

James chapter 2

No partiality in Christ (verses 1-13)

James begins the second chapter with the phrase “My brethren”. This is a common designation for his readers throughout the Epistle. He uses it 15 times throughout the book along with brothers (4 times) and sisters (once). He implores his readers “do not hold the faith...with partiality” (verse 1).

The founder and source of our faith is “our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory”. No other faith will suffice. Contrary to what many in current society try to tell us, religious pluralism is wrong. Religious pluralism states that one faith is as good as any other. In the name of tolerance our society insists that no particular faith can say that it is the only correct way. This type of thinking was absolutely foreign to James and the other writers of the New Testament. Our faith is built upon Jesus and that cannot be shared with any other belief.

In verse 1, James commands that no partiality be shown in the way we treat our brothers and sisters in Christ. The King James Version translates *partiality* as *respect of persons*. This can also be translated as favoritism and comes from the same Greek word used in Romans 2:11 and Colossians 3:25. It denotes the same idea expressed by God in Leviticus 19:15.

James provides an illustration of this concept in verses 2-3 when he describes two visitors to an assembly of Christians (from the Greek word *sunagoge* referring to the Jewish synagogue, which once more provides evidence that James was writing primarily to Jewish Christians). One visitor is dressed in fine apparel and wears golden

rings (see 1 Peter 3:3 where Christian sisters are cautioned not to trust in these items) while the other visitor is obviously a poor man dressed in filthy clothes. The King James Version describes his garments as “vile raiment” which denotes dirty or cheap clothing.

The fact that two visitors have arrived at the assembly of Christians is not a problem. What does become a problem is the reaction of the Christians to the appearance of the two visitors. As James says, “and you pay attention” or as the King James Version says, “have respect” to the visitor with “fine clothes”. The problem is partiality. Simply because of the outward appearance of the visitors one is told “You sit here in a good place” while the poor man is commanded “You stand there” or “Sit here at my footstool”. Now sin has arisen in the assembly of Christians.

Because the Christians showed partiality in preferring the rich visitor to the poor one, they have also committed the sin of pretentiousness. This is something Jesus consistently preached against (Luke 11:37-44; 14:7-14, 21). James drives the point home in verse 4, “have you not shown partiality among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” Christians who are guilty of partiality or pretentiousness are not exhibiting an authentic faith. In Christ there can be no partiality.

The next argument James makes against partiality is found in verse 5. Since God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom (1 Corinthians 1:26-28) Christians must not discriminate against them. James charges his readers with dishonoring the poor man because they preferred the presence of the wealthy. An excellent example of the consequences of this course of action is found in Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Paul records the institution of the

Lord's Supper as revealed to him by Jesus. The reason Paul had to remind the Corinthian church about the proper way of observing the Lord's Supper was because they had perverted the communion. They had transformed the remembrance of the body and blood of the Lord into a wild, drunken feast. He describes this situation in 1 Corinthians 11: 17-22 and one of the strongest arguments Paul makes is, "do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing?" (verse 22). What had happened in Corinth was that Christians began bringing in food and drink to feast upon while they were remembering the Lord's death. Obviously the ones who were better off financially were able to bring more food and drink than those who were poor. This resulted in a situation where the poor Christians watched while the rich Christians turned the Lord's Supper into an orgy. In so doing they had shamed the poor, which is exactly the same situation James refers to in his Epistle.

James reminds his readers that it is the "rich who oppress you" and "drag you into the courts" (verse 6). Things have not changed much since New Testament times. Those who have money continue to abuse those who have less. James wants to know why the church would prefer those whom God has not chosen and who blaspheme the noble name of Christian (1 Peter 4:16). James is not suggesting here that a rich person cannot be a Christian, but likely is referring to the teachings of Jesus concerning the love of riches.

Instead of showing partiality by being prejudiced in favor of the wealthy, James insists that if we really want to fulfill the royal law we will love our neighbors as we love ourselves (verse 8). This teaching originated with God in His commands to Moses

(Leviticus 19:18) and was reaffirmed by Jesus (Matthew 22:34-40) and also by Paul (Galatians 5:14). James also commands that we follow this royal law. It is a royal law because it comes from God Himself. Loving our neighbor in this way means that we will not show partiality or be pretentious in our dealings with brothers and sisters.

