

# Rich in Faith, Righteous in Deed

Week Three  
July 12– July 16

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**A Daily Study of the Book of James  
Summer 2021**

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*Listen, my beloved brothers,  
has not God chosen those  
who are poor in the world  
to be rich in faith and heirs  
of the kingdom, which he has  
promised to those who love him?*

*James 2.5*

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**Cornerstone Assembly of God**  
10551 Chalkley Rd, N. Chesterfield, VA 23237

Monday, July 12 .....James 2.1-4

## Faith and Favoritism

*<sup>1</sup> My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. <sup>2</sup> For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, <sup>3</sup> and if you take notice of the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," <sup>4</sup> have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Read James' illustration of the gold-fingered man and the destitute man in filthy rags in light of Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16.19-21).
  - a. What similarities are there between the gold-fingered man and the rich man in the parable?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. What implications does this have for the destitute man as he parallels Lazarus?
  
2. Why does James see this form of favoritism—which disenfranchises the poor and marginalized—as the sin of judging based on appearances?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. One of the world's burdens is pushing the poor and at-risk people out of view or into demeaning boxes (*i.e.*, 'stand over there' or 'sit at my feet'). Why was James disturbed to find this practice in the church?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. How is James inviting us to live more fully like Jesus in relationship to the poor, the widow, orphan and stranger?

## • PRAYER POINT •

### UNBLOCKING OUR CHRIST CONFESSION

- Jesus taught us to pray by hallowing the name of our Father God, lifting up his name in praise and worship. As you celebrate God today, rejoice that Jesus is our glorious Lord, Savior and Deliverer.
- As you seek forgiveness for your trespasses, invite the Holy Spirit to show you where partiality toward some and prejudice against others has stood in contradiction to your confession of Jesus' Lordship in your life.
- Close your time refreshed, praying the words of James' brother Jude: "To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God, our Savior, be glory, majesty, power and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 1.24)

## COMMENTARY

v.1: **My brothers**...His sermon continues and James the pastor reminds them again of their family relationship before he confronts a blight on fellowship in the church. Throughout the section, James assumes that his Messianic audience are sincere believers but their current behavior is putting their faith at risk. Like a loving pastor, he calls them to wrestle with the sin emptying the power from their faith, to repent and find life-giving transformation in Christ.

**show no partiality**...James warns his listeners that showing partiality, favoring one over another, is disobeying the word. Favoritism is the complete contradiction to true religion which is marked by caring for the marginalized (1.27).

Scot McKnight notes the grammatical structure of verse one strategically places partiality in conflict with their confession of faith in Jesus Christ. In essence, it could read “do not ... in partiality ... confess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious one,” showing the assembled Christians where their favoritism was disconnecting them from their confession of faith.

Partiality, literally to ‘receive the face,’ which was brought into the Greek from Hebrew describes favoring one based solely on their external characteristics. According to Douglas Moo, this included “race, nationality, wealth, or manner of dress.”

The early church frequently dealt with issues of discrimination based on racial and ethnic lines. As diaspora Jews came to faith in Jerusalem, their widows were neglected in favor of the Hebraic widows (Acts 6.1). To answer this partiality, the apostles appointed deacons to ensure all widows were served equally. Where the churches were multi-ethnic, like those who partnered with or were planted by Paul, partiality was always a concern. Paul addressed partiality both in the Church in Rome and in Ephesus in the same terms as James (Romans 2.11; Ephesians 6.9). James and Paul challenge us to stop passing judgments on people based on external characteristics or cultural biases because in the process, we are condemning ourselves and refuting our very confession of faith in Christ (Romans 2.1)!

**as you confess faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory**...Jesus Christ is the Lord of glory: he is the presence of God the Father among us, like the glory of God leading the people out of Egypt and inaugurating the Temple (Exodus 13.20-22; 2 Chronicles 7.1-16). And if He – God incarnate, God with us, dwelling with us – then we should adopt his kingdom view of all peoples made in His image, rich and poor, Jew and Greek, male and female (John 1.3, 14; 1 Corinthians 8.6; Colossians 1.16; Hebrews 1.2).

James encapsulates the nature of Jesus in a rapid-fire sequence, the aspects that would have been recognized in the believer’s confession. Jesus is our Lord. He holds

absolute control over His creation, the supreme authority. Jesus is our Savior. The name Jesus is the transliteration of the Hebrew name *Yehoshua* which means 'God saves.' Jesus is our Christ. He is the anointed one, the Messiah promised by the Father who would deliver His people. Jesus is glorious. He is the regal majesty radiating from the Father. What a confession, indeed! Jesus is our glorious Lord, Savior, and Deliverer.

v. 2-3: **The Rich and the Poor**...The specific form of discriminatory favoritism occurring among Messianic congregations was along lines of wealth and poverty. The poor were being neglected and treated as less than image bearers of God should be, while the rich were being given royal treatment. Therefore, James the preacher chooses to illustrate his point with an image they recognized.

