

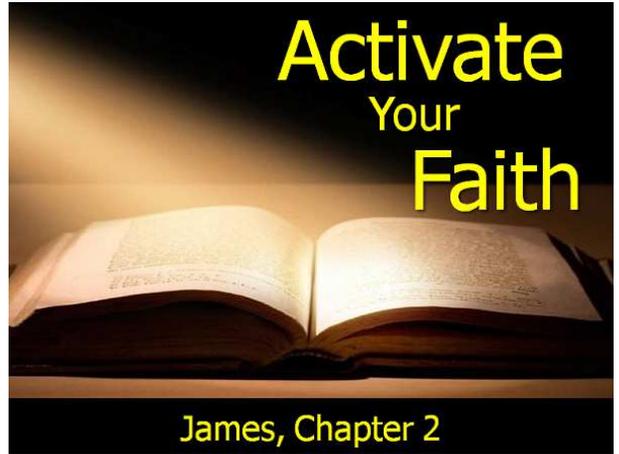
Activate Your Faith

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois –April 17, 2016

James 2:1-26 ESV

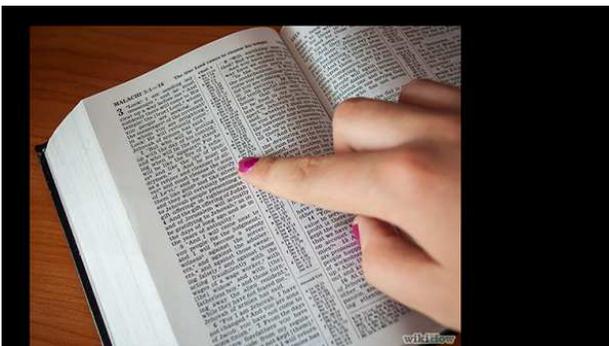
My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, 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? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?



If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"— and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.



"I stand alone on the Word of God . . ."

As you all know, one of the areas where Protestants and Catholics differ has to do with the authority of Scripture. Catholic teaching upholds the authority of the Bible, but it also holds that the proper interpretation of Scripture comes through the "magisterium," or the teaching of the church and its leaders through the ages. They believe the Holy Spirit works through the institutions of the church to bring about the true understanding of the Word of God.

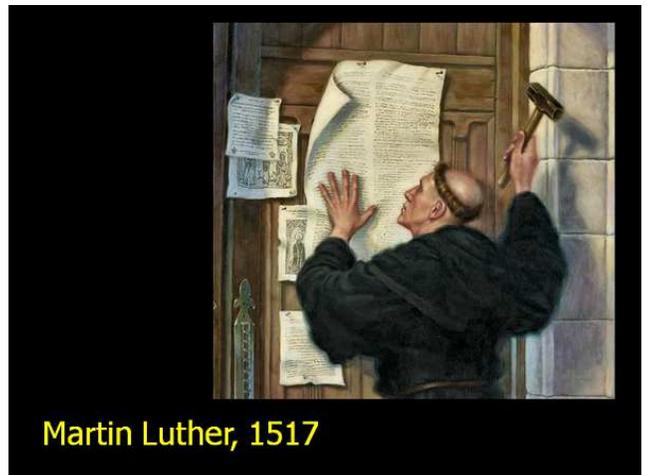
Protestants, on the other hand, tend to believe that the Holy Spirit can guide each interpreter to the understanding of what Jesus and the biblical authors are saying to us. So Protestants, in theory at least, regard the Bible as the definitive authority for what constitutes Christian faith and

practice. Although different teachers within the Protestant fold may offer different interpretations as a result of their own study of the Word, all are agreed that we need to go directly to the Word for an understanding of the mind of the Lord, and not require that understanding to be filtered through any sort of “magisterium” or church teaching authority. As the old jingle goes,

*The B-I-B-L-E,
That’s the Book for me!
I stand alone on the Word of God,
The B-I-B-L-E.*

So the Bible — the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments — stands as the body of teaching which, collectively, serves as the authority we go to when we seek to understand how we relate to the Creator of the universe, what his plans are for us, and how he intends for us to live our lives as he works out that plan. Imagine, then, if someone should rise up and say that there are parts of the Bible we need to ignore, or even throw out, or we’ll be compromising the true Christian faith. What would we think of someone who claimed that some particular book of the New Testament doesn’t really belong, because it’s inconsistent with the rest of New Testament teaching? Would we regard such a person as a very good Protestant?

