

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Epistle of James: James 2:1-26

Broadly speaking, in James 1 we have considered Faith and Trials and Faith and Truth. In James 2, we will find:

1. **Faith and Favouritism** This deals with favouring the rich above the poor and God's view of the rich and poor in general.
2. **Faith and Laws** Here we find the Royal Law of Love; The Law of God given by Moses; and, the Law of Liberty that Christians possess today.
3. **Faith and Works** This section shows us that Faith is Revealed by Works; Faith is Perfected by Obedience; and, there is such a thing as Justification by Works as far as the Christian is concerned.

James 2:1-7 deal with 'Faith and Favouritism': *"My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts? Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?"*

James addresses his letter to 'My Brethren' so emphasising the family aspect of the church and his own sharing with them all. He immediately tells them that Christians (those who have the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ), do not show favouritism when assembled together. There is to be no difference to be made between the rich dressed in all his finery and the poor dressed in rags when they come into the assembly situation.

It was customary for the people in the Jewish synagogue to sit according to their rank, with those of the same trade together. The introduction of this custom into Jewish Christian places of worship is here refused by James. Rather, he indicates that Christ is the Lord of glory. As such, He provides both rich and poor Christians with glory because of their union with Him. The glory of Christ resting on the poor believer makes him to be regarded as highly by his fellow Christians as his richer brother. The Lord Jesus treated both rich and poor alike. The rich, like Nicodemus, were touched by the beauty of His Person, His compassionate works and His authoritative teaching. Elders and doorkeepers of churches should have the same qualities of the Christ who said, *"Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest for your soul: for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."* (Matthew 11:28-30). James insists upon no class distinction when assembled for church services. Today, we might say that there should be no age discrimination either.

Those who did show prejudice were setting themselves as judges of men. Unfortunately, they proved themselves to be judges having evil reasonings. It is God alone who knows the heart. Unfortunately, man tends to look only at the outward appearance (see 1 Samuel 16:7)

Nevertheless, there is obvious spiritual distinction between the rich and the poor, in general, because James pleads with his *beloved* brethren to remember that it is the poor of this world that God has chosen to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. He reminds them of the attitude of the rich to the things of God. They are those who both oppress the poor and blaspheme the name of Christ. *"And [do not] they blaspheme the excellent name which has been called upon you?"* James asks rhetorically (James 2:7).

Does this mean that God is prejudiced against the rich? By no means! God knows that the rich do not respond easily to His grace. The Lord Jesus said that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25, Luke 18:25). The reason for this is that so many of them prefer to serve their riches rather than serving God. From this, we determine that the world's judgment of the poor contrasts with God's. Those who despise or dishonour the poor despise the very ones whom God honours.

God's Kingdom is said to be "promised to them that love Him." (James 2:5) Most of those to whom James wrote would have dogmatically stated that the kingdom was promised to the Jew only. This was now seen to be an error. The kingdom is promised to those who love God and included Jew and Gentile.

Notice also the expression quoted previously, "that worthy name by which ye are called." (James 2:7) The rich Jew blasphemed the name of Christ, but God pronounces it a **worthy** name. It was by this name they were called - this seems to indicate that, when James wrote, the name **Christian** had been commonly adopted since its first coining in Antioch (Acts 11:26). The poor were the objects of persecution not so much because they were poor, but because they were identified with Christ, and He was the object of the world's hatred.

The next section James 2:8-13 deals with the Royal Law relating to: Loving our Neighbours, the Law of God and the Law of Liberty. We read in James 2:8-9: "*If indeed ye keep [the] royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well. But if ye have respect of persons, ye commit sin, being convicted by the law as transgressors.*"

This favouring of persons is not only contrary to the faith of Christ, but even to the law itself. The latter tells us to love our neighbours as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18). In James 2:8 this is called the 'royal' or 'kingly' law. It is the one command that should be observed by every king who would reign in a godly manner. Any person who breaks that law stands convicted as a transgressor as James 2:10-11 show: "*For whoever shall keep the whole law and shall offend in one [point], he has come under the guilt of [breaking] all. For he who said, Thou shalt not commit adultery, said also, Thou shalt not kill. Now if thou dost not commit adultery, but killest, thou art become transgressor of [the] law.*"

The Law of God of the Old Testament is like a chain. When one link (commandment) is snapped, then the whole law is broken. If we do not love our neighbours as ourselves then we are guilty of breaking the Law. But will we be judged by God as breaking the Law given by Moses?