For whatever reason various Jewish Christians were favoring the rich, this was most likely taking place in their local synagogues. Solomon Andria tells us that not until the rabbinic council in AD 90, held in Jamnia, where they declared an absolute distinction between Judaism and Christianity. Perhaps some Messianic believers were seeking to curry favor with wealthy patrons and members of their synagogues as a way to influence them toward the gospel. This, however, seems to be an ineffective witness as it appears to not lead to the rich accepting Christ as Lord while simultaneously dishonoring the poor.

**For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing**...What is translated 'wearing a gold ring' appears to be a word James made up, literally meaning 'goldfingered,' implying someone showing off his wealth and status.

Bo Reicke argues that in the Roman empire only senators or noblemen were permitted to wear gold rings and 'splendid garments' of a politician who is seeking public office. Just as a politician today will seek to acquire the support of diverse groups in his district, this was similar at the time of James' letter. He goes on to say, "simultaneously the religious and the secular organizations of antiquity were eager to secure might and wealthy protectors." In this sense, politicians were looking for support from the masses, and the Messianic Jewish communities were also searching for powerful politicians to champion their cause.

Paired with goldfingers, the rich man is wearing fine clothing. This recalls the contrast that Jesus used to describe John the Baptist (Luke 7.25). John was not a wealthy, well-dressed man living comfortably in a palace, but an obedient prophet receiving all those who would heed his call to repentance in preparation of Christ's kingdom (Matthew 3.2).

**and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in**...The poor man is destitute, dressed in filthy clothes. One can imagine him entering the fellowship of believers with all the senses; smelling his stained rags and see his reddened sore-covered skin, unkempt hair and emaciated cheeks. As he stood next to them could they hear his

empty stomach crying for bread. And yet, as he entered they did not touch his feet to clean them as a guest, but told him to sit by their anointed feet while the rich reaped the spoils of their hospitality.

v. 3: **and if you take notice of the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place”**...James uses the verb ‘take notice’ ironically here. It means to give special attention to someone or something. Luke is the only other biblical author who uses this particular word and his use draws the contrast. James’ audience gives their special and careful attention to the rich man, doting on him as they take notice of his fine clothing. Luke records the virgin Mary’s song, where she glories that in her humble and low social status, God took notice of her, elevating her in His mercy, casting down the proud and the strong as He lifted the humble and filled the hungry (Luke 1.48, see vv.46-55). In the same way, Luke records a father beside himself in distress, urgently calling to Jesus to take notice of his suffering son (9.38). Jesus does take notice of the demon-possessed boy *and* of his distraught father, meeting both of their needs for mercy and healing.

The congregation giving the best seats to the wealthy have more in common with the Pharisees who loved their priority seating than Jesus who rebuked the Pharisees directly and in parables (Matthew 23.6-7; Luke 14.7-14).

**while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet”**...As the wealthy person is given more than enough room and generosity, the poor are left to stand awkwardly or sit undignified by someone’s feet. The image of the poor being dishonored while the rich are feted should embarrass some and infuriate others. This is not goodness for the poor promised by Isaiah that Jesus came to fulfill (Isaiah 61.1; Luke 4.18).

v. 4: **have you not then made distinctions among yourselves**...These distinctions are the products of double-mindedness. They are re-introducing the way of the world which Jesus came to turn upside down. Paul witnessed a similar division between the rich and poor believers in Corinth, dishonoring the Lord’s supper, as the wealthy ate and drank to their hearts’ content while others were left watching and hungry (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). A meal that was meant to commemorate the work of Jesus became shameful as they discriminated against the poor. This symbolizes their lack of love for one another rather than the glory of Christ.

**become judges with evil thoughts**...The Ivorian theologian Soro Soungalo summed this point up perfectly: “Favoritism easily becomes corruption.” James rebukes the followers of Jesus for becoming judges that elevated the rich to a position not rightfully theirs while insulting the dignity of the poor who bear God’s blessing. To do the opposite of how Jesus the Messiah showed his followers to live they are showing their corrupted mental processes (McKnight). They have, through their sinful decisions and actions, chosen a worldview foreign to that of King Jesus and his kingdom. Favoritism has easily become corruption.

Tuesday, July 13.....James 2.5-7

## **A Promise from the King**

*<sup>5</sup> Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? <sup>6</sup> But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? <sup>7</sup> Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?*



## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why is it refreshing that God has chosen the poor in the world for His special attention?
2. Remembering his Jewish audience, what bearing do Moses' words have on James' rebuke?
  - a. Deuteronomy 4.37-38
  
  - b. Deuteronomy 7.7-8
3. What does James mean that the poor are chosen to be rich in faith?
4. What does he mean that the poor are heirs to God's kingdom?
5. How is James challenging his audience to take off the burdens of this world that pursues the rich, power and influential hoping for their needs to be met?
6. James called the Church to stop putting her hopes in the rich and powerful of this world who were only sustaining their patterns of abuse, but instead to remember God's promises for those who love Him. Why is this still difficult for us today?