In fact, James teaches that if we do show partiality we commit sin (verse 9). James uses the example of living under the Law of Moses to illustrate this point. His Jewish readers were all familiar with the legal demands of the Law of Moses and knew that if they broke any of the commandments they were convicted as sinners. James points out the impossibility of keeping the Old Testament law perfectly (Galatians 3:10) by showing that if we keep all of it except for one thing it is the same as if we had broken the whole law. In this context he is showing the reader that the very fact of showing partiality against the poor was a violation of a law of God that was just as important as any contained in the 10 Commandments.

The same God who said adultery was a sin also said that murder was a sin. We cannot divide sins into big and little, there are no such distinctions with God. Sometimes we fall into the same trap by reacting with disgust toward certain sins but overlooking those we don't consider quite as bad. A case in point would be homosexuality, which is certainly a sin condemned by the Word of God. However, homosexuality is not better nor worse than lying, cheating, being unforgiving, or any other sin we can think of. James is driving this point home to the reader: no matter how holy we think we are, and no matter how much worse we think someone else is, we are all sinners needing the grace and forgiveness of God which is only available through the sacrifice of Jesus. The

encounter that Jesus had with the rich ruler (Luke 18:18-23) is an excellent illustration of this. The ruler came to Jesus asking what good thing he needed to do in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus told him to keep the commandments of Moses and the ruler stated that he had kept all of them (this statement was an impossibility, and therefore revealed that the ruler needed to repent of lying at the very least). Jesus then instructed the ruler to sell all of his possessions and give to the poor. The ruler was not willing to do this (in violation of Leviticus 19:18) and went away sorrowful.

In contrast to the legal demands of the fleshly law (Law of Moses) Christians are subject to what James describes in verse 12 as “the law of liberty”. This is a term he has already used for the law of Christ (James 1:25) and is a concept shared with Paul (2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 5:1). We are to speak and do as those who will be judged by a different law than the Law of Moses. This is the law of liberty given by Jesus. It requires not just words but actions as James will show in the next section of the chapter.

Under the Law of Moses mercy was a rare thing. Judgment was swift and punishment was sure for the transgression of the Old Testament laws. Since the death of Christ upon the cross we have been blessed to live under a covenant of mercy rather than a covenant of judgment. Mercy is what God shows us when He forgives our sins. We must be willing to also forgive those who sin against us (Matthew 6:12). Jesus taught that those who do not forgive will not be forgiven (Matthew 18:21-35). This also has reference to our reaction to the poor (Proverbs 21:13). Truly mercy triumphs over judgment!

The proper relationship of faith and works (verses 14-26)

James teaches that faith without works is dead. Faith without action is not authentic. Some have tried to identify a conflict between Paul and James with regard to faith and works. Paul does teach justification by faith, but it is a faith that works (Titus 2:14; 3:4-8, 14). James taught the same thing, a faith that works. This is identical to the teaching of Jesus in John 6:29.

This passage has been the cause of considerable debate among Christians. The idea of salvation by faith alone was championed by the Reformation preachers, beginning with Martin Luther. Salvation by faith alone was one of the main ideas that led to the Protestant Reformation. The reformers were reacting against the works based salvation of the Roman Catholic church that had gradually developed during the Dark Ages when superstition and scriptural ignorance prevailed. Most Protestants after being exposed to works based salvation went to the other extreme, that is, a position requiring no works, only faith. As we shall see from this passage, James identifies an authentic faith as one that works.

In verse 14 James asks what “profit” is there in a faith that does not work. He also asks, “Can faith save him”? In the New International Version this question is phrased, “Can such faith save him?” Perhaps a better translation would be, “Can this kind of faith save him” or “Can a faith that doesn’t work save him”?

To prove his point James describes a hypothetical situation concerning a fellow Christian who is hungry and without proper clothing. The person of faith says to them “depart in peace, be warmed and filled” yet they do nothing to alleviate the needs of

their brother or sister. James asks yet again, “what does it profit”? Can we imagine any authentic Christian refusing to minister to the needs of their brother or sister (1 John 3:17-19)?

