

Faith and Works

James 2:1-17

Have you ever given serious thought to Faith and Works and how they relate to you and your walk with God? James starts this passage by calling his readers brother and sisters who claim Christ. James teaches that because we are children of God through faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, there are some things we ought not to do and there are some things we ought to do.

High on his list of “ought not to” is showing favoritism.” Jewish people in that day coveted recognition and honor, and vied with one another for praise. We have this same problem today. There are those, especially in this election year, seeking high positions among us, not only in politics, industry, and society, but also in the church.

James put it this way, a gold-fingered and brilliantly clothed man comes into the church, and this scene, a poor man in dirty clothes also enters. Special attention and preferential seating is given to the rich man, and standing room only or an inferior seat on the floor is afforded the poor man.

Sad to say, we often make the same mistakes. When visitors come into our church, we tend to judge them on what we see outwardly rather than what they are inwardly. Dress, color of skin, fashion, and other superficial things carry more weight than the fruit of the Spirit that may be manifest in their lives. It may be that we cater to the rich because we hope to get them to join and they may become big time givers to the church, and we avoid the poor because they embarrass us and we don't think that have anything to contribute in the way of giftedness or resources.

Jesus did not do this, and He will not approve of this kind of behavior in His Church.

We are to see people *through the eyes of Christ*. If the visitor is a Christian, we can accept him or her because *Christ lives in them*. If they are not a Christian, we can receive them because *Christ died for them*. It is Christ who is the link between us and others, and He is a link of love.

In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) one of our goals is to become an anti-racist, pro-reconciling church. Where all are welcome as children that God loves. The basis for relationship with others is the person and work of Jesus Christ. Any other basis is not going to work. Remember, God can use even the most unlikely person to bring glory to His name. He used Peter and Zaccheus and John Mark, Mary and Martha and God can use that poor man whom we might reject. But most of all, God can use us!

God has given us grace. Grace implies God's sovereign choice of those who cannot earn and do not deserve salvation (Eph. 1:4–7; 2:8–10). God saves us completely on the basis of the work of Christ on the cross and not because of anything that we are or have.

God ignores national differences (Acts 10:34). The Jewish believers were shocked when Peter went to the Gentile household of Cornelius, preached to the Gentiles, and even ate with them. The topic of the first church council was, "Must a Gentile become a Jew to become a Christian?" (Acts 15) The answer the Holy Spirit gave them was, "No!" In the sight of God, there is no difference between Jew and Gentile when it comes to condemnation (Rom. 2:6–16) or salvation (Rom. 10:1–13).

God also ignores social differences. Masters and slaves (Eph. 6:9) and rich and poor are alike, supervisor and worker are the same to God. James teaches us that

the grace of God makes the rich man poor, because he cannot depend on his wealth; and it makes the poor man rich, because he inherits the riches of grace in Christ.

Showing favoritism is also an “ought not” because it can lead a person into disobeying all of God’s Law. Take any of the Ten Commandments and you will find ways of breaking it if you show favoritism because of one’s social or financial status. Favoritism could make you lie, for example. It could lead to idolatry (getting money out of the rich), or even mistreatment of one’s parents. Once we start acting on the basis of favoritism and rejecting God’s Word, we are heading for trouble. And we don’t need to break all of God’s Law to be guilty. There is only one Lawgiver, and all of God’s Laws are from God’s mind and heart. If I disobey one law, I am capable of disobeying all of them; and by rebelling, I have already done so.

It appears that some of those listening to James defended themselves by saying they were only treating the rich man in the same way that they wanted to be treated. But James reached back into the Old Testament for one of God’s laws, “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Lev. 19:18). In His Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus told us that our neighbor is anyone who needs our help (Luke 10:25–37). It is not a matter of geography, but opportunity. The important question is not, “Who is my neighbor?” but “To whom can I be a neighbor?”

James called “love your neighbor” “the royal law” because it was given by the King. God the Father gave it in the Law, and Jesus the Son reaffirmed it to His disciples (John 13:34). The Spirit fills our hearts with God’s love and expects us to share it with others (Rom. 5:5). Christians are “taught of God to love one another” (1 Thes. 4:9).

But “love your neighbor” is the royal law for a second reason: it rules all the other laws. “Love is the fulfilling of the Law” (Rom. 13:10). There would be no need for the thousands of complex laws if everyone truly loved their neighbors.

But the main reason this is the royal law is that obeying it makes you a royal. Hatred makes a person a slave, but love sets us free from selfishness and enables us to reign like royalty. Love enables us to obey the Word of God and treat people as God commands us to do. We obey God’s Law, not out of fear, but out of love. So James sees obeying God's royal law as one of the “ought to's.”