That very thing happened, back in the sixteenth century when a certain church leader wanted to get rid of one of the books of the New Testament. Strangely enough, the leader was Martin Luther, the very man whose actions sparked the Protestant Reformation. And the book Luther didn’t like was the Letter of James. It was so worthless, he believed, and so contrary to the gospel as he understood it, that Luther called James “an epistle of straw.” Happily, Luther never went so far as to cut James out of the Bible he translated into German, but he made his feelings about it clear enough. Why did Luther think so little of the Letter of James, and why do I believe he was so mistaken in his estimation of this book? We’ll look at those questions as we proceed through our discussion of chapter 2 of the Book of James.

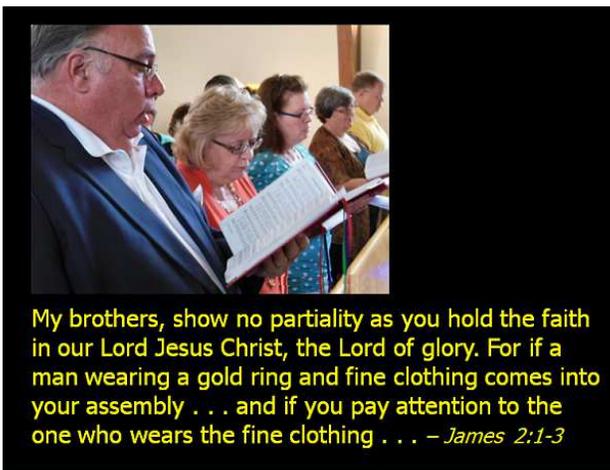


But we’ll start at the beginning of the chapter, where James is addressing a problem he perceives in the churches he’s writing to. “My brothers,” he says, “show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory” (2:1). It seems that there was obvious favoritism in these congregations; if a wealthy

person came into the assembly, either as a visitor or somebody who worshiped regularly, the other members of the church made sure they got the place of honor, “the best seat in the house.” But if a poor person came in, he was told to sit on the floor, or stand somewhere off to the side, out of the way.

We need to put ourselves in the place of these early Christian congregations, struggling in an environment that was hostile to belief in Jesus as the Messiah. In an environment where Christians were subject to persecution, these Christians felt they needed all the help they could get. It wasn’t that they were after the rich man’s money. After all, they didn’t have church buildings to maintain or pastors’ salaries to pay; they met in homes, and they didn’t have a

paid clergy. No, I don’t think it was the wealthy man’s *money* they coveted, so that they “battered them up” by giving them the seat of honor. But these Christians, harassed by hostile authorities, would have loved to have the rich man’s *influence* in their favor. You weren’t rich, in that culture, unless you had some kind of “in”



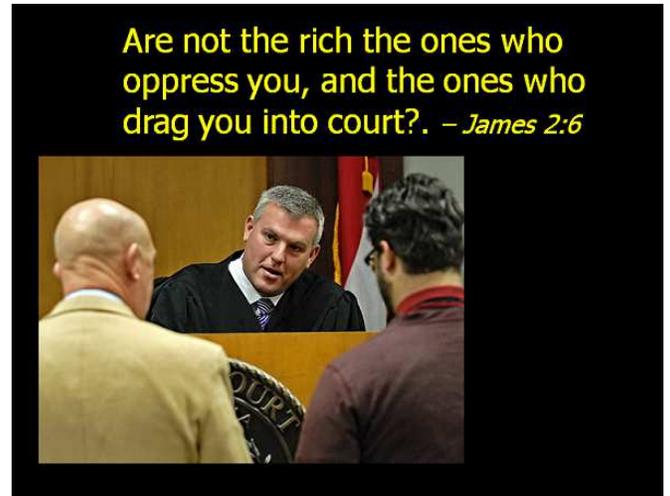
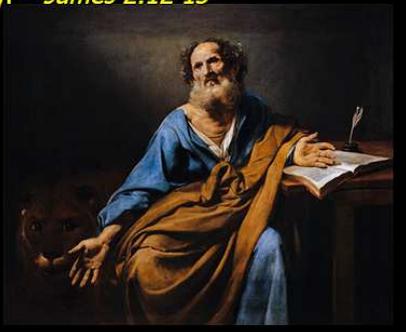
with the influential people in your region. "If we can get a couple of wealthy, influential people to become part of our church," they might have been thinking, "then maybe the authorities will lay off on the harassment."