The early church began with the Christians pooling their resources so that those who were in need could be helped (Acts 2:44-45). The practice of the Jerusalem church was for Christians to sell extra possessions in order to provide for the needy (Acts 4:34-35). When the Jerusalem church grew to a large number of disciples the first conflict among believers was the exact situation that James described. In Acts 6:1-7, Luke explains that the Greek widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food and other supplies. To correct this neglect the Apostles (including James) exhibited authentic Christianity by commanding that seven deacons be chosen to insure that no widow was neglected. This was Christianity at work, an authentic faith, a faith that works.

After presenting his first argument, James says in verse 17, that faith without works is dead. It is not an authentic faith. James uses the Greek word, *nekros*, which literally means a corpse. A faith that will not work is like a corpse at a funeral (see verse 26). The parable of the two houses illustrates this point very well. In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus speaks of two different types of people, one who hears the words of God and does them; the other who hears the words of God and does not do them. One house is built on the rock; the other is built upon the sand. When the storms of life come only the house built upon the rock will stand. Only the person who does what Jesus asks will be saved.

Verse 18 is difficult because of the English translation. James is basically playing the part of a hypothetical person who says “you have faith but I have works”. It is evident that a person would not have works without faith, but it is also possible that a person could claim to have faith without showing any works to prove it. That is why James exclaims, “Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works”.

James further attacks the idea of a non-working faith by showing in verse 19 that even the demons could be justified if all God required was a belief that He exists. A mental faith is not enough, even the demons and Satan believe in God (Matthew 8:28-29), they are just not willing to act upon that faith in a saving way.

In verse 20, James asks the “foolish man” (or the one who refuses to work based upon his faith) if he wants proof that faith without works is dead. The New International Version translates this part of verse 20 as, “do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless”?

So, James proceeds to provide the proof that faith must be accompanied by action. He uses the one example that all Jews would immediately identify with: Abraham. In fact, James describes Abraham as “our father”, and so he was for the original readers of this Epistle. All Jews (except proselytes) were direct descendants of Abraham, and it is Abraham who James picks to provide the perfect example of a faith that works.

James asks, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?” (verse 21). The word justified in this verse means essentially

that a person is righteous before God and comes from the same Greek word translated justified the other 30 times it appears in the New Testament. Yes, Abraham had faith, but he also was willing to act upon his faith and this caused God to be pleased. Abraham was prepared to offer his son, Isaac, in accordance to God's command (Genesis 22:1-19) and he is included in the book of Hebrews as a great man of faith (Hebrews 11:17-19).

In fact, James shows that faith operated together with Abraham's works and caused his faith to become "perfect" (verse 22). This word perfect can also be translated "complete". So, Abraham's faith was completed in the eyes of God when he ascended Mount Moriah to offer his son, Isaac. The scripture was fulfilled "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness". This verse is found in Genesis 15:6, before Abraham took his son to Mount Moriah. After Abraham was obedient to God he was called the "friend of God" (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8). This was all possible because Abraham acted upon the faith he had in God.

James tells us in verse 24 that we are justified by works (that is, actions we take because of our faith) and "not by faith only". This is the only time in the entire New Testament where the words "faith only" occur together, and in this case, the words "not by" precede them. This does not mean that salvation is an either/or proposition. It is not that works save us or that faith saves us, what James is trying to illustrate is that the only kind of faith that saves is a faith that acts.

In verse 25 James provides one more example to show the necessity of works. The example he chooses is Rahab, the harlot. Rahab was a citizen of the city of Jericho before it was destroyed by the Israelites. But, instead of perishing with all of the other

inhabitants of the city, Rahab and her family were saved because they believed in God and took the appropriate actions (Joshua 2:1-21, note especially verses 18 and 21; Joshua 6:25). James declares that she was justified by works. By this we know that she was a woman of faith, but she had a faith that acted. Rahab is also mentioned in the book of Hebrews as a champion of faith (Hebrews 11:31).

James ends the second chapter by emphasizing that “as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also”. James has strived in this chapter to impress upon his readers that an authentic faith is a faith that works, not just a mental process.