

Genuine Faith

Was last week's homework powerful? Only someone so steeped in Jewish tradition and indebted to the redeeming love of a brother of Jesus could write so articulately about the perfecting attributes of the "law that gives freedom" in connection with "the Word planted in us" being the perfect gift from the Father to make us the "first fruits of all he created". Could you hear Jesus' own voice echoed in the background of James' exhortation? Can you imagine Jesus standing behind his brother breathing inspiration into James' ear and flowing through his hand as he wrote each precious word?

James uses words with such economy that not one is wasted ink. Before we get started I want to point out this deliberate choice in words in the opening of Chapter 2. Otherwise we might miss this beautiful gem and think it just high and eloquent praise. Verse 1 begins,

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ...¹

So frequently when we read the opening of an epistle, or in this case the beginning of a new section of James' treatise on living our faith, we tend to skim over such flowery language and dismiss it as superfluous – thinking to ourselves "well, of course Jesus is glorious, I know that, let's get on to the message." But in this instance, and because we know James is so deliberate in his choice of words, let's pause over this description a moment to see what James is claiming. Look how this verse is translated by various scholars of James:

...faith in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ

...faith in our Lord of Glory, Jesus Christ

...faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Glory

...faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, our Glory

Jesus is being identified as Glory, or in the case of both the NIV and NRSV², "glorious" is an attribute or adjective describing Jesus. He is identified with the Shekinah glory of God – the visible manifestation of God's glory. For a couple of descriptions of this manifestation of glory, take a few minutes to read the following passages:

- Exodus 34:29-35
- Exodus 40:34-38
- Matthew 17:1-3
- John 1:14

¹ NIV

² "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?"

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

Personal Reflection

As we begin our homework this week, let's start with a bit of personal reflection and prayers of praise for who Jesus is. Reflect on God's Glory made manifest in our Lord as illustrated by the verses above. As you read John 1:14 consider John's words in connection with who was present with Jesus in the previous Matthew passage.

Favoritism

The rest of our homework for this week will be focused on Chapter 2 of James and in particular on the prevalent problem of favoritism. Favoritism was just as ubiquitous in James' day as it is today, and we may not even realize how easily we fall into this behavior. This is a sin that worms its way into virtually *every* public setting and *everyone* is prone to this behavior – it knows no social or economic boundaries and is almost second nature for all of us. Believe me I am not pointing my finger at anyone; I know I have fallen into this exact trap and have reaped the consequences for it. Oh, the things we will realize we have missed out on when we recognize we have denied another person a second thought or a kind word based on our own poor judgment! I have been there and done that more often than I want to confess, and each time it has brought shame upon me. The opposite is true as well – I am ashamed to say, there have been times when I've given more attention to someone based on wrong motives. It never works and lessens our testimony as children of God in the eyes of those who may be watching our behavior.

James' lesson today is like a firebrand waving in our faces and if we read his words with the desire to let it change our hearts, we will need a good measure of God's grace to gaze intently upon our reflection in the mirror of "*the perfect law that gives freedom*"³ today. As we prepare for today's lesson, take a few minutes before the Lord and ask him to awaken our souls and give us the grace to change the way we think about and interact with others, both in the church and in the world.



Read James 2:1-13 and answer the following questions.

In verses 2-4 James gives us a hypothetical illustration of a situation. Where does it appear this little scene takes place?

³ James 1:25

Describe the two men who enter.

How are the two men treated?

What are the reasons why these men might be treated so differently? What are the thought processes behind the treatment of each?

By whose or what standard are the rich man and poor man being judged?



It is very interesting to me that the same Greek word used to describe the way the poor man is dressed in “*dirty clothes*”, is the same as the word used in 1:21, in the phrase “*get rid of (cast off) all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent*”(NIV). What is the connection between the “dirty clothes” and the “moral filth”? In verse 4, James points out the discrimination and condemns the behavior as “*[judging] with evil thoughts*”. How is this connected with the “*evil that is so prevalent*” of 1:21?

According to verse 6, this behavior insults the poor and extends favor to the rich.

- How is this behavior an insult to the poor? See 1 Corinthians 11:22b.

- What does James tell us the rich are doing to the community of brethren (v.7)?
- And again, for emphasis, who is it this community is catering to in this hypothetical situation?

What is it we must do to “do right” according to James (v8)? Look up Leviticus 19:18 and Luke 10:25-28.

- How are we to treat others?
- What does James call this law?

“Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!”

*1 Corinthians 11:22b
(NIV)*

In verse 10 James says, “*For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking ____ of it*” (NIV)⁴. James uses the sins of adultery and murder in his argument – the first being somewhat less grave than the first, at least in the eyes of man. But in God’s estimation how does he view both these sins, and then additionally what can we extrapolate about showing favoritism?

At the end of our scripture passage today what does James exhort his *hearers* to *do*⁵? See also Matthew 6:14-15, 18:21 and Ephesians 4:31-32.

