

# THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

## *“Book of Faith, or Epistle of Straw?”*

### JAMES – Chapter Two

#### BIBLE STUDY PRESENTATION @ SESSION #4

(In this and subsequent study sessions, three translations of the Holy Bible are used; they are identified as THE AMPLIFIED BIBLE [AMP], THE MESSAGE [MSG], and THE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION [NRSV].)

**A GENERAL INTRODUCTION** – In James 2, there is a call to hold faith in Jesus Christ without showing partiality. Apparently, some in the early church were displaying favoritism toward the rich in their assemblies, while despising those who were poor. Showing respect of persons made one a judge with evil thoughts. In 2:1-13, James provides several reasons why such prejudice was unbecoming of believers and worthy of condemnation.

Then, in 2:14-26, James addresses the relationship between faith and works, especially the folly of professing faith when unaccompanied by works. Using several examples to make his point, including those of Abraham *“the friend of God”* and Rahab *“the harlot,”* James declares three times that faith without works is dead!

As this session was in initial preparation, your facilitator was reminded of an incident that occurred 50+ years ago, that still seems worthy of telling. At that time, I was serving as pastor of a quasi-suburban church just west of the Philadelphia city border. In the heart of the city there was a large and affluent Lutheran church. The Senior Pastor of this church often received news coverage of his sermons, both on T.V. and in the newspapers; frankly, I was sometimes a bit jealous!

One Sunday morning, a visibly destitute man got off the city bus at North Broad Street and Roosevelt Blvd., and entered that church. The brick edifice was one of Philadelphia’s larger modern church buildings, comfortably seating well over 1,500 people. Descriptions, later provided to me, said that the man clearly looked *“down and out!”* Nobody greeted him when he entered; yet, the man proceeded to sit in a pew, next to the center aisle, about midway in the nave; there he was observed by all. Other people, who were sitting nearby, reportedly moved quickly to claim alternate seats. No one offered the man anything but curious and distrustful looks. Many in the congregation wondered where the Sr. Pastor was that morning; and, why he had not indeed confronted the man and asked him to *“clean himself up”* before the service. It was said that the Pastor was accustomed to regularly dealing with such *“street”* persons! Worship began at the appointed hour under the direction of one of the church’s associate pastors. During the reading of the Gospel, the man had such a *“loud fit of coughing”* that some persons in the assembly could not adequately hear that lesson. A matronly lady reportedly whispered to the friend sitting beside her, that maybe the man had *“escaped”* from the State Tuberculosis Sanatorium, located nearby, on Henry Avenue.

When it came time for the sermon, all present were mildly terrorized as this *“street person”* began walking swiftly up the main aisle toward the chancel. He reached the front pew; all wondered where he was going next. Several male ushers, sitting in the last pew, wearing white carnations in their jacket lapels, and white gloves on their hands, sprang into action and began moving forward hurriedly when the man began to ascend the stairs leading into the massive pulpit. The man reached that pulpit before he could be stopped; then removed a wig and false beard. Whereupon, the assembly let out a collective gasp of relief as they recognized their Sr. Pastor,

who was also a personal friend of mine. That pastor began his sermon on that memorable morning, using a contemporary translation of the following biblical text:

**James 2:1-4 –**

[MSG] **“My dear friends, don’t let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious, Christ-originated faith. If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him, and you say to the man in the suit, ‘Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!’ and either ignore the street person or say, ‘Better sit here in the back row,’ haven’t you segregated God’s children and proved that you are judges who can’t be trusted?”**

**LET’S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT THIS TEXT:**

**A) TRUE RELIGION DOES NOT SHOW PARTIALITY ..... (James 2:1-13)**

**... It should not be influenced by public opinion (vs. 1)**

[AMP] <sup>1</sup>**“My brethren, pay no servile regard to people [show no prejudice, no partiality]. Do not [attempt to] hold and practice the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ [the Lord] of glory [together with snobbery]!**

**Facilitator’s Comments:**

1. The Greek noun used here is: **PROSOPOLEMPZIA**; it comes from the expression **PROSOPON LAMBANEIN** [**PROSOPON = face; LAMBANEIN = to lift up**] Literally, to **“lift up a person’s countenance”** was to regard that person with special favor
2. Both O.T. and N.T. condemn partiality of judgment which results in favoritism being shown anyone as a result of that person’s social standing, wealth or worldly influence
3. In **Acts 10:34**, the apostle Peter, after his vision of the sheet with the clean and unclean animals upon it, learned that with God there is no respect of persons.
4. This is also a truth that Paul brings up repeatedly (see **Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25**)

**RETURNING AGAIN TO THE BIBLICAL TEXT:**

(OUR CONTINUING MAIN POINT ‘A’: True Religion Does Not Show Partiality...)