## • PRAYER POINT •

### A LIFE REFLECTING THE KING

- John Chrysostom, the great fifth century preacher and Archbishop of Constantinople, called the church to “bear the greed [of the rich] as patiently as you can! Those people destroy themselves, not you. For while they rob you of your money, they strip themselves of God’s favor and help. For the one who bases his life on greed and gathers all the wealthy of the world around him is in fact the poorest of all.”
- At the time of Chrysostom’s preaching, he witnessed the rampant abuse of power and wealth in the Empire and the Church. He practiced what he preached, not saving his household budget for personal comfort, but to care for the poor and build hospitals.
- Ask the Lord where He is calling you to create space in your life, family and community to love those He’s chosen.

## COMMENTARY

v. 5: **Listen, my beloved brothers**...In the middle of his accusation against their unChristlike behavior, he once again reinforces that he still believes they are his brothers and sisters in Christ. He is writing them chiefly because he knows they are his spiritual family and desires to correct their misguided practices.

Theologian Solomon Andria of Madagascar shows us these failures are universal. He says, "Christian communities in Africa are not immune to this sometimes unconscious discrimination in favor of the rich since the power of money is strong when many are poor. The rich are easily noticed and gain the respect of leaders. Then the poor find themselves shoved to one side because, as the proverb says, 'thin cows are not licked by their friends.' They are ignored because they are 'thin' and cannot make a financial contribution to the community."

**has not God chosen those who are poor in the world**...Once the ancestors of James' audience were poor slaves in Egypt. In the midst of their suffering God did not turn a cold shoulder to his people in favor of the strong and powerful Egyptians. In fact, God was faithful to His promise to Abraham to bring his people out of their poverty and suffering (Exodus 3.9; Deuteronomy 4.37-38; 7.7-8; 26:7). Jesus took up this special concern for the poor (Luke 6.20).

Many first century believers were not from the privileged classes of society, as seen in the Church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1.26) and the Messianic assemblies James was writing. As noted by Schreiner and Perrin, "God overturns human expectations in those whom he calls to salvation. He does not typically choose the wise, the powerful and the 'somethings' of this world, but instead shows his favor to the foolish, the weak and the 'nothings' of this world." The Church was not called to seek out social status and public honor, sought after by as many in the Greco-Roman world as today, but to boast in the high status of their Lord Jesus Christ.

**to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom**...The poor followers of Jesus are unencumbered with the deceptive wealth of this world that entices us to preserve our comfort, status and power above all things, losing our faith in the process. For those who seek after Jesus will find him, ready to embrace them, meeting their needs for mercy, making them rich in faith. They will be exceedingly rich in faith because they are now blessed as heirs of the kingdom (Matthew 5.3; Luke 6.20). Like the Israelites of old, poor and oppressed in slavery, God made them heirs to His kingdom, inheritors of promised land and purpose. The poor in the assemblies of Messianic Jews were the physical image of their ancestors who God led out of Egypt into the His promise.

**which he has promised to those who love him**...As the people of Israel came out of Egypt on their desert journey to the promised land, God met with them at Sinai, there establishing the foundation of the law. God's promise found in Exodus 20.6 would

have reverberated in the ears of James' hearers in these words. God promised to show love to them and for a thousand generations to those who loved Him.

v. 6: **But you have dishonored the poor man...**In the middle of his series of questions, James places this loving rebuke: you have dishonored the poor. It is not a point open for debate. They have not imitated Christ and his action toward the poor, the marginalized and disenfranchised. They had flipped Jesus' call, dishonoring the small while welcoming the great (Luke 9.48), and in the process creating more problems for themselves as the following phrases demonstrate.

James draws on the Greek translation of Proverbs 14.21 which states "it is a sin to "dishonor/despise" one's neighbor, but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy." James reproves his audience for failing to remember their heritage in God's story of redemption by dishonoring the poor.

**Are not the rich the ones who oppress you...**Sadly, just as they have mistreated the poor among them, the wealthy have done the same to them.

It is a common human belief that the wealthy and influential are the ones who can best champion a cause. If the Messianic believers across the Roman Empire were hoping to most effectively communicate the good news of Jesus, in a worldview not shaped by Christ, they would seek to get the well-resourced rich and the politically connected powerbroker in their communities in the Church. But, like the current Church in North America who mirrors this misled perspective, James sees the believers being oppressed, persecuted and abused by the very ones they were seeking to impress.

