like.

c) *Blasphemers (2:7)*

Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

(1) Blaspheme

MacArthur: Even worse, aren't they the ones who 'blaspheme' ... your religious faith.

Morgan: James saves the worst accusation until last. We derive our world blaspheme as a transliteration of the Greek. It means 'to speak evil of, slander, to be intentionally irreverent.' One can imagine rich Jewish unbelievers slandering the followers of Jesus as disciples of a cursed criminal.

Moo: The third example of the oppressive practices of the rich moves from the economic sphere to the religious.... Indeed, the two may not have been clearly separated, as religious differences may have played a major role in the decisions of the rich to oppress the poor and defenseless Christian community. The 'slander' directed against Christians may have taken several different forms. The word James uses is *blasphēmeō*, from which we get the word 'blaspheme.' In its deepest sense, the word connotes a violation, usually in speech, of God's own person (see, e.g., Mt. 9:3; 26:65; Mk. 3:28-29). But it can be extended to include any slander that involves God, even indirectly – such as criticism directed against any Christian behavior by other believers (1 Cor. 10:30; Rom. 14:16) or abuse heaped on believers by unbelievers over differences in morality (1 Pe. 4:4).... It may have been Gentiles profanely mocking the God whom believers claimed to worship. It may have been Jews criticizing Christian claims about Jesus. Or, more generally, it may have involved unbelievers making fun of Christian morality and worship practices (such as the Lord's Supper).

(2) Name

MacArthur: 'The fair name' of course, refers to the name of Jesus, which was slandered and blasphemed by enemies of the church. 'Don't you realize that the rich profane the name of your Lord, promote civil and religious hostility, and cause you unbelievable hardship and misery?'

Morgan: James did not mention Jesus' name, but he spoke of the honorable or beautiful (*kalos*) name of Jesus. 'By which you were called' is from a compound verb, 'to put a name upon.' ... The use of this word refers to the occasion when the name of one person is spoken over another's

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to designate the latter as property of the former. The name Christian is a powerful and precious designation of the one who belongs to Christ.

Moo: The specific object of the unbelievers' slander is *the noble name of him to whom you belong*. The NIV is a good paraphrase for a Greek construction impossible to translate directly into English: 'the good name which has been called upon you.' The construction which is not good Greek either, betrays its Semitic origin (see, e.g., Amos 9:9, quoted in Acts 15:17). To have a name 'called' on someone suggests the idea of ownership; hence the NIV rendering. Whose is the 'good' or 'honorable' (Gk. *kalos*) name bestowed on believers? ... Probably James intends either God or, more likely, Christ (in light of v. 1).

C. The Practice of Partiality (James 2:8-11)

Moo: In vv. 5-7, James has argued that favoritism toward the rich at the expense of the poor is wrong because: 1) it contradicts God's regard for the poor; and 2) it makes no sense. The former reason is theological, while the second is more (but not completely) pragmatic. But the attention James devotes to the matter suggests that his third argument against such favoritism is the most important: it violates the law of love (vv. 8-13). The main point comes at the beginning, in vv. 8-9; partiality is sinful because it violates the love command. Verses 10-11 justify James' assertion that committing one sin, such as showing favoritism, can turn one into a 'lawbreaker' by insisting on the indivisibility of the law.

MacArthur: Not only is partiality, or favoritism, contrary to God's character inconsistent with the Christian faith and with God's choosing the poor (and conversely, consistent with the rich persecuting the poor and the righteous), it is also contrary to God's 'royal law.' In and of itself, it is sin, a transgression of the divine law.

1. The Royal Law Cited (2:8)

⁸*If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well.*

a) If You Really Fulfill (2:8a)

MacArthur: Verse 8 is far-reaching and goes well beyond the issue of favoritism. In the Greek the clause introduced by 'if' is first-class conditional, meaning that 'if' could be translated 'since' or 'because.' Such a clause represents a reality that is assumed and self-evident.

Morgan: 'Indeed' (*mentoi*) ties James' argument to what has gone before. The example of Jesus and the grace of God call for love on the part of the followers of Christ. James reached back to the Old Testament and pulled out a universal maxim that should govern our behavior. The law of love mandates compassion and concern for everyone, not just for those considered important or worthy. In this verse James imagines a detractor who argues with him about his directive against partiality (called a 'diatribe' style).

b) The Royal Law According to the Scripture (2:8b)

Morgan: The law is 'royal' (*basilikon*, kin to the word for 'king' and 'kingdom') for two reasons. *First*, the King, God the Father gave it.... *Second*, it denotes a law fit for the kingdom citizens who would do well to follow it. Jesus said that on the law of love hang all the Law and the Prophets (Mt. 22:40).

