

Chapter 2

2:1-13 Partiality had apparently become a major problem within the synagogues by the time of James' writing. As with anywhere else, those who held the money also held the power. James writes to say that this is unacceptable. Christ Himself, the One who holds all things, chose to become a servant. This alone should lead the Christ follower to exalt the poor.

2:1 I love the way this is translated by Adamson: "Do not try to combine faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, our Glory, with worship of men's social status." This, to me, most clearly illustrates what James is trying to demonstrate here, that our faith in Christ Jesus should be noticeably different from the world. It should be characterized by impartiality, by a genuine desire to show the world that God's Kingdom values the poor equally with the wealthy. Here James echoes Paul's words in Galatians 3:28 – "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." All hold equal status in the Kingdom of God, as Romans 2:11 tells us that God Himself "shows no partiality."

2:2-4 We begin with a contrast between the two men: one wearing fine clothes, the other wearing shabby clothing. The wealthy man is given a position of honor, whereas the poor man is given a position of dishonor or servitude. Notice James' specification as to the type of judgment taking place here: this is judgment involving "evil thoughts" (2:4). Scripture tells us on numerous occasions that we are to judge in some sense (e.g., Matthew 7:1-5; 1 Cor 6:1-5). In any event, we are called to a certain standard. We have to hold one another accountable for our actions. Judging one another does not mean hypocritical judgment, but judging right from wrong and ensuring that we remain strong Christ followers.

2:5-7 James ensures that the poor are treated with the same level of dignity and honor as the wealthy by his recognition that "God [chose] those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom" (2:5). Interesting to note that Luke's version of the beatitudes differs in a slight way from Matthew's in a way that supports James' understanding of this concept; where Matthew famously reports Jesus' words as "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3), Luke records Jesus as having said, simply, "Blessed are you who are poor" (Lk 6:20). James' willingness to take up the cause of the poor is once again a reflection on his time with Christ in the flesh. It cannot be forgotten that the God of the universe, who owns all things, chose to take the form of a servant to be with those who were overlooked by the world. If this is the God we serve, who would willingly choose to take up the cause of the poor rather than sit idly by to receive the glory due His Name, then how can we, His people, do otherwise? We are every bit as obliged to take up the cause of the poor as James ever was.

The rich, at this time, were more actively oppressive toward the poor. They would often drag the poor into court to get the money they were owed, and due to their status and their ability to hire better lawyers, they continued a cycle of oppression with the poor – yet somehow, in the eyes of the world, they were still honored! Money can be quite the draw even to this day. Many a church has failed because they listened to those with control over the finances instead of listening to the direction of the Spirit. The Kingdom of God is not subject to the whims of the wealthy, but to the guidance of the Spirit who leads us in all righteousness.

2:8-9 Unlikely as it may be for us, if we fulfill the law to love others as we love ourselves, we are right on track. However, it is far more likely that we show partiality. We have our friends whom we favor, and we overlook those with whose personalities we most often clash. This is where James begins to break down the importance of the law for the Christ follower. Keep in mind that James is writing to Jewish Christ followers, so there is still great value placed on the Law of Moses here. Many in our time will attempt to make the argument that the Old Testament law is invalidated by the New Covenant. Is that the case? Certainly not, based on what James says here. We know based on chapter 1 that he still emphasizes many of the same points of morality as the OT Law lifts up, including avoidance of idolatrous behavior and remaining free from immoral sexual behavior (see Acts 15). James gives us reason to remember that the New Testament remains indebted to the Old Testament, that Jesus fulfills the law rather than abolishing it (Mt 5:17), and that the moral requirements which God laid out for His people are still just as applicable to Christians as they are to OT Jews – if not more so! The Jews of the OT were incapable of living up to the moral standards God required, but in Christ, we are made capable of living according to the will of God. We are given God’s own Spirit in order to accomplish this task. As such, we are even *more* accountable to the law, from a moral perspective! Our task is not to fulfill the letter of the law, but to go even beyond the law to its very heart so that we are honorable in the eyes of God. On our own power, we are every bit as incapable as those in the Old Testament; by the power of the Spirit, we are equipped to achieve the maturity and wholeness that God always intended for us. He who began a good work in us will see it through to completion!