**the ones who drag you into court...**James leaves the details of the oppressions the rich were laying on the church undefined except for one example: they were aggressively being taken to court by the rich. Perhaps these cases were centered on outstanding debts or land disputes, regardless, James rebukes them for modeling their lives more on those persecuting them than after Christ.

If Bo Reicke is correct, arguing that the goldfingered, toga-wearing, rich, highly honored in the assembly of the Christians are politicians (much to the greater disenfranchisement and dishonor of the poor), then not only have their human efforts to curry favor with the powerful failed but they have created even more problems for themselves in the process. During the reign of Emperor Domitian (AD 81-96), "it was dangerous to have connections with senators and rich men, since they and their retainers were subject to prosecution by the Roman authorities... This danger would be avoided by not permitting such rich men to control a Christian community." (Reicke)

v. 7: **Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?**...If the behavior of the Christians was not like that of Christ who loved the poor, mercifully taking notice of their needs, then how much more were lives of the rich blasphemous to the name of Christ!

If these rich people were members of the church, oppressing their fellow Christians, dragging their co-heirs in Christ before worldly courts for their selfish gain and personal profit, they had more in common with Saul the persecutor than Paul the redeemed Apostle (Acts 9.14). Their actions, even more than the middle-income families in the church, were profaning the holy name of Jesus. They were not loving the Lord God or their neighbor as they dragged the poor into court.

Wednesday, July 14.....James 2.8-13

## Life by the Royal Law

*<sup>8</sup> If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. <sup>9</sup> But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. <sup>10</sup> For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. <sup>11</sup> For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. <sup>12</sup> So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. <sup>13</sup> For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. If the rich were blaspheming the name of Jesus by publicly persecuting the poor, what law does James recommend as a remedy for this sinful behavior?
  
2. How does the royal law remove the burden of this world from our lives?
  
3. What parallels can you draw between the sins of favoritism, murder and adultery?
  
4. Reflecting on James 2.12 what do Jesus and Paul say:
  - a. Matthew 12.36:
  
  - b. Matthew 23.23:
  
  - c. Matthew 16.27:
  
  - d. 1 Corinthians 3.10–15:
  
  - e. 2 Corinthians 5.1–10:
  
5. Hesychius of Alexandria described mercy like the oil wrestlers coat themselves in to escape the hands of their opponents. How does God's mercy help us in the wrestling match of this life?

## • PRAYER POINT •

### A MERCY TRIUMPHANT

- Today celebrate the royal law of Christ, loving God and those He brings across your path. Honor Him with your speech and action, quick to follow His Spirit's leading.
- Invite the Spirit to guide you through the names of those who've transgressed against you, forgiving them one by one—casting off the burdens of unforgiveness—breathing in the Father's forgiveness from your transgression.
- Spend time rejoicing in the mercy you've been shown through Christ. Be refreshed in His mercy as you seek to show mercy.



## COMMENTARY

v. 8: **If you really fulfill the royal law...** James the preacher turns the question sideways from his previous section. He has established that they have failed to honor the poor in a way that is pleasing to God. As if to turn his attention to those in the room who are saying with their eyes, “But I do care for the poor. I am loving my neighbor as myself,” he anticipates their reaction. He challenges them, if they are really fulfilling the royal law, putting Jesus’ commands into practice, then they are on the right track. Jesus’ command to love one’s neighbor as one’s self is the solution to the discrimination infesting the church (Matthew 22.39).

**royal law...** The law is royal, literally a kingly law, because it has been proclaimed by King Jesus. In it Jesus adds the purity teaching of Leviticus 19.18 to the Shema, which all Jews would have recited daily since childhood (Deuteronomy 6.4-9).

Built on the previous verses, where the Messianic believers have been injured for attempting to align themselves with rich and powerful people, James is reminding them that they are already established in direct relationship with the King of the Kingdom. In their efforts to curry favor with so-called goldfingered men to the detriment of the marginalized, they are actually distancing themselves from the King who holds absolute authority and has commanded them to care for the poor, the widow and orphan. Instead of pursuing the false promise of political connection they should put into practice the royal law of Jesus to love their neighbors.

**you are doing well...** As already noted, James is willing to assume that many in the congregations are putting their faith into practice, loving the poor among them. This phrase here then serves as a blessing. It is a contrast to the previous verse where the rich are blaspheming the name of Christ. By their fulfillment of the King Jesus royal law, they are making His name beautiful through their appealing behavior. Their sincere faith is revealed through their righteousness.

v. 9: **But if you show partiality...** Now James circles back to confront those who have shown favoritism so they might understand the deep gravity of their actions. Understanding the law of King Jesus, discriminating between their neighbors—prayerlessly choosing those who they thought deserved their attention—was a clear violation.

