

James Chapter 2

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The *New Living* translators looked at the single Greek word for *brother* and translated it to the gender-neutral *brothers and sisters*. Gender-neutral language is used simply because the male-oriented language of the original text is thought to be offensive in today's English world. So readers here should be aware of the addition to the original inspired text.

(James 2) My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others?

A. Favoritism Conflicts With Faith

- James is writing to Hebrew people who have a rich heritage in the Law of Moses and the Prophets of the Old Testament. From those sources, they knew that treating the wealthy differently than the poor was a violation of godly living.

"Do not twist justice in legal matters by favoring the poor or being partial to the rich and powerful. Always judge people fairly. (Leviticus 19:15)

"So I have made you despised and humiliated in the eyes of all the people. For you have not obeyed Me but have shown favoritism in the way you carry out My instructions." (Malachi 2:9)

B. Favoritism Must Have Been Happening

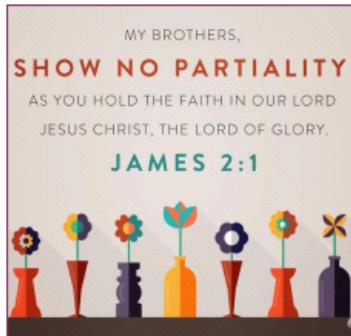
- This favoritism must have been happening in their church meetings for James to address the subject here. This is an easy failure in any generation and

among any kind of people. Contempt for others because of poverty is a practical denial of the faith.

(2) For example, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in dirty clothes.

A. When The Wealthy Attend

- We assume that the wealthy man would not be a believer, but a visitor. An usher guides him to the most prestigious seating. His clothes are **fancy** and his **rings** are many and **expensive**.



B. When The Poor Attend

- The **poor** person could also be a visitor. The usher treats him differently.
- **Dirty clothes.** While our translators have chosen **dirty** to describe the **poor** man's clothes, other translators have chosen *worn out* or *old*. At any rate, the reader gets the idea. James is describing something that may have been happening and had to stop.

(3) If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, "You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor" — well, (4) doesn't this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives?

A. Seating For The Rich

- It was standard among the Jewish people to arrange their public meetings with special seating for the

most honorable. This can be seen in Jesus' comment about the religious leaders in Matthew 23:6:

And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues.

Such **discrimination** was to find no place in the gatherings of the believers.

B. The Poor On The Floor

- The poor were to **stand** away from the honorable area or **sit on the floor**. The usher is guided by **evil motives**.

(5) Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the Kingdom He promised to those who love Him?

A. Why God Chooses The Poor

- The **poor** are more able to see their need for spiritual healing and have their spiritual eyes opened that they might see Jesus and find salvation. Jesus Himself said:

God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for Him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. (Matthew 5:3)

Or consider Paul's comments to the Church at Corinth:

Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. (1 Corinthians 1:26)

B. The Poor Inherit Eternal Life

- **Inheriting** comes long after being born into the family. **Inheriting** is used of the next life, not the present one.
- **William Barclay** says:

It is not that Christ and the Church do not want the great and the rich and the wise and the mighty; we must beware of an inverted snobbery. But it was the simple fact that the gospel offered so much to the poor and demanded so much from the rich, that it was the poor who were swept into the Church. It was, in fact, the common people who heard Jesus gladly and the rich young ruler who went sorrowfully away because he had great possessions. James is not shutting the door on the rich--far from that. He is saying that the gospel of Christ is specially dear to the poor. . . .

(6) But you dishonor the poor! Isn't it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court? (7) Aren't they the ones who slander Jesus Christ, whose noble name you bear?

A. The Poor Are Dishonored

- Requiring a visitor to sit on the floor or stand was **dishonoring** them. In the Lord's eyes, they are the same as the **rich** person.