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Moo: We note the use of the adjective ‘royal.’ The word could also be translated ‘supreme’ or ‘governing’; and some take it to introduce the following love command.... However, while the interpretation squares well with Jesus’ teaching about the love command, the Greek word used here can probably not bear the meaning ‘governing’ or ‘supreme.’ This term means ‘belonging to the king.’ ... Important for our immediate question is the proximity of ‘royal’ to the related word ‘kingdom’ (*basileia*) in v. 5. Combined with Jesus’ focus on the love command of Lev. 19:18 (Mt. 22:34-40), this suggests that James intends ‘royal’ to connote the law pertaining to the kingdom of God. As with the phrase ‘the perfect law that gives freedom’ in 1:25, then, ‘royal law’ might be James’s way of referring to the sum total of demands that God, through Jesus, imposes on believers.

MacArthur: ‘Royal’ carries the ideas of supreme and sovereign, indicating the absolute and binding authority of the ‘law.’ When a sovereign king gives an edict, it is incontestably binding on all his subjects. There is no court of appeal or arbitration. ‘According to the Scripture’ indicates that God’s sovereign ‘royal law’ and His biblical commands are synonymous.

Dorani: As we’ve seen, favoritism is foolish and worldly, though it seems such a small sin and doesn’t seem to hurt anybody much. Favoritism is the antithesis of love for the needy and for neighbor.... ‘Love your neighbor’ is the royal law in two senses. It is the law of the kingdom, and it is the law of the King Jesus.

c) You Shall Love Your Neighbor as Yourself (2:8c)

Moo: James’s suggestion that the love command stands at the heart of the NT ethical code goes back, of course, to Jesus’ teaching (cp. Mt. 22:37-40).... James is in line with that teaching as he argues that love for the neighbor, the heart of ‘the royal law,’ forbids the church from discriminating against any who might enter its doors. And James’s application of this love command to the problem of favoritism finds a solid contextual basis in Leviticus 19, where a prohibition of partiality occurs just three verses before the command to love the neighbor (compare Lev. 19:15 and 19:18).

MacArthur: What James calls the ‘royal law’ is, in essence the sum and substance of the complete Word of God, summarized in Matthew 22:37-40 as perfectly loving God and loving one’s neighbor (cp. Rom. 13:10).... The particular ‘royal law’ James focuses on is ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ which is found in Leviticus 19:18 and is what Jesus declared to be the second greatest commandment (Mt. 22:37-39; Dt. 6:5; Lev. 19:18).... The purpose behind that law is obvious. Because we love ourselves, we do not want to be killed, lied to, stolen from, or abused. And if we love others with that same degree of love and concern we will never do those things to them thereby fulfilling God’s ‘royal law.’ Most important, to love others in that way reflects our heavenly Father’s own nature and character (cp. 1 Jn. 4:7-8).

Morgan: James reminds his Christian readers of the priority and binding nature of this commandment. Righteousness and love go hand in hand in God’s kingdom.... To show favoritism is in total opposition to the summary of the second table of the law – ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

Hughes: To catch the force of what James is saying here, we need to understand that the Ten Commandments—in fact, the entire Law—was summarized in two commandments, the first being *vertical* (Dt. 6:4-5): to love God with all you are, and the second *horizontal* (Lev. 19:18): to love your neighbor as yourself. James’ readers knew that if they truly loved God they would fulfill the first four of the Ten Commandments.... Following this, if they loved their neighbors,

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as themselves, they would keep the last six of the Ten Commandments.... We have it from the very lips of Jesus (cp. Mt. 22:37-40) that if we love God and our neighbor, we fulfill the whole Law. The problem is, no one has ever perfectly fulfilled this except Jesus!