If that was their thought, James was not impressed. After all, he was the brother of Jesus, and Jesus had taught his disciples that the way to lead in *his* movement was not to influence and dominate but to bless and to serve. "If anyone would be first," he said, "he must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). At the Last Supper, Jesus set the example by taking upon himself the humblest task of a household servant, washing the feet of his disciples. He did this to bring out how the kingdom of God isn't like the cultures of the world, where people seek for privilege and the authority to boss others around; instead, in the kingdom of God leadership comes from service, looking to the interests of others above your own. James wasn't present when Jesus taught these things, but he must have heard about them after the risen Jesus appeared to him. And James, more than any other New Testament book, seems to echo the way Jesus taught about life in the kingdom he set in motion.

So James has no illusions. Wealthy people are surely welcome in the church, but not because of their wealth. They're welcome because *they need to hear the gospel*, like everyone else, and respond with a changed life. But of the unredeemed rich man James has some strong things to say later on, and right here he points out that most members of his congregation haven't had a very good experience with rich people. "Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?" (2:6-7). So to show favoritism to the wealthy is hypocritical, because you're cozying up to the very people who typically mistreat you and scorn the name of Jesus. By favoring the rich, James says, you dishonor the poor. "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?" (2:5). Remembering the poor, not the rich, is a principle at the very heart of the Christian faith, and James doesn't waver from that conviction.

Wouldn't it be great if the mayor decided to join our church? Or somebody in state government? Or some wealthy person who could give large offerings and really put our church on the map? If we're tempted to think this way, we need to listen to James. When the Lord touches a person's life and moves upon them to get with other believers, they want to find a community that cares about them regardless of their status in the community or their income level. The advice Paul gives the Philippians could just as easily have come from James: "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4). When that happens, the church is being what it's supposed to be.

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. – James 2:12-13



James continues his discussion in much the same vein. To show partiality is to violate the law of God, which James calls "the royal law." "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well" (2:8), he says. The heart of the law is mercy, which is why James calls it "the law of liberty." And he adds, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy" (2:12-13). We can hear a clear echo of the words of Jesus: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their

trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15).

Mention of mercy and forgiveness leads James into a discussion of *faith*. Evidently there's an important connection between forgiveness and faith; we can see that connection in the ministry of Jesus. When Jesus told his disciples they always needed to forgive their brother who sinned against them, their immediate response was, "Increase our faith!" (Luke 17:3-5). They understood that they couldn't forgive their brother *without* faith.

We can define faith in several ways — we'll get to that in a moment — but when we think of faith as trust in the Lord, or commitment to him above all else, it's easy to see why it takes faith to forgive others. If I think *I'm* the center of the universe and the one in charge of my life, then if someone wrongs me it's hard to forgive them; after all, if I'm "god" they've sinned against God! But if by faith I see myself in a different light, and understand that I'm not the "big cheese" I thought I was but, instead, I'm a servant of One greater than I am — well, then it might be easier to forgive someone who sins against me. Such forgiveness is God's requirement for our own sins to be forgiven. "Forgive us our debts," we pray, "as we forgive our debtors."

Thus James launches into a discussion of faith, and this is where Martin Luther had his problem. "What good is it, my brothers," James asks, "if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?" This really stuck in Luther's gullet, because of the battle he was waging against the practices of the Medieval Catholic Church. Pope Leo X was trying to raise money to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, so he issued an indulgence — a remission of the penalty of purgatory — for those who would contribute to the building fund. As an Augustinian monk, Luther had struggled with the question of his own salvation. In studying the New Testament he realized that God accepts us not on the basis of such "works" — like doing penance or securing an indulgence — but on the basis of God's grace, received through faith. A key passage in Luther's understanding was Ephesians 2:8-9, where Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."



The Pope signing and selling indulgences (1521 Engraving)

So when Luther read the words of James, that "faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (2:17), he recoiled. Such teaching, he believed, went against the gospel of God's grace through Jesus. Therefore he called James "an epistle of straw," a worthless document that ought to be stricken from our New Testament. And since Luther's time Protestant and evangelical preachers, although not endorsing Luther's opinion of the Book of James, have typically continued to play "faith" off against "works," and to insist that there's nothing

we can do to earn God's favor and ensure our entrance into his eternal life — it's only through God's grace that we can come to him.

