

Living Out the Gospel of Jesus

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God justifies people by faith, not works; however, true faith is verified by works.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: James 1–2

Less talk and more action. This cultural maxim accords well with the Book of James. James's letter is about faith in action: "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (Jas. 1:22). James took action by encouraging his poor brothers and sisters to suffer injustice in such a way that their steadfast faith would be an example to their oppressors (4:1-8). Violence doesn't bring about justice; love does (1:19-20). James also encouraged those with means to care for those who were poor and distressed, namely, orphans and widows (1:27). To both groups, and to everyone in between, James explained that true worship is reflected and empowered by God the Holy Spirit not merely in what we say we believe but in how we live that out by loving those around us.



What are some ways we can show our love for others?

Date of My Bible Study: _____

Group Time

Point 1: Faith is dead without works (Jas. 2:14-17).

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

James believed that faith in the Messiah transforms us to love the vulnerable and weak. Those who are incorporated into the righteousness of Christ by faith are empowered by God the Holy Spirit to live out that righteousness by providing for the needs of our poor brothers and sisters. For James, and all the apostles, how we treat the “least of these” is an expression of our faith—or the lack thereof—in the Lord Jesus Christ (Jas. 2:1,14; see Matt. 25:31-46). How we treat those in need reflects our allegiance to the one true God. The way we treat people is an act of worship.



Voices from Church History

“The love with which man loves God and his neighbour is the love of God and no other; for there is no other love; there is no love which is free or independent from the love of God.”¹

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer
(1906-1945)



As followers of Jesus, what is our responsibility to the poor?

In this letter, James rebuked the believers for showing favoritism to the rich over the poor (Jas. 2:1-9). They were not worshipping the Lord Jesus because they dishonored their poor brothers and sisters whom God had blessed with a rich faith. James said the wealthy people they favored were ones who blasphemed the name of Christ, likely because they took advantage of the poor (2:7; 5:1-6). The “faith” of such people is dead. So rather than side with rich oppressors, they were to love and care for their poor and demonstrate their faith in Jesus was alive and well.



What are some actions characteristic of those whose faith is dead?

Point 2: Faith is proven by works (Jas. 2:18-19).

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

Our faith in God and His Son is expressed by the good works we do for our neighbor. Mere intellectual assent to God’s existence is not enough. James made this clear because even the demons believe in the one true God. Yet they do not love God; in fact, they actively oppose Him. Everyone has a responsibility to recognize God as the Creator of this world (Rom. 1:18-20), but acknowledging God and an active faith in Him are two different things, and there is no middle ground. A meaningless faith is demonic.



In our evangelism, how should we respond to people who say they believe in God?

Some say the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. By comparing those who have faith without works to demons, perhaps James was making a similar point. Just as indifference is the true opposite of love, idleness is the opposite of faith. Thus, in one way, demons possess a better kind of faith than some people who attend our churches! At least demonic faith elicits some type of noticeable response to the biblical truth that the Lord our God is one—*the demons shudder*. But again, the faith that saves stems from a true fear of the Lord that produces good works.

Justification by Faith: Justification refers to the moment when a person is objectively _____ righteous before God based on the righteousness of Christ’s atoning death. This act of declaration takes place through _____ in _____ and not as a result of human works or effort. Through justification, a person is made to be in right standing before God, changing what was once an estranged and hostile relationship to one of _____ into the family of God.

Point 3: Faith is made complete by works (Jas. 2:20-26).

²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

In James 2:20, James informed the believers who would show favoritism and callously dismiss the needs of their poor brothers and sisters that they were acting like fools. Their faith was bordering on useless because it was not being expressed through love and honor for others. James asked those who were walking in disobedience to take a moment and learn about their misconception of saving faith. One sign of our responsiveness to Jesus’ lordship and grace is our willingness to learn about His ways.



What have you had to learn as you have grown in your faith in Christ?

“Active love is to faith what the breath is to the human body.”² Our faith in the Messiah, by necessity, produces works of love for God and neighbor. James used wealthy Abraham and poor Rahab as extreme examples from Israel’s history to prove this point.

- Because Abraham believed God, he was justified by faith alone (Gen. 15:6), and his faith in God moved him to works, one example being his obedience to God’s command to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen. 22).
- Rahab, a social outcast, Gentile prostitute, and ancestor of Jesus (Matt. 1:4), displayed her faith by her actions. Believing in the one true God of the Israelites, she hid the Hebrew spies on her roof and kept them safe from the authorities of Jericho (Josh. 2; 6).

