

The Letter of James – Chapter 2

No Playing Favorites (James 2:1-13) - Preferential treatment based on a person's perceived status (financial, racial, social, theological, etc.) happens almost on a regular basis in our churches. In what ways have you seen this happen in this church? Have you ever experienced negative prejudicial treatment from someone? Have you experienced positive preferential treatment from someone?

Key Points:

- The way we behave toward people indicates what we really believe about God. It is a test of our faith.
- God is no respecter of people. God's grace is not merit based.
- Christian love means treating others the way God has treated me.

Key Words:

- Partiality: an attitude of personal favoritism. From the Greek word *prosopolempsia*, literally meaning lifting up someone's face with the idea of judging by appearance and giving special favor or respect. This word is only found in Christian writings.

Questions to Consider:

- What aspects of our behavior toward other people will God judge? How does showing mercy to others affect God's judgement of us?
- Read Matthew 22:34-40. How does obeying the "royal law of love" eliminate the sin of partiality and favoritism among people of faith?
- Read Philippians 2:3-4. What does this passage (and the context) say about our attitudes and relating to others?

Dead Faith (James 2:14-20) - Faith is a key part of understanding what it really means to be a Christian. Faith and works are connected in this understanding. Are we saved by faith and good works? How do you define faith?

Key Points:

- A dead faith substitutes words for works. (v. 14-17)
- A dead faith relies on the intellectual experience over practical experience. (v. 14-17)
- Faith that joins only the intellect and emotions is not faith that saves. (v. 18-20)

Key Words:

- Faith: accepting the truths of the Gospel. Throughout church history, theologians have debated about the idea of "sola fide" or salvation "by faith alone." The Reformationist movement, led by Martin Luther, defined faith simply as "the confidence of man, associated with the certainty of salvation, because the merciful Father will forgive sins because of Christ's sake." For most Protestant denominations, this is the understanding of faith that drives our belief: we are justified by faith alone through God's grace.

Questions to Consider:

- What two examples does James use to show the futility of faith without works? How are these good examples of dead faith?
- Read Matthew 25:31-46. What does this parable reveal about the relationship between faith and works? how is the King able to tell which are his true subjects?
- Read Ephesians 2:8-10. What does Paul say about the relationship between salvation and works? How does this compare with James' idea?
- What have you learned about the dangers of only doing good works? Of only having only intellectual faith?

Passing the Faith Test (James 2:21-26) - James gives us many different ways to test our faith. Taking our faith past the point of intellectual and emotional requires us to do something. Faith is dead until it is exercised by putting into action our trust in God. What is the greatest step of faith you have ever seen someone take? Do you think some Christians have a greater capacity for faith than others?

Key Points:

- Dynamic faith is faith that is real, faith that has power, faith that results in a changed life.
- We are saved by faith in Christ as revealed in God's Word.
- By faith, we are justified before God and our righteousness is declared; by works, we are justified before people and our righteousness is demonstrated.

Key Words:

- Justification: the act of God whereby God declares the sinner righteous on the basis of Christ's finished work on the cross. In the Greek, it is the word *dikaioo*, which means treating a person as righteous, and proof of righteousness. The justified person has a changed life and obeys God's will. Justification by God takes place by faith alone in Jesus Christ. Our works are the expression of our faith through acts of obedience.

Questions to Consider:

- How would you answer the person who argued from James 2:21 that our works (or behavior) do play an important role in our salvation?
- Read Romans 4:1-25. What insights does this passage contribute to your understanding of the relationship between faith and works?
- Read 2 Corinthians 13:5. In light of the reality of dead faith that often masquerades as saving faith, what should professing Christians do?
- Why should Rahab's inclusion in this passage be a great encouragement to modern-day Christians?