Doriani: Jesus takes love to its apex. He *says*, ‘Love your neighbor,’ and He *shows* us how to love our neighbor. ‘Love your neighbor’ is both what the King *says* and the way the King *lives*. By His incarnation Jesus became our neighbor. By His sacrifice on the cross and by His resurrection, He demonstrated the extent of His compassion for us.... The law tells us *how* to love, and love fulfills the law. Love has primacy *within* the law, not *over* the law.

d) You Do Well (2:8d)

Morgan: The word translated ‘right, well’ is not the usual word *dikaios* but *kalōs*. The word used here points to what is pleasing to God, what He likes or gives Him joy.

MacArthur: ‘You are doing well’ could perhaps better be translated, ‘You are doing excellently.’ To love others as we love ourselves is to do more than just love satisfactorily. It is to love as our heavenly Father loves and as He wants His children to love.

Hughes: We understand that the Law is meant to bring us to the end of ourselves, to prepare us to humbly receive the gift of Christ’s righteousness by faith. Then, as Christians indwelt by the Spirit, we can begin to love God and love people as we ought and thus fulfill the Law of God. This is why James says in verse 8: ‘If you really fulfill the royal law...you are doing *well*’—you are living out the royal law of love that came from Heaven and was lived out by King Jesus!

2. The Royal Law Convicts (2:9)

⁹*But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*

a) Committing Sin (2:9a)

Hughes: James...abruptly moves from the upside of keeping the royal law to the downside of breaking it.... Showing favoritism to the elite and privileged is a flagrant violation of loving your neighbor (those in need) as yourself. And such sin is no small thing.

Moo: *Show favoritism* translates a verb, used only here in the NT, that comes from the same root as the word ‘favoritism’ in v. 1.... Extending James’s principle, the love command also requires that we enthusiastically welcome into our church meetings people from other races, and that we give as much deference to people with no status in the community as we do to famous politicians, actors, or athletes.

Morgan: The use of ‘but’ (*de*) anticipates a reversal of thought from verse 8. ‘Prejudiced favoritism’ is the verb form from the noun in verse 1. The word is found nowhere else in the New Testament. The opposite of the ‘royal law’ is ‘prejudiced favoritism,’ and James speaks quite plainly that the contrast is between ‘doing well’ (v. 8) and ‘committing sin.’

MacArthur: Like the preceding one, verse 9 of James 2 begins with a first-class conditional clause...which has the meaning: ‘If you show partiality, *and you do*, you are committing sin...’ Some believers in the churches to which James wrote obviously were guilty of such ‘partiality.’ ... ‘Show partiality’ is a verb form (used only here in the New Testament) of the noun rendered ‘personal favoritism’ in verse 1. The form indicates that James is not speaking of occasional

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favoritism but of habitual, blatant ‘partiality.’ Those engaged in it were ‘committing’ serious sin and were thereby ‘convicted by the law as transgressors).

b) *Convicted Transgressors (2:9b)*

Hughes: James views such an action as deliberate and ugly. It is not merely an excusable lack of courtesy, but a scandalous breach of God’s love. When James saw the gold-fingered rich man politely seated, and the poor man treated brusquely, he knew Heaven was deeply offended.

MacArthur: Their lives were *characterized* by breaking God’s law, testifying to their unbelief... ‘Partiality’ is not merely a matter of inconsiderateness or discourtesy, but a serious ‘sin.’ In this verse James speaks of it in two forms or aspects. *Hamartia*, translated simply ‘sin’ pertains to missing the mark of God’s standard of righteousness, whereas *parabatēs*, (‘transgressors’) refers to someone who willfully goes beyond God’s prescribed limits.

Morgan: ‘Being convicted’ is from *elegchō*, a strong verb meaning ‘to expose so that one has to acknowledge guilt.’ To break the law of love through an act of favoritism is to make one a ‘transgressor’ (*parabatēs*, ‘to step over the line’ in rebellion).

Moo: Since favoritism violates the command of love, the heart of a kingdom law, the final conclusion James draws in this verse follows as a matter of strict logic: believers who show favoritism are *convicted by the law as lawbreakers*. The verb translated ‘convict’ (*elenchō*) often means ‘reprove’ (a sinner; cp. Mt. 18:15) or ‘refute’ (opponents; cp. Titus 1:9), but sometimes (as here), it has the legal sense of ‘convict’ (of wrongdoing; cp. Also Jn. 8:46; 16:8; 1 Cor. 14:24; Jude 15). It is the law that does the convicting, since its standards are violated when favoritism is shown.

