

Scripture teaches us that we are to love others as ourselves, but James will teach us in this passage that we are violating that command when we show favoritism to some people. He will also teach us that faith that does not produce good works is “dead” (not the genuine faith indicative of having eternal life). Such “faith” is no better than that of demonic spirits who believe in God but do obey Him.

1 My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.

James addresses his “brethren” (fellow believers in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ) and urges them not show partiality toward some people as those who have faith in Jesus Christ.

2 For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; 3 And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: 4 Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?

“For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile [dirty] raiment” – James gives an example scenario to illustrate the kind of partiality he’s talking about. In this scenario, two men come into their church service: one man is apparently a wealthy man who is well dressed, and the other man is poor and is wearing dirty clothes (possibly smelling badly as well).

“And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay [splendid; radiant] clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place” – In the first century, synagogues and assembly halls had limited seating and most people had to either stand or sit on the floor. In James’ scenario, the wealthy man is treated as an honored guest and is given one of the best seats in the house, likely one reserved for special guests.

“and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool” – At the same time, the poor man is not given the same respect as the wealthy man and is told to either stand or sit on the floor. The expression of someone sitting at your footstool has its origins in the idea of placing your foot on the neck of a conquered foe. Thus, placing a visitor “under my footstool” meant that you were holding them in the lowest esteem and seating them in the most humble or even humiliating places in the house.

“Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil [bad; unethical] thoughts?” – If someone behaves the way James has described in his example scenario, then they have shown partiality and become “judges of evil thoughts.” The Greek could be more accurately translated as “judges with evil thoughts.” James is saying that his readers would have judged these two men (decided that the wealthy man was deserving of more respect than the poor man) and sinned because of their unethical thinking.

5 Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?

“Hearken [listen], my beloved brethren” – James wants us to pay attention and listen to what he is about to say, because he is going to tell us why we should not disregard the poor or treat them as inferior to the rich.

“Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?” – The poor may not be rich in this world’s possessions, but many of them are rich in faith and God has responded to their faith by making them heirs to His kingdom. God is not choosing them because they are poor but because of their faith and their love for Him.

6 But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? 7 Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?

“But ye have despised [to treat with contempt] the poor” – Despite the fact that God holds some of these poor in high regard because of their faith, James says that these poor have been regarded as unimportant or worthless by some in the church.

“Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats?” – James’ readers have held the rich in high regard and yet he reminds them that it is typically those who are rich who are oppressing believers in Jesus Christ, accusing them of wrong and bringing them before the authorities to be judged. It is important to note that James is not saying that being rich is a sin or that all rich people are evil and all poor people are good. Some rich people are evil and some are good, just as some poor people are evil and some are good. The difference is that rich people have the resources and influence to exert their will upon others, unlike the poor, who frequently lack the resources to protect themselves from their oppressors.

“Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?” – These oppressors (who are typically rich) that bring believers to the judgment seats are frequently also guilty of blaspheming the name of Jesus Christ in their accusations. James is asking why such people should be given preferential treatment simply because they are rich.

8 If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: 9 But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.

“If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well” – This “royal” law, quoted from Lev. 19:18, is the supreme law above others concerning our relationship to others. Jesus called this a great commandment, second only to loving the LORD with all our heart, soul and mind (Matt. 22:35-40). We do well when we obey this commandment, because obeying this royal law prevents us from breaking a multitude of others concerning our relationship to others.

“But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced [convicted] of the law as transgressors” – Showing “respect to persons” (favoritism or partiality) is a violation of the royal law, making us a transgressor of the law.

10 For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

This does not mean that we are guilty of each individual commandment, but that we are guilty of violating God's law as a unit. We only have to break one commandment in order to be a law breaker. God does not grade on a curve but requires 100% adherence to His law. So it does not matter if we have perfectly kept all of the other commandments – once we break one commandment, then we have become guilty of being a transgressor of the law (v. 11).

Verses 11-13: James reinforces his statement in v. 10 by pointing out that keeping one law (such as the commandment against adultery) does not excuse you for breaking another, such as the one against murder. We should both speak and act as those who are accountable to God for breaking His law. When we are judged, we will be shown mercy in the same proportion that we have shown mercy to others.

14 What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?

“What doth it profit [advantage; benefit], my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works?” – The meaning of vs. 14-26 have been debated by commentators for many years. Some believe that James is saying that we must practice good works in addition to our faith in order to be saved. However, we will see, that is not what James is saying at all. James is simply questioning the benefit of a faith that does not prompt us to do good works. Notice the reference to a man that “says” he has faith. Men can claim a lot of things, but reality can be quite different from his claims.

“can faith save him?” – Commentators point out that this question can be translated as “can that faith save him?” or “can that kind of faith save him?” James is asking whether or not a faith that does not produce good works is genuine saving faith.

15 If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, 16 And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?

To illustrate the point that a faith that does not produce good works is worthless, James uses the example of encountering someone who is in need of clothing and food. We can express our desire that they have their needs met, but talk is cheap and does not meet this person's need. James' question to us is: How does this poor person benefit from what we say if we do not actually give them what they need? They need action, not talk, in order to be warmed and fed.

17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

Genuine faith that results in the new birth means that the Holy Spirit resides within us. The presence of the Holy Spirit within us will cause us to show compassion on these people (loving them as we do ourselves – v. 10) and meet their need. A faith that does not produce such works is “dead” (not the kind that brings eternal life).

18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.

James now speaks of how the man with works could challenge the man who merely claims to have faith. He challenges the man to prove his faith in the absence of good works while he himself demonstrates his faith by doing the good works that God has ordained that his children do. **Eph. 2:10** “*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.*” Obviously, the man without works cannot prove that his faith is anything more than mere talk.

19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. 20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

“Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well” – James now shows us that genuine saving faith goes beyond a mere belief that God exists. Many people believe in God but are not saved. James states that it is a good thing to believe in God, but that belief alone is not enough for salvation.

“the devils also believe, and tremble” – James shows that merely believing that God exists is not enough for salvation by pointing out that demonic spirits also believe in God. Not only do they believe, but they also tremble in fear because they know that God exists and that they will be judged by Him. Thus, merely to believe in God does not put us in any better standing than these demonic spirits who believe in God but that belief does not produce obedience.

“But wilt thou know” – After giving two examples showing that faith without works is useless (“dead”), James is asking if the man claiming faith without works is finally understanding the point he's trying to make. “Do you now understand?” “Do you finally get it?”

“O vain [empty] man” – The man who says he has faith without works is claiming to possess eternal life but he is actually empty and possesses nothing.

“that faith without works is dead?” – The man who claims he has faith is claiming that he has eternal life, and yet if it doesn't produce any evidence in his life (such as obedience to God and the fruit of the Spirit described in Gal. 5:22-23) then his faith is dead and he is still dead in his trespasses and sins. James supports the idea of “lordship salvation.”

Verses 21-26: James uses the examples of Abraham and Rahab to show that faith leads to obedience, proving the genuineness of their faith. Hebrews 11 lists countless people who responded to God's promises in faith and acted on the basis of that faith to do great things in obedience to God. Their actions demonstrated that they did indeed trust God.