2:10-13 In a very difficult text, James reminds us that when we break one part of God’s law, we “become accountable for all of it” (2:10). In other words, guilt in breaking one part of the law makes it as if we also murdered, stole, etc. Why? Think to what we formerly said concerning the heart of the law – if one is guilty of lying, then they have failed to love their neighbor as themselves. This, at its core, is a lack of love for God. When we break one part of the law, we break all of the law at its core. This is likely where we derive the idea that “all sin is equal in the eyes of God.” In actuality, this is not the case. We see in numerous places that sins of different nature do not carry the same weight (such as sexual sin being worse for people than other sins in 1 Cor 6:18), or their consequences are worse for people than other sins. Clearly, sins are not equal in their weight. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is not proposing that we go ahead and commit adultery because we’ve lusted for someone in our hearts; He is simply saying that the condition of the heart is the same. Likewise, James is not telling us, “You might as well murder instead of just being angry with somebody – it’s all breaking God’s law anyway!” Rather, he’s simply demonstrating that God’s law is broken either way, and we are all guilty as a direct result.

It is here that James reminds us that we are given freedom and liberty in Christ Jesus. We are to live “as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.” A footnote in the Zondervan Study Bible (NIV) notes, on the topic of the “law of liberty,” that “[t]he Mosaic law is perfected in Christ, who brought the law to its true fulfillment... The ‘law’ believers stand under is the ‘royal law’ (2:8), the teaching of Jesus (and the apostles) about the true meaning and application of the law” (2527). James previously referenced the “royal law” as being that which Jesus exalted, namely that one must “love your neighbor as yourself.” We are to speak and act, therefore, as those who love their neighbors. This is why James then goes on to contrast the judgment of the merciful with the judgment of those who have no mercy, for if we truly love our neighbors as the royal law of Christ has instructed us to do, we will show the same mercy to them that Christ

so graciously demonstrated to us. We expect great mercy for ourselves, and yet we often hold the sins of others against them. Especially applicable here is the parable of Matthew 18:21-35, variously referred to as the “Parable of the Unmerciful/Unforgiving Servant.” Therein, Jesus relates the story of a servant who was forgiven by his master a debt greater than could be repaid in many lifetimes. This servant then goes to a fellow servant who owes him a mere pittance by comparison, demanding what he is owed and even going so far as to imprison the man who is indebted to him. The servant who was forgiven much is then judged by his own unfair standard. The parable stands as a reminder that our forgiveness for others – the mercy we display – must be such that it is modeled after God’s own mercy toward us. If He has forgiven us more than we could ever repay, what right do we have to hold the small wrongdoings of others against them? James concludes this passage in 2:13 with a short, yet powerful reminder: “Mercy triumphs over judgment.” Jesus says something quite similar in Matthew 7:2 – “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.” If we expect that God will grant us mercy on the day of judgment, our own lives must also be characterized by mercy.

2:14-17 The lack of value of faith without deeds is explored by James in this passage. He even goes so far as to say, through the rhetorical question of the latter half of verse 14, that faith without works will actually be ineffective at saving someone. The classic Christianity of Protestantism has often insisted that “sola fide” – the “faith alone” theology of Martin Luther – does not require any sort of action on the part of the believer. However, James makes it clear that although salvation is not merit-based, there is undoubtedly something required of us. Faith without a genuine change in the heart leading to action, says James, is effectively meaningless.

The example James gives is of one who sounds spiritual in their responses, yet is devoid of meaningful change resulting in faithful action. The words of the proverbial brother in 2:15 are likely some which we would all feel quite spiritually profound in uttering: “Go in peace, be warmed and filled.” What a nice sentiment this is! And yet how meaningless in light of the fact that we have done literally *nothing* to help our brother or sister! James once again reflects his time serving alongside Christ – that which we do in the interest of ministering to others must be supplemented by meeting the physical needs they exhibit. The Church throughout history has done this in numerous ways – founding food pantries to combat hunger, hospitals to fight sickness, sober living facilities to fight addiction, and much more. All of these serve the purpose of following in the footsteps of Christ – first meeting the physical need so that the spiritual/emotional can be appropriately met as well.