3. The Whole Law Condemns (2:10-11)

Moo: In vv. 10-11 James justifies (*for*) the last clause of v. 9 by showing that the breaking of even one commandment incurs guilt for the law as a whole. We are presented with a chain of reasoning that leads at the end of v. 11 to the same accusation James has already leveled in v. 9 – Christians who show favoritism are ‘transgressors of the law.’ ... Paul reflects this same tradition in Gal. 5:3.... Especially significant, as is usually the case for James, is Jesus’ teaching (cp. Mt. 5:18-19).

a) *The Principle (2:10)*

¹⁰*For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.*

Moo: James is not suggesting that anyone is in reality fulfilling every demand of the law; he simply puts forth a ‘suppose it were so’ assumption. That person, were he to ‘stumble’ (i.e., fail to obey; cp. 3:2; Rom. 11:11; 2 Pe. 1:10) at even one ‘point’ (or commandment), *is guilty of breaking all of it*. The NIV rendering here is very appropriate. Some versions simply translate ‘have become a transgressor of the law’ (NSRV) but leave out the notion of judicial guilt that the word James uses here seems to have (*enochos*).

Morgan: According to Paul in Galatians, to fail in keeping the law in one point brings one under the condemnation of the whole law (Gal. 3:10).... James’ readers failed to understand that even if they meticulously kept the law in all other points, yet failed in the royal law of love, they ‘stumble’ (*ptaiein*, found also in 3:2 and only two other times in the New Testament) in all its

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points. Stumbling and ‘stepping over the line’ (v. 9) are interrelated. They undercut the basic essence of God’s will in our dealings with others. We cannot pick and choose what we wish to obey and what we will set aside. To violate any part of the divine law shows lack of reverence and transgresses both the whole law and the Lawgiver.... A rock thrown through a window strikes the glass at only one point, but it can cause the whole window to shatter. So, it is with the law. The lesson for these people in the first century remains the same for us today: Christians must not judge and treat others simply based on shallow considerations. James drives home the point: ... the law is broken in its entirety when only one point is ‘transgressed.’

MacArthur: In order to become a lawbreaker and a sinner, it is only necessary to disobey a single commandment, for we are obligated to keep God’s ‘whole law,’ not merely part of it. If we fail—as we all do—we are therefore ‘guilty of’ breaking ‘all’ of it. To break any of His commandments is to defy His will and His authority which is the basis of all sin. God’s law is unified: it all hangs together and is inseparable. It is like hitting a window with a hammer. You may hit it only once, and that rather lightly, but the whole window is shattered.

Dorani: If someone violates just one law, he is accountable for the whole, because God gave the whole.... If people pick and choose what they obey, then they are still very much their own god. All commands are united by this principle: *God gave them*.... Some people think of obedience as a pile of individual good deeds. The piles get a bit larger with each good deed and a bit smaller with each sin. The more the good deeds and the larger the pile, the more God is pleased. But as James sees it, obedience is more like a sheet of glass, one flawless whole. And disobedience is like a brick tossed through that glass, one destructive act that shatters the whole.

Hughes: James underlines the seriousness of this sin.... James sees the law as a seamless garment that, when ripped in one place tears the whole garment (cp. Gal. 3:10; 5:3).

Moo: If we view the law as a series of individual commandments, we could assume that disobedience of a particular commandment incurred guilt for that commandment only. But, in fact, the individual commandments are part and parcel of one indivisible whole, because they reflect the will of the one Lawgiver. To violate a commandment is to disobey God Himself and render a person guilty before Him.

b) *The Picture (2:11)*

¹¹*For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.*

MacArthur: As an illustration, James quotes from Exodus 20:13-14 and Deuteronomy 5:17-18.... James chose two of the most serious social sins, in both cases the breaking of which demanded the penalty of death. Perhaps he chose those in order to illustrate the extreme sinfulness of partiality. But he could have used any of God’s laws to make the same point. It only takes the breaking of one commandment, *any* commandment, to ‘become a transgressor of the law.’

Morgan: Verse 10 states James’ case in a general way; verse 11 makes it individual and personal. Two extreme examples of breaking God’s law are now cited: adultery and murder. ‘He who said’ reminds the readers that this is *God’s* law and it has inherent power because of the One who uttered it. Critical to the argument is that we have not just a text, but also *Someone* speaking.

