

THE ETHICAL IMPLICATION OF HOLINESS IN JAMES 2

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I. INTRODUCTION

The text of James 2:1–13 is a self-contained pericope concerned with the preferential treatment of one group of people (the rich) to the detriment of another group of people (the poor). The passage has been interpreted in multiple ways, including a concern for egalitarianism,¹ Christian brotherhood,² or the believer's obligation to obey a particular statute of the law.³ Apart from its OT connections, one or several of the above options would be legitimate. However, when its OT underpinnings are considered, one moves away from interpretations that emphasize reciprocity in communal relationship to an interpretation that is theocentric, leading toward a concern for functional purity within the community of faith. On the basis of the OT infrastructure of this text, it shall be argued that James is asserting that favoritism within the community of faith is a violation of the holy name of God himself. While Jas 2:8 is a direct quote from Lev 19:18, it is evident that the whole of Jas 1:27–2:13 is tied to Leviticus 19 in many other ways as well. It is to Leviticus, then, that this essay must first turn its attention.

II. PARALLELS WITH LEVITICUS

An examination of the structure of Leviticus indicates that chapter 19 begins a new section of laws signaling a shift from a concern for ritual and moral holiness (chs. 11–18) to a concern for behavioral holiness.⁴ This new section is preceded by regulations concerning the purity of Yahweh's tabernacle (chs. 11–18) in which pejoratives are applied toward such things as touching dead animals (11:1–47), discharge from childbirth (12:1–8), leprosy (12:1–14:57), and repulsive bodily discharges (15:1–33). This section culminates with the prescribed remedy for ritual

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¹ David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 117.

² James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 102.

³ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 111–12.

⁴ David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 79. The section pertaining to holiness beginning in chapter 19 and continuing through chapter 26 forms a chiasm:

- a Moral holiness of people in everyday life (Leviticus 19)
- b Serious violations of moral holiness (Leviticus 20)
- c Priestly holiness (Leviticus 21–22)
- d Priestly activities at the seven holy convocations (Leviticus 23)
- c' Priestly attending to lamps (Lev 24:1–9)
- b' Serious violations of moral holiness (Lev 24:10–23)
- a' Moral holiness of people in everyday life (Lev 25:1–26:2)

impurity being established in the Day of Atonement (16:1–34). This section then progresses toward the more serious purity laws involving offensive behavior when eating sacrifices (17:1–16) and defiling moral behaviors (18:1–30). While Leviticus 11–16 stress the need to maintain the ritual purity of Yahweh’s tabernacle, chapters 17–18 emphasize the need to maintain the moral purity of Yahweh’s people in the midst of whom he dwells.⁵ Only by moral purity can fellowship between Yahweh and his people be maintained. Dorsey notes,

Moral defilement is profoundly offensive to God, and the resulting spoiled fellowship is far more serious. Unlike ritual impurity, the Israelites are to avoid moral impurity at all costs, because its defilement will lead Yahweh to punish them severely: they will be expelled from his presence and driven from the land, like the Canaanites before them.⁶

Purity, both ritual and more, was critical to maintaining the covenant relationship Israel had with Yahweh.

The statutes in Leviticus 19 are grouped together “according to a loose association of ideas more than according to any logical arrangement, they are linked together by the common purpose.”⁷ Verse 2 expresses this purposes in the enjoinder to Israel concerning their and Yahweh’s existential holiness, קדשים תהיו, כי קדוש אני יהוה אלהיכם (“Be holy for I am holy, I am the Lord your God”). This affirms that everything holy must act and be treated as holy. David Dorsey notes that “everything identified as holy is subject to rules involving special care and caution.”⁸ Obviously, this applies to the entire nation as a holy people. Interestingly, Leviticus 19 deals with social issues of life outside the tabernacle beyond and subsequent to ritual holiness.⁹ It is the moral implication of holiness which drives the regulation of conduct outside the tabernacle. Hence, Leviticus contains regulations that are “often specific and detailed, being tied to the very fabric of personal and communal life in ancient Israel.”¹⁰ Holiness and purity were to be the distinguishing factors between Israel and other nations.¹¹

There are several theological themes at the core of Leviticus. Primary among them is the one encompassing the Lord’s desire to “show His holiness so that he might be honored among the people.”¹² Personal holiness is essential for those who desire to approach the Lord (10:3, 9–11). The oft-repeated phrase אני יהוה אלהיכם (“I am the Lord your God”), in conjunction with the word קדוש (holy), both refer to the person of God. It is the person of God who is the primary interest in

⁵ Ibid. 78.

⁶ Ibid. 79.

⁷ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch* (Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament; 27 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n. d.) 2:418.

⁸ Dorsey, *Literary Structure of the Old Testament* 79.

⁹ This does not imply that issues related to Israel’s social conduct were ancillary or secondary to that of ritual purity but rather were complimentary to it.

¹⁰ Richard E. Averbeck, “The Theology of Leviticus,” *NIDOTTE* 4:907.

¹¹ Ibid. 915.