**[if you show partiality you] you are committing sin...** The origin of the Greek word we translate as ‘sin’ means to miss the mark, like an arrow missing the target. Scot McKnight argues that James’ precise use of the word ‘sin’ contextually develops its meaning to be “the perverse desire and choice not to do what one knows is good (1.14–15; 2.9; 4.17),” and as seen in verse 11, is an act against the will of God. Put together, those who have sinned have willfully missed the mark. They have taken errant aim with the arrow of their lives and failed to hit the mark.

**[if you show partiality you] are convicted by the law as transgressors...** Willful sin – intentionally missing the mark of God’s purpose for our lives – demands a divine response. The choice to act against God, to break the royal law of Jesus, has made them guilty before God. They stand convicted of transgressing the law, which James will make clear in vv. 10-11.

v. 10: **For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it...** Remembering that James’ audience were Messianic Jews is important because they were earnestly seeking to keep the law of Moses, to be pure and undefiled in their observance of the law. These words must have been a painful reminder of King David’s words: “there is no one who does good...all have turned away and have become corrupt” (Psalm 14.1, 3). Breaking any one law, even this one royal law, they had become guilty of the entire law.

v. 11: **For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law...** Messianic Jews understood that one was either observant or a transgressor when it came to law. Not committing adultery but killing someone did not make a person only partially guilty of transgressing the law; they were fully judged as a transgressor (McKnight). The Messianic Jews would also been acquainted with Jesus’ teaching on these points in the Sermon on the Mount, as well (Matthew 5.21-30). It was not just the external action that made a person ‘miss the mark,’ but the internal motivation (or corrupted desire) beneath it.

These two particular sins could seem rather intense when set next to favoritism as examples of human transgression against God, but when we consider it further they make perfect sense. James, following Jesus, uses these two aggressive and dehumanizing sins as parallels to the sin of mistreating the marginalized, at-risk and poor. Murder and hatred makes another person expendable, negating they have been made in the image of God capable of knowing him and making him known (Genesis 4.1-11). Adultery and lust deforms another person into a sexual object to be used for personal gratification. None of these distortions “hit the mark” of God’s good and perfect will for his people to love and respect one another, not using others or dehumanizing others for our self ambitions (Philippians 2.3)

v. 12: **So speak and so act...** By this James encapsulates all of life into these two: speaking and acting. One thinks of Luke reminding Theophilus of his gospel where he wrote about “all that Jesus began to do and to teach,” (Acts 1.1); later returning in Stephen’s description of Moses (as ‘powerful in speech and action’ 7.22) in his speech before the Sanhedrin. Scot McKnight spurs us to remember that the final judgment “will be established in what we say...and do,” (see Matthew 12.36; 16.27; 25.31–46; 1 Corinthians 3.10–15; 2 Corinthians 5.1–10).

**those who are to be judged under the law of liberty...** James reminds his audience that they will be judged before the throne of God, not by the law in its unfulfilled state, but by how they lived out the law of freedom fulfilled in Christ. With this understanding, it is not just the observance of the law, *i.e.* not committing adultery or murdering others, but loving neighbors as one's self and caring for the poor.

Knowing that we will be judged under the law of liberty, we should seek to put into practice a ministry of liberation in the lives of others. Just as Jesus has made us free, so we should stand firm, not become burdened again by the yoke the world (Galatians 5.1). Therefore, seek to free others, not tying up heavy, impossible loads or requirements on others, practicing what we preach (Matthew 23.4).

v. 13: **For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy...** For those without mercy the judgment of God is devoid of mercy. This is a painful and bleak indictment of the favoritism practices in the church communities James is addressing. But by confronting these behaviors now, those listening to James have time to confess their sin, admitting their transgression against the marginalized poor, and begin showing mercy as Jesus called them to do.

**Mercy triumphs over judgment...** Understanding how James uses the word mercy in context helps see the verbal and behavioral sides of caring for others, especially those who cannot care for themselves. This is mercy: generosity in our speech, and readiness to respond to the needs of others.

Christlike mercy triumphs over judgment. James' words reverberate with the Lord's prayer and Jesus' beatitude: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy," (Matthew 5.7). Showing mercy like Jesus expresses a Jesus-life within that triumphs over the weight of judgment. Those who practice mercy, who love and serve those who are in need, do not need to fear the judgment. They have shown mercy and will be shown mercy.

The word for 'triumphs' carries the idea of boasting, like a warrior who stands triumphant after the battle or the greased wrestler imagined by Hesychius who defeated his opponent in the ring. The merciful stand victorious because they have chosen to speak and act like Christ.

Thursday, July 15.....James 2.14-17

## **Faith in Action in the Face of Nominal Belief**

*<sup>14</sup>What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? <sup>17</sup>So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How should our Christian faith be good and beneficial:
  - a. For us?
  
  - b. For those in need around us?
  
  - c. Where does the merciful action overlap with our professed faith?
  
