

The Royal Command of Love

The letter of James not only contains teaching similar to the sayings of Jesus; it also adopts the hermeneutic of Jesus, maintaining that love is the key to fulfilling God's law and doing God's will.

Jesus said that love for God and love for neighbor are the greatest commandments, the ones on which "all the law and the prophets" depend (Matt. 22:36–40; cf. Mark 12:29–31; Luke 10:25–28). He summarized ethics with the Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12).

James likewise identifies "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) as "the royal law" (2:8), "the law of liberty" (1:25; 2:12), and "the perfect law" (1:25). Faced with the prospect of keeping the whole law, with all its various points, believers do well to concentrate on this commandment (2:8–10).

James further interprets this royal law in context. He appears to have examined the Old Testament section in which the command to love one's neighbor appears and incorporated more of what that part of the Bible says into his moral exhortations:

- Leviticus 19:12 forbids swearing false oaths (cf. James 5:12).
- Leviticus 19:13 forbids withholding wages from laborers (cf. James 5:4).
- Leviticus 19:15 forbids showing partiality to the rich (cf. James 2:1–12).
- Leviticus 19:16 forbids slander and evil talk (cf. James 4:11–12).
- Leviticus 19:17 commends reproof as a way to reconciliation (cf. James 5:20).
- Leviticus 19:18a discourages vengeance and holding grudges (cf. James 5:9).
- Leviticus 19:18b commands "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (cf. James 2:8).

See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 123–35.