

Lesson 2 | March 12, 2023

The True Life of Faith

Study Text: James 2:1–26

Central Truth: Authentic faith is expressed by our loving actions toward others.

Key Verse: James 2:17

Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone (KJV).

So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will recognize that partiality in the church is wrong.
- Students will love others as the Scripture commands.
- Students will express their faith by their actions.

Introducing the Study

Say: The Protestant reformer Martin Luther did not think the Book of James belonged in the Bible because he believed its teachings were contrary to the message of justification by faith. But a careful reading of the Book of James shows this to be untrue, highlighting instead the importance of works in the lives of those who already believe the gospel. Works do not bring us to salvation, but our faith in Jesus results in good works because we love Him and want to live in a way that pleases Him.

Opening Activity—Evidence of Faith

Ask. What evidence of faith do you expect to find in a believer's life?

Say: True faith is demonstrated in the life of the believer. While each individual person is different, certain evidences of faith will shine from every true believer. James described some of those evidences in his letter. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Faith is more than mental assent to the truths found in God's Word. Faith is trust and confidence that God's Word is true and that God will do what He has promised. We will display genuine faith in God by active obedience to God and His Word. Our good works, then, are evidence of our faith in God.

In this week's study, we will explore the relationship between faith and works. Because we know Christ, we should not neglect the needs of others. Our faith will challenge us to find ways to help those in need.

Allow this study of James 2:1–26 to challenge you in making your faith known to others through your good works. Then others will glorify God because of your life of faith.

Part 1—Partiality Condemned

Favoritism Forbidden

James 2:1–4

[Jas 2:1-4 KJV] 1 My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, [the Lord] of glory, with respect of persons. 2 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; 3 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: 4 Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?

Say: Favoritism can destroy a church. While we all have certain individuals to whom we feel close, we cannot let favoritism hinder our relationships with others. Favoritism can happen among those who regularly attend the church or toward those who are newcomers. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The recipients of James’s letter were mostly Jewish Christians, but a number of Gentile believers were included as well. By addressing his readers as “my brethren” (James 2:1, KJV; “my dear brothers and sisters,” NLT), James recognized the bond in Christ between every individual in the church—Jew and Gentile alike. In addition to addressing economic differences, as he did in the next few sentences, he may have been dealing with ethnic tensions as well.

Verse 1 indicates that favoritism was present in the church. James asked, “How can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others?” (NLT). The individual who wore fancy clothing and jewelry was treated kindly and given a place of honor. But the poor individual who was not well-dressed and possibly lacked good hygiene was told to stand (likely at the back of the room) or to sit on the floor. Our favoritism in the church today may not be that obvious, but our attitudes can certainly make a negative impact on visitors.

We sometimes show favoritism toward people whose interests are similar to ours or to those who have positions of authority or name recognition. Some show partiality based on ethnicity or family backgrounds. When the issue is one of a choice that is contrary to God’s Word, we must prayerfully balance the principles of Scripture with the love that God commands, even for those who are lost.

We become judges with evil thoughts and motivations if we form opinions based on incomplete or incorrect information or through selfish motivation. Our standards are not God’s standards. We look on outward appearances, not the heart. When we are impartial, we are demonstrating God’s love. We show people that we value them for

who they are and not for what they possess, what they can do for us, or which special people they know.

A victim of favoritism may feel like an outcast. In the church, no one is to be treated differently because of his or her clothing, ethnicity, shape, or size. This kind of behavior has no place among Christians.

Discuss

? How have we become judges when we show partiality?

? How can we demonstrate God's love, even to those who make sinful choices?

God's Grace Demonstrated

James 2:5–7

[Jas 2:5-7 KJV] 5 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? 6 But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? 7 Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?

Say: God's grace cannot be bought. He extends the plan of salvation to everyone, regardless of their economic status. When we, as believers, show partiality to the rich, we are indicating that they are more important to God than the poor. By our attitudes we can limit God's grace to those who need Him by making them feel unwelcome. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

James placed importance on the issue of showing partiality, especially to the rich. In James 2:5, he urges his readers to "hearken" (KJV) or "listen to me" (NLT). This indicates the intensity of his appeal. God has promised salvation and a place in His kingdom to all, including the poor. Those who are poor in the eyes of the world have actually been made rich because of their faith in Christ. They will inherit God's kingdom the same as all believers.