Our scripture lesson today starts with an exhortation by James: “*don’t show favoritism*” (2:1b)⁶. Favoritism, from the Greek literally means “lifting the face” which originates from the ancient practice of when a subject, seeking an audience with a ruler, would prostrate himself face down on the ground. The ruler would indicate whether or not that subject could “lift his face” from the ground for an audience, or the ruler could refuse the audience and leave him face down in the dirt. When we show favoritism we are doing exactly what that ruler did – judging whether or not a person is worthy of our attention.

Verse 4 goes on to say that when we show favoritism to one above another – showing favor

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based on outward appearance or social standing – we have “*made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts.*” (NRSV) James is saying in essence, “Who do you think you are when you judge someone worthy or not worthy of your attention?” Not only have we slighted and rejected the one we have deemed not worthy, but how

are we to know what we have rejected in favor of outward appearance and social standing? Have we turned our back on someone whom we could have helped? Or shone the love of God to? Or perhaps that person was gift from heaven sent our way, someone the Lord sent to be our friend or to bless us in some way.

⁴ Here the NIV’s translation “*breaking the law*” is stronger than the NRSV’s “*accountable for the law*” and more in line with the Greek “*ptaiō* meaning to stumble, offend, or fall in the moral sense. —Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words”

⁵ See James 1:22

⁶ Very bluntly and succinctly translated by the NIV.

That evil judgment and our rejection of those around us reveal a heart more keen on increasing our own social status by associating with those whom society deems “acceptable”. We are attempting to increase our social status and seeking the favor of man over God. One commentary explains it this way: “Do not try to combine faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, our Glory, with the worship of men’s social status.”⁷

Our society is rampant with a type of idolatry called social status. We “friend” people on facebook with whom we want to be associated. We can also “unfriend” those whom we no longer regard as worthy of our attention. We seek “face time” with those who can further our agenda, whether personal, or political; whether it benefits us individually or an organization to which we belong. Do we seek out and court those whose wealth may benefit our church, our favorite charity, our school? While these may be “noble” motivations, they require us to act ignobly, showing favoritism to those who can help us, at the expense of others. Those who have pithy things to say about current events often have “followers”. You frequently hear, “I follow so and so on twitter”, or “I have so many followers on Instagram”. Ironically many of whom we “follow”, while they may have amusing things to say, often say little of any substance. We follow people in the tabloids, or on reality TV because they are entertaining or famous (more likely infamous) because of their behavior and activities, not usually their good morals or values. Yet they garner a huge following, even among the body of Christ. These people become our idols and yet they share none of our values and frequently reveal their hatred towards the Lord by their words and actions. When we seek after and focus our attention on these so-called celebrities (idols) we choose them above whom? Our God! We choose their filth over our Lord and Savior whose face we have left in the dust. And our attention and interest then leads others to follow suit. Favoritism is idolatry – it is showing favor to someone or something above God. And, it is incompatible with the ways of God. Favoritism is the idolatry of social status. Favoritism is in direct opposition to the royal law: “Love your neighbor as yourself”.

Favoritism falls under the same category as the “*moral filth*” and “*evil that is so prevalent*” of James 1:21. When we participate in or make a practice of favoritism, we treat those whom we are showing no favor with utter contempt. We treat the favored one with zealous hospitality; but, the unfavored we treat despicably. Verse 3, usually translated as “*Sit on the floor by my feet*”⁸ ought actually be translated as “*sit here under my footstool*”. Psalm 110:1 reveals what it means to be someone’s footstool:

*The LORD says to my lord,
"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies your footstool."*

The one we tell to “*sit at my feet*”, or more accurately, “*under my footstool*” we are treating like an enemy of God. If this isn’t enough to take your breath away, James says in verses 5-6, this person is chosen by God to inherit the kingdom. The one whom we not only have insulted, we have also treated as our enemy. In this scenario, who are we behaving like? The very ones to whom

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⁷ NICNT

⁸ NIV and NRSV

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preferential treatment is given – the ones, in these verses, who drag Christians into court and show contempt for the Lord. We are emulating the very ones who do not love the Lord.

Faith and favoritism do not mix. In fact favoritism, like any worldly behavior, squelches the holy presence of God within us. 2 Corinthians 4:6-7 says, “*For it is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us’*”. The Glory of God, the Shekinah glory made manifest in Jesus Christ resides within us as it had in the tabernacle of Moses’ day. We are the temple in which the glory of God rests, and yet we can so easily prevent it from shining brightly in the world by our evil tendencies. The NRSV begins Chapter 2 by posing this question in verse 1: “*My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?*” Clearly in James’ mind, one cannot show favoritism and truly believe that Jesus – and all he taught – was God made manifest in him.

When we act with mercy, we reveal that we know we too have had need of mercy at one time or another. We reveal that we know our Lord Jesus Christ and have benefited from his mercy. We reveal that we know what it means to be children of God acting justly but also with compassion.

Faith Without Works is Dead

Did James’ words hit close to home in our previous lesson? They did for me too. How I wish I could teach the easy parts of scripture and leave out some of the more challenging and finger-pointing passages – but that would do us no good. James probably knew Jesus better than anyone (save His mother), and he speaks with the same eager vehemence that Jesus did. And in that eagerness I think there is a sincere desire for those of us who confess Jesus as our savior, to live according to that belief and to eradicate those behaviors that reveal a double-minded heart. Favoritism certainly is that – double-minded. It requires us to make judgments based on exteriors and preconceived notions, a methodology of the world, rather than viewing the person before us as a beloved child of God. We become torn between two world orders that cannot co-exist.