¹² Ibid. 917.

these statutes. “Holiness is the quintessential quality of Yahweh.”¹³ The derived holiness of the community was to be evident in its separation from sin and all things that defile.¹⁴ Other theological themes found in Leviticus which center on fellowship being maintained through holy conduct are that of atonement¹⁵ and the concepts of status (holy versus common) and condition (clean versus unclean). While the status of a person, place, or thing is fixed, the condition of a particular person, place, or thing remains in flux.¹⁶ In all these theological themes, the holy person of God is the overarching component.

Holiness (שׁוֹדֵף) thematically intersects the Decalogue also. The correspondence that Leviticus 19 has to the Decalogue and preparations related to the giving of the law (Exod 19:3–20–21) is evident in the fact that both are concerned with holiness.¹⁷ In Exodus, the people are invited to come to Yahweh’s holy mountain after they make themselves holy so that they may be made a nation of holy priests and a holy nation (19:3–20). Even after this, only the priests could approach Yahweh and this after they too had sanctified themselves (Exod 19:22). An additional correspondence is seen in the fact that most of the Decalogue is reiterated in Leviticus 19 through 26.¹⁸

1. *The centrality of love.* At the center of the concern for a pure community is a summons for the practice of love. Hence the matter of favoritism goes to the very heart of the concern for purity stressed in Leviticus. To practice favoritism is to have a divided heart. Averbeck writes,

In its various contexts this “I am the Lord (your God)” formula emphasizes the importance of exclusive worship and obedience to Yahweh because He is truly the Lord. It is with Yahweh as their God and their lawgiver that Israel must concern itself.¹⁹

Single-minded devotion to Yahweh leads to single-minded devotion to the community at large. Averbeck again notes,

Holiness in Israel was to have its effect in all walks of life and for everyone who lived there, not just one’s family and Israelite neighbors but even strangers and aliens in the land (vv. 33–34). The presence of the holy Lord in their midst demanded a kind of lifestyle that set this nation apart from other nations.²⁰

The purity laws in Leviticus 19 have the effect of broadening the concerns about holiness to every level of relationship.

The mandate to love one’s neighbor is situated in the middle of a chapter addressing communal holiness (Lev 19:18). This structuring is one of several literary devices employed to unify the chapter.²¹ It serves to concretize the concept

¹³ John Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC 4; Dallas: Word, 1992) 312.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Averbeck, “Theology of Leviticus” 917.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 918.

¹⁷ Dorsey, *Literary Structure of the Old Testament* 80.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Averbeck, “Theology of Leviticus” 920.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 921.

²¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 264.

of holiness, implying that communal holiness is defined as love expressed in displays of integrity and guardianship for one's neighbor. It teaches that the covenantal community is to show love precisely because *it is* a holy community; it is not a matter of showing love in order to *become* holy. Hence, the mandate to show love to one's neighbor is a working order for the expression of holiness in the community. Wenham notes that the focus on community, in one form or another, is a prevalent theme in Leviticus chapter 19. He notes the frequent relational terms used in this chapter:²²

vv. 11–12		associate (אָמִית)		
vv. 13–14			friend (רֵעַ)	
vv. 15–16		associate (אָמִית)	people (עַמִּים)	friend (רֵעַ)
vv. 17–18	brother (אָח)	associate (אָמִית)	countrymen (בְּנֵי עַם)	friend (רֵעַ)

These relational terms suggest the nature of one's relationship with Yahweh and with one another as being more organic than contractual and it is precisely this that compels one to express love for those to whom one is organically related. Fellowship within the community of believers is at the very heart of Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh.²³ Holiness is the means by which the fellowship is maintained. As Roy Zuck notes, "the nature of the covenant commitment is such, however, that the purposes of the Lord must prevail and His people must, sooner or later, fulfill the purpose for which He elected and redeemed them."²⁴

There are other thematic, linguistic, and structural parallels between the Epistle of James and Leviticus 19:

Lev 19:11 LXX: οὐ ψεύσεσθε

Jas 3:1: μὴ ψεύδεσθε

Lev 19:12 LXX: οὐκ ὀμείσθε τῷ ὀνόματί μου ἐπ' ἀδίκῳ

Jas 5:12: μὴ ὀμνύετε μήτε τὸν οὐρανὸν μήτε τὴν γῆν μήτε ἄλλον τινὰ ὄρκον· ἦτω δὲ ὁμῶν τὸ Ναὶ ναὶ καὶ τὸ Οὐ οὐ

Lev 19:13 LXX: ὁ μισθὸς τοῦ μισθωτοῦ παρὰ σοὶ ἕως πρωῒ

Jas 5:4: ὁ μισθὸς τῶν ἐργατῶν τῶν ἀμησάντων τὰς χώρας ὁμῶν ὁ ἀπεστερημένος ἀφ' ὁμῶν κράζει

Lev 19:14 LXX: φοβηθήσῃ κύριον τὸν θεόν σου

Jas 3:9–10: ἐν αὐτῇ εὐλογοῦμεν τὸν κύριον καὶ πατέρα

²² Ibid. 267.

²³ Roy B. Zuck, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1991) 57.

²⁴ Ibid. 59.