2. What would be your first reaction if you saw your own brother or sister walking toward you with torn clothes, dirty and looking emaciated?
  - a. Why would that be your reaction?
  
  
  - d. Why is it so striking to imagine yourself not helping your sibling in the face of dire need?
  
3. How do our external acts of mercy demonstrate the internal depths of our Christian confession?

## • PRAYER POINT •

### REPEALING CALLOUSES

- Often in our lives we need to examine our spiritual eyes for callouses. Saul, zealous to serve God was unable to see the good news of Jesus that was transforming the lives of his countrymen. It wasn't until he met with Jesus on the road to Damascus that he saw the truth of Christ's Lordship (Acts 9.1-9).
- In your walk through life today, seek the presence of Jesus to show you where callouses have grown over your faith, impairing your ability to show mercy to those in need.
- On the road to Damascus, Jesus placed real callouses on Saul's eyes, which only fell away when the disciple Ananias was obedient to visit Saul in his need (Acts 9.9-19).
- Respond to the Spirit's prompting to serve others to see their callouses fall away from their faith.
- Spend some time with a fellow follower of Jesus, unburdening yourself with them, trusting that God will peel back the callouses that have clouded your vision.

## COMMENTARY

Joined to the previous passage where the believers were failing to show mercy to the poor in their pursuit of wealthy and powerful patrons, some listening to James' messages would have become indignant. Perhaps in their frustration they were saying to themselves, "We are followers of Christ, just like James, and our strategies for personal and kingdom advancement surely share an equal footing with those of James." James anticipates this self-justification for their failing to care for the poor: their faith is dead.

v. 14: **What good is it, my brothers...** Building on his previous image of mercy triumphing over judgment, James asks his listeners what good is a faith without works? The word here translated 'good' connotes benefit. Therefore, what benefit is a faith that does not express itself through acts of mercy? The immediate context is still of the financially oppressed and struggling members of the church who are being neglected. James challenges them to question the sincerity of their salvation if they are willing to not show mercy as Jesus would.

In the words of Scot McKnight: "Works may well indicate the presence of faith, but the absence of works proves the absence of a faith that can bring about what James calls the 'good.'"

**if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?...** Much has been written on the apparent disparity between the teachings of James and Paul along these lines. Martin Luther who struggled with the guilty weight of his sins during his monastic years found freedom when reading Paul's epistle to the church in Rome (Romans 3.28). Subsequently, the reformation struggled to understand James and its place in Scripture. It is key to remember that James was most likely written after Paul wrote Romans and Galatians, in which time some believers would have been misinterpreting Paul's words to excuse their excesses, as well as their lack of work on behalf of the marginalized. Recalling this, these two Apostles do not stand in opposition to one another, but as hedges on two sides of the same narrow path, guiding people toward Christ as they balance their faith and faithful action.

Truly, faith that is empty and inauthentic cannot be defined as faith at all. It is worthless religion of the deceived heart and libertine lip. Works, in this sense, are like air exhaled from lungs breathing in the pure oxygen of God's grace. One can claim a dead body is living, but without the proof of air moving in and out of the lungs, the claim is baseless.

v. 15-16: **If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?...** James the preacher again sparks the imagination of his audience to recognize the poor Christians in their midst, even to turn their eyes to the poor men, women and children literally sitting on the floor by their

feet in the synagogue while the rich sat comfortably. The first illustration along these lines was the contrast of the goldfingered man and the destitute rag man. In the second, he strips the rag man, leaving him naked. This image is shameful, not just for the poor man or woman who is unable to dress correctly, but the community around them that leaves them naked.

Key to understanding these verses is the relational language employed by James. He does not call the Messianic believers to search out the unknown destitute or give alms to unknown beggars. James uses the words describing siblings, brothers and sisters. These are not unknown beggars or strangers. The believers would have known them. It is one thing to look at a panhandler one doesn't know and wonder if they are sincerely in need, but there is no question of the need of these brothers and sisters. How could a true sibling ignore the need in a brother and sister of Christ? Faith, true Christ-life faith involves mercy in action.

Warmest regards and best wishes do not fill the empty stomachs of orphans or defend the widow fighting for her life. They do not keep the cold man wearing rags warm. Platitudes don't put food on plates or cover shivering shoulders. James' messianic audience would have recalled the words of the prophet Isaiah (58.7-9) who "exhorted his contemporaries to put meaning into their religious rituals" by sharing their food with the hungry, sheltering the poor and clothing the naked (Douglas Moo).

**go in peace**...In many cultures, including the Jewish culture, a prayer of peace is used as an important way of greeting others (2 Samuel 15.9; Luke 10.5). At times, this becomes little more than 'hello'; but spoken with sincerity, it serves as a genuine appeal to God on behalf of the other person (Acts 16.36; 1 Samuel 1.17; 20.42).