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Moo: The commandments James uses to illustrate his point come, of course, from the Decalogue.... It is...likely that James's reference to the prohibition of murder presumes the 'deepening' of it in the sense that Jesus gave it (Mt. 5:21-26). Anger, Jesus taught, is also 'covered' in His reinterpretation of the commandment; and James may see the favoritism being shown in the community as an instance of this kind of anger, or disregard or others, and so tantamount to 'murder.' Perhaps, then, he intends to single out people in the community who may be priding themselves on their avoidance of 'sins of the flesh' (adultery) all the while they are discriminating against poor people and de facto committing murder.... [Or] James may, after all, simply be citing these two commandments as representative examples (as did, e.g., Paul, Rom. 13:9).

Doriani: If we obey the laws that seem right to us, then we obey only when a law passes our judgment or suits our purpose. This approach forgets that *God* gave every law. It enthrones the self. Thus, if we disobey any law, we disobey God. We are not simply disobeying His law; we are rejecting Him as Lord and Lawgiver. If we pick and choose among the commands, we never really obey *God Himself*. If we follow only the laws we like, if we obey only laws that we find agreeable, we make ourselves the final arbiter of truth. In effect, we *consult* with God and possibly gain valuable pointers from Him. But we are still masters of our lives. In this way, obedience is all or nothing. We submit to God totally or not at all.

Hughes: James illustrates the seamless garment principle in verse 11.... It takes but one lie to make a liar, one adulterous act to make an adulterer, one theft to make a thief, one murder to make a murderer, and only one broken law to make a lawbreaker. This does not mean you and I have committed every individual sin mentioned in the Law, but that we have broken the seamless garment of the whole Law—and thus are guilty of breaking all of it! ... James has made favoritism a notorious sin, listing it with murder and adultery, perhaps because he sees favoritism as adultery with wealth, or maybe because Scripture associates murder with discrimination against the poor and failure to love one's neighbor (Jer. 7:6; 22:3; 1 Jn. 3:15).

4. The Whole Law Considered

Doriani: James is making a profound point. We think of favoritism as a little sin, but, James says, the category called 'little sins' does not exist. If we break just one part of the law, we are accountable for and guilty of breaking the whole. Notice that James connects the apparently trivial matter of favoritism to the question of our global obedience to God.... First, since disobedience violates the will of God, it also violates His character, for all His laws reflect His character.... In a way, even a small sin is an affront to God's character. Second, if we break one law, we do indeed violate the whole law.... 'Sit here on the floor' breaks many commandments. We see this as we work backward through the Decalogue:

- *Tenth commandment:* Favoritism prefers the rich man because it covets the riches that the rich can bestow.
- *Ninth commandment:* It bears false witness because it implies that a poor man has less worth.
- *Eighth commandment:* It robs the poor of the dignity they deserve.
- *Seventh commandment:* To favor the rich is a kind of unfaithfulness to the bond of Christian fellowship.
- *Sixth commandment:* It kills the spirit of the poor by demeaning them, even in the church.

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- *Fifth commandment*: Favoritism dishonors the poor, but we must honor all who deserve honor, including one another.
- *Fourth commandment*: If we show favoritism in the church, we defile our worship, hence the Lord's Day.
- *Third commandment*: Every believer is a representative of God. If we favor the rich over the poor, we misrepresent God and His name, for He does not play favorites.
- *First and second commandments*: God gave this command. All disobedience is a kind of denial of God's lordship.

D. The Peril of Partiality (James 2:12-13)

MacArthur: Because partiality is such a serious sin, James closes out this section with an appeal for believers to fully consider the danger of divine judgment. And the obvious implication is for them then forsake the sin of partiality, asking the Lord's forgiveness and cleansing.

1. Admonition (2:12)

¹²*So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.*

a) *So Speak and So Act (2:12a)*

Morgan: After a detour to show that those who show prejudiced favoritism are lawbreakers (vv. 10-11), James now returns to his exhortation toward practical behavior.

Moo: After a detour to solidify his claim that people who show favoritism are 'lawbreakers' (vv. 10-11), James not takes up his exhortation once again.... Both 'speak' and 'act' are in a Greek tense that stresses the continuing nature of these actions: 'be constantly speaking,' 'always be acting.' And the Greek text puts even more emphasis on the need for Christians to regulate their conduct with an eye on the judgment to come.

