

Tested through Relationships

James 2

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We are often tested through the trials God sends. We learn to resist the temptations that are unique in trials. And we learn to seek God's wisdom.

We are also tested through the relationships God has placed us in. We live in a web of relationships – family, school or work, church, friends, neighbors, ministry partners. And many of these relationships at times are difficult or troubling.

Relationships seem to have become a real problem in the church James is writing to. Over and over again, James counsels and confronts trouble between people. Sometimes it is between groups of people as we will see in this text. Sometimes it is between individuals. In any case, the same underlying heart issues may drive both.

Partiality and Love

(v.1-13)

¹ My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

The Simple Command

(v.1)

The commands here is quite simple. Do not show partiality. Do be biased. Do not treat people differently based on their outward attributes. This can be either showing special favor or treating badly.

This is essential in how we are to understand and live what we believe. Bigotry, partiality, prejudice have no place in the faith. Part of the glory of the New Covenant is that all people are seen as equal before the cross. They are not equal in the way they sin; but their place in society should not affect their place or position in the church. While this may be our formal confession, what is our personal belief and practice?

Notice how James is clear to point out Christ as being the "Lord of Glory". Showing partiality has no place in the life of believers. We represent Christ in his glory on earth. He alone is the One who has the right to judge. He alone sits on the throne of glory. James is beginning to highlight the real thoughts and desires behind our judging others and showing partiality – we are promoting and enthroning ourselves. This is the great self-deceit and hypocrisy in all this – it looks like you are promoting others when you are really just promoting yourself or your "group".

¹ I am indebted to Pastor Steve Vaughan for allowing me to use and adapt his materials and sermon on James 2.

The Practical Example**(v.2-4)**

Here is the example James gives us.

² 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, ³ 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," ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

The rich were being given the prominent places in the church gatherings. The poor were being in the lowly positions. This was represented by their seating which doesn't resonate with us. It would be like appointing someone to be an elder or deacon merely because they have money and never considering a poor or lowly person for the leadership.

We get a glimpse to the person James has in mind. He is both a rich man and a respecter of other rich people. He leads the way in recognizing important people in the community. He is a part of their society. And he brings the world's way of thinking into the church.

Notice that we have a false standard of judgment arising from evil thinking. This is a kind of judging: it assumes that human power or prosperity means blessed of God. This is not necessarily so. But look carefully: James says this is evil thinking.

What are some illustrations that might ring true here?

How do we treat important or prominent people who might be our guests? What if a John Boehner or even Mr. Obama came in to our service?

How do we respond to people who don't look like us?

The Theological Argument**(v.5-7)**

James counters this problem with a theological argument.

⁵ 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? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

Jesus often used the poor as an example and illustration of those who would inherit the Kingdom, and often showed the wealthy as ones who would likely face judgment. Does this mean the wealthy were necessarily not going to inherit eternal life and the poor were...No, but the poor were more likely dependent on God, and the wealthy are often dependent on their own strength and means...those opposing heart can illustrate a response to the gospel message as well. For only those who are broken and completely willing to be dependent on God receive the gospel message.

The theme in the Old Testament of the rich oppressing the poor is also supposed to be related to as James furthers his discussion on the oppressed. As believers, there

should not be favoritism, but in the setting of partiality in this church setting, poor believers were being grossly dishonored. This is not unlike the abuse of the Lord's Table in the Corinthian church.

The irony in the dishonoring of the poor, is with all of the preference the church showed to the rich, it was actually the rich dragging the Christians into court, because they knew the Jewish and Roman courts would be favorable to slandering Christians. This was happening to the church regularly. Yet the church was deciding to treat one another the same way as the world was treating them.

The Scriptural Argument

(v.8-11)

Now the sin is countered by a Scriptural argument.

⁸ If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹ 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.

If there is any partiality shown in the church, is the royal law of "loving your neighbor as yourself" being kept? The royal law is possibly used here, because Jesus summed up our duty to the Old Testament Law before he died as loving God with all of one's heart, and love your neighbor as oneself. But this is merely a minimum guideline, and yet showing partiality is absolutely breaking God's command.

Do you think the listeners deflected the thought of Christ's sacrifice for their sins all the while making judgments based on socio-economic status? I believe this is also directed towards both sides of the argument, rich and poor, as we will see later in the letter, but especially at this point, James has leadership in mind for many of his concerns.

