

Our Faith and Its Deeds

1 My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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? 8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. 14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18 But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

It is natural, even healthy and right, for a Christian to be concerned, at least careful, about this text and about this second chapter of the Book of James. Luther himself was rattled by it for a while until he came to understand the difference between James and almost all the other letters of the New Testament. You see, in Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 Peter, and on and on, the main focus is on how we are saved, the doctrine of justification (that is, salvation), by faith in Christ alone. But here in James, the main focus is not on our faith, but on what we do. That is, our works or our deeds.

Now, the Bible tells us that we’re saved by faith and not by our deeds. Paul says in Ephesians: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.”^a The Apostles want us to understand that salvation does not come from any of us in any way. It is not even a choice that we make, because if any of our salvation were up to us, how could we ever be certain that what we did, whether a work, or a deed, or choice, was enough? Or whether the choice was pure and without any selfishness or sinful motive? No. “Grace,” the love from God that we don’t deserve, is entirely and completely up to God alone.

There are some people who might want to reason or explain that faith itself is something we do,

^a Ephesians 2:8-9

and therefore it is a deed or a work that brings us to God. But faith, which is our trust in Christ, is a gift, not a choice or a decision. Faith is a gift in the same way that a rope or a floating lifebuoy or life-ring is a gift to someone struggling in the water, or that a ladder is a gift to someone who is stuck deep in a pit.

So, Paul says we are saved by faith and not by words or deeds. But James says that faith without deeds is dead. Those things don't contradict each other. Faith is the IV Tube through which God gives us his forgiveness, salvation, new life, and the promise of the resurrection from the dead. The deeds James is talking about is how we show those things in our lives here on earth. Jesus explained the difference with his parable of the talents. God has given us our faith. Now we should put it to good use. The gift that's never used is a useless gift.

James' real point about our faith and its deeds is to love your neighbor. Especially, don't show favoritism. He says this in two ways. First: If you see two people coming in to church and one has expensive clothes on and gold rings and whatnot, and the other one has grubby old clothes on, don't discriminate against the one by playing favorites with the other. Because if we do fall into the easy trap of playing favorites, we sin. That's the simple truth. We are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

The other example is outside of church, where we see or know about somebody who is really in need, and although we could do something about it, we don't. That's a sin every bit as much as the other was.

James says: "Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." That verse, James 2:10, is itself a stumbling point to some Christians because it doesn't seem fair. What do you mean I've broken the whole law if I only break one little bit of it? If a coffee mug is broken in one place, isn't the whole mug broken? If a ring is cut in one place, or a chain is broken at one link, or a light bulb broken in just one spot, isn't the whole thing broken? If a thief breaks into my home only a one window, isn't he guilty of breaking into my house, period?

God's law is perfect and holy, and also complete. Breaking a portion of it is rebellion against God, and therefore against all of his righteous law. Let's not go through every law, or even through every commandment, but let's do nothing more than divide the law into its two tables. The first table is to love God above all things, and the second table is to love your neighbor as yourself. James even calls this "the Royal Law."

Faith can't be divided. Jesus our Lord is not a buffet table, as if we can pick and choose this or that of what Jesus offers and not everything. But we run into the danger of violating this doctrine all the time by trying to pick and choose just which things in the law of God are truly sinful, and

which things we think are not. Or we want the things that offend us to be serious sins, and we want the things we like to do to be little-bitty sins, hardly really sins at all. In other words, what each of us truly wants deep down is for God to stand behind us with his arm around our shoulder so that he can wink at us and scowl at everybody else. Each and every one of us wants God to listen to us, to serve us, to obey us. We would never dare to think that thought, but it's what we're saying with our sinful desires. It's the line the devil has gotten us to cross without us even realizing it. That's why when we think we keep the whole law but stumble at just one point, we're guilty of breaking all of it.

The more we contemplate this, the more we understand it, the more deeply we dive down to inspect the wreckage of sin all through every single inch and millimeter of our existence, the more we understand: I take my sins to Christ, and God forgives me through Christ, and then I confess: I have more. And God says, I forgive that, too. And then I confess: I have more. And so it goes throughout our lives.

Do not be afraid, no not ever afraid to admit to God that you have more sins to be forgiven. But be afraid on the day when you think you don't.

James picks us up by the ears and lifts us out of this spiral of guilt and more guilt, and as we delight in God's forgiveness, Pastor James gives us direction and advice. In fact, there's almost no gospel in this text at all; it's nearly all law except that James refers to the Savior as "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" and there is always gospel in God's name and titles. But here the law James preaches is the law for repentant sinners. This isn't the law so much as curb or mirror, but the law as a guide, an instruction manual.

Show your faith. You're not saved by what you do, but your faith is shown, preached to the world and laid out for God to see by the things that you do. Show it by loving those who need help and helping them in whatever way you can. Show it by not passing judgment on people because of what you think is their social status. Don't assume that people who don't have the same background or history that you have, are evil.

Consider that Abraham came from a pagan family that worshiped false gods. Both Isaac and Jacob played favorites with their sons. Moses was a murderer. Matthew a tax collector. Paul, the enemy of the Christian Church. God brought them each in to his family, forgave them, and used them for his good purpose.

It isn't for you or me to decide who God will welcome into his family use to build up his kingdom. But it is for you and me to reach out with the gospel to all who are lost, so that they will know as we know our glorious Savior Jesus Christ, and how we might show our faith with our deeds. Amen.