Today we delve into one of James’ more well-known and perhaps controversial passages regarding faith and deeds. We will look at his words and examples drawn from the Old Testament. We briefly look at why some have deemed this passage contrary to Paul’s writings. Take a few moments to prepare to study this inspired Word of God.



Read James 2:14-26 and answer the following questions.

Consider verse 14 and fill in the blanks: “*What _____ is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith _____ you?*”

In the illustration of verses 15-16, is the blessing offered of any use to the poor person? _____

Has anything good come out of that interaction? _____

How would you describe the effectiveness of that blessing?

James is comparing faith to that empty blessing if it is a faith that puts too much stock in just believing in Jesus' saving work on the cross. We were saved for so much more than just believing that Jesus died for our sins so that we could have eternal life. We were saved with a greater purpose, read John 15:12-17.

- According to verse 16, what is the purpose for which he chose us?
- How do we bear fruit that will last? (see v. 17)

Do you think that the love Jesus is talking about is active or passive?

- What does Matthew 7:26 say?
- According to 1 John 3:17-18, what are we to put into practice?

According to James 2:18, how does James reveal his faith?

In verses 20-24 James gives us Abraham as an illustration to prove his argument that faith without works is dead. For a little background on Abraham, what do the following verses tell us about Abraham's relationship with God?

- Genesis 15:6
- Romans 4:3

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.

Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.

This is my command: Love each other.

John 15:12-17 (NIV)

- 2 Chronicles 20:7

- Isaiah 41:8

For what was it that Abraham was considered righteous? (See Genesis 22:1-19, in particular verses 12 and 16.)

According to verse 22, what were Abraham's faith and actions doing?

How does the end of verse 22 describe the interaction of work and faith?

Was Abraham saved by just believing God is who he said he was? How was his faith measured?

In verse 25 James points to Rahab as an example of living faith. How did she prove her faith? (See also Hebrews 11:31)

One last point to consider in this argument that faith that produces no works is dead. Go back and read James 2:19. Who else believes that God exists? _____ By the description of their reaction to God, what does this tell us?



Is just believing in Jesus sufficient for salvation?

James was combating a superficial faith that had no wholesome effect in the life of the professed believer. Paul on the other hand was combating legalism – the belief that one may earn saving merit before God by his good deeds. – Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 12, p. 169

Our scripture passage today is one of James' most notorious passages that seems to confound and confuse more Christians through the centuries than any other passage. Even Martin Luther found frustration and an inability to reconcile Paul's prolific writings with James' blunt and to the point letter. Are Paul and James' stands necessarily an "or" debate: faith *or* works; or is it possibly an "and" command: faith *and* works?

Paul in his writing makes the case that salvation is by faith alone, but here it may appear that James is making a contradictory argument for actions or works leading to salvation. That is clearly not the case. We cannot earn salvation by our works – by serving and obeying God. Paul's epistles addressed those who believed they could earn their salvation through their actions. It is only our faith that will justify us in the eyes of God.

James, on the other hand, is writing to an audience that already believes they are saved by faith, but resting on the faulty belief that intellectual recognition of Jesus being their savior is sufficient. That kind of faith eventually stagnates; it does not mature and grow into a faith that will bear fruit through good works. Salvation must come through faith, but only true faith reveals itself in good works. Both Paul and James are correct, in that our salvation is guaranteed by faith, but it is our actions that reveal true faith. The teachings of James and Paul complement one another. Good works do not justify or save us, but they testify to true faith. Active obedience demonstrates that our faith is genuine and complete. Faith allows our works to be “good” and our good works complete, mature and perfect our faith. Neither are stand alone elements of salvation and life in Christ. Coming to faith in Jesus isn’t the end, it is the beginning of a life dedicated to serving God and producing the good fruit God planned for us to complete.

The question to be asked, then, is: without those good works, does one who claims faith have *true faith*? If we have no works to testify towards our faith we are little more than the religious hypocrites who make a show of their faith, but their actions benefit only themselves. Where is true faith in such a lifestyle? James points out that even the demons recognize Jesus, shudder in fear of Him, but they do not obey him. True belief, true faith requires a commitment of the whole self, a complete commitment to God and an intentional turning away from the ways of the world. Being double-minded isn’t enough of commitment. Claiming to have our eyes on God, but making decisions based on worldly wisdom is not commitment to God; it is being double-minded. This commitment to God must be all or nothing, but when entered into whole-heartedly, it is transformative. True faith makes itself known in a changed life and good deeds that benefit others, watches out for the poor and oppressed, and is holy and righteous. This is the crux of James’ epistle.

Personal reflection

According to James 2:23, Abraham, by his faith and obedience was called God’s friend. Read again John 15:12-17. Jesus calls us his friend, not his servant, but his friend if we do what? What does it mean to you to be called a friend by Jesus?