James takes issue with the insincerity of the believers who have the means to mercifully act on the grave needs of their own brothers and sisters, but instead make empty appeals to heaven. Before them are standing their own brothers and sisters, half naked and starving, but instead of being moved by compassion like Jesus, they absolve themselves with a passive prayer (Matthew 9.36; Mark 6.34). They sound pious, but their faith is dead.

v. 17: **So also faith by itself if it does not have works, is dead**...Consider the words of Valerian of Cimiez, the fifth century French bishop, who was frustrated with the inactive piety of the merciless: "Fruitless tears are offered to heaven. What does it profit to bewail another man's shipwreck if you take no care of his body, which is suffering from exposure? What good does it do to torture your soul with grief over another's wounds if you refuse him a health-giving cup?"

James refutes those in the Messianic congregations who claim faith in Christ can exist that looks nothing like the life of Christ. Christ, even when He was tired, responded to the needs of others. His life was marked by compassion and acts of mercy.



It is worthwhile to speculate concerning the history of compassion in the early church. James was the pastor of the congregation in Jerusalem during the great famine of AD 45-63 (Acts 11.27-30). During this difficult time, several multiethnic fellowships planted by the missionary work of Paul, Barnabas and their contemporaries were actively raising funds to help their affected brothers and sisters in Jerusalem (Acts 20.1-5). Just as there were churches who put their faith into practice, sacrificially giving toward the needs of their impoverished brothers and sisters, there were surely others who did not—and to their shame. It is worth wondering if James is remembering this here, recalling those who excused their inactivity with passive prayers while their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem went hungry.

## A Living Faith Across the Ages

*<sup>18</sup> But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. <sup>19</sup> You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! <sup>20</sup> Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? <sup>21</sup> Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; <sup>23</sup> and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. <sup>24</sup> You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. <sup>25</sup> And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? <sup>26</sup> For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.*



## • PRAYER POINT •

### LIKE A FACE IN THE MIRROR

- The byzantine poet Symeon the new theologian, in the 10th century said, “Faith is shown by deeds like the features of a face in a mirror.” Ask the Lord to show you what the face of your faith looks like today.
- As followers of Jesus, you have breathed mercy into your living faith. How is He calling you to breath out mercy into the lives of others?

## COMMENTARY

v. 18: **But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works...** James the preacher drives his message home here with a careful shift from plural speech — addressing the audience as a whole—to singular pronouns, as if he were speaking one on one with someone.

He contrasts the “faith” of carefully crafted words versus his faith put into practice in the lives of others. These works do not replace faith, they are the products of faith. Moreover, these products of sincere faith are the evidence of faith itself. They are external evidence of internal transformation.

As seen in the next verse, the “faith” of an empty confession is held by another group James would not encourages us to model our lives after: demons.

v.19: **You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!**...The phrase ‘God is one’ is rooted in the Shema (Deuteronomy 6.4), the statement of faith recited daily by Jews. This proclamation of faith is a start, but one should not be deceived into thinking this kind of nominality is the kind of faith God wants for us.

James calls His audience, and us as well, to more than a nominal faith. Our faith must be more than a cross on a necklace or a family tradition. Recognizing the character and nature of God is good, but it is no different than what demons know to be true. At least when the demons remember the uniqueness of God, they tremble and react with extreme fear.

Ben Witherington sums it up perfectly: “The demons were perfectly orthodox and perfectly lost.” They are hardly the model to which we should aspire.

v. 20: **Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?**...James does not let up his argument against the person disagreeing with him. After demonstrating that the faith of this anti-works of mercy person is no different than that of demons he becomes even more sarcastic. James asks if the empty-headed person needs to be shown why their empty hand is useless.

vv. 21, 25: **Abraham and Rahab**...James now takes on his audience of one (see note on v. 18), by providing biblical examples that support his point. In true Jesus fashion, James uses both male and female examples. Think of John recording Jesus meeting with Nicodemus, a religious important man, and the Samaritan woman, a shunned woman with a difficult social standing (John 3-4). Luke takes this further, telling us the story of Jesus and his ministry making women and men equal in his narrative: Zechariah the priest and the Mary the young virgin (Luke 1.8-23, 26-38); Simeon and

Anna praising God at Jesus' dedication in the Temple (Luke 2.25-38); Jesus speaking to widows and lepers (4.25-27) are only a few examples.

v.21: **Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?**...Abraham is not justified by the action of offering up his son on the altar but by the faith that produced the obedient action. The word we translate 'justified' means to 'show to be righteous.' By this James means when we look at the life of Abraham we can see his righteous faith by what is visible: literally, his faith lived out in deeds. Abraham was put to the test and his works, rooted in faith, showed his righteousness. This same word reoccurs in v. 24 and 25.

