

James 2:1 – 26

2:1 My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. 2 For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, 3 and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? 5 Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? 7 Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? 8 If, however, you are fulfilling 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 and yet stumbles in one point has become guilty of all. 11 For He who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not commit murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. 13 For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. 14 What use is it, my brethren, if you say you have faith but have no works? Can that faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? 17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. 18 But someone may well say, “You have faith and I have works”; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. 20 But are you willing to recognize, you fool, that faith without works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? 22 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he was called the friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

Teaching Notes to James 2:1 – 26

THE BIG SHIFT: In teaching this section of James, the big shift is that the sin of omission (not loving the poor) is really a sin of commission (being partial and judgmental). By contrast, middle class morality typically focuses on sins of commission (adultery and murder are examples in James), situations where you actively do something wrong. But what about not loving your neighbor? Middle class morality tends to say, 'It's unfortunate, but it's understandable – after all, you can't really measure it.' In fact, middle class morality maintains that it's okay to be greedy and selfish as long as you 'don't hurt anyone else.' But James disagrees. He says that not loving your neighbor is a sin of commission – it is active! – because it's an act of judgment and partiality in your heart. That is where the sin is committed.

Ask the questions prior to study:

1. What is the social situation James speaks into? What's going on, especially in v.1-6?

Allow them to voice their concerns and questions about this passage beforehand. Don't try to answer them at this point, just allow them to state their questions. This builds some momentum towards getting through the passage together. Allow the invitational-style discussion to wrestle with these questions. Remind them of The Big Shift from chapter 1.

Other interesting notes

- Faith vs. works: James says that we are justified by works. Paul says we are justified by faith. There are various ways to resolve this:
 - The simplest way is to say that we are saved by the works of Christ lived out through us. Saving faith in Jesus produces the life of Jesus in us.
 - The most accurate resolution to that puzzle is N. T. Wright's definition of 'justification.' See New Dictionary of Theology (IVP). Justification is not the *process* of how an individual is saved. It is the *evidence* that an individual has joined the covenant people. It is communal. And it involves both faith in Jesus and the works commanded by Jesus (forgiveness of others, loving enemies, no partiality) which Paul would also endorse.
- While we look at the rich man vs. poor man case in v.1-6, remind them that in the 20th century, the rich didn't even want to be near the poor or in the same worship service. So they moved out to the suburbs, creating the inner city and its current conditions. Let your audience feel uncomfortable with this fact.
- Who are 'the poor' in v.5 who are inheritors of the kingdom and rich in faith? It is not 'the poor' generally. It is 'the poor' in the congregations that James is addressing. The Christian poor. They have a unique quality to their faith because of their forced dependence on God.
- There is a contrast in v.12-13 between two different realms of being. On the one hand, the person who shows partiality to others really judges others. That person will be judged by God. On the other hand, the person who shows mercy to others is not judging others. That person will be shown mercy by God. Faith in Jesus moves us from the first realm to the other. Recall that 'the law of liberty' is 'the law of Christ' or 'the word of Christ' that 'gave us birth' (from chapter 1).
- The hypothetical retort in v.18 is hard to understand, and there is some disagreement between Bible translations about where the end quotation mark should be. It would seem more logical for someone disagreeing with James to say, "I have faith and you have works." It could be that James' hypothetical debater is speaking to the poor man in need in v.16, saying, "You have faith and I have works," as if the poor man should be sustained and fed miraculously by faith, while the rich man excuses himself from giving by using this perverse argument that he has works. In this case, James would be saying, "No, that's not the way it is."
- James does not like simply believing a propositional truth about God, v.19. God's Truth has to impact who you are and the way you live.
- James' aim is to perfect faith, in v.22.
- Abraham and Rahab are justified because of their response to the living God, NOT to adherence to the Mosaic Law. Interesting. Living faith responds to life (a brother or sister in need). Living faith responds to a living God.
 - Rahab was justified because she joined the covenant community. Justification is about joining the covenant community.

- Abraham was justified because he identified himself with his son Isaac, who was a foreshadowing of Christ and those resurrected with him. This is also covenantal and communal.