While that's true, there's a tendency, especially in some quarters, to insist that how we conduct our life doesn't matter; we can do, or not do, whatever we want and God is so loving that he will still accept us on the basis of his grace alone, whether or not we repent and change. Preachers who teach this are fond of quoting that verse in Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith," and they often add, as Luther did, "by faith *alone*," although Paul didn't write that. And they fail to go on to the next verse, where Paul writes, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for*

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

— Ephesians 2:8-10



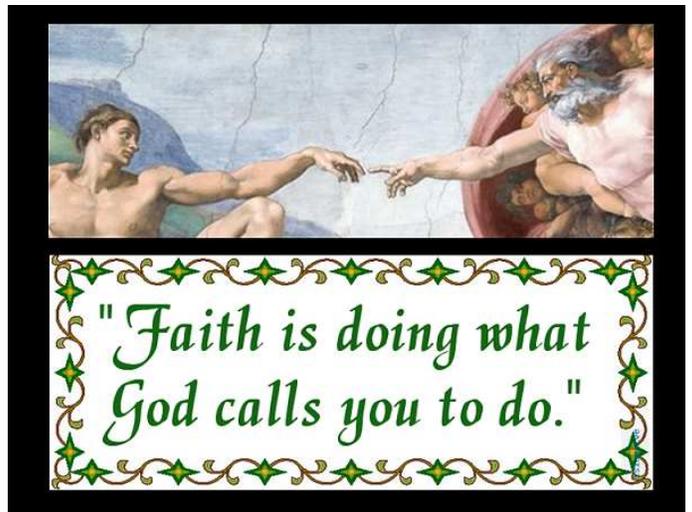
good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). In Romans 2, Paul wrote that God "will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life" (Romans 2:6-7). Sometimes preachers will say, "All you have to do to be saved is trust in Christ," but when you read the New Testament you find there's more to the gospel; there a *way of life* that's part of the package, a life in which we follow the Lord and know his blessing. Clearly Paul and James agreed on this point: that faith and works aren't mutually exclusive; they go together, just as James wrote: "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (2:18).

The problem, in my opinion, is that some people who teach on this subject don't understand what the New Testament means by "faith" and "works," and maybe they don't even understand what the New Testament means by "salvation." As to salvation, people take that just as having a ticket to heaven when this life is over, but in Scripture salvation means having a life after the pattern of the risen Jesus, *a life that can be lived today* that rises above the circumstances and conditions of a sinful, godless culture. And that life involves doing stuff, or maybe not doing stuff, by which we manifest that we belong to Jesus.

There are plenty of descriptions of that new life in the New Testament, and whoever is living in Jesus can have it now. In Colossians, for example, Paul says, "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Therefore, he says, there's a kind of life we're supposed to live, one in which we "put to death" those things that belong to the corrupt and idolatrous practices of our social environment. We're to have the mind of Christ, Paul tells the Philippians, and that involves the kind of behavior he partly describes: "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). If that kind of thing is what constitutes "works," then it doesn't seem to me that Paul, any less than James, can separate faith from works. Luther was so concerned that people might think they could earn God's favor by some religious practice — by purchasing indulgences or by some extreme act of penance — or just by "being a good person," that he "threw the baby out with the bathwater," and some preachers have followed him in this ever since, distorting the full teaching of the New Testament.

Perhaps the whole question comes down to what we really mean by "faith." If, by faith, we mean a certain belief in our head, then Christianity becomes just a "head trip" and nobody can tell if we're a follower of Jesus or not because it's all inside our head. That, clearly, isn't what Jesus and the apostles taught. Or we can say that faith goes beyond mere belief in an idea to placing our trust in God. That's certainly true as far as it goes; my father used to say, "You may believe that I can drive a car, but faith is getting in the car and riding with me." But I like the definition I heard not long ago from another preacher: "*Faith is doing what God has called you to do.*"

Both Paul and James lift up Abraham is the great example of faith, because he did what God called him to do in offering his son Isaac on the altar. The Revelation to John calls Jesus "the faithful witness" (Revelation 1:5), because Jesus did what God called him to do in proclaiming the coming of his kingdom, and taking that message all the way to his cross. So we are rescued from a sinful, pointless life through the *faithfulness* of Jesus, and share in his resurrection life when we become a member of him through baptism and our commitment to live for him. Faith is *being faithful to God*, placing him first in our lives and doing what he calls us to do as people who belong to his family.





If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? – James 2:15-16

That "family" aspect of faith comes out in the way James illustrates faith made manifest through works. "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" (2:15-16) We make our faith real in the way we treat other "brothers and sisters," the members of our spiritual family or people we would like to bring into that family we call the body of Christ. I'm so glad our church family is a welcoming, caring family, and we care for people in our community also by some of the things we do here. We don't pat ourselves on the back and say we've done all we need to do, but I think we realize that for our faith to become real there are certain "works" we always need to be doing.

I like to fool around with "old" computers and try to make them work again. One process involved is reinstalling the operating system. So on two junky computers recently I reinstalled Windows XP. After I did that, in order for them to keep running, I had to go online and *activate* the Windows installation. It's just like that with our faith. We can say we have it, but it won't stick with us *unless we activate it*. That's what James is writing about here, and why he says, "Faith without works is dead."

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