The answer is, of course, 'No!' The reason being that we are not under that law, but under grace. In Romans 8:1-4, we read: "*There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*"

The Christian faces no judgment for sin because Christ bore that judgment on his behalf. Nevertheless, we shall stand before His judgment seat in a day to come. There, our works for Him will be assessed and rewards presented. 2 Corinthians 5:10 states: "*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.*"

This is confirmed by 1 Corinthians 3:11-15: "*For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.*"

In James 2:12-13, James speaks of the law of liberty: "*So speak ye, and so act, as those that are to be judged by [the] law of liberty; for judgment [will be] without mercy to him that has shewn no mercy. Mercy glories over judgment.*" As Christians, we shall be judged on the basis of the 'law of liberty'. This is an expression which shows that God has revealed His will to us through Christ. As those saved by grace, our lifestyle should match our profession. The law of liberty, through God's mercy, frees us from the curse of the Old Testament law. Therefore, we should be free to love and **obey willingly**. We, ourselves, are responsible to show mercy. If we will not in turn practice the royal law of love to our neighbour, that same law condemns us still more heavily than the old law, which spoke nothing but wrath to those who broke it. This idea takes us back to the treatment of 'the poor man in vile raiment'. Such prejudice had not been according to the mercy displayed in the Gospel. The leaders set themselves up as 'judges of evil thoughts'. By so doing, they were placing themselves under judgment.

In James 2:13, we read of mercy and judgment: "*For judgment [will be] without mercy to him that has shewn no mercy. Mercy glories over judgment.*" Here we see that divine mercy goes hand in hand with righteousness, and thereby it triumphs against the judgment that otherwise had been our due.

The next section shows us that faith is revealed by works. In James 2:14, James poses the following question: "*What [is] the profit, my brethren, if any one say he have faith, but have not works? can faith save him?*" This shows that true faith is a living thing which manifests its life in works.

The first example, found in James 2:15-16, shows that faith should practice love: "*Now if a brother or a sister is naked*

and destitute of daily food, and one from amongst you say to them, Go in peace, be warmed and filled; but give not to them the needful things for the body, what is the profit? So also faith, if it have not works, is dead by itself." This shows the practical side to a living faith. This is more than faith that simply gathers to itself certain knowledge of God. It involves faith witnessing to the loving kindness of God.

It must be noted that these works are *the works of faith*. That is to say, faith comes first. It is faith that makes a person a new creation called to do good works. Romans 3 and 4 confirm that we are justified by faith and not works. Galatians 3 confirms this. Meanwhile, the so-called 'good works' of an unbeliever pursuing salvation are classed by God as 'filthy rags' (See Isaiah 64:6).

Paul speaks of *'the works of the law'*. They are works done in obedience to the demand of the Law of Moses in order to gain a righteousness to bring someone into the blessing of God's earthly kingdom. *"This do, and thou shalt live"* said the Lord (Luke 10:28). Unfortunately, not one of us is able to keep that law. We are all sinners by practice and are all sinful in nature. Therefore, life cannot be gained by that Law of God. That law simply condemns us to death - for the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23).

In the words of FB Hole: "The works of faith, of which James speaks are those which spring out of a living faith as its direct impression and result. They are as much a proof of faith's vitality as flowers and fruit prove the vitality and also the nature of a tree. If no such works are forthcoming then our faith is proclaimed as dead, being alone." (*Hebrews to Revelation* Hole, FB ISBN: 9780901860453)

If a person claims to be a Christian but his life does not exhibit any works that bring glory to God, then his faith is classed as dead. It is very questionable that the person is a believer at all. Works flowing *from* the faith that justifies are commanded by James and by Paul. In writing to Titus, Paul states: *"These things I will that thou affirm constantly; that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works."* (Titus 3:8). The works that are to be kept up are those done by 'those who have believed'. We could define "good works" as selfless works completed for the benefit of others and to the glory of God.

One of the problems of this passage is found in James 2:24: *"Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only."* This seems to contradict the scriptures that say we are justified by faith alone. Then again, Romans 4:2 says: *"If Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God."* While James 2:21 states: *"Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar."* How can these things be explained? The answer lies in James 2:1: *"But some one will say, Thou hast faith and I have works. **Shew me thy faith without works, and I from my works will shew thee my faith.**"*

Justification by faith alone is **before God** (Romans 4:2). Our faith is quite apparent to His all-seeing eye. Ephesians 2:8-9 state: *"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."*

Justification by works of faith is **before men** (James 2:18). From the latter, we see that another believer may ask that we display our faith by our works, thus justifying ourselves and revealing our faith to him. Ephesians 2:10 says, *"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."*

In James 2:19 the question of believing in one God is raised. James writes: *"Thou believest that God is one. Thou doest well. The demons even believe, and tremble."* Here, James addresses an individual who believes there is one God. Yet, he demands, in the words that follow, that a response to such faith is necessary. He says that the demons believe in one God and hate him. They cannot be saved. Therefore, they tremble. So, the individual who believes in one God should show his faith by acting in a godly manner. If there is no action or change in lifestyle accompanying faith, then James 2:20 applies: *"But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?"* If men are to see that a Christian's faith is real then it must be characterised by obedience to God.