Hughes: 'Speak' and 'act' are present active imperatives: keep on speaking and keep on acting in the reality of the coming judgment.

b) *As Those Who Are to Be Judged (2:12b)*

Moo: With these commands, James returns to the dominant theme in this section of the letter: the need for believers to validate the reality of their 'religion' by 'doing' the word (1:22). But a new twist is added here. For the first time, James warns about eschatological judgment and suggests that conformity to the demands of the law will be the criterion of that judgment. He therefore anticipates the controversial teaching of 2:14-26, where he argues that 'doing' ('works') is necessary if one wants to experience God's justifying verdict.

MacArthur: The admonition...is tantamount to saying, 'Live and act as a true believer who has been saved by God's grace and who will 'be judged' on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness.

Hughes: James' assertion that favoritism is a sin naturally leads to the subject of judgment.... The unchangeable fact for all of us is that we will undergo a final judgment by the Law that gives freedom. All nonbelievers will be judged by the Law and will be condemned, receiving eternal equity for all transgressions. However, no true Christian will be condemned.

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Doriani: The law will be our judge. Why? Above all, because God gave the law. To break the law is to contradict God's will. Moreover, when we break the law we fail to act like His children. We neither walk in His ways nor imitate Him.

c) Under the Law of Liberty (2:12c)

Moo: God's gracious acceptance of us does not end our obligation to obey Him; it sets on a new footing. No longer is God's law a threatening, confining burden. For the will of God now confronts us as a *law of liberty* – an obligation we discharge in the joyful knowledge that God has both 'liberated' us from the penalty of sin and given us, in His Spirit, the power to obey His will. To use James's own description, this law is an 'implanted word,' 'written on the heart,' that has the power to save us (1:21).

MacArthur: That righteousness frees the believer from the law of bondage and judges him under the redeeming 'law of liberty,' God's Word of the gospel, the New Testament in Jesus Christ, which frees the repentant sinner from the bondage of sin (cp. Jn. 8:31-32)....

Morgan: Three facts arise about the 'law that sets free.' *First*, it is the *royal law* (v. 9), the law of the King and we should wish to obey it. *Second*, it is the *law of God*, and we must obey it. *Third*, it is the law that 'sets free' – corresponding to the law of liberty in 1:25 – and we *can* obey it (cp. Rom. 8:2).... As Christians we have been set free from bondage to sin.... We have been set free to do as we ought; we have a new power within to obey Christ that we did not have before. 'About to be judged' is a reminder that the certainty of the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10) calls us to a careful and diligent walk in the light of God's Word.

MacArthur: The gospel is 'the law of liberty' because it frees those who place their faith in Jesus Christ from the bondage, judgment, and punishment of sin and brings them ultimately to eternal freedom and glory. It liberates us sinners from falsehood and deception and from the curses of death and hell. Even more marvelously, it frees us to obey and serve God, to live faithfully and righteously according to His Word and by the power of His indwelling Spirit.

2. Judgment (2:13a)

¹³*For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.*

MacArthur: In this context, the 'one who has sown no mercy' obviously refers to unbelievers. Their lives are characterized by partiality, hardness, selfishness, and lack of concern for others—in short, lovelessness.

Morgan: James points the finger of criticism toward those in the church who have not shown mercy to the poor and outcast. In the Day of Judgment, they will have the tables turned on them. The person who practices unprejudiced, impartial love toward all fulfills the royal law.

Hughes: James now concludes his warning with the insertion of a note of terror, a proverb-like statement: 'For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.' Jesus taught this in His Parable of the Unmerciful Slave (Mt. 18:21-35).... Jesus' parable reveals the spiritual psychology of the soul: an unmerciful spirit reveals a heart that has not received mercy, but the heart that has been the object of divine mercy will be merciful. This is why the fifth beatitude proclaims, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy' (Mt. 5:7). If we are not merciful we have much to fear, for the beatitude becomes a curse parallel to James' words. The unmerciful will not receive mercy. A terrifying thought!

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Moo: Relevant, as usually is the case in James, is the teaching of Jesus. Particularly apropos is the parable about the unmerciful servant (Mt. 18:21-35). But James also, in effect, transforms Jesus' beatitude – 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy' (Mt. 5:7) – into its opposite: 'Cursed are those who are not merciful, for they will not be shown mercy.' Being 'merciful' as these texts suggest, is not merely a feeling of concern, but involves actively reaching out to show love to others. The discrimination that James's readers are practicing is the opposite of such mercy; and if they continue on this path, they will find at the end of their lives a judgment 'without mercy.'