James clearly writes, if you show partiality, you are committing sin. You are accountable to God. Perhaps the leadership really didn't think what they were doing was really a big deal. Even the sin in our hearts which no one sees, breaks the whole law of Christ. James illustrates how in the Old Testament if you break just one law, you have broken the whole law. No sin is small sin for all sin is evil. We can be like those James addresses. We are making judgments in our hearts about others, and failing to recognize our own transgression against Christ.

Concluding Appeal

(v.12-13)

We are pressed then to respond to a concluding appeal.

¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Therefore, how much more should we show mercy to our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, for we are all judged from the same Lord and Savior. There is no reason for partiality, if we focus on our future rewards and judgments.

We make silly judgments on others over every kind of issue. What about the judging we do against one another even when we are carrying on a loving conversation? Are we showing partiality in our hearts when we tear others down in our heads to make us look better? To carry our desires in this way will give way to outward sin in our church settings. It will not bring glory and honor to our savior Jesus Christ. Outward sin in the church will dishonor the name of Christ. God will deal with those who are not merciful to the poor and lowly, to those who need the help of the church.

Generosity and Faith (v.14-26)

James now addresses both the root of the problem and the harvest of the problem. Partiality is an expression of a deformed faith. Words without deeds are an expression of a dead faith.

The Probing Question (v.14)

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

Now, I want you to listen carefully to what I am about to say. James is not discussing whether we are saved by faith or by works. That was a Pauline concern. James is addressing whether true belief (faith) can exist without producing wants, actions and emotions. Through the question he is making an assertion: faith works, faith does. What we actually believe will be shown in our actions and our emotions. To put it the Hebrews way, "faith is believing God in an obeying way."

The Practical Example (v.15-17)

James gives an example from their church life.

¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ 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? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Simple, clear illustration. A need is seen. Words are said. Nothing is done. What good is that?

In the same way words express a faith. That "faith" produces nothing, does nothing. That faith or belief is dead. It is not living. It has no spiritual breath in it.

The Theological Argument (v.18-19)

Someone counters with a theological error.

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

The assertion is simply, some people have faith and some people have works. They still are separating believing from doing. And he challenges them. Let me see your faith without doing and you will see what I believe by what I do. They can't. It is not possible to see believing without doing. Even the demons emotionally respond to a

truth believed. You and demons both say you believe that God is One Essence. But I know the demons believe because it causes them to shudder. What about you?

The Scriptural Argument (v.20-25)

Now, James makes a Scriptural argument that is often misunderstood and misused. This paragraph is often taken out of its context to teach that we are saved by faith plus works. In the context, James is talking about how all believing (faith) produces doing (works). Now listen to the text:

²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ 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. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ 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?

Wow, "you foolish person". Strong words. You are a fool if you do not see that believing produces doing. So, James is going to take us to the Scripture to make the argument.

That Abraham's saving, justifying, righteousness receiving faith was genuine is evident, shown, seen by his obeying God in sacrificing Isaac. Isaac was the very means by which God would fulfill His promise. Abraham believed that promise. How do we know that he really believed the promise? He did what God said.

The same with Rahab. She said she believed in God. That justifying faith was shown, seen, made visible when she received and protected the messengers.

All believing produces doing. Saving faith produces works. The works saving faith produces show that the saving faith exists. It is more than words. So, we do not work for our salvation because that is not saving faith. But our saving faith in the truths of gospel does produce gospel works that show our profession of faith is real. Your works show that your words of faith are not merely words, but are genuine belief.

The Concluding Illustration (v.26)

²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

The most believable profession of faith, without works, is dead. The root is dead when it produces nothing green and no fruit. Faith is the root, good works are the fruits. We must see to it that we have both. We must not think that either one alone

will justify and save us. This is the grace of God wherein we stand, and we should stand to it.²

Reflect and Respond

Where do you struggle with bias against others? Do you overly honor the rich, the powerful, the prominent?

Treat other people (1) as the Lord treats them and (2) as you want to be treated.

Are you poised to help the needy and the lowly in the church?

Do you understand that you cannot claim to have faith when you do not have what faith produces?

- You are not saved by what you do. You are saved by believing in what God has done.
- What you believe is shown and seen by what you do. Simple, clear, principle.
- To claim that what you do has nothing to do with what you believe makes you a fool.
- To claim that you really believe when that belief is not producing what it should makes you self-deceived.
- Those who do not do what the Bible says do not believe what the Bible says. They may know what the Bible says, but the lack of doing betrays the lack of believing.

May our faith and love be pleasing to God as we are tested in our relationships.

²Adapted from Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1991), Jas 2:14.