

## James 2: Good Works Demonstrate True Religion

James 2:1-13 seamlessly follows the statement, “Good works demonstrate true religion.” It is precisely here that the critics of James say, “James is just a hodge-podge of ideas.” He goes from a grand thesis about true religion to a trivial thing about seating patterns of the local synagogue. What is on his mind? Why does he do this? In fact, he is illustrating what true religion is for us. Here is the picture he paints. The synagogue or church service has just begun. In the ancient world, the synagogues in Israel were small. The house churches would hold at the most 100 people, so they would squeeze in until the room was absolutely full, with no room for anyone else. Now, two people come in simultaneously and one of them is rich. You can tell by looking at his clothes and the rings on his fingers. The other person is poor, shown by his bare feet and shabby dress. The usher shows favoritism by paying special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and gives him a good seat. “Sit well over here,” it says literally. But to the poor man he says, “You stand over there, or you sit here at my feet.” The word that is used for “at my feet” is a word used for a footstool. It is like the reference to the Messiah (Jesus) in Psalm 110: “He will put all His enemies as a foot stool under His feet.” In James the idea is, “Sit here at my feet so I can put my feet on you, since you are at the bottom.” That is favoritism. The Greek word for ‘favoritism’ comes from two different words, ‘face’ and ‘reception.’ James says do not receive somebody based on their face. Do not treat somebody on the basis of their outward appearance. In this case, it is whether your clothes are good or not, but any form of favor based on the way they look is favoritism.

A survey was done by “Dress For Success” where they took a man to New York City and dressed him in a new beige raincoat the first day and a dark, slightly shabby raincoat the second day. Both days they put him in front of the same hotel and asked him to say, “I have lost my wallet; all my ID is gone. I have an airplane ticket, and I need to get home. Would you please loan me the money for a taxi fare to get to the airport?” He asked all day long. He was the same man, in the same city, saying the same words. The only difference was his raincoat. He got twice the money the first day, when he was wearing the new beige raincoat.

We could do the same thing, although it is not consistent with our profession that Jesus Christ is Lord. James 2:1 starts oddly: “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Jesus Christ do not show favoritism.” The Greek is even stranger, saying, “Do not hold your faith with favoritism.” You cannot have faith in Christ and favoritism at the same time, because Jesus did not have favorites. To Jesus, everybody was the same, rich or poor. Everybody was exactly the same, totally in need of His mercy, totally in need of His grace. Who did He associate with? He associated with Jews, Gentiles, Arabs, male and female. He had dinner with rich, scabby, outcast tax collectors, with prostitutes, with Pharisees and with ordinary people. He would associate with anybody because they were all the same before Him. So it is logically impossible to mix favoritism and faith.

But there is even more to it than that. This little scene in James, about who gets to sit where, gives you all three tests of true religion. What are the tests? The first test is controlling your tongue. Here is a person who did not control his tongue. In fact, he used his tongue to give one more slight to the poor person. The poor person is already beaten down enough. The church should be the place where he received good treatment, but even at church he is told, “Sit here at the bottom. Be nobody. Stand over there. Sit at my feet.”

What is the second test? Caring for widows and orphans in their distress. That means caring for the poor and for the outcasts who cannot take care of themselves. The church should care for the poor by giving them dignity, by giving them a good seat, by talking respectfully. At the church here in James, this usher fails to show kindness to the man who is poor. Favoritism harms the poor but true religion helps them.

The third test of true religion is keeping oneself unstained by the world. Favoritism is the epitome of worldliness—to notice who has favor, who has the money, who has the power, and to do them a favor so maybe they will notice and do you a favor back. That is the epitome of worldliness.

