

James 2

A. Partiality and the Law of Love (2:1–13)

2:1. In this section, believers are exhorted not to treat others with personal favoritism, a term which literally means “to lift up the face/appearance.”

Partiality in judging is condemned in Leviticus 19:15

2:2–4. James describes a typical, yet theoretical situation where a wealthy individual enters the assembly (*synagogue*), and receives special treatment or favoritism. In the Diaspora (the scattering of the Jewish people), the synagogue served as the center of Jewish identity and it is identified as a “house of prayer”.

That the wealthy man is shown special attention and allowed to sit ... in a good place is indicative of social status where the command to sit down by my footstool suggests submission or disgrace. The concern with making distinctions ... and becoming judges with evil motives is set in the context of deciding on appearances only.

Jesus routinely up-ended social tradition and custom to make a point that God’s judgment of people is not based on man’s criteria.

2:5–7. Did not God choose the poor of this world: God’s choice of the poor here reflects His choice of Israel (Deut. 4:37; 7:7; 14:2), the “poor” of Israel. Israel was the least of the nations yet God chose them to be his people.

Jesus reinforces the idea of the poor receiving greater blessings repeatedly in his teaching.

[Sermon on the Mount, Rich man and Lazarus, Jesus becoming poor to live with mankind, treasures in heaven vs. treasure on earth.]

The rich oppress and blaspheme, yet we are drawn to them. Why is that?

Why were the poor drawn so strongly to the early church?

2:8–13. The royal law You shall love your neighbor as yourself is a quotation from Leviticus 19:18 and the reference to showing **partiality** in v. 9 is an allusion to Leviticus 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.”

2:10-11. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all:

James is appealing to the Jewish background of law being the primary means to relate to God. The New Covenant doesn’t nullify the behaviors that God established in relational situations.

James puts favoritism on par with murder and adultery, two “big” sins in interpersonal relationships.

2:13. Judging on appearance only is likened to lacking mercy. We must never think too highly of ourselves such that we lose a tender heart.

B. Faith and Works (2:14–26)

Faith from OT and the “Law of Liberty” from ch 1:25. James is bridging gap between OT law and NT works. OT was more than faith, it was action. OT heroes of faith were known by their actions.

2:14. James’s question, **if someone says he has faith but he has no works?** bears a concern with behavior that fashions character rather than mere profession of belief.

True faith means a faith with action. Did the martyrs really believe? If they denied faith by action, then how would you judge their faith?

2:15–16. The account of fellow believers going without clothing and in need of daily food suggests that they were associated with the poor and shame in general. By all indications this is a generalized or generic description because the expression in need of daily food (literally, “lacking food for the day”).

Ignoring this need is equal to denying that God’s love lives in you based on John’s statement.

1 John 3:17 But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?

James and Paul on Faith and Works

Paul tells the Christians of Galatia: “Knowing that a man is not justified (declared righteous) by **the works of the Law** but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; **since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified**” (Gal. 2:16). To make this argument, the apostle appeals to the example of Abraham, whose story is told in Genesis, one of the books of the Law: “Even so ‘Abraham believed God, and it was **reckoned to him as righteousness**’” (Gal. 3:6; cf. Rom. 4); “Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).

James, however, argues that it was Abraham’s works that justified and qualified him to be called “friend of God” (James 1:22–24). Does James contradict Paul?

According to v. 24: “A man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.” This coheres with what Paul says in Ephesians 2:8–10. In vv. 8–9 the apostle stresses the importance of divine grace and human faith, but in v. 10 he says: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Here James would surely agree with Paul.

There is a difference in being made righteous and being made known righteous. The transformation is not achieved by works, but is validated by works.

2:21–23. Abraham our father: God promised Abraham that he would become the father of many nations (Gen. 17:4–5). He was called father both by Jews (Isa. 52:2) and Christians (Matt. 3:9; Luke 1:73; 3:8; 16:30; Rom. 4:1).

James calls upon Abraham’s action of offering **up Isaac his son on the altar** (Gen. 22:9, 12; which was viewed as one of ten tests Abraham endured) as a paradigm example of faithfulness. In Jewish literature, the command to sacrifice Isaac exemplifies Abraham’s “work” of faith which proved his obedience to God, and validated his righteousness that came from his faith.

As a result of Abraham’s faithfulness, James declares: **the Scripture was fulfilled which says, And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned (counted, credited, considered) to him as righteousness.** This is a direct quotation from the Greek version of Genesis 15:6.¹

How do we live out this analysis in our lives today? What does it mean as we evaluate our faith and that of others?

¹ Darian R. Lockett and Craig A. Evans, “James,” in *John’s Gospel, Hebrews–Revelation*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Craig A. Bubeck, First Edition., The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary (Colorado Springs, CO; Paris, ON; Eastbourne: David C Cook, 2005), 272–276.2