**... It should not show preference to the rich (vss. 2-3)**

[AMP] <sup>2</sup>**For if a person comes into your congregation whose hands are adorned with gold rings and who is wearing splendid apparel, and also a poor [man] in shabby clothes come in, <sup>3</sup>and you pay special attention to the one who wears the splendid clothes and say to him, Sit here in the preferable seat! While you tell the poor [man], Stand there! Or, Sit there on the floor at my feet!”**

## FACILITATOR'S COMMENTS:

1. James illustrates a case in point: the preference being given to seating arrangements in the assembly hall
2. James image is similar to that in Jesus' Parable of two men who prayed @ **LUKE 18:10-14** – [NRSV] *“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”*
3. There is little doubt that there must have been significant social problems in the early church at the time James was being written; the church was the only place in the ancient world where social distinctions did not exist

## A BREAK for DISCUSSION:

1. What is it about humans that makes us uncomfortable with situations such as this?
2. Why do we show partiality based on outward appearances?
3. Does Jesus' parable in Luke provide an idea or clue as to the reason that we might not treat others the same? What is it?
4. Do you wear your best available clothing for worship services? Do you pay more attention to what you wear to church compared to other events? Why or why not?

## + RETURNING TO THE BIBLICAL TEXT +

(CONTINUING MAIN POINT 'A': True Religion Does Not Show Partiality...)

### ... REASONS NOT TO SHOW PARTIALITY TOWARD THE RICH (vss. 4-13)

[AMP] *“**Are you not discriminating among your own and becoming critics and judges with wrong motives?**”*

**<sup>5</sup>Listen, my beloved brethren: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and in their position as believers and to inherit the kingdom which He has promised to those who love him? <sup>6</sup>But you have insulted [in contrast] (humiliated, dishonored, and show your contempt of) *the poor*. Is it not the rich who domineer over you? Is it not they who drag you into the law courts? <sup>7</sup>Is it not they who slander and blaspheme that precious name by which you are distinguished and called [the name of Christ invoked in baptism]?**

**<sup>8</sup>If indeed you [really] fulfill the royal Law in accordance with the Scripture, You shall love your neighbor as [you love] yourself, you do well. <sup>9</sup>But if you show servile regard (prejudice, favoritism) for people, you commit sin and are rebuked and convicted by the Law as violators and offenders. <sup>10</sup>For whosoever keeps the Law [as a] whole but stumbles and offends in one [single instance] has become guilty of [breaking] all of it. <sup>11</sup>For He Who said, You shall not commit adultery, also said, You shall not kill. If you do not commit adultery but do kill, you have become guilty of transgressing the [whole] Law.**

**<sup>12</sup>So speak and so act as [people should] who are to be judged under the law of liberty [the moral instruction given by Christ, especially about love]. <sup>13</sup>For to him who has shown no mercy the judgment [will be] merciless, but mercy [full of glad confidence] exults victoriously over judgment.”**

[MSG] “Listen, dear friends. Isn’t it clear by now that God operates quite differently? He chose the world’s down-and-out as the kingdom’s first citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God. And here you are abusing these same citizens! Isn’t it the high and mighty who exploit you, who use the courts to rob you blind? Aren’t they the ones who scorn the new name – “Christian” – used in your baptisms?

You do well when you complete the Royal Rule of the Scriptures: “Love others as you love yourself.” But if you play up to these so-called important people, you go against the Rule and stand convicted by it. You can’t pick and choose in these things, specializing in keeping one or two things in God’s law and ignoring others. The same God who said, ‘Don’t commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Don’t murder.’ If you don’t commit adultery but go ahead and murder, do you think your non-adultery will cancel out your murder? No, you’re a murderer, period.

Talk and act like a person expecting to be judged by the Rule that sets us free. For if you refuse to act kindly, you can hardly expect to be treated kindly. Kind mercy wins over harsh judgment every time.”