B. The Rich Oppress You and Slander Jesus

- It is from the class of the **rich** that **oppression** comes. They **drag** believers into court over all kinds of matter. They find ways to take property from the **poor**.
- They **slander** the name of **Jesus Christ** and we are called by His **Name**, so they are slandering us and our Lord.

(8) Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (9) But if you favor some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law.

A. The Royal Law Is Love

- James is answering an anticipated objection that we must show **love** to everybody including the rich. The New Testament hadn't been written yet, so James is referring to the Old Testament **Scriptures**, quoting Leviticus 19:18:

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

- James calls it the **royal law**, perhaps because Jesus quoted the verse and Jesus is our King!

B. Favoritism is Sin

- **Love** is right and even required, but the person or persons responsible for this discrimination is **sinning** and guilty of **breaking the royal law**.
- **Donald Fream** gives a perspective:

Their treatment went far beyond the normal courtesy given any stranger. It was a difference clearly measured by the amount of their wealth. It was such honor as to show distinct preference even to the point of insulting the poor. James points out inconsistencies of their (unstated) claim to be fulfilling the royal law.

(10) For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws. (11) For the same God who said, "You must not commit adultery," also said, "You must not murder." So if you murder someone but do not commit adultery, you have still broken the law.

A. Every Law of God Must Be Kept

- We cannot say, "I keep nearly all of God's laws." Measured by guilt, we are still lawbreakers. The **law** is like a chain with ten links. Break one, and the chain is broken.

B. We Cannot Be Selective And Ignore Some Laws

- We don't like to adjust our ways to those of God, but this is required. It is called *repentance*.

(12) So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free.

A. Everything We Say Or Do Is On The Record

- This is life. The cameras are recording. They cannot be backed up and do a retake. We will be accountable for everything no matter how we felt that day or whatever excuse might occur to us.

B. Believers Must Know That God Plans To Judge

- We will be **judged** by the law of liberty rather than by the Law of Moses. But we **will be judged**.
- **Donald Fream** paraphrases this difficult statement:

If you are hiding behind the law of loving your neighbor in your treatment of the rich, and you do not love the poor the same way, then you have broken a part of the law: therefore you are a lawbreaker and will be judged as such. You had better stay under the grace of Christ in your speech and deeds, for as a lawbreaker you need His grace!

This explanation by Fream fits well with the next verse.

(13) There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when He judges you.

A. No Mercy For The Unmerciful

- We might debate that we are hardnosed and allow no nonsense. No one is above the law.

B. Mercy for the Merciful

- God adjusts our **judgment** with reference



to how **merciful** we have been **to others**.

- We must quote **Fream** again:

I am not protected by the law of liberty unless I live under the law of liberty. For Christ to forgive me I must live the forgiving life, for this is the only way I can live in Christ. Rather than trying to justify the action of favoritism to the rich by appeal to the law, I should rather observe the Spirit of Christ and view all men, both the rich and the poor, through the eyes of compassion and love and liberty. This would govern both the way I talk and the way I live.

(14) What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?

A. Faith Must Lead to Actions

- Our **faith** must go beyond being a mental exercise.

B. Faith Saves, But It Must Produce Works

- Our **faith** must prove itself in the **actions** of our lives.

(15) Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, (16) and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

A. A Case to Suppose

- **A brother or sister has no food or clothing.** This is a case that any believer must help to please God.

B. Worthless Outcome

- Wishing the poor believer **well** and not helping is contrary to God's will and demonstrates that the faith of the person talking is worthless.
- **William Barclay** writes:

There is nothing more dangerous than the repeated experiencing of a fine emotion with no attempt to put it into action. It is a fact that every time a man feels a

noble impulse without taking action, he becomes less likely ever to take action. In a sense it is true to say that a man has no right to feel sympathy unless he at least tries to put that sympathy into action. An emotion is not something in which to luxuriate; it is something which at the cost of effort and of toil and of discipline and of sacrifice must be turned into the stuff of life.