God is concerned, not about how much money someone has, but about each person's salvation and spiritual welfare. But the believers' treatment of the poor in the church James addressed stood in direct contrast to God's treatment of poor believers (verses 5–6). God is still concerned about the poor, and believers will be held responsible for their attitudes and actions concerning the poor.

James was puzzled by these believers' favoritism toward the rich. Some of these believers were being oppressed and taken to court by those who were rich (verse 6). The rich were even slandering the name of Christ, and yet they were receiving preferential treatment by these believers (verse 7).

Sometimes in our desire to win favor with those who can benefit us—because of their position or economic status—we overlook that person’s lack of concern for the things of God. We cannot afford to cheapen the gospel by catering to those who are opposed to the gospel. To do so actually degrades the message of salvation.

God’s grace is extended to those who trust Him, regardless of their economic status. God has “chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith” (verse 5, NLT), although He did not choose only the poor to be saved. He chose all who believe in Jesus, and He did not exclude anyone.

Discuss

? According to verse 6, how did James show the foolishness demonstrated by the believers’ favoritism of the rich? How can this situation be seen in today’s churches?

? In what ways might we discriminate against others—either consciously or subconsciously?

Resource Packet Item 1: Showing Favoritism

Distribute the case study and have someone read it aloud. Then discuss the questions and examine ways you can apply the principles James taught.

Part 2—The Royal Law of Scripture

Living the Royal Law

James 2:8–11

[Jas 2:8-11 KJV] 8 If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: 9 But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors. 10 For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one [point], he is guilty of all. 11 For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law.

Say: Paul says that “since we are his [God’s] children, we are his heirs . . . of God’s glory” (Romans 8:17, NLT). As children of the King, we live under a different law than that of the world. James refers to it as the “royal law,” which demands that you “love your neighbor as yourself” (James 2:8, NLT). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Loving your neighbor—the royal law—demands the highest type of love. James commended those who were keeping this law (James 2:8). It was decreed by God in the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:18) and reaffirmed by Jesus in the New Testament (Matthew 22:34–40). Keeping the royal law means seeking the highest good for all

people (Romans 13:9–10). This royal law governs all other laws, actions, and relationships. If we keep this law in proper focus, we will show equality in all of our relationships with others.

James stated, “If you favor some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law” (James 2:9, NLT). Some of James’s readers may have prided themselves on observing God’s Law. However, if they failed to show love for even one person, they became guilty of breaking all of the Law (verses 10–11). While this may seem harsh, it is the law of God’s kingdom.

By loving others—obeying what James calls the “royal law” (verse 8)—we do not need to worry about obeying the Law. After all, “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10, KJV). When we think of favoritism as breaking God’s Law, it takes on more significance. If we do not treat all people impartially, we are disobeying God’s will for our lives, and we bring dishonor to Him and His Church.

Discuss

? What is the royal law as defined by James?

? What are some practical ways we can fulfill the royal law?

Judged by Mercy

James 2:12–13

[Jas 2:12-13 KJV] 12 So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty. 13 For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.

Say: God’s mercy is the standard for our lives. Because of His mercy we have salvation and we have been set free from sin. God expects us, in turn, to be merciful to others. When we fail to love others and show them mercy, regardless of who they are, we are disregarding the mercy God has granted to us. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The seriousness of disobeying God’s Word is seen in James 2:12–13. Believers must remember God will judge their actions and attitudes. James urged his readers to live in obedience to the Word because they would be “judged by the law that sets you free” (verse 12, NLT; “judged by the law of liberty,” KJV).

The Jews were governed by a set of man-made rules and regulations added to the Law that Moses gave to them. But these rules did not bring liberty—only bondage. The law of liberty, on the other hand, is the desire placed within us by the Spirit to please God.

Believers will be judged by God’s Word at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). But the law by which we are judged is not like the enslaving legal system

imposed by the Jewish religious leaders in Christ's day. God's Law gives us freedom as we walk according to the Spirit (Romans 8:2).