Justification and Works: Justification is not the result of human effort or good works but through faith in the righteousness of _____. Although good works do not lead to justification, justification leads to good works in the life of a believer. While good works do not establish justification, they do _____ a genuine faith and make our justification _____ to others.

Daily Study

Day 1: Read James 1:1-26

Have you ever seen poverty up close?

A few years ago, my daughter and I traveled to Kolkata, India. After serving my brothers and sisters in the local church, I realized that I've never experienced poverty, though I thought I had.

These believers lived in a literal garbage dump. They were among the “untouchable class,” which meant that by the caste system, their poverty and persecution were a result of *karma*; therefore, they were not worthy of help.

In light of this, let's consider James's exhortation concerning trials:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (Jas. 1:2-4)

In their various trials, these poor believers had a beautiful holiness, joy, and maturity. They thus gave the world a greater glimpse of Jesus.



How has your faith been affected by serving or interacting with the poor?

Day 2: Read James 2:1-13

Remember the saying “don’t judge a book by its cover”? One day I was running late for a meeting with a friend at a five-star hotel. Because I was running late, I didn’t have time to change out of my workout clothes. As I began to walk toward the entrance of the hotel, I was stopped by a bellman. He asked me, “What are you doing here?” I said, “I’m meeting my friend for breakfast.” At that moment as I was challenged at the door, many thoughts raced through my mind. Another employee recognized me and I was permitted to enter.

What’s my point? We should treat the CEO and the garbage man the same. We should treat every person we ever encounter as an image-bearer, someone God created and a person for whom Jesus was willing to lay down His life (Heb. 2:9). And if Jesus, the ideal image-bearer, shared a human nature like this person’s, then we should treat all people with love, dignity, and respect, regardless of their ethnicity, class, or gender.



In what ways does Christianity establish the inherent worth of every human being apart from social and economic class and ethnicity?

Day 3: Read James 2:14-17

What is the greatest threat to Christianity in America?

The responses I’ve received from fellow believers on this question range from Islam to the liberal media. However, the greatest threat to American Christianity is what Jesus said two thousand years ago: “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:24). Money is not evil, of course, but when it becomes our god, it destroys our souls.

Imagine this, if Christians were to start giving just ten percent of their incomes, \$165,000,000,000 would be released to fight global hunger, eliminate death from preventable diseases within five years, heal the world’s water and sanitation problems, end illiteracy, and fund overseas mission work.⁴

As Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matt. 25:45).



Why should the generosity we exercise reflect the generosity we’ve received in salvation?

Day 4: Read James 2:18-19

Talk is cheap.

There is a reason this maxim has stuck around. People can claim to be something a lot more easily than they can live out that claim. It's one thing to claim to be a good parent, loving spouse, or reliable employee, but it's another thing to act as any one of these identities on a day-to-day basis.

In the context of James 2, the author is making the point that it's easier to claim to be a Christian than it is to actually be one. It is easier to assert faith than to act in faith. There is no such thing as saving faith that does not manifest itself in good works. Yes, talk can be cheap, and the verbal expression of faith is a necessity; however, if our faith only results in our using religious jargon and never reaches the point of caring tangibly for orphans, widows, and others in need, then we are self-deceived (Jas. 1:26). Our talk truly is cheap.



Why do we often slip into caring more about what a person says about his or her Christian faith than we do about how they act out this faith?

Day 5: Read James 2:20-26

The moment God the Holy Spirit opened your heart to “the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and [you] believed in him,” Jesus yelled words of life into the dark abyss of death and called you out of it into His marvelous kingdom of light (Eph. 1:13-14; see Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9).

Through faith in Jesus, a new unalterable reality has dawned in your life (Jas. 1:18). Because of this great gift of salvation, the Holy Spirit infuses you with a new heart that has a new desire to glorify God by loving your neighbor as you love yourself. Behind the “works” that James wrote about is the key motivating disposition—love.

Because you have been loved by God, your faith produces works of love, and by your works of love, the world will know that you are Jesus' disciple (John 13:34-35).



Why is no good work truly good without being done out of love for God and love for neighbor?