Lev 19:15 LXX: οὐ λήμψη πρόσωπον πτωχοῦ οὐδὲ θαυμάσεις πρόσωπον
 Jas 2:1: μὴ προσωπολημψίαις

Lev 19:15 LXX: ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ κρινεῖς τὸν πλησίον σου
 Jas 2:9: εἰ δὲ προσωπολημπεῖτε

Lev 19:16 LXX: οὐ πορεύση δόλω ἐν τῷ ἔθνει σου
 Jas 4:11: μὴ καταλαεῖτε ἀλλήλων

Lev 19:17 LXX: ἐλεγμῷ ἐλέγξεις τὸν πλησίον σου
 Jas 5:19–20: εἰάν τις ἐν ὑμῖν πλανηθῆ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ ἐπιστρέψῃ τις αὐτόν, γινωσκέτω ὅτι ὁ ἐπιστρέψας ἀμαρτωλὸν ἐκ πλάνης ὁδοῦ αὐτοῦ σώσει ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐκ θανάτου καὶ καλύψει πληθὸς ἀμαρτιῶν.

Lev 19:18 LXX: ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτόν
 Jas 2:8: Ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτόν

An additional correlation between James and Leviticus concerns the definition of religion as keeping oneself spotless from the world in Jas 1:27 (ἄσπιλον ἑαυτὸν τηρεῖν ἀπὸ τοῦ κόσμου). The term ἄσπιλον (“spotless”) is a cultic term corresponding to the Hebrew word **מִקְנָה** (“free from blemish”); a word frequently used in Leviticus in connection with the condition of cult sacrifices.²⁵ It indicates something that is without defect or free from blemish. **מִקְנָה** expresses the concept of integrity, “conveying the meaning of that which is complete, blameless, just, honest, perfect, peaceful, etc.; hence an attribute or an attitude that reflects genuineness and reliability.”²⁶ By using this term, James makes a symbiotic connection between religious purity and religious practice. Even more, he brings the affiliation between faith and practice closer together, creating a seamless relationship between one’s religious declaration and the conventions of that religion declaration.

James presumes the status of his readers as the Christian community of faith. He is concerned that the members of this community remain in a clean condition so that they might approach the Lord and anticipate His benefits. When James addresses his readers, it is not simply to make a statement regarding the urgency of impartiality. Neither is he merely borrowing from the form and content of Lev 19:18 to make moralistic precepts as though he was saying “this is that.” Nor is he advocating a revival of Judaic legalism within the community. He is in fact calling the community of faith to holiness expressed in love for others. The members of this community were to be doers of the word and not merely hearers (1:22–23, 25), and love is the distinguishing factor of genuine religion (1:26–27). Hence, James is doing nothing more than recalling to his readers’ minds the compelling need to

²⁵ Hans Währisch, “ἄσπιλον,” *NIDNTT* 923.

²⁶ J. P. J. Olivier, “**מִקְנָה**,” *NIDOTTE* 3.306.

practice communal holiness. The tenor of James's words reflects a concern for the purity of the community and its focus is on one's neighbor equal to that expressed in Leviticus 19.

III. PARALLELS WITH JESUS

Can we say that in the case of James 2 we have an interpretation of Scripture that can be traced back to Jesus himself? It seems this question can be answered affirmatively. There are many parallels between Jesus' teaching as found in Matthew's Gospel and James's letter:

- 1:2: Joy in the midst of trials (cf. Matt 5:10–12)
- 1:4: Exhortation to perfection (cf. Matt 5:48)
- 1:5: Asking for good gifts (cf. Matt 7:7ff)
- 1:6: Exercise of faith without doubt (cf. Matt 21:21)
- 1:20: Against anger (cf. Matt 5:22)
- 1:22: Hearers and doers of the Word (cf. Matt 7:24ff)
- 2:5: A blessing pronounced on the poor (cf. Matt 5:3)
- 2:8: Love one's neighbor as a great commandment (cf. Matt 22:39)
- 2:10: The whole law to be kept (cf. Matt 5:19)
- 2:13: Blessings of mercifulness (cf. Matt 5:7)
- 2:13: Warns against biased judging (cf. Matt 19:23–24)
- 3:1: On the desire to be called teacher (cf. Matt 23:8–12)
- 3:2–3: On the dangers of hasty speech (cf. Matt 12:36–37)
- 3:18: Blessings of peacemakers (cf. Matt 5:9)
- 4:4: Friendship of the world as enmity against God (cf. Matt 6:24)
- 4:10: Blessings of humble (cf. Matt 5:5)
- 4:11–12: Against judging others (cf. Matt 7:1–5)
- 5:2ff: Moth and rust spoiling riches (cf. Matt 6:19)
- 5:9: The Divine Judge at the doors (cf. Matt 24:33)
- 5:10: The prophets as examples (cf. Matt 5:12)
- 5:12: Against oaths (cf. Matt 5:33–37)

On the basis of these numerous allusions to the teaching of Jesus found in James we venture to say that James had heard Jesus preach on many occasions and therefore had become familiar with his teachings.²⁷ In spite of the fact that James seems to be familiar with the message of Jesus, echoing “the tone and tenor of Jesus' preaching in the gospels,” a case for literary dependence on the Gospels (especially Matthew) cannot be made.²⁸ Nowhere does James quote Jesus directly, suggesting that James is recalling the words of Jesus rather than using Matthew's Gospel as a source. Also, if he had been acquainted with the written Gospel accounts and with the apostolic epistles, James would have been more theologically than ethically oriented in his epistle.²⁹

²⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker, “The Theological Message of James,” *JETS* 29 (1986) 57.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 55.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 56.

