

# EPISTLE: ST. JAMES

## 2



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### PRACTICE QUIZ

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**H**ow do you treat others? What is your *real* attitude toward them (and, related to this, to yourself)? These questions are at the heart of James chapter two, which begins with an explanation of what the *Orthodox Study Bible* calls “the Law of Love.”

The first thirteen verses of chapter two are directly related to the end of chapter one: St. James said that “pure and undefiled” religion involves, among other things, caring for widows and orphans (1:27); here he says that we should not show special preference and honor to the rich. If we give special recognition to a finely-dressed person who exudes money and power, while ignoring those who obviously have little money and influence, then St. James says we are “judges with evil thoughts” (2:4). This point is hammered home in the Protestant *New Living Translation’s* rendering of the verse, “Doesn’t this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives?”

This is appalling, the saint points out, because God Himself enables the poor to become rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom (2:5). In contrast to such love

from God, however, some Christians have chosen to dishonor and oppress the poor (2:6). This blasphemes the name of Christ (2:7), Venerable Bede says, because such Christians “put their riches before Christ, who are themselves strangers to His teaching and use their power to oppress those who believe.”

It would be good if all Christians followed the “Royal Law”—called this because it is embodied by Christ—to love our neighbors as ourselves (2:8; see Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:38-40; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27-28). When we show partiality to some people and discriminate against others, however, we are rank sinners (James 2:9). The problem is with what we can call a “pick-and-choose” approach to righteousness. If we choose to love only certain people, and then claim that we’re following God’s Law, then we are like people who avoid adultery but commit murder (2:10-11): despite our nominal obedience of God, we’re ultimately deliberately rejecting Him. And this is no minor matter, St. James explains, because people who do not show love and mercy to others will not be shown mercy by God (2:13). In contrast, Elder Moses of Optina reminds us, “Should you exercise mercy toward another, you will receive mercy for it.” The key then is to live according to the “Law of Liberty” (2:12), which a Christian known as Oecumenius says “is the one which does not recognize classes of persons. This is the law of Christ.”

In a nutshell, how we think and act is thoroughly tied into our faith: St. James puts it like this, “Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (2:17). What we believe is shown in and through what we do, as can be seen by the fact that being unconcerned with the poor and suffering shows a weak, if not dead, faith (2:15-16). In fact, believing there is one True God is itself not enough—St. James notes even the demons believe that (2:19)! Just as our Righteous Forefather Abraham and Rahab took decisive—and even dangerous—actions because of their faith (2:21-25), so we see that, like Abraham, our faith is made perfect by our works (2:22). As St. Cyril of Alexandria says, “The person who in faith honors the God and ruler of all has righteousness as a reward.”

## LIFE TIP

St. Isaac the Syrian explains what it means to have a merciful heart: “And what is a merciful heart? It is the heart’s burning for the sake of the entire creation, for men, for birds, for animals, for demons and for every created thing; and by the recollection and sight of them the eyes of a merciful man pour forth abundant tears. From the strong and vehement mercy which grips his heart and from his great compassion, his heart is humbled and he cannot bear to hear or see any injury or slight sorrow in creation.”