**FACILITATOR'S COMMENTS:**

1. It is not that the church wanted to exclude the great, the rich, the wise and the mighty; however, the fact is that the gospel offered so much more to the poor and placed so many demands on the rich
2. In society, the rich generally oppressed the poor; they regularly dragged them into law courts; they had no sympathy. It is not the riches that James is here condemning; it is the conduct of the rich for not showing sympathy.
3. Vs. 7 provides an indication that the rich were abusing the name by which Christians were called. The Greek word James uses for "called" is **EPIKALEISTHAI**. It was the word used for a wife taking her husband's name in marriage; the Christian was called after Christ; the rich in society and the masters would have had understandably many reasons for insulting the name 'Christian.'
4. James calls the great injunction *"to love our neighbors as ourselves"* **THE ROYAL LAW**; then, he goes on to set forth a great principle about the Law of God – that to break any part of it as to become a transgressor. The typical Jew, on the other hand, regarded the law as a series of detached injunctions; to keep one was to gain credit with God; to break one was to incur debt. A man could add up the ones he kept and subtract the ones he broke and so emerge with a credit or debit balance. Partiality, therefore, will convict us as transgressors, even if we stumble in just one point.
5. Finally James claims that we shall be judged by the **law of liberty**, in which judgment without mercy is given to those who show no mercy

**A BREAK for DISCUSSION:**

- 1) James is reminding his readers, who were typically poor, that the rich are exploiting them; dragging them into court; slandering the noble name of Jesus Christ. Is James encouraging his poor brothers to disrespect the rich members of the assembly? Why or why not?
- 2) Was there ever a time in your life when you were loved by someone that would demonstrate the idea of "love your neighbor as yourself"?
- 3) Remembering Jesus' teaching that "our neighbor" is anyone who needs our help, how can we love our neighbors as ourselves?



**+MOVING ON+**  
**A NEW SUB-SECTION IN OUR STUDY OF THE TEXT**

**B) TRUE RELIGION SHOWS FAITH THROUGH WORKS (JAMES 2: 14-26)**

**...FAITH WITHOUT WORKS CANNOT SAVE ANYONE (vss. 14-19)**

[AMP] <sup>14</sup>*“What is the use (profit), my brethren, for anyone to profess to have faith if he has no [good] works [to show for it]? Can [such] faith save [his soul]? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is poorly clad and lacks food for each day, <sup>16</sup>And one of you says to him, Good-bye! Keep [yourself] warm and well fed, without giving him the necessities for the body, what good does that do? <sup>17</sup>So also faith, if it does not have works (deeds and actions of obedience to back it up), **by itself is destitute of power** (inoperative, dead). <sup>18</sup> **But someone will say [to you then], You [say you] have faith, and I have [good] works. Now show me your [alleged] faith apart from any [good] works [if you can], and I by [good] works [of obedience] will show you my faith.** <sup>19</sup>**You believe that God is one; you do well. So do the demons believe and shudder [in terror and horror such as make a man’s hair stand on end and contract the surface of his skin]!***

[MSG] Dear friends, do you think you’ll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, ‘Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!’ and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup - where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense? I can already hear one of you agreeing by saying, ‘Sounds good. You take care of the faith department, I’ll handle the works department.’ Not so fast. You can no more show me your works apart from your faith than I can show you my faith apart from my works. Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove.”

**FACILITATOR’S COMMENTS:**

1. James emphasis is a universal N.T. emphasis, namely that Christianity must be ethically demonstrated:
  - a) John the Baptist declared **“bear fruits that befit repentance”** (MT 3:8; LK 3:8)
  - b) Jesus preached **“Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”** it (MT 5:16; 7:15-21)
  - c) Paul speaks (Romans 2:6) of a God **“who will render to every man according to his works”**
  
2. Notwithstanding the above, James, whose major stress in teaching was on action and faith, is often interpreted as being in variance with Paul’s main emphasis on grace and faith. The essential Pauline position, stated at Acts 16:31 is **“believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.”**
  - a) It is suggested that there are 2 kinds of belief:
    - The belief which is purely intellectual – the acceptance of a fact without allowing it to have any influence on my life
    - The belief that is practical and exerts a definite effect on life and actions
  - b) What James was arguing against is the first kind of belief, the acceptance of a fact without allowing it to have any influence on life