Let us be clear. Christian love does not mean that I must like a person and agree with them on everything. I may not like their vocabulary or habits, and I may not want them for an intimate friend. Christian love means treating others the way God has treated me. It is an act of the will, not an emotion that I try to manufacture. My motive is to glorify God. I am able to do this by the power of the Spirit within (“for the fruit of the Spirit is love”). As I act in love toward another, I may find myself drawn more and more to them, and I may see in them (through Christ) qualities that before were hidden to me.

Love should help the poor person do better; love should help the rich person make better use of their God-given resources. Love always builds up (1 Cor. 8:1). This is another “ought to!”

Faith is a key doctrine in the Christian life. We were saved by faith (Eph. 2:8–9), and we are to walk by faith (2 Cor. 5:7). Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6).

Someone has said that faith is not “believing in spite of evidence, but obeying in spite of consequence.” When we read Hebrews 11, you meet men and women who acted on God’s Word, no matter what price they had to pay. Faith is not some

kind of nebulous feeling that we work up; faith is confidence that God's Word is true, and conviction that acting on that Word will bring God's blessing.

Now James is ready to move on and to discuss the relationship between faith and works. He said the two must go together! James gave a simple illustration. A poor person came into a fellowship, without proper clothing and in need of food. The Christian noticed the visitor and saw the needs, but did nothing to meet the needs. All the Christian did was say a few pious words! "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed" (James 2:16). But the visitor went away just as hungry and poorly clothed as he came in! The Christian forgot that food and clothing are basic needs of every human being, whether they are a Christian or a non-Christian.

As Christians, we have an obligation to help meet the needs of people, no matter who they may be. "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good to all, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). And Jesus said: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brothers, you have done it unto Me" (Matt. 25:40).

To help a person in need is an expression of love, and faith works by love (Gal. 5:6). The Apostle John emphasized this aspect of good works. "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and truth" (1 John 3:17–18, NIV). The priest and Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan each had religious training, but neither of them paused to assist the injured man at the side of the road (Luke 10:25–37). Each of them would defend his faith, but neither demonstrated that faith in loving works.

James says our confession of faith should result in a change in our behavior. Any declaration of faith should result in a changed life and good works. Saving faith always brings life, and life produces good works. Faith in Christ brings life

(John 3:16), and where there is life there will be growth and fruit and a concern for others that cause action on their behalf.^{1 2}

Before we close this message on what James tells us what we ought and ought not to do, I need to explain how this scripture has been misused. This passage is often used in an attempt to show that James and Paul had totally different views of salvation. It is apparently from the last four months of sermons that Paul's emphasis was that a person is saved by faith alone and that deeds do not come into the process at all. It is often argued that James is not simply differing from Paul but is flatly contradicting him. But James's emphasis is in fact a universal New Testament emphasis. It was the preaching of John the Baptist that people prove the reality of their repentance by the excellence of their works (Matthews 3:8; Luke 3:8). It was Jesus' preaching that men and women should live so that the world might see their good works and give the glory to God (Matthew 5:16). He insisted that it was by their fruits that people must be known and that a faith which expressed itself in words only could never take the place of one which expressed itself in the doing of the will of God (Matthew 7:15–21).

But this emphasis is not missing from Paul's teaching. His letters never failed to end with a section in which the expression of Christianity in works is insisted upon. Paul repeatedly made clear the importance he attaches to works as part of the Christian life. He speaks of God who will reward every one according to their works (Romans 2:6), and insists that every one of us will give account of ourselves to God (Romans 14:12). Each of us will receive own reward according to our labor

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Jas 2:1

²Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:824

(1 Corinthians 3:8). We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that every one may receive good or evil, according to what we have done in the body (2 Corinthians 5:10). The difference between James and Paul is they begin at different times in the Christian life. Paul begins at the very beginning. He insists that no one can ever earn the forgiveness of God. The initial step must come from the free grace of God; one can only accept the forgiveness which God offers in Jesus Christ.

James begins much later after we have become Christians, the one who has already forgiven and in a new relationship with God. Such a person, James rightly says, must live a new life because they are a new creature. The fact is that no one can be saved by works; but equally no one can be saved without producing works. By far the best analogy is that of a great human love. One who is loved is certain that they do not deserve to be loved; but they are also certain that they must spend their life trying to be worthy of that love.

The difference between James and Paul is a difference of starting-point. Paul starts with the great basic fact of the forgiveness of God which no one can earn or deserve; James starts with the Christian and insists that one is to prove their Christianity by their actions. We are not saved by works; we are saved for works; these are the twin truths of the Christian life. Paul's emphasis is on the first and James's is on the second. In fact they do not contradict but complement each other; and the message of both is essential to the Christian faith in its fullest form.³

We thank God for the opportunity to show our faith by our works for one another.

³ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Letters of James and Peter*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1976 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 62