Hughes: A deeper terror in James' words is this: *favoritism is evidence of an unmerciful spirit.* The merciful do not ignore the poor in favor of the privileged but reach out to them. James is saying that a life characterized by discrimination and favoritism indicates a damned soul! This is frightening moral theology from the brother of Jesus.

3. Mercy (2:13b)

Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Morgan: In contrast to the warning of 13a, James expresses great hope in 13b: 'yet mercy triumphs over judgment. God's mercy is stronger than the condemnation passed by the law.'

MacArthur: James brings us to the climax of his great argument. Partiality is inconsistent with the Christian faith because the Christian faith is consistent with the nature of God—and God is wholly impartial. Partiality is inconsistent with the purpose and the plan of God in choosing the poor of this world to be spiritually rich. Partiality is inconsistent with loving your neighbor as yourself. Even if it were the only sin a person ever committed, partiality, like all other sins, shatters the entire law of God and makes a person a transgressor, condemned to hell forever. If you come before the judgment seat of God and He sees that you have lived a life that is merciful to others, He will show mercy to you, because your mercy will testify to your saving faith. It will be true in your case that 'mercy triumphs over judgment.' Contrarily, a person who has lived a life devoid of mercy to others will show himself to be without saving faith.

Hughes: Of course, there is an upside in his final sentence: 'Mercy triumphs over judgment.' A heart full of mercy through faith in the mercy of God 'triumphs over (literally *boasts against*) judgment.' A truly merciful Christian heart looks forward to judgment.... James is saying that real faith is not indicated only by avoiding the big no-no's like murder and adultery, but by how we treat people, especially the needy.

Moo: But James does not end the paragraph on this negative note, but with a word of hope: *Mercy triumphs over judgment!* The assertion is short, even (again!) proverbial.... Some commentators think that James refers to the mercy of God Himself. While setting forth a strict standard, conformity to His holy law as the basis of judgment, God is ultimately a God of mercy who also provides in His grace a means of escaping that judgment.... This gracious note is, of course, sounded very often in the NT and James may well refer to it here. But the 'mercy' that James has been referring to in this context is human mercy, nor God's (v. 12). We therefore think it more likely that he is making a point about the way in which the mercy we show toward others shows our desire to obey the law of the kingdom and indirectly therefore, of a heart made right by the work of God's grace. The believer, in himself, will always deserve God's judgment: conformity to the 'royal law' is never perfect, as it must be (vv. 10-11). But our merciful attitude and actions will count as evidence of the presence of Christ within us. And it is on the basis of

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this union with the one who perfectly fulfilled the law for us that we can have confidence of vindication at the judgment.

Doriani: ‘Mercy triumphs over judgment’ has been understood two ways. It may refer to human mercy. That is, disciples will act in mercy after all, so that human mercy will win the day! But this seems unlikely. James hardly seems optimistic about human goodness. Indeed, James 2:1-7 shows that we fail the tests of true religion. The second explanation of ‘Mercy triumphs over judgment’ asserts that the mercy is God’s.... He does not explain, at this moment, *how* mercy triumphs over judgment. But he is speaking to believers. We know that mercy triumphs by a single yet profound process. First, we recognize our sins and repent, grieving over them and intending, by God’s grace, to abandon them.... Second, we turn to Jesus as He is offered in the gospel.... Believers fail, yet by their faith in the Redeemer, God’s mercy to His children triumphs over the judgment we deserve. In Christ, mercy triumphs.

4. Summary

Doriani: James 2 stings the complacent believer with several sharp warnings about sin. First, even a ‘small,’ common, all-but-invisible sin such as favoritism has large consequences; by it we fail the tests of true religion. Second, we have no right to pick and choose among God’s commands. If we reject a command because it is unpalatable, we have rejected the Lord who gave that law. These are serious matters. Still, God’s grace is greater than our sin. The gospel goes to *sinner*s, to the unworthy, to the poor in spirit. The Lord is pleased when we obey, yet for all who repent and believe, He loves and forgives even when we fail Him.

For next time: Read James 2:14-26.