1. *James's hermeneutic.* James's interpretation of the OT certainly reflects Jesus' interpretive methodology in that the central principle is the person of God. This intersects with Jesus' estimation of Deut 6:5 as the highest point of the law and Lev 19:18 as the definitive law for the comportment of the covenantal community. James likewise refers to Lev 19:18, calling it the "royal law." Just as Jesus' comments in Matthew 22 focus on the ubiquitous person of God as the fulcrum upon which all laws pivot, so also James, in appealing to Lev 19:18, leaves us with the impression that it is God's name that is at stake.

More precisely, James's reference to the "glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1) and concern for blaspheming that "fair name" by which believers were called (2:7) ties together the person of Christ and the person of Yahweh.³⁰ "The stress on Christ as 'glorious' heightens the gross inconsistency of allowing favoritism and discrimination to be associated with faith in such an exalted person as Christ."³¹ It seems likely that James's primary concern is to stress the believer's definitive relationship with God and then to elaborate on the behavioral implications of that relationship.

It must be kept in mind, however, that Jesus' appeal to the love commandment in the *Shema* (Deut 6:5) is not intended to make it "a kind of hermeneutical canon for interpreting all O.T. law."³² Rather, Jesus was noting the priority of love within the law.³³ Simply put, unless these two commands are obeyed, nothing else in Scripture can be obeyed.³⁴ Jesus unifies the law and the prophets by these two commands and by doing so "[il] assure à la volonté de Dieu concrétisée dans 'la Loi et les prophètes' son instauration plénière. Tel est le but de sa mission."³⁵

2. *The two great commandments.* Commands relating to religious rites and rituals are often ennobled at the expense of the appropriate treatment of one's neighbor which is ranked much lower in priority. Most consider the command to love God "by its very quality outranking all others that may be added,"³⁶ to be singularly preeminent among the commandments. Yet Jesus considered the second greatest command to be qualitatively similar to it. While a parallel text, Matt 5:44 ("love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you") expresses the same "love of understanding and corresponding purpose"³⁷ that God demands of us toward our neighbor, the love called forth by Lev 19:18 and quoted by Jesus (Matt 22:39) calls

³⁰ Moo, *Letter of James* 109. Moo points out that the use of the word *blasphémō* "connotes a violation, usually in speech, of God's own person."

³¹ Donald W. Burdick, "James" (EBC 12; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 177.

³² Donald A. Carson, "Matthew" (EBC 8; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 465.

³³ Moo, *Letter of James* 112.

³⁴ Carson, "Matthew" 465.

³⁵ Daniel Marguerat, *Le jugement dans l'Évangile de Matthieu* (Le Monde de la Bible; Genève: Labor et Fides Éditeurs, 1981) 128.

³⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of Matthew* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961) 882.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

for each believer to recognize the obligation existing between members of the community of faith to exercise custodial responsibility for each another. The danger of prioritizing these commands so that one is qualitatively categorized above the other is that it renders the divine command to love one's neighbor not only impossible to justify but it also is an affront to the One who so adjures the community of faith.

The dual command to love God and one's neighbor provides an irreducible quotient by which the law of God becomes organic in the practices of the members of the community of faith. Rather than separately compartmentalizing God and people, these two commands are complementary and contingent, for the one cannot function without the other³⁸ without the result being that "obedience to commandments degenerates into mere legalism."³⁹ In contrast, love that emanates from God and is experienced by believers naturally works itself out in relationships. Bonnard writes,

En conséquence, l'expression le *deuxième qui lui est semblable* ne signifie pas: au deuxième rang en degré d'importance, mais: un deuxième commandement aussi important que le premier; le deuxième commandement n'est pas comparable, ni analogue au premier, mais égal à la gravité de ce qu'il prescrit, il n'est pas identique au sens d'interchangeable; l'amour du prochain n'est pas identifié à l'amour pour Dieu mais aimer le prochain est aussi urgent qu'aimer Dieu.⁴⁰

3. *God's name and the commandments.* Burdick appropriately points out the sharp contrast evident in God's choosing the poor and their being insulted by those showing partiality, as well as the incongruity of such behavior as dramatized in the three pointed questions James asks. He writes, "to show favoritism to those who blaspheme that wonderful name is the greatest incongruity of all. It is not a question of mere incongruity but of the rightness or wrongness of showing partiality."⁴¹

A sharper focus must be laid on James's primary concern about the holy name of God being calumniated when one of the community of faith acts in this way. Such an attitude of favoritism, which James directly addresses, is completely uncharacteristic of God. Pandering to the wealthy is a result of "breaking the solidarity of the community. This, claims James, is fundamental disloyalty to the

³⁸ Carson, "Matthew" 467.

