

...a faith without works.

- James 2

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James 2

1 My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, [the Lord] of glory, with partiality. 2 For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, 3 and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool," 4 have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world [to be] rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? 7 Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called? 8 If you really fulfill [the] royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; 9 but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one [point], he is guilty of all. 11 For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. 14 What [does it] profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what [does it] profit? 17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! 20 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? 23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. 24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent [them] out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

2:1-26

James is defining, even dividing, what is true faith, what is true practice, and what is not. Here, James takes the practical position of loving one's neighbor. He speaks now concerning giving partiality for certain folks over others because of some external or worldly issue. Prejudice is a tricky thing. We might be impressed by or drawn to one individual because he or she looks to be worldly successful, or might be apt to do just opposite. Meaning our tendency could be to fawn over the individual who steps in here with very little to his name and has a messy life, and give little attention to the guy who has a car that is not "rust colored."

If Christ is to be our example, then there should be no preference among us...up or down, due to wealth or community status, nor in the other direction because of one's poverty or poor social status. Prejudice can work in both directions: favoring the rich and looking down upon the poor, or the other way around. Both are in violation of this verse. Money, fame, status, or possessions will never determine a person's worth before God and therefore should not for us either.

"For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality." (Deut 10:17)



However, we should note that the Word does not forbid the giving of honor because of rank, office, or age. In fact, it instructs us over and over to give honor and submission to those who rule over us. It tells us to honor the aged (Lev 19:32). It tells us to honor our parents and church leaders, as well as others. But honor in that capacity is far different than what James is warning us about.

While this issue is certainly important to each of us as individuals, it is critical within any church body as a whole. For this is not just an issue of harmony. It's crucial if we are to reflect the nature and character of God our Father as well as reveal the operational aspects, the very spiritual dynamic, of the Kingdom of God.

Christ showed no preference for any man because of worldly status, wealth, or achievements. He was a poor man Himself, though spiritually a king.

"For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9)

James seems now to shout, "Listen up, gang." He clearly wants to really get their attention on this matter: "Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the Kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?" This verse states a reality that has been manifested throughout history, which is that those who are monetarily poor in this world are often the richest in faith. Perhaps that is because they have the greatest opportunities to trust and live in true faith in God because they have to! Without the stretching of our faith, indeed it will never grow. Faith is often slow to grow in those who materially have a lot. It is often those who are the poorest in this world who are the greatest servants, and, ironically, the greatest financial givers within the body of Christ today! No mystery there, really. For they inevitably step up and are the faith warriors! Not everyone who has faith can be described as rich in faith, but I want to be one of them!

Let us make note that these folks are not just rich in faith, but are said to be the "heirs of the Kingdom!" We know that the Kingdom of God does not begin for us at death or in the "heavenly thereafter." No, it actually begins at the moment of salvation. It's the "Promised Land" for the believer. The problem is that many of us aren't actually in the Promised Land at all, but live out our lives instead in the wilderness, just wandering around. And then, even if we are in God's land of promise, many of us have never reached out to take all of the land He gave us. Thus, so many of us have never experienced all God has for us as an inheritance, simply because we have chosen to trust and lean upon our bank accounts, health insurance, or worldly security instead of Him. After all, it is often a lot easier to trust in the money in my hand that I can see than in a God who is effectively invisible.

James speaks of this issue as the "royal law" and does so likely because it was given by our Lord and King, Jesus Christ Himself. James goes so far as to clearly call this partiality, this respect of persons in this context, as "sin." Not just inappropriate or a slight, but actually a *sin*. It's not the behavior of Christ and therefore should not be ours.

Obviously how we treat people, how we love them or fail to love them actually matters. We might tend to think of this passage as a small issue, but James does not. Certainly in this world there are classifications of sin, ranging from really bad ones like murder, to small "inconsequential" ones like lying or cheating. Make no mistake, God has no such designations! To God, sin is sin on any level; and James is reminding us that it only takes one sin to make us guilty of breaking them all.

Without the direct intervention of Christ, we are all hopelessly lost and absolutely guilty. He died to pay for all sin, great and small. Yet because of the equality of sin, we are all equal in guilt, and equally in need of a Savior and His grace. May we never be guilty, *either individually or corporately within the church*, of falling into the world's classification of sin. The heart of man is wicked, and we all stand equal before God as sinners, albeit some saved by grace! But even if we are covered, such does not give us license or permission to be sloppy in our discipline of holiness. We are given grace, but the grace that empowers us to live differently than the world.

James is therefore driving the final nail into the casket of guilt. His point is that it is impossible for a man be justified by obedience to the law, the rules of Scripture, if total guilt is established merely by failing in just one point. So ironically, for those who think the book of James is a mandate of legalism and rules, James is actually taking the opposite position! He is not saying we can be made right with God through good works, but actually strikes the death blow to that belief.

Verse 12 says, *"So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty."* We are called to not just talk it, but live it. Certainly James seems to have a handle on human nature. Talking the talk is easy, but doing, *when it is hard to do*, is a whole other level. But he isn't cutting us any slack here. We take every opportunity to talk grace, mercy, and love, but rarely does the issue of holiness and judgment find their way into the conversation these days. It's like we think we have, as a greater church, somehow evolved beyond such issues, and we avoid the harsh aspects of the fact that, judgment is indeed coming for all of us!

This does not speak of the Great White Throne Judgment of eternal standing (whether we are reborn or not), but of the Bema Seat Judgment waiting for every believer. The Bema Seat is the judgment of works: the things we did, or did not do, for God and Kingdom, the use of the talents, gifts, and calling He has given us as His earthly emissaries. 2 Corinthians 5:10 reminds us clearly that "...we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.."

