



# OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

## Impartiality Honors the King

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In addition to being inconsistent with God’s nature and ways (2.5–7) ([here](#)), showing partiality transgresses the commandment Jesus ranked second in importance: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Jas 2.8; Lev 19.18; cf. Matt 22.39).

James emphasizes this in James 2.8–11, expanding on the command and explanation elaborated in verses 1–7. The continuation of the emphasis is clearer in the NET which translates the conjunction μέντοι (*mentoi*) with the English “but” instead of “really” as in the ESV and NIV. In contrast to the partiality his readers were practicing in the assembly, James calls for disciples to treat others according to the standards revealed in Leviticus 19 where verse 18’s command to love one’s neighbor “summarizes a series of commands ... that includes a prohibition against showing partiality” (McCartney 2009, 146). This, James says, is what it means to “fulfill” the command in “the royal law.” Both terms require more elaboration.

“Fulfill” in verse 8 translates τελέω (*teleō*), “to complete,” not the more customary τηρέω (*tēreō*), “to keep” (cf. v. 10). Similar use of *teleō* is found in Luke 2.39 and Romans 2.17 where the expectation is that someone will fulfill an obligation. It is also found in Matthew 5.17 where his subsequent life shows that Jesus intended more than checking off commandment observances in his determination to “fulfill the law” (McCartney 2009, 147). As James will show in

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verses 9–11, a life of faith that seeks to honor God must take seriously the prohibition of partiality; this is part of what is involved in loving one’s neighbor.

The phrase, “the royal law” (v. 8) has been much discussed. While it is correct to say that it “refers to the law of God generally” (McCartney 2009, 147), a more precise understanding is suggested when we notice the proximity of the term *royal* (βασιλικός, *basilikos*) to the word *kingdom* (βασιλεία, *basileia*) in verse 5. The reference is thus understood to mean “the law articulated or ratified by Jesus ‘the glorious Lord,’ whose name ‘is invoked over them’ (2:7)” (Johnson 1995, 230). This comports with the parallel connection between the reference to loving God in verse 5 and the citation of the command to love one’s neighbor in verse 8, echoing Jesus’s ranking of the greatest commandments in Matthew 22.37–39 (Johnson 1995, 235).

James’s use of the phrase, “according to the Scripture” underscores the point that the law against showing partiality in Leviticus 19.15 is part of the context for the command to love one’s neighbor in verse 18. Thus, he says in verse 9, “But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” The repetition of the word *partiality* (προσωπολημπτέω, *prosōpolēmp̄teō*) from verse 1 again recalls the prohibition in Leviticus 19.15. The language in James’s charge shows its seriousness: to show partiality is, literally translated, to “work sin” (ἁμαρτίαν ἐργάζεσθε, *hamartian ergazesthe*); those who continue in this sin will be “convicted by the law as transgressors” (παραβάτης, *parabatēs*), or “violators” (NET). This was “a serious rebellion for the Jew and Jewish Christian. It was to throw off the yoke of heaven and to stand under the judgment of God” (Davids 1982, 116).

James is calling on his readers to make their faith-practice consistent with their faith-profession. As Johnson summarizes, “one cannot claim to love while practicing favoritism in judging, for the prohibition of such favoritism is part of the law of love” (Johnson 1995, 236).

Verses 10–11 show the rationale for the conclusion in verse 9, reminding the readers of a characteristic of the law with which they were familiar and then illustrating it with two of the ten commandments. Verse 10 states the principle: “For whoever keeps [*tēreō*; see above] the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” This echoes and concisely summarizes Jesus’s statement in Matthew 5.19: “Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” The idea that keeping the law means obeying it in its entirety was also expressed by other Jewish writers, not least Paul (Gal 5.6, 14; cf. 4 Macc. 5.20–21; 1QS 8.16) (McCartney 2009, 149).

James illustrates his point by quoting the sixth and seventh commandments. No one would seriously contend he had faithfully kept the law by not committing adultery if he had committed murder; clearly, his action as a murderer would show that he was “a transgressor [*parabatēs*] of

the law” (v. 11), regardless of his marital fidelity or the keeping of any other command. It’s possible that James chose the prohibition against murder as part of his illustration because of its frequent association in the prophetic writings with discrimination against the poor and failure to love one’s neighbor (cf. Jer 7.6; 22.3; Amos 8.4); John makes a similar connection in 1 John 3.11–15, and Jesus had declared that devaluing a brother violated the same principle that is involved in murder (Matt 5.21–26). It is also worth noting that James will return to the ideas of murder and adultery in chapter 4.1–4 (Davids 1982, 117). But he does not explicitly explain why he chose to illustrate his point with murder and adultery, and it is possible that he cites those commands “because they were customarily used to illustrate the demands of God in his law (cf. Mt. 19:18; Rom. 13:9)” (Moo 1985, 97).

While it is fascinating to ponder his reasons for using the sins of murder and adultery to illustrate, we should not let such deliberations distract us from James’s point: we cannot profess steadfast faith in God, and especially obedience to the command to love our neighbors that Jesus ranked as second in importance, if we are discriminating against anyone whom God esteems.

## Works Cited

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