³⁹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (NAC 22; Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 335.

⁴⁰ Pierre Bonnard, *L'Évangile Selon Saint Matthieu* (Commentaire du Nouveau Testament, Deuxième Série; Genève: Labor et Fides, 1982) 329.

⁴¹ Burdick, "James" 179. Question #1: The rich are the ones "who are exploiting you," are they not? *Katadynasteinō* ("exploit") is a strong term describing the brutal and tyrannical deprivation of one's rights. Question #2: Is it not the rich "who are dragging you into court?" Although *belkō* ("drag") may sometimes mean nothing more than "to draw or attract," in other situations it describes the act of forcibly dragging a person, as seems to be the case here. Question #3: The rich "are slandering the noble name" of Christ, aren't they? Where God or his name are being spoken against, it is better to translate the Greek *blasphemeō* by the English word "blaspheme," which has come to refer to speaking irreverently and disrespectfully of deity.

law of Christ.”⁴² As Johnstone notes, the church of Christ is a brotherhood. He writes,

For “respect of person” to enter here, for regard to worldly distinctions to intrude itself as a governing influence in the sphere of religious feeling and action, the incongruity of this with “the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ” is especially obvious when we remember that He is the “Lord of Glory.” In the light of His glory, all worldly distinctions should be seen to be very trivial.⁴³

Consequently, disloyalty to the brotherhood is disloyalty to Christ. Horizontal relationships are inseparably interlocked with our vertical relationship with God through Jesus Christ. To give preference to one over another is ultimately to blaspheme the name of the Lord by which all believers have been called.

Given the evidence, it seems very probable that when James refers to “the royal law” he is referring to the command to “love your neighbor” found in Lev 19:18.⁴⁴ His high estimation of this law reflects Jesus’ same regard for this command as the penultimate summation of the Mosaic code (Matt 22:39). This is also reflected in James’s argument concerning the unity of the law (Jas 2:10).

IV. JAMES IN DIALOGUE WITH LEVITICUS AND JESUS

The setting that forms the broader context of this pericope in James’s letter is unclear. Surface statements suggest that James was concerned about injustice in the form of a bias (נְשֵׂא פָנִים) that may be practiced among believers of one socio-economic class against another. Whether James speaks hypothetically or is addressing a real situation is unclear.⁴⁵ Either way, its relevance remains considering that miscarriages of justice against the poor have been a perennial issue since the beginning of jurisprudence. The situation provides an example of the insincerity of false religion he desired to expose and disqualify. It is worse than unreasonable to believe that one would be functioning according to the law if he was engaging in the prejudicial conduct noted in 2:1–4. To keep some laws and yet violate the royal law is as good as violating the whole law (2:10). But more than that, it violates the holiness of our Lord who underwrites the community of faith and at the same time places those who compromise their impartiality at risk. Martin writes,

James may be saying that those of the church who discriminate against the poor indict themselves because they betray a way of thinking and acting that dissociates them from the poor. This places the audience of James’ epistle on danger-

⁴² Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1982) 101.

⁴³ Robert Johnstone, *Lectures Exegetical and Practical on the Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954) 174.

⁴⁴ Ralph P. Martin, *James* (WBC 48; Waco, TX: Word, 1988) lxxi.

⁴⁵ Davids, *Epistle of James* 108. Davids believes that the issue is being discussed in the abstract. Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (trans. Heinrich Greeven; ed. Michael A. Williams; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 135. Dibelius argues that the situation is contrived by James. Others argue that verse tilts the scales in favor of an actual scenario (Martin, *James* 60–61). Burdick also argues that although preferential treatment was being practiced, verses 2–3 relate a hypothetical situation (“James” 177).

ous ground, for they are at risk of excluding themselves from the promise to those who inherit the kingdom.⁴⁶

Although the form-critical approach of Martin Dibelius led him to believe that James's letter is a *paraenesis*,⁴⁷ Mußner sees theological unity in the letter.⁴⁸ James is dealing with concrete problems in the everyday life of the Christian. Unlike Leviticus 19, the loose arrangement of ideas in James chapter 2 are linked together by a common purpose rather than a systematic presentation.⁴⁹ Although James's letter exhibits a high degree of interest in upright living, this concern does not mean that he has little interest in theological matters.⁵⁰ His concern is for the importance living out one's profession of faith, "but this is not based on some general philosophical principle, but on theological convictions."⁵¹ James's concern is for the ethical practice of theology. Some links between James's theology and his concern for conduct are seen in the following:

- 1:17: God is "the immutable One" from whom all good things come
- 1:27: Visiting widows and orphans in their trouble are examples of true and acceptable religion
- 2:1: Jesus is the Lord of glory
- 2:5: God has chosen the poor in this world rich in faith, pointing out God's concern for the poor and faith as his gift
- 3:9: The *imago Dei* has implications for the way we should live. As God is consistently righteous, he demands righteousness from his people
- 4:4: The world is in opposition to God and being a friend of the world is to be an enemy of God
- 4:6–7: God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble and so we are to be subject to God
- 4:15: By God's providence, every detail of life is provided for
- 5:4: God hears the cries of the poor reapers who have been defrauded
- 5:7: Christ will return
- 5:11: God is compassionate and merciful
- 5:14–15: God deals with evildoers and is ready to heal the sick
- 5:16: Prayer is effectual

From this it becomes apparent that the argument presented in James 2 begins and is grounded on James's statement in 1:27. Accordingly, it is reasonable to conclude that the issues addressed in this entire pericope are actual rather than hypothetical. The injustice being practiced among believers of a certain socio-economic class would be the same kind as that perpetrated by this same class in the public setting, adding insult to injury.