We may see a rich man donating large sums to charity. We may find a poor woman engaged in activities of kindness. Do these works show faith in God? Not necessarily! It depends on whether they are Christians acting for the glory of God or unbelievers acting independently of God.

There is always a danger of people thinking they are Christians if they are generous or helpful to others. It is recorded that DL Moody asked a man if he was a Christian when he appeared in the inquiry room. The fellow replied that he was a 'practical Christian'. Moody then asked when he was converted. The man answered, 'I never was converted. I don't believe in that stuff.' 'But the Bible says that you must be born again,' said Moody. 'I don't know anything about that. I don't believe the Bible.' 'You don't believe the Bible and you call yourself a practical Christian,' said Moody. 'Do you believe Webster's Dictionary?' 'Yes,' said the man, 'I believe in Webster's Dictionary.' 'Well,' said Moody, 'Webster says that a man who doesn't believe the Bible is an infidel. You'd better call yourself by your right name.'

The key to works that reveal faith is obedience to God. Such a Christian would have a keen interest in reading the Bible in order to gauge the will of God. She or he would attend a Bible-believing church and have a genuine care for fellow believers. Her or his life would also display acts of faith. Two examples of this are given by James in James 2:21-25. The first is the obedience of the father of the Jews, Abraham. We read: *“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Thou seest that faith wrought with his works, and that by works faith was perfected. And the scripture was fulfilled which says, Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he was called Friend of God. Ye see that a man is justified on the principle of works, and not on the principle of faith only”*.

When believers look at the record of Abraham's obedience, they see that Abraham believed God when He promised that Abraham would become a great nation (Genesis 12). How? By his actions in leaving his own country and family. In Genesis 18:18, God told Abraham that all the nations of the earth would be blessed in him. Then, in Genesis 21:12, we read, *“... In Isaac shall thy seed be called.”* The promises of God to Abraham depended on Isaac living. Abraham knew that God would not break His promise. God tested his faith by telling him to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering (Genesis 22). God only stopped Abraham from killing Isaac as he took the knife in his hand. Hebrews 11:19 tells us that Abraham trusted that God would have raised Isaac from the dead if he had been called upon to slay him. Abraham's obedience to God in this trial was an amazing expression of his faith.

Immediately after the offering, God confirmed His promises to Abraham: *“By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; **because thou hast obeyed my voice.**”* (Genesis 22:16-18).

The second example concerns a Gentile woman of bad reputation, Rahab, and is found in James 2:25: *“But was not in like manner also Rahab the harlot justified on the principle of works, when she had received the messengers and put [them] forth by another way.”*

The actions of Rahab in lodging and then hiding the Israelite spies showed that she had rejected the gods of her own culture and now feared the might and mercy of the God of Israel. In her confession of faith to the spies, she stated: *“I know that Jehovah has given you the land, and that the dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you. For we have heard that Jehovah dried up the waters of the Red sea before you when ye came out of Egypt; and what ye did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and to Og, whom ye utterly destroyed. We heard [of it], and our heart melted, and there remained no more spirit in any man because of you; for Jehovah your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.”* (Joshua 2:9-11). She firmly believed this because she risked her life to identify herself with the people who had the LORD as their God.

In conclusion, we find, *“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”* (James 2:26) The spirit is the life force of the body. Through the body the spirit expresses itself. So faith is expressed through works that bring honour to God. As a result of our study, we who are Christians must show ourselves to be faithful to God as those who:

1. Worship Him as Father - John 4:23-24 says: *“But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”*
2. Walk in His will - Ephesians 5:1-2 state: *“Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour.”*
3. Work according to His purpose - 1 Corinthians 5:58 encourages us: *“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”*
4. Witness to His Person - The Lord said to His disciples (Acts 1:8): *“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”*
5. War against evil for Him - Ephesians 6:10-13: *“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”*

May we do so for His name's sake.

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