So what is this "law of liberty" spoken of here? It is the rule that we now live under as believers in the New Testament age. "Liberty" in that we are truly free in Christ. Free to serve, but not free to sit! This law of liberty is about being freed from the power of sin and being enabled to live a life that pleases God through faith and love. Under such a "law," how shall we live? The fact today is that so many of us knee-jerk so far from the Old Testament law, that we excuse ourselves from His service with cries of freedom and grace! Apparently, the early church had fallen into that same trap as early as the ministry of James.

James is reminding us that there will indeed be a judgment day in which we will be asked to produce the fruit or the "results" of that which we have been given in opportunities, calling, finances, abilities, and service. Have we 'buried' that which God has given us like the guy in Matthew 25? Or have we, in our freedom, responded in love, proven by our service?

"What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?"

James runs and jumps unflinchingly into the pool here. That statement has been debated, vilified, and hotly contested, no doubt, since the first reader poured over this letter. Certainly, plucking it out of the context without the whole letter can make us bristle. After all, doesn't Paul literally say in Ephesians 2:8 that we have been saved by faith? Well, yes. But it actually says we have been saved by **grace through faith**, meaning Christ gave us salvation without price and we believe it. The historical battle on this subject seems to come because men feel inclined to choose a side, and then dig in. We seem to be quite adept at dancing around the absolute relationship between works and faith.

One side lays all the weight upon what a man *does* and *has done*. These folks seem to find no need or desire to move into the realm of something as nebulous as a "heart-based faith." On the other side is the guy who is lost in the experience of his salvation. He loves the feeling and the assurance of his stand in God, yet it has no tangible results in terms of life change or response.

Both sides miss the mark. Both sides are forgetting that real regeneration produces a transformed life! If we allow the work of the Holy Spirit...the power and bastion of righteousness, to truly exercise His power, there will indeed be that same practical righteousness manifested in a person's life. Christianity is not just faith and not just works. It is a faith manifested by works! Works are the fruit of our salvation. And whether we want to acknowledge such or not, they are the litmus test of rebirth.

A faith that does not manifest itself in action is not faith at all. It is just *belief*. It is a belief *of*, but not a belief *in* Christ. A person truly reborn in Christ will innately have an active, growing faith evidenced by new passions and motivations. Thus, there is no battle here between the stand of Paul in Galatians and Romans and that of James. There is only a difference in emphasis, which together presents a complete picture of our walk in Christ.

Note the word "says" in verse 14. James is differentiating between those who truly have faith and those who just *say* that they do. What James is driving at here is, "*Can the kind of faith that is only words with no actions save him?*" Such faith has no power and can save no one. Saving faith is authentic faith! The dividing point then is not between works and faith, but faith that results in works, and "belief" that does not.

Such a belief does nothing for the individual who holds it. Without a true and active faith, there is no love manifested. The Word tells us, "...*by this shall all men know you are my disciples, if you have love one to another*" (Jn. 13:3). God's love is an active love. It is a love that *does*. "*For God so loved the world that he gave...*" His love was a love that clearly moved. If it is His love that resides within us, then we too will move in its presence!

Verse 17 tells us that "*faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*" We certainly grasp the concept that in death there is no feeling, no hearing, and no movement. Once dead, the object in question is no longer any earthly good.

"*Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*" The harsh reality here is that there are pews throughout America each Sunday that are full of people who have never really been reborn but think they are. This has come in an age where we have removed the Holy Spirit from Christianity and thus His power and intervention out of our practice of faith. It is critical that we do not fail to grasp this. Failure means living a lifetime lying to one's self, with the final end apart from God.

The bottom line here, *however uncomfortable it might make us*, is that if one's faith does not act, then that individual needs to re-evaluate his position with God. For if such is the case with any one of us, there is every reason to see that we have never really experienced a supernaturally changed life.

There are innumerable individuals who, when questioned, will state emphatically that they "believe" in Jesus Christ. But one must clearly define what the word "believe" means. A recent poll says that 62% of Americans say they are Christians. Few would therefore doubt that a defining of the term would be in order. John Dickerson, author of the book "The Great Evangelical Recession," has made compelling arguments that the actual number, by scriptural definition, is less than 10%. The problem certainly lies here before us. Do we believe *in* or do we only believe *of*? James is pointing out that even demons believe the reality of a person called Jesus Christ. They believe, *even clearly know*, that He is the Son of God and the awaited Messiah. They hold in reality the fact that He is the only path to God and to eternal life. But they certainly will not be in heaven eternally with the saints. So, where is the discrepancy?

John 3:15 tells us that "*whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*" But the "believe" Christ spoke of here has the idea of "commitment, trust and confidence in." "*Believing in*" means more than acknowledging the existence of Jesus. It means acknowledging what He said is fact, who He said He is, what He asks of us, and all that is contained in Him. Can you truly say you believe you are going to be hit by a car, if you don't move to get out of the street? A true belief elicits true action! John 7:38 tells us, "*He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.*" Does that sound like you and your life?

But how many of us are really willing to hear and receive this truth? Or does our pride prevent us from considering this crucial question? Am I truly saved? If the answer is yes, then what is my basis? What is my evidence?

Matt 7:16-23 "You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"

Real faith does not mean you will never fall short or struggle in the midst of trial, tribulation, and testing. But throughout, that individual will evidence a supernatural change, even in attitude and action. His or her time spent, ...his peace, and her passion for the things of God will all glorify the Redeemer. We absolutely know that justification comes through belief. That truth is whole and complete if it is real belief. Both Rahab, and Abraham before her, expressed their faith in real action. All of the inhabitants of Jericho had the same information concerning the Israelites that Rahab had. But the difference was she believed enough to act. Her faith was a saving faith. Is yours?