Justified – 'shown to be righteous' – then stands in contrast to useless faith that is not good or beneficial. The life of Abraham, the father of the people of Israel, stands in contradiction to the empty-headed person's argument.

v. 22: **You see that faith was active along with his works and faith was completed by his works**...James cleverly brings faith and works together, making them inseparable but still distinct. James calls his audience to see that Abraham's faith took on an active role with his works. He places the verb *sunergeó* (which is the preposition 'with' joined to the noun *ergon* meaning 'work') next to the noun *ergon*. Literally, Abraham's faith worked in unison with his works, his faithful worked collaboratively with his works themselves. Doing this, his works made his faith complete.

Abraham is the perfect example for James' Jewish congregation. Abraham was the father of the nation, the example of obedient faith. And yet, he struggled in his journey with God, seeking to fulfill God's promise through his own means: taking his nephew Lot with him to be his heir, later his servant Eliezer and lastly the birth of his son Ishmael by his wife's servant Hagar. All of these were examples of Abraham's human attempts to fulfill God's plan for his life. It was, however, when he trusted God's promise to bring a son through Sarah that Isaac, the child of promise, was born. Considering the long and difficult road Abraham took to see the birth of Isaac, it is no small work for Abraham to obediently work out his faith by placing Isaac on the altar.

v. 23: **and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"**...When Abraham's faith worked together with his works, obediently trusting God's plan by placing Isaac on the altar, Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness.

This passage further demonstrates that James and Paul have the same objective, although from different vantage points in mind. Both James and Paul cite Genesis 15.6 concerning Abraham's faith being counted as righteousness (Romans 4.22; Galatians 3.6). Where Paul is correcting the Judiazers who are breaking the backs of Gentiles salvation tying it to Jewish law, James is applying braces to a disordered faith that claims there are no standards for the Christian life.

**he was called a friend of God...** James climbs to the pinnacle of his rebuttal to the empty-headed person disrupting the faith of the congregation celebrating that through his faithful action, Abraham was called a friend of God. James weaves this truth revealed in the voice of the prophet Isaiah and in the prayer of King Jehosaphat (Isaiah 41.8; 2 Chronicles 20.7). What higher honor could an image bearer seek to have than be called a friend of God?

**v. 24: You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone...**

To develop this faith and works thought more fully, Paul rightly teaches that faith and works are two different things, with which James here would agree. The two are distinct. In response, James reminds us that faith and works are inseparable, because true faith will always create works pleasing to God, with which Paul would readily agree also (Galatians 5.6).

Sandwiched between the faith shown to be righteous through action and the same in the life of Rahab, James calls his audience of one to see that a person is justified “shown to be righteous’ by acts of obedience.

**v. 25: And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by**

**works...** Rahab stands juxtaposed to Abraham, for where Abraham was obedient to offer his son believing in the faithfulness of God, Rahab risked her own life, and the life of her family, to preserve those of the Israelite spies believing in the faithfulness of their God (Joshua 2).

Rahab was highly regarded by the early church. Her low social status surely must have spoken to the disenfranchised survivors of sexual exploitation in the Greco-Roman culture. Many prostitutes in the Roman empire were slaves or former slaves pressed into by force or economic desperation. Alongside James, who reveres Rahab as an exemplar of faith applied through works, so the author of Hebrews champions Rahab as a hero who put her faith into action (11.31).

Following these biblical celebrations of Rahab, a first century leader in the Roman Church, Clement, wrote the struggle church in Corinth to be encouraged by Rahab as well (1 Clement 12.1-3, 8). He tells them it was her faith and hospitality to strangers that saved her when Jericho fell to the Israelites (Joshua 2). The Greek word used for hospitality by Clement is the same in the command of Hebrews 13 to not neglect hospitality to strangers and care for those suffering in prison as they love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ (Hebrews 13.1-3). Paul uses this same term when he called the Church in Rome (including Clement himself!) to put their love into action, devoting themselves to one another, sharing with one another and practicing hospitality (Romans 12.9-13).

**when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?**...In all of this, Rahab becomes a type for the Christian church, caring for those in danger and at risk, marginalized and in need. Her faith put her in between the people beloved of God

and those who would persecute them, rather than take the easier path of not intervening.

v. 26: **For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead**... Abraham and Rahab both put their faith into practice believing in the trustworthiness of God. From this, James says their faith was alive, visible to be seen as righteous. James has proved the argument that a confessional faith not marked by acts of mercy characteristic of God's revealed nature is in error.

Once again, capturing the image of air moving in and out of living lungs, a body apart from the spirit is dead. Faith inflates the lungs as we breathe in God's grace and mercy. And like lungs, we cannot hold our breath forever, we must exhale. It is in the action of exhaling our faith into the community and the world that we breathe out good works. Where a body is not breathing out works it is evident that the body is dead.