⁴⁶ Martin, *James* 65–66.

⁴⁷ Dibelius, *James* 1–7. A *paraenesis* is a collection of miscellaneous teachings from various sources having no internal coherence among its various themes.

⁴⁸ Franz Mußner, *Der Jakobusbrief* (HTKNT XIII; Freiberg: Herder, 1975) 12. Mußner argues for this in several excursuses.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 312.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

1. *God and the commandments.* Although Dibelius argues that James is urging strict religious observance,⁵² Davids correctly points out that it is an antipathy for empty religious practice that James has in mind.⁵³ Moo further explains that such practice not only violates communal purity, but faith itself. Discrimination is a “manifestation of a wavering, divided attitude toward God.”⁵⁴ James’s concern for purity is expressed in negative form in 1:27 where he stresses that true religion is not only evident in charity, but also in keeping oneself “unstained by the world.” Morris writes,

James wants believers to exhibit genuine faith, not the faith that the devils have which produces nothing more than a shudder (2:19) or offers a blessing to those who have real needs (2:15–16). Faith is more than intellectual assent to a system of beliefs. James seeks faith that transforms so that his life exhibits good works.⁵⁵

Genuine religion ought to be disclosed in holy love. James writes that true religion is καθαρά καὶ ἄμίαντος (“true and undefiled”). These two terms form a hendiadys and have a “long established ethical usage and fit together as positive and negative statements of the same thing.”⁵⁶

In chapter 2, James applies the key ideas mentioned in 1:19–27 to discrimination.⁵⁷ Moo sees justification for James’s argumentation in the fact that to act in a discriminatory way is to act in direct contradiction to this central command of God’s law, betray a “fawning mentality,” and “violate the demand of love for neighbor, the centerpiece of Jesus’ reinterpretation of the law of God.”⁵⁸ James is dealing with concrete problems in the everyday lives of Christians. Consequently, he does not structure his argument systematically.⁵⁹

Although Mußner argues that James is introducing a new theme in chapter 2 asserting that James is “jedoch nicht als nähere Entfaltung der in 1:27b gestellten Forderung verstanden werden kann,”⁶⁰ 2:1ff is connected to the preceding section (esp. 1:27) by the entire epistle’s stress on authentic religion. Johnstone paraphrases Jas 1:27 this way: “Genuine religion will express itself in holiness of life, in a lofty morality, comprising personal purity and earnest devotion to the glory of God through the good of men.”⁶¹ Hence, the dual themes of wealth and charity reappear from the first chapter (1:22–27) under the main theme of purity.

The question arises as to what τῆς δόξης (“glory”) modifies. It could modify τὴν πίστιν (faith) rendering it, “the glorious faith,” or it could modify κυρίου (“Lord”) making it read “faith in the Lord of glory Jesus Christ.” But τῆς δόξης

⁵² Dibelius, *James* 121–22.

⁵³ Davids, *Epistle of James* 102.

⁵⁴ Moo, *James* 100, 104.

⁵⁵ Morris, *New Testament Theology* 312.

⁵⁶ Davids, *Epistle of James* 102.

⁵⁷ Moo, *James* 98.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Mußner, *Jakobusbrief* 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶¹ Johnstone, *Lectures* 169.

could possibly be in apposition to Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (“Jesus Christ”) in which case it would read “our Lord Jesus Christ the Glory,” or it could be an adjectival genitive of quality making it read “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.”⁶² Davids notes that “as awkward as this genitive function is, it has a precedent in 1:25 and it allows one to explain the word order as a qualifying (and amplifying) addition to a standard title as in Eph. 6:24.”⁶³ The grammar is acceptable and it has strong thematic reinforcement from Leviticus where the reputation of Yahweh was at stake. Now, in the new community of faith, the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is at stake.⁶⁴

2. *Community and commandments.* The apodosis to the conditional sentence in 2:2 indicates that something indeed was occurring along the lines of James’s concern, most likely in the context of a worship gathering,⁶⁵ but this is uncertain: it could also have been taking place in a church council such as that recorded in Acts 15. Regardless of the locality, those who were discriminating had, in James’s mind “become judges with evil thoughts” (2:4). Burdick notes that “*diekritibete* is built on the same root as the word for ‘judges’ (*kritai*).”⁶⁶ He sees a play on words indicating that “in so judging between men, the readers had become unjust judges.”⁶⁷

Be that as it may, Burdick and others are careful to point out that in 2:5 James did not “exclude the rich from the ranks of the saved,” nor was he asserting that God’s choice of the poor was on the basis of any merit inherent in poverty.⁶⁸ Poverty is not more ethically acceptable than wealth; rather, everything belongs to God and everything that belongs to God is holy. Hence, the sanctity of every believer is diminished when preferential treatment is given to one another. Therefore, all who belong to Yahweh ought to be accorded decent treatment. To do otherwise disrespects the Lord.⁶⁹ This concept, too, aligns with the emphasis on the holiness of the name of Yahweh found in Leviticus 19.

