

Study 3: James Chapter 2

Introduction

James introduces two great themes of scripture – partiality and favouritism in the church, and faith and works. The epistle of James was dismissed because of a misunderstanding of what Paul has said about Faith and Works, with the perception that James contradicts what Paul says.

The divide between the rich and the poor was introduced in chapter 1. We need to be in control of what we say, and *be doers of the word* by putting our faith into practice.

Body of the Study

Rich Man Poor Man

The Royal Law

Faith and Works

Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter 3 in preparation for next week

How far should we go in ensuring that the “poor” don’t get neglected over the “rich”? Should we give preferential treatment to them over the rich?

What are some other practical ways that we can help our brethren and show our love to them? (2:15-16)

Notes for study 3: James Chapter 2

Introduction

The second chapter of James introduces two great themes of scripture – that of partiality and favouritism in the church, and the great theme of faith and works. Many people have dismissed the epistle of James (most notably Martin Luther) because of a misunderstanding of what Paul has said about Faith and Works, and the perception that James contradicts what Paul says. We will see that this is not so.

Rich Man Poor Man

The divide between the rich and the poor has already been introduced in 1:9-10. James has discussed a couple of aspects of putting our faith into practice in 1:26-27, that of being in control of what we say, and *being doers of the word* by visiting with and helping those who need it.

An extension of putting our faith into practice is how we relate with each other in the church, especially in the levelling of social statuses. This is not a hypothetical situation, and it must have been common amongst the churches *scattered abroad*, because James says “...***But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?...***” (2:6 NIV, emphasis mine). The instruction is given as an extension to the things of the previous chapter of getting practical “...*My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism...*” (2:1 NIV). The next few verses get down to the nitty gritty of the practical ways that we actually exhibit such partiality in our actions and interactions with our fellow brethren.

James draws a simple contrast between a rich man and a poor man – a “have” and a “have not”. The rich man is well-to-do and has “...*fine clothes and gold rings...*” (2:2) whilst the other is “...*a poor man in shabby clothes...*” (2:2 NIV). These men come in the assembly (literally “synagogue” but the emphasis is on the assembly for worship, not what happened in the Jewish synagogue). When they arrive the rich man is looked after and taken to the most prominent seat, whilst the poor man is taken to the back of the assembly. The application of this is obvious “...*have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?...*” (2:3 NKJV). God looks at our hearts – at the inner man – and we must not jump to wrong conclusions about people based on their outward appearance.

It should be noted that this does not provide justification for the rich man to wear shabby clothing. The poor man *only had* shabby clothing to wear. Nor does it provide justification for trying to dress up to out-do each other – for that is the exact point that Paul makes in 1 Tim 2:9. We need to remember that when we come together, we are coming to worship the King of Kings, and we should dress appropriately. It's not about dressing up, or about dressing down. The point that James makes is how we treat the person when they arrive, and that we must not treat them with partiality – the church is a place where all are equal before God. Equally, a person must not disdain the due reverence that is due to God by *dressing down* from the normally accepted standard of clothing that would wear to work or social occasions *into shabby clothing*, and by doing so to cause other members in the congregation to be offended by the way they have dressed.

James spells out the equality issue for us “...*Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?...*” (2:5 NIV). Generally, the rich rely on their riches and think that they have no need of God, whilst the poor who have nothing (or very little) understand their total reliance on God to sustain their lives, and they live a life of faith. In direct contrast, the rich are the ones who have been persecuting the poor “...*Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?...*” (2:6 NIV).

It is not the rich in the church who were doing this, since James adds “...*Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?...*” (2:7 NIV). They obviously had no respect for God by taking His name in vain, and causing the Christians to sin. The Christians were being persecuted, and the ones causing the trouble were the rich people. The problem was that the class distinction was beginning to invade the church. Once the distinction and platforms of the rich and the poor are abolished, it is a level playing field for all of God’s people.

The Royal Law

James presents a moral argument to support treating people equally, which he describes as “...*the royal law...*” (2:8), and shows that this is consistent with scripture (Lev 19:18). “...*If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers...*” (2:8-9 NIV). The term “Royal Law” is not found in the Old Testament scriptures, and appears only here. It is a description of the nobility of the principle rather than the name of a law, and is not one of the ten. When Jesus was asked which are the greatest of the commandments, He replied “... “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart*”, and the second is like it “*you shall love your neighbour as yourself*”...” (Mt 22:36-40). Neither of these commandments were in the 10. However, the command to love your neighbour is frequently referred to in the NT (Mt 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mk 12:31; Lk 10:27; Ro 13:9; Gal 5:14; Js 2:8).

However, the true test comes about when we try to identify who is our neighbour – which is the whole point of the parable of the good Samaritan. By showing partiality we are not treating everyone equally, and are neglecting some of our neighbours. James says “...*but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors...*” (2:9 NKJV). The point is that to show partiality is sinful, and it is a practice in a chain that must be broken.

We cannot say that it is only a little issue, and that on the whole we keep God’s law “...*for whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all...*” (2:10 NKJV). Many people in the world have the idea that the good things that we do outweigh the bad things, and that on the whole we are pretty good. But God sees the bad things, and the debt for the bad must be paid. “...*For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker...*” (2:11 NIV). We have a choice – we can either pay the debt ourselves (which **WILL** be our eternal spiritual death) – or, we can let Jesus pay our debt for us. The choice is ours.