- c) What Paul held was the second kind of belief. For him, to believe in Jesus meant to take that belief into every section of life and live by it
3. James and Paul also approach the subject of belief from different starting points in the Christian life. As discussed in an earlier session on Luther's view of James, a case can be made for speaking about salvation in the past tense and salvation in the present and future reality.
    - a) Paul starts at the very beginning and insists that no human can ever earn the forgiveness of God. The initial step must come as a free act of God's grace; one can only accept the forgiveness which God offers in Jesus Christ.
    - b) James begins much later with the already professing Christian, the person who claims to be already forgiven and involved in that new relationship with God. Such a person, James declares, must live a new life by virtue of being a new creature. Having been justified, now the requirement for that person is to show he/she is sanctified.
    - c) The fact is that nobody can be saved by works; but equally no one can be saved without producing works. It is not a case of *faith* either *or* works; it is necessarily a case of *both* faith and works.
  4. James' aversion to Christian profession without practice is vividly illustrated by the brother or sister who is poorly clad and lacking food.
    - a) Almsgiving for a Jew was of paramount importance; it was, and still is, one of the great and lovely marks of Jewish piety
    - b) In the time of James, there was a competing strain of Greek religion to which the emphasis on sympathy for the poor and the giving of alms was very alien. Stoics aimed for APATHIA, the complete absence of feeling. The way to perfect peace was to eliminate all emotion. For the Stoic, being blessed meant being progressively wrapped up in one's own philosophic detachment and experiencing ever-increasing levels of calm.
    - c) Ultimately, the person oriented toward stoicism becomes less and less likely to be aware of and respond to the needs of others in society.
  5. The devils believe in God, and tremble!

### + RETURNING TO THE BIBLICAL TEXT +

(CONTINUING MAIN POINT 'B': True Religion Shows Faith Through Works...)

#### ... FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD (JAMES 2:20-26)

[AMP] <sup>20</sup> ***Are you willing to be shown [proof], you foolish (unproductive, spiritually deficient) fellow, that faith apart from [good] works is inactive and ineffective and worthless?*** <sup>21</sup> ***Was not our forefather Abraham [shown to be] justified (made acceptable to God) buy [his] works when he brought to the altar as an offering his [own] son Isaac?*** <sup>22</sup> ***You see that [his] faith was cooperating with his works, and [his] faith was completed and reached its supreme expression [when he implemented it] by [good] works.*** <sup>23</sup> ***And [so] the Scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed in (adhered to, trust in, and relied on) God, and this was accounted to him as righteousness (as conformity to God's Will in thought and deed), and he was called God's friend.*** <sup>24</sup> ***You see that a man is justified (pronounced righteous before God) through what he does and not alone through faith [through works of obedience as well as by what he believes].*** <sup>25</sup> ***So also with Rahab the harlot – was she***

***not shown to be justified*** (pronounced righteous before God) ***by*** [good] ***deeds when she took in the scouts*** (spies) ***and sent them away by a different route?*** <sup>26</sup> ***For as the human body apart from the spirit is lifeless, so faith apart from [its] work of obedience is also dead.***”

[MSG] “Do I hear you professing to believe in the one and only God, but then observe you complacently sitting back as if you had done something wonderful? That’s just great. Demons do that, but what good does it do them? Use your heads! Do you suppose for a minute that you can cut faith and works in two and not end up with a corpse on your hands? Wasn’t our ancestor Abraham ‘made right with God by work’ when he placed his son Isaac on the sacrificial altar? Isn’t it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in works? That the works are ‘works of faith’? The full meaning of ‘believe’ in the Scripture sentence, ‘Abraham believed God and was set right with God,’ includes his action. It’s that mesh of believing and acting that got Abraham named ‘God’s friend.’ Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by faith fruitful in works? The same with Rahab, the Jericho harlot. Wasn’t her action in hiding God’s spies and helping them escape – that seamless unity of believing and doing – what counted with God? The very moment you separate body and spirit, you end up with a corpse. Separate faith and works and you get the same thing: a corpse.

### **FACILITATOR’S COMMENTS:**

1. These two examples show that faith and deeds are not opposites; they are in fact inseparables.
  - a) Abraham stands as the “*Father of the Jewish nation*”
  - b) Rahab had sheltered the spies sent to investigate the Promised Land (*see Joshua 2:1-21*)
2. No human is moved to take action without faith; no faith is genuine unless it moves a person to action. Deeds are the proof of faith.
3. Faith and deeds are opposite sides of a human’s experience of God.

### **FINAL BREAK for DISCUSSION:**

1. Besides Abraham and Rahab, who from Scripture best illustrates this concept of faith with works?
2. What did Jesus Christ teach us about the concept of faith and works? Can you cite a scriptural reference?