In James 2:13, James emphasized the necessity of being merciful to all people. Mercy is a characteristic of a person who has received God's mercy. Because we have been shown mercy, we are to show mercy to others, including those who are different from us ethnically, socially, and economically. The real test is how we treat someone who cannot pay us back with similar favors, those from whom we will never receive anything. If we do not show mercy to others, we will be judged without mercy (Matthew 18:23–35). But if we have shown mercy to others, we can face the final judgment with confidence and joy.

Discuss

? What is the law of liberty, or the law that sets you free?

? If your mercy to others is judged by the mercy you have received from God, how do you measure up?

Resource Packet Item 2: Love and Mercy

Distribute the worksheet and assign someone to read each of the Scripture passages aloud. Then discuss the questions.

Part 3—Correlation between Faith and Works

Expressing Faith

James 2:14–19

[Jas 2:14-19 KJV] 14 What [doth it] profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, 16 And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be [ye] warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what [doth it] profit? 17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. 18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. 19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.

Say: Christians are saved by faith, not works. We do not need to earn our way into heaven.

This is one of the principles that separates Christianity from false religions, most of which depend on works. In a statement that may be an oversimplification, we could say that it is a matter of “cause and effect.” Good works do not cause us to be saved; rather, good works are the effect of Christ's work in our lives (see Ephesians 2:8–10). (Share your

highlights from the following text.) v (***Play the video available at RadiantLifeCurriculum.com/Adult.***)

The relationship between faith and works is still a major issue in Christianity. While our works do not secure or retain our salvation, they are an indication that we are saved. Our faith will be expressed through loving actions. The question in James 2:14 is aimed at those who claim to have faith but have no service that springs from their faith. The construction of the question in the original language requires a negative answer to James's question, "Can faith save him?" (James 2:14, KJV). Any true declaration of faith in Jesus Christ will result in good works.

To show that faith without actions is really dead faith, James presented a hypothetical situation. To offer only well wishes to a fellow believer who had serious physical needs is worthless Christianity. To say, "Stay warm and eat well" (verse 16, NLT) when a person is without food or clothing shows a lack of love and care toward that person. The needy person did not have the resources to meet his own needs. To respond in this way is not helpful; in fact, it is an insult.

Faith and works are "two sides of the same coin." Good works will follow faith in God, and faith in God will result in good works. Good works will be done to help people and to glorify God. Faith that does not demonstrate good works is dead (verse 17). In fact, according to James, it is not faith at all.

In verse 18, James continued to argue that one must demonstrate his faith by his actions. Faith and works are inextricably united and function harmoniously to demonstrate Christian love.

Belief in God is not enough. Even the demons believe in the existence of God, and they tremble with fear (verse 19). Yet they have no saving faith in God.

God is pleased with faith that crosses barriers with an active love that exemplifies biblical Christianity. If we love as God has commanded, instead of asking, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29), we will ask, "To whom can I be a neighbor?"

Discuss

? What role do works play in our relationship with the Lord?

? How can faith and works be used to help our brothers and sisters in need?

Examples of Faith

James 2:20-26

[Jas 2:20-26 KJV] 20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he

had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? 22 Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? 23 And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. 24 Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent [them] out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Say: James 2:20 repeats the thought of verse 17: “Faith without good deeds is worthless” (NLT). James used two Old Testament characters, Abraham and Rahab, as examples of faith and works. Because his readers would have been very familiar with both stories, it was easy for them to make the connection between their faith and their actions. Coming from vastly different backgrounds, both Abraham and Rahab were justified by faith that was demonstrated by works. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Abraham was the father of Israel, God’s chosen people, and a friend of God (2 Chronicles 20:7; James 2:23). Abraham believed in God and obeyed His command to offer his son Isaac on the altar (Genesis 22:1–14; James 2:21). His obedience proved he had faith, and that faith was manifested through his actions (verse 22). Because of Abraham’s faith, which was revealed by his actions, God declared Abraham righteous (Genesis 15:6; James 2:23).