James is careful not to lose sight of the bigger picture *vis-à-vis* the person of God. He does not respond to the situation by reversing the objects of discrimination. To do so would be to perpetuate the wrong being done by simply redirecting it toward another socio-economic group. It is discrimination that is banned, not the rich. Concerning James’s comments in verse 6, Moo writes,

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. But James is not counseling the Christians not to be kind to these rich

⁶² Dibelius, *James* 128. Mußner, *Jakobusbrief* 116. This last option is preferred by both commentators.

⁶³ Davids, *Epistle of James* 106.

⁶⁴ Adamson, *Epistle of James* 23. According to Adamson, this simple statement draws upon a wealth of widely disseminated messianic anticipation. The term glory being applied to our Lord Jesus is, according to Adamson a reference to the Shekinah; the divine presence.

⁶⁵ Davids, *Epistle of James* 107–8.

⁶⁶ Burdick, “James” 177. Given the context, the justification for accepting διακρίθητε as an active verb, rendering its meaning as being “to make distinctions” offered by Burdick appears the most plausible meaning.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 178. Johnstone, *Lectures* 181.

⁶⁹ Dorsey, *Literary Structure of the Old Testament* 79.

people; he is simply arguing that they should not give undue deference to them at the expense of the poor.⁷⁰

Such discrimination requires “making judgments about people based on external appearances,”⁷¹ and compromises the purity of the community as well as the fair name by which it is called (Jas 2:7). Referring again to Leviticus 19, James writes,

Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly (Lev 19:15).

As Johnstone puts it, “faith in Christ and respect of persons are diametrically opposed to each other; so that in proportion as the one is cherished, the other necessarily is weakened.”⁷² In the context of purity, Leviticus 19:15 indicates, being pure means being just and justice is defined as equality. Determining the status of a person on the basis of artificial criteria is no concern of the church. The church is communion, both with God and with one another. This communion must be maintained in a condition of holiness. The preferential treatment of the wealthy at the expense, exploitation, or complete neglect (1:27) of the poor is, in James’s estimation, not merely insulting but constitutes a patently false religion. “Snobbery,” Leon Morris suggests, “is another sin, it is not a harmless peccadillo. To fail in only one point of the law is to be guilty of all.”⁷³ Such snobbery ought not to be known in the church.

Τελέω normally means to complete or perfect. Used in Jas 1:27, however, it implies that compliance is essential to make the law more than a list of statutes. The law is dead unless it is activated in the lives of people. So it is with faith. Just as the law is a paper tiger without its being activated in life, faith must be activated and expressed in the lives of people if it is to be a living faith. It must be activated in the lives of people if it is to be real and complete. Τελέω is used frequently in James’s dialogue with the church. It is most often translated as “perfect” (NASB). It refers to the perfect work that results from endurance (1:4), to the perfect gift of God which is (1:17), to the perfect law of liberty (1:25), and to the perfect man (3:2). In each of these texts the word implies a bearing of completion or realization in the here and now, bringing forward the functional attribute of genuineness and reliability as noted in connection with 1:27. Only in 2:8 does it refer to the concept of fulfillment, implying something that is yet anticipated. For this to occur, the human element of heart orientation rather than mere formal compliance to religious obligation is required. Hence, to be oriented toward God and one another with genuine purity means to be actively functioning in love. Moo notes, “completing the sum total of God’s will for His people takes place in accordance with conformity to the central demand of that law, love for the neighbor.”⁷⁴

The use of the concessive particle μέντοι (however) shows the contrast that James wishes his readers to see between the way things were and the way they were

⁷⁰ Moo, *James* 108.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷² Johnstone, *Lectures* 173.

⁷³ Morris, *New Testament Theology* 314.

⁷⁴ Moo, *James* 112.

supposed to be. The partiality being practiced was in itself sufficient evidence of this. As it was, this situation was not in keeping with the divine prescription of either purity or love for the community of faith.

On the basis of its use in early Judaic literature,⁷⁵ several interpretations of the phrase νόμον τελεῖτε βασιλικόν (“you fulfill the royal law”) have been offered. While Dibelius argues that the phrase indicates that the law has royal authority,⁷⁶ Mußner and Burdick agree that it is a law of royal rank above all others.⁷⁷ Davids, on the other hand, contends that it refers to the whole law rather than to a single command,⁷⁸ and Moo asserts that this phrase refers to the law which governs the kingdom.⁷⁹ However, given the close connection between James’s letter and the teaching of Jesus, and given that James is referring to a command Jesus identified as the second-highest ranking law (Matt 22:39), it is more likely that James is thinking of Lev 19:18. This view is supported by the random placement and minimal selection of biblical statutes James chooses to support his argument as to the unity of the law rather than speaking of the law in broader terms. It may also be suggested that the law holds its rank because loving one’s neighbors is the formulating essence of the holiness of God. In other words, to love as God loves *is* to be holy as God is holy.

