

Isaiah 35:4-7a
 Psalm 146
 James 2:1-17
 Mark 7:24-37

Faith
 creates works
 works complete
 faith

FAITH BY ITSELF, IF IT HAS NO WORKS, IS DEAD

Today we discuss James 2:1-17. The letter of James begins, “*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greeting*” (Jas 1:1). At least three men named James were close to Jesus, and could conceivably have written the letter. Their traditional names are

1. James the Great, the brother of John and son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles (Mark 3:13-20). Not long after Pentecost, James was put to death by King Herod (Acts 12:1-3).
2. James the Less, son of Alphaeus, also one of the twelve (Mark 3:13-20 again).
3. James the Brother of the Lord (Mark 6:3), who did not believe in Jesus (John 7:5) until after he had seen him risen (Acts 1:14, 1 Cor 15:7). He was a leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:12-21, Gal 2:9), and became known as “James the Just.”

The words we read today are traditionally assumed to have been written by James the Just. They are addressed to *the twelve tribes in the Dispersion* (1.1); in other words, to Christians everywhere, since the Christian church has always consisted of believers dispersed throughout the world.

James’ letter is mostly about how *faith* should *become evident* in the lives of believers. It is written as if the identity of Jesus Christ, the purpose of the cross, and the glory of the resurrection are all known to its readers. The name of Jesus appears only in the first verse of the letter and at the beginning of Chapter 2.

To get the flavor of the letter, review 1:22-24, “*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.*”

Discuss the analogy between (1) looking in a mirror and forgetting what you have seen, and (2) examining your behavior and forgetting what you have found. It is easy to see something wrong in our conduct and then rationalize it away and forget what we have seen. Some of us are skillful at doing this.

James 2:1-7. *My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ²For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while you say to the poor man, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brethren. 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? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you, is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme that honorable name which was invoked over you?¹*

• *My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ* (v.1). *Partiality* gives evidence of not remembering (as in Jas 1:23-24) what really counts in life. *Impartiality* is evidence of *faith* in the life of a believer. We know the playing field is level in the sight of God because righteousness, not fame or wealth, is God’s measure of men, and the Bible says *all men “are under the power of sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one.’”* (See Rom 3:5-12). Therefore we are to love all men equally as God loves us and not be *partial*, that is, not treat people according to their worldly status. If we happen to have an opportunity to make friends with someone famous and influential, we must at the same time resist any temptation to see others as people who “don’t count.”

¹ Bible quotations are from the RSV.

• *For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly ... (v.2-7).* There is plenty of evidence here and elsewhere in Scripture of God's desire for us to treat others impartially. It is not necessarily bad to honor someone rich or famous who "comes into your assembly," but it is never right to ignore someone else just because he is "a poor man in shabby clothing." This amounts to "judging with evil thoughts," that is, deciding the rich and famous one is "better" because he can do more for you.

Galatians 3:28-29 says, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.*" Men have made all sorts of distinctions to justify preferential treatment. Today we call it "discrimination" – racial, gender, age, whatever. Nevertheless, the inheritance promised to believers ("*heirs according to promise*") far outweighs the things that give status in the world.

Look also at Col 3:18-25 which concludes, "*Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.*" In the world, men show partiality when they serve other men for the sake of worldly rewards. In the kingdom of God, when we work for heavenly rewards, partiality is never part of the picture.

James 2:8-17. *If you really fulfill the royal law, according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well. ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. ¹¹For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," said also, "Do not kill." If you do not commit adultery but do kill, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment.*

¹⁴*What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

• *If you really fulfill the royal law, according to the scripture ... (v.8).* The law is *royal* because it is written and given to us by God our King. And the particular law that governs your behavior toward others is, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*" (v.8; also Lev 19:15-18, Matt 22:34-40). But if I give preferential treatment to someone for my own benefit while ignoring the needs of someone less important to me, I am "showing partiality" in the sense of v.9. If we do this, v.9 says we *commit sin*.

• *For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it (v.10).* This follows from the fact that the law is *royal*. Its author is the King, the King is God, and *The Lord our God is one Lord* (Deut 6:4, Mark 12:29). He is *the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change* (Jas 1:17). The law is like its author: *It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one dot of the law to become void* (Luke 16:17). There are various judgments for breaking the laws of men. But in the case of sin, "*Every one who commits sin is a slave to sin*" (John 8:34). God's response to this is in Romans 6:23: *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

• *What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? (v.14).* There are two questions in v.14. Suppose we take the second out of its context. Then the answer has to be "yes." The Bible says *faith* was reckoned to Abraham as *righteousness* (Gen 15:6). It says you are *justified by faith* (Rom 5:1). It says *you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God* (Eph 2:8). You are saved through faith in Christ, who has given his life for your redemption.

But in this context, *faith* consists in *receiving (believing in)* Jesus Christ, not just believing something about him. And Eph 2:10 says good works are the necessary outcome and evidence of this faith. Jesus put it this way: "*The tree is known by its fruit*" (Matt 12:33). When you *believe in* Jesus Christ, the tree will be made good, and your life will produce fruits of kindness and good works without end. He invites you today to receive him, so that he may begin to produce these good works in you, and give evidence of your faith.