In the same way that not meeting the physical needs of another is ultimately pointless, James says, faith without works to back up its meaning is dead. “Dead” here derives from the Greek word “*nekros*,” which is in a spiritual sense defined by Strong’s Concordance as “inoperative to the things of God.” Faith, unless it is bolstered by meaningful action on our part, is quite literally diametrically opposed to the things of God.

2:18-26 James begins this section by challenging the assertion that faith and works can be mutually exclusive. “You have faith and I have works,” the hypothetical opponent to James’ point responds. Many would still say something along these lines to this day. To James, the works associated with faith are essentially a means of “putting our money where our mouths are.” Works give legitimacy to faith. This leads him to say, “You show me your faith apart from works,

and I will show you my faith by my works.” One popular quote derived from the works of St. Francis of Assisi says, “Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.” Although it may or may not have been taken directly from St. Francis, the point of the quote is certainly in line with the words of James – it is our actions which should inform others that we are in Christ, rather than necessarily our words alone.

In perhaps the most convicting of examples, James makes the bold statement that even demons have the basic conviction that God exists. They’ve seen Him face-to-face! Yet the fact that they know God exists serves no real purpose when coupled with the fact that they also live in complete opposition to God. Likewise, many will live in such a way that their lives never seem to model the good news of Christ. This makes their knowledge that God exists meaningless! Paul will even go so far as to say, in Romans 1, that all human beings possess this basic knowledge that God exists, and they can even discern certain basic principles about Him simply based on Creation itself and the way it’s ordered. This is what we call “general revelation,” or that which can be understood about God even without Scripture to tell us these specifics. We know God provides for us because of the fact that even the animals are provided for. We know God is good because He has ordered the world in such a way that it is livable for the creatures of this planet. Such basic principles can be understood regardless of whether we have deep, meaningful faith in God – and at the end of the day, this basic faith in the existence of God means nothing if it is not paired with action. The demons shudder because they know God exists and they’ve opposed Him. We ought to shudder as well in knowing that God exists until such time as we live in line with His Word!

Henceforth James gives two meaningful examples to illustrate the point that faith apart from works makes no discernible difference in a person’s life: 1) Abraham, and 2) Rahab.

- 1) Abraham – James begins with the story of Abraham nearly sacrificing Isaac in obedience to the command of God. Genesis 22 begins with the words, “After these things, God tested Abraham...” God never intends for Abraham to truly sacrifice Isaac; rather, He intends to see if Abraham will be found faithful. Abraham has walked with God for over 25 years at this point, and has even spoken with Him face-to-face. Abraham meets God when he is 75, and by the time Isaac is born, Abraham is 100. This story takes place several years later.

Abraham knows two truths: first, God is good and has not lied to him. God told him that it was through Isaac that his offspring would be reckoned, meaning that Isaac’s family line would be the one to bring forth the Messiah. Second, Abraham knows that God has told him to sacrifice his son. Abraham reasons through these two truths and comes to the conclusion, according to Hebrews 11:19, that God must intend to raise Isaac back from death after Abraham proves himself faithful. THAT is extraordinary faith in God, and it was Abraham’s faith in God which led to action! Abraham is considered righteous for this very reason – his willingness to act in faith, regardless of the fact that the truths seemed incongruous.

- 2) Rahab – James’ second example comes from Joshua 2, the story of the Israelite spies sent to scout Jericho. As the spies get to the city, Rahab, a prostitute, gives the men shelter and helps the Israelites remain safe. Rahab’s quote in Joshua 2:9 is particularly telling: “I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you.” As Rahab continues, she acknowledges

YHWH as “God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath” (2:11), and asks simply that the Israelites show mercy to her and her family as she has shown to them. This is interesting: Rahab shows mercy, and is therefore shown mercy. Rahab’s story not only confirms James’ point concerning faith being coupled with works, but also confirms his point from 2:12-13 that mercy is shown to those who have demonstrated it themselves.

James concludes this section with a final affirmation that the body apart from the spirit is dead just as faith without works is dead. Our constant surrender to the will of God, to maturity and wholeness in Christ Jesus, is required of us if our faith is to have any meaning.