James now brings into focus his justification for asserting that the absence of love for one’s neighbor within the community of faith is just as sinful as committing adultery or murder. “Those engaging in partiality are convicted by the law as lawbreakers” (2:9). Some understand this as a reference to the law in general.⁸⁰ Another possibility is that it refers to the injunction against partiality found in Deut 16:19. Burdick, however, asserts that James has already cited the law he is referring to. It is the “royal law” to love one’s neighbor.⁸¹ This seems most plausible given the fact that the phrase is being used in a contextually defined sense by James: the law is the royal law.

The basis for the unity of the law (2:10–11) is expressed in the premise that the same person (God) uttered both laws noted here.⁸² Martin points out that the two commandments James cites “do not concern outward ritual but penetrate to the core of ethical behavior.”⁸³ Although only one commandment is broken, the entire law of God is flouted. “When viewed like this, an act of favoritism is far from insignificant.”⁸⁴

⁷⁵ Daniel 2:5; 1 Esdras 1:7; Tobit 1:20.

⁷⁶ Dibelius, *James* 143.

⁷⁷ Burdick, *Lectures* 179. Mußner, *Jakobusbrief* 124. Mußner argues, “daß das Gebot Lv 19,18 königlichen Rank unter den andern Geboten hat. Weil die Verächter des Armen sich gegen das “königliche Gebot” versündigen, sind sie vom Gesetz selber als Übertreter überführt, und zwar in einem grundsätzlichen, totalen Sinn, wie V 10 begründet.”

⁷⁸ Davids, *Epistle of James* 114.

⁷⁹ Moo, *James* 111–12.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Burdick, *Lectures* 180.

⁸² Martin, “James” 69.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Burdick, *Lectures* 180.

Being guilty of violating the whole law by violating one statute is not original to James (Matt 5:18–19). “The law is an indivisible unity” because it is not merely a series of individual commands but because the individual commands are “part and parcel of one indivisible whole”⁸⁵ and because they reflect the Lawgiver himself. The phrase James uses is extraordinarily rigorous, but is “gründet aber in einer tiefen Einsicht in das sittliche Wesen Gottes.”⁸⁶ James appears to reverse arbitrarily the order of the two commands he refers to in 2:11. However, he may be expressing the deeper sense that Jesus gave these commands (Matt 5:21–26).⁸⁷ This qualified compliance to the law appears untenable in light of the fact that James’s argument for a unified inherent structure of the law on account of its unique and sole author is in view.

The standard by which one will be judged will be according to the degree to which one fulfills that command to love one’s neighbor as himself (2:13).⁸⁸ Mußner appeals to rabbinic thought regarding this, arguing that withholding the support that is rightly due to one’s neighbor is a form of murder, and preference for the rich to the detriment of the poor is a form of adultery.⁸⁹ This, however, is unnecessary because James has already argued that these guidelines are in the law itself.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In calling the covenantal community to ethical relationships James is calling the community to purity. What legitimates this call to holiness in action? It is the fact that the same One who prohibits murder and adultery is the One who commanded love. The same One who brought Israel into existence as a covenantal community also constituted those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ into a covenantal community. Purity is not an individual possession; it is the possession of the commonwealth of Christ. Purity is essential for the community of faith and love is essential to purity. These cannot be dissociated from one another.

The church, however, possesses more than ancient Israel. It has an organic relationship with the Lawgiver through his Son Jesus Christ. The nature of this relationship is not clearly defined by James. Yet James’s mention of the implanted word (1:21) is significant. It suggests that he has in mind a redefinition of Israel (1:1) through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (2:1) and, therefore, may feel fully justified in applying the law to the new community of faith. Hence, his appeal to Lev 19:18 in 2:8.

There is a correlation between Leviticus 19, James 2, and Matt 22:37–40 in terms of the definition of purity as being a personal, relational reality expressed in

⁸⁵ L. T. Johnson, *The Letter of James* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1995) 232.

⁸⁶ Mußner, *Jakobusbrief* 125.

⁸⁷ Moo, *James* 115–16. Moo suggests that James is not urging perfect compliance to the whole law, but only to the royal law as understood and reinterpreted by Jesus.

⁸⁸ Mußner, *Jakobusbrief* 126. Here is where James is perceived to be in opposition to Luther’s maxim that justification comes by faith. However, Paul uses the same argumentation in Rom 13:8–10.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* Mußner cites Sirach (34:26) and Testament of the 12 Patriarchs (Gad 4:6–7).

actions of love. To own a faith in which deeds or displays of love and mercy are absent is to own a faith which is not, by James's estimation, a genuine faith in Christ. It is, instead, a faith that is devoid of purity and not grounded on the person of God. The ethical implication of holiness drives James's comments regarding conduct: the community of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is a holy community and, therefore, all must act and be treated in a holy manner.