It is worth noting that the references here to the Law, show James’ leaning towards the Jewish Christians as his audience – but the audience includes all spiritual Jews as well as the physical Jews.

The section concludes with an exhortation to action “...*So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty...*” (2:12 NKJV). We need to remember that God will judge us, and that we are accountable to Him for our actions. However, (fortunately) rather than being judged according to the Law of Moses, we are judged in accordance with the Law of Christ, which is a law of liberty. That doesn’t mean that we have the liberty to sin or the liberty to break the law. Rather, we will be judged with mercy “...*For judgement is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgement...*” (2:13 NKJV). God is merciful, and He will show mercy to us – by not inflicting the punishment that we deserve. But to receive God’s mercy we need to show mercy to others. And in the context of the discussion here – by showing mercy to the poor in the shabby clothes.

Faith and Works

The practical application of our faith comes down to *doing something* – putting it into action. Faith is not just about belief. We need to work at it. However the kind of works that James discusses is not work of a meritorious nature – we have done “something” therefore God “owes us”. In fact there is absolutely nothing that we could do to put us in any position of having God owe us anything. The debt is always going to be the other way. But that does not mean that we do not have to *do anything* (ie do nothing). James is talking about work that we do in gratitude for what God has done for us.

Hebrews 11 is the great chapter on faith in the NT – “faith’s hall of fame”. As we look at the great examples of faith in this chapter we see time and time again that these people did something because of their faith:

- By faith Abel *offered* a more excellent sacrifice (11:4)
- By faith Noah ... *prepared* an ark (11:7)
- By faith Abraham ... *obeyed* and *went out* not knowing where he was going (11:8)
- By faith Abraham ... *offered up* Isaac (11:17)
- By faith Isaac *blessed* Jacob and Esau (11:20)
- By faith Joseph ... *gave commandment* concerning his bones (11:22)
- By faith Moses ... *was hidden* for three months (11:23)
- By faith Moses ... *refused* to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter (11:24)
- By faith (Moses) *forsook* Egypt (11:27)
- By faith (Moses) *kept* the Passover (11:28)
- By faith they *passed through* the Red Sea (11:29)
- By faith the walls of Jericho *fell down* (11:30)
- Etc etc.

We can see in these great examples how people *acted* (ie did something) because of their faith. It was a *doing* faith – and that is exactly the point that James makes. “...*What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?...*” (2:14 NKJV). We need to put our faith into action. “...*Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?...*” (2:15-16 NIV). The person who says such a thing but does nothing about it is just full of hot air, and really didn’t wish the person well at all. On the contrary, the person who goes out of their way to ensure that a brother or sister has the things that they need shows their faith by the actions. James concludes “...*Even so faith, if it hath not works is dead, being alone...*” (2:17 KJV). The KJV version here uses the words “faith” and “alone” together, and this is the only place in the NT where these two words are together in the same verse.

It is a common (but incorrect) belief in the religious world, and one that you will often hear said “we are saved by faith alone”. However this is the exact opposite of what James says. He says that we cannot be saved by faith when it is alone, and it requires works to go with it. The confusion is caused by a mis-understanding and a mis-application of the works under consideration. Some religions (most notably the Roman Catholic, but not exclusively) have the idea that we need to do good deeds (works) to earn our salvation, and that God will reward us because of and if we do enough good deeds (penance). The works James has in mind, as well as the Hebrew writer, and also Paul (most notable in Romans) is the work that we do because of and in practical demonstration of our faith. “...*But someone will say, "You have faith; I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I by my works will show you my faith...*” (2:18).

James presents a further practical example of faith in action to illustrate the point “...*You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder...*” (2:19 NIV). The demons, and even Satan himself believes in God. He has faith – but it’s not the saving faith that

we put into practice because of the salvation that we have in Christ. James gives us a perfect example that faith (belief in God) alone is not enough!

If that is not enough, further examples follow “...*You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone...*” (2:20-24 NIV). James follows similar examples to the Hebrew writer that was cited earlier. Little more needs to be said, except to observe that Abraham is given time and time again in the New Testament as an example of a typical life of faith. His faith was not exhibited in just one action, but it was a life-long experience. It began with his calling from Ur of the Chaldee’s when he obeyed not knowing where God would lead him (Heb 11:8). At that time he was about 70 years old “...*and Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness...*” (Gal 3:6-8). It took another 30 or so years before the promise of a son was fulfilled in Isaac, through miraculous circumstances. The son of promise who was miraculously born was then offered as a sacrifice “...*and Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness...*” (Jas 2:23).

A second example, also recorded in faith’s hall of fame (Heb 11) is Rahab the prostitute. Whilst she had led a sinful life, yet she was saved from the destruction of Jericho because of her faith – and specifically because she put her faith into action. “...*In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?...*” (2:25 NIV). In the same way, we are saved by our faith, even though we are sinners.

The point that James makes is that the kind of faith that saves us is not just saying “I believe”, but a faith that demonstrates that we believe by the things that we do. “...*As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead...*” (2:26 NIV).

Incidentally, this verse tells us when we die, it is when the spirit leaves the body. A corollary of that is, that life begins when the spirit and the body come together, although there has been much speculation about whether this is at the time of birth, at the time of conception, or sometime during the pregnancy process. Although it is a special circumstance, we are told concerning Adam that “...*God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul...*” (Gen 2:7 KJV).