Rahab was considered righteous because of her faith-filled actions (verse 25). Rahab was not of Hebrew heritage, nor did she possess any righteousness of her own. In fact, she was a prostitute in Jericho, a city that was about to be destroyed by the people of Israel. Yet she recognized “the Lord your God is the supreme God of the heavens above and the earth below” (Joshua 2:11, NLT). She proved her statement of faith with her actions, hiding the spies and helping them escape. Rahab’s actions indicated that she had put her faith in God. Because of this, her family was saved and she gained a place in Jesus’ genealogy (Joshua 6:25; Matthew 1:5).

James made a strong point about the faith-works issue in James 2:26. If faith has no works to prove its existence, then it is dead. Faith is only alive when there are dynamic, loving, obedient works that demonstrate God’s grace and validate the Christian’s faith in God.

People are justified through their faith, which is demonstrated through their actions (verse 24). True faith is more than an intellectual belief. True faith manifests itself in ways that prove that we are truly born of God. By faith we are justified before God, and by our actions we declare our faith to others.

Discuss

? Compare and contrast the background and faith journey of Abraham with the background and faith journey of Rahab?

? How are believers today called upon to demonstrate their faith?

Resource Packet Item 3: Faith and Works

Distribute the worksheet and divide your students into groups to read each pair of Scripture passages. Then ask various groups to share their findings.

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Many people do good works even though they have not accepted Christ as Savior. Some of them may believe they will go to heaven because of their good actions. Other people may have made a profession of faith at some time in their lives and believe they can live as they wish, making no effort to live out their faith in their daily lives. Sadly, neither of these is correct. We are saved through our faith in Jesus, but our gratefulness for that salvation will be revealed as we do the things that please the One who gave His life for us.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Take steps to eradicate favoritism from your life.
- Look for ways to reach out to someone who is different from you in background or ethnicity.
- Evaluate your actions to see if they demonstrate your faith.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Be Generous to the Poor.
Deuteronomy 15:7–11

[Deu 15:7-11 KJV] 7 If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother: 8 But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, [in that] which he wanteth. 9 Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the LORD against thee, and it be sin unto thee. 10 Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou putteth thine hand unto. 11 For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.

Tuesday:

Be Kind to the Foreigner.

Ruth 2:8–13

[Rth 2:8-13 KJV] 8 Then said Boaz unto Ruth, Hearest thou not, my daughter? Go not to glean in another field, neither go from hence, but abide here fast by my maidens: 9 [Let] thine eyes [be] on the field that they do reap, and go thou after them: have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch thee? and when thou art athirst, go unto the vessels, and drink of [that] which the young men have drawn. 10 Then she fell on her face, and bowed herself to the ground, and said unto him, Why have I found grace in thine eyes, that thou shouldest take knowledge of me, seeing I [am] a stranger? 11 And Boaz answered and said unto her, It hath fully been shewed me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother in law since the death of thine husband: and [how] thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people which thou knewest not heretofore. 12 The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust. 13 Then she said, Let me find favour in thy sight, my lord; for that thou hast comforted me, and for that thou hast spoken friendly unto thine handmaid, though I be not like unto one of thine handmaidens.

Wednesday:

God's Mercy Restores.
Hosea 2:14–20

[Hos 2:14-20 KJV] 14 Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. 15 And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. 16 And it shall be at that day, saith the LORD, [that] thou shalt call me Ishi; and shalt call me no more Baali. 17 For I will take away the names of Baalim out of her mouth, and they shall no more be remembered by their name. 18 And in that day will I make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven, and [with] the creeping things of the ground: and I will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the earth, and will make them to lie down safely. 19 And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. 20 I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the LORD.

Thursday:

Motive for Doing Good.
Matthew 6:1–4

[Mat 6:1-4 KJV] 1 Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. 2 Therefore when thou doest [thine] alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 3 But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy

right hand doeth: 4 That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

Friday:

Minister to All People.
Romans 1:14–16

[Rom 1:14-16 KJV] 14 I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise. 15 So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

Saturday:

Confront Partiality.
Galatians 2:11–20

[Gal 2:11-20 KJV] 11 But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. 12 For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. 13 And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation. 14 But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before [them] all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews? 15 We [who are] Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, 16 Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. 17 But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, [is] therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid. 18 For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. 19 For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. 20 I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.