By this simple, trivial act of favoritism, true or false religion is revealed. That relates to a saying, “A true gentleman is the one who uses the right fork when no one is watching.” It is a trivial thing that discloses whether our faith is genuine or not. That is why James begins this way. He sets us straight in chapter 2, verse 5 saying, “God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith...But you have insulted the poor. Do you not realize the poor are not the ones harming you? It is the rich who exploit you [They are not doing you favors and you are not going to win their favor.]...They are slandering Christ.” Verse 8 continues, “You should truly keep the royal law found in Scripture.” This phrase, ‘royal law,’ means to love your neighbors as yourself. This is not a little law or a little rule. It is the law of the King. It is the law of God. It is the law of the glorious Jesus Christ. There is no trivial law. If you keep that law, you are doing right, but if you show favoritism, you are committing a sin. You are a law-breaker. Then James increases the challenge. In verse 10, James says, “If you even show favoritism, even if you keep the whole law and you stumble at just one point, you are guilty of the whole thing,” and then he elaborates. He says it is because the same person who said, “Do not commit adultery” also said, “Do not steal, and do not lie.” There is a unitary nature to the will of God. Picking and choosing between the commands of God is impossible because it is the Word of God. If you pick and choose what you obey, you are rebelling against God, who says, “It is all My law.”

There is a unitary character to the law of God. When you show favoritism, it is slandering someone. What sin, what command are you violating when you tell a lie, or slander somebody? The ninth commandment, “You shall not bear false witness.” Now, if the church is the body of Christ, and we all owe each other respect and dignity and kindness, there is a brotherly bond among all Christians. If you do not give dignity to your brother, who is your peer, part of the same community, you have been unfaithful to him. You have not kept the implicit vow to treat each other well. So you have broken the seventh commandment, “Do not commit adultery.” Adultery basically means, be faithful to your social relations. Then, of course, favoritism is murderous, because you are murdering their spirit, wounding their soul. Favoritism certainly dishonors the person, so it violates the fifth commandment, “Give honor to all who deserve honor.” It violates the third commandment, because the third commandment says, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.” We are all Christians, so wherever we go we bear the name of Christ. If we bear the name of Christ and yet use our tongue to put others down and not welcome people into our church then it implies that God in Christ is not a Christ who welcomes and treats all people well. It is a lie about Christ because we image or reflect Christ to the world. Certainly, it is a violation of the first and second Commandments because they tell us to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength. When you treat people like this and God has told you not to, you are not loving God.

The truth is, you could take almost every command and see that all the commands are interwoven. They are interwoven because each act of sin violates God, and it violates other people. Furthermore, every deliberate sin is an act of rebellion against the Lawgiver and King. That is James’ main point. If you break the law, it is the royal law. You are breaking the law of God, who said, “Do not commit adultery, do not commit murder.” He is the author of the whole law. He says, “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.” It does give freedom, but can also judge you if you do not heed it.

This sounds very harsh. In fact, this chapter is something we all need, because we are all guilty of these things. Yet on the other hand, it can bring us down. Basically what James said is, “If you are not perfectly obedient, you are not obedient at all.” We do not like that. We like to think maybe 70% obedience is good enough. But before God, and in the world, some things are all or nothing. You cannot be a little bit pregnant; either you are, or you are not. In sports, you either make the shot, or you do not; a basketball shot that goes in and back out still does not count. Obedience to God is like that sometimes; it is an all-or-nothing affair. You cannot pick or choose.

We can feel the weight of our condemnation. The law’s word is justice. However, mercy triumphs over judgment. It is almost as though James knew how this could be taken, so he adds that mercy does triumph over judgment (2:13). You may sin, you may violate the law, but I want to tell you one last word. If you are feeling condemned by all of this, the last word is mercy. Mercy triumphs. We will be judged, but on the last day, the word of judgment will be triumphed over by the Word of Christ who is the Lord, even the Lord over those who have sinned this way. They have turned to Him in faith and He said, “Yes, true, they are guilty—but My mercy will cover their sin.”

So James ends his first great discourse on what faith is. Faith then has these marks: perseverance and trials, growth through trials, and showing itself. Real faith will show itself broadly through those three signs, and then in little things, disclosing in quiet ways whether we are, or are not, enacting those signs.