(17) So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

A. Faith Cannot Stand Alone

- **Faith** by itself can't save us. Alone, it is **dead and useless**. Empty claims to **faith** that didn't result in observable change and action didn't impress James.

B. Deeds Enable Faith

- **Faith** flourishes when it is coupled with **productive** action.

(18) Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." But I say, "How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds."

A. Case: Faith Instead of Deeds

- The claim is made that some have faith while others show good deeds. One person may not have both qualities.

B. Deeds Display Faith

- The real truth is that the way to see faith is through the deeds that are caused by faith.

(19) You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror.

A. Faith Defined

- A defender of the *faith-without-deeds* view claims that the evidence of their **faith** is that they believe in **one God**. They do not practice any form of idolatry.

B. The Demons Believe

- The response to this excuse is that **demons** have the same kind of **faith**. It brings them to **terror**, so meaningful **faith** is more than just a mental exercise. Perhaps we should be in terror, too.

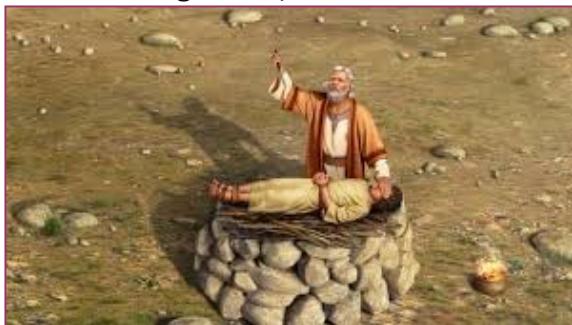
(20) How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless? (21) Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was shown to be right with God by his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

A. Useless Faith

- **Faith** not coupled with **good deeds** is a **useless faith**.

B. Remember Abraham

- It is clear that James is addressing Jews and not Gentiles. **Our ancestor Abraham**. Many commentators take the twelve tribes in James 1:1 to be the whole church, but this verse is clear that James is talking to his Jewish brethren.



- Abraham's faith in God's promises was tested when he was asked to **offer his son** of promise on the **altar**. How was **Abraham** to be the father of many nations if his son was not alive?

(23) And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith." He was even called the friend of God. (24) So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone.

A. Abraham Was Counted As Righteous

- Abraham trusted in God's promises over his own reasoning. This act of faith caused Abraham to be called righteous. More than righteous, God called Abraham his friend! And yet, unless Abraham had been prepared to obey God to the uttermost, his faith would have been unreal.

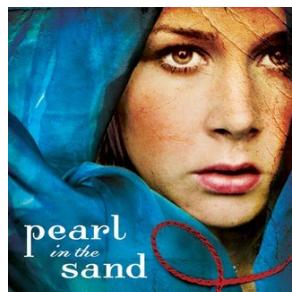
B. Righteousness Comes By Action

- We are required to do something similar. God attributes righteousness by what we do and not because of the mental exercise of faith.

(25) Rahab the prostitute is another example. She was shown to be right with God by her actions when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road.

A. The Case of Rahab

- Unless Rahab had had faith, she would never have taken the risk of identifying her future with the fortunes of Israel. Unless Rahab had been prepared to risk all to help the spies, her faith would have been useless.
- The Christian Fiction novel *Pearl in the Sand* by Tessa Afshar is an excellent read. The writer takes the known facts from Scripture and builds a plausible story around them. It may be available in your library or



from a book dealer like Amazon.

B. Rahab Played A Role in Israel's History

- **Rahab** played an important role as Israel was taking the land of their inheritance. These two examples show that faith and deeds are not opposites; they are, in fact, inseparables. No person will ever be moved to action without faith; and no person's faith is genuine unless it moves them to action.

(26) Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.

A. The Body Requires Breath

- When a person is not **breathing**, we conclude that they are **dead**.

B. Faith Requires Works

- When a person shows no good **works**, God concludes that their **faith is dead**.

