

The Unity of Faith and Action
A Sermon on James 2:1-26
Proper 18
September 9, 2018

Introduction

James has gotten a bad rap for centuries. His fiercest critic has been Martin Luther, who called James “an epistle of straw” and said it was a mistake to include it in the canon. This was because when James said things like, “Faith without works is dead,” he seemed to contradict Paul’s teaching on justification by grace alone, which became one of the central organizing principles of the Protestant Reformation.

Today we look at the most famous passage in James—his discussion of faith and works. I would ask you to put Paul out of your mind for a few minutes and consider James on his own terms. What does James have to say about our faith in God and how we reflect that faith? What does James have to say about what mature faith looks like?

First Move: God Does Not Show Partiality

James begins by imploring his audience to have the same faith as Jesus Christ had. This is not faith in Jesus Christ, that is, faith in the divinity of Jesus. This is sharing the faith of Jesus, looking to Jesus as a role model for what our faith should look like.

Not in partiality do you have the faith of Jesus. Partiality is a translation of the Greek word *προσωπολημψίας*. This word does not appear in secular Greek usage; it appears only in the New Testament. It means *lifting up the face of someone*. People showed deference to a king by getting on their knees and bowing with their face touching the ground. If the person was a person of honor and wealth, the king would lift up their face, like giving them a salute.

God doesn’t do that. God doesn’t salute anybody. The same word is translated in Acts 10:34-35 in the King James Bible as God is no respecter of persons. The same idea is expressed in Deuteronomy 10:17, which is a courtroom setting in which God is the judge. King James translates this verse as, “For the Lord your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward.” God’s honor and status is so far beyond human status that God takes no notice of the honor and respect that humans give one another. God

is not moved by the trappings of power. People in the ancient world treated rich and powerful with respect and deference in hopes that the rich person would become their patron and grant them favors. This doesn't work with God, who does not look for reciprocity for the rich man. God does not "taketh reward."

James compares how God regards the rich and powerful man with how the people in *your* synagogue greet a man with a gold rings on his fingers in splendid clothing. You tell him, "You sit here in the good [place]."

James, the brother of Jesus, was the leader of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem after the death of Jesus. Acts 15 describes the Jerusalem Council in which the followers of Christ agreed that James and Peter would take the gospel to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles. The Jewish Christians still met in synagogues in James' day. They aren't necessarily gathered for worship. The synagogue was a community center. Besides being a place for worship, it was a place for public meetings and trials in the Jewish community. James may well be referring to a trial in a synagogue. God treats everyone alike in judgment, Jew and Gentile, rich man and poor woman. That is the ideal in the courtroom. Leviticus 19:15 says, "You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great; with justice you shall judge your neighbor." James scolds his audience for showing the beggar in filthy clothing to "stand there or sit under my footstool." The trial between the rich man and the beggar is already decided before their case is heard.

It might sound contradictory that "God choose the beggars to the world [to be] rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he promised to the ones who love him." How do we square God shows no partiality with God's preferential option for the poor? God *did* show partiality by choosing lowly Israel to be a light to the nations. James also may be drawing on the Sermon on the Mount, which would have been circulating in the oral tradition before Matthew wrote his gospel some time after James was written. "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens." The poor *are* blessed.

God heard the cries of the Hebrew slaves, groaning from their oppression. God instructed Israel to care for the widow and the orphan, "just as I brought you out of the land of Egypt." God cares for the vulnerable and is moved by their plight. It is easier for the poor to be rich in faith. They depend on God out of necessity. The rich man is more likely to rely on his riches instead of his faith. Yet when the rich and the poor, Jew and Gentile, come to God in judgment, God looks at the content of their character rather than the honor that society gives them. All people stand before God as children of God, nothing more, nothing less.

James also appeals to the experience of his audience. Why do you dishonor beggars? Do not the rich oppress you and pull you into lawsuits? Do they not slander the good name by which you were called? That good name is as followers of Christ. James is not referring to persecution of Christians. He is talking about the universal practice in cultures of the world to defer to the rich, who loan money to the poor and drag them into court when they can't pay.

James also appeals to Scripture and singles out the royal law, "Love your neighbor as yourself." The royal law means the law that God hands down as king, the law of the kingdom of God. Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments as love God and love your neighbor.

James tells his audience that they violate the law of loving your neighbor when they show partiality. James compares partiality to murder and adultery. They are sins that violate God's will for life in the kingdom. Sin brings God's judgment "For the judgment [is] merciless to the one who has not done mercy." This is an echo of the Lord's Prayer: forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Second Move: Deeds Complete Faith

James discusses how faith is reflected in works. Works is a translation of the Greek noun, ἔργα. We can't help but think of Paul and Luther when we hear the word *works*. The primary meaning of ἔργα is activity, actions, deeds. ἔργα is plural, so I translate it as deeds.

James asks a rhetorical question: "What [is] the benefit, my brothers, if someone says to have faith, but does not have deeds? Is faith able to save him? [my translation]."

Faith alone is no use to us. It does not give us life. Our actions should reflect our beliefs, otherwise we are hypocrites.

"If a brother or sister is naked." The Greek word for naked here means without the outer garment, partly naked. "If they are in need of food for the day." This echoes the Lord's Prayer: "Give us today the bread that we need for today." What is the benefit if "someone of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warm and be filled.'" but you do not give them what is necessary of the body?" You are mocking them or dismissing them.

"Faith, if it does not have deeds, is dead in itself." Instead of bringing life, faith that does not result in deeds brings death.

Faith means believing that God is one. That is one of the central affirmations of Judaism: you are the only god and you are one. Yet that belief itself does not give life. Even the demons believe that, and they shudder when they hear it.

James turns to Abraham and Rahab, two examples of mature faith. James and Paul both quote Genesis 15:6: “And Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” James says that Abraham showed himself to be righteous from deeds when he offered up Isaac his son upon the altar. His faith led him to be willing to trust God even when God asked him to do the most painful thing he could have done. “Faith was working together with his works [or deeds] and from the works [or deeds] the faith was made complete.”

The story of Rahab is told in Joshua 2. Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho. At great risk to herself, she welcomed the Hebrew spies into her home when they were doing reconnaissance before invading the Promised Land. She put them up for the night. The king of Jericho heard about it and ordered her to surrender the spies. She sent them out another way so they wouldn’t be caught. She told the spies that she believed that “the Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below.”

Abraham was the father of faith, and Rahab was a Gentile, yet both are examples of faith in action.

James concludes his teaching with the line that so offended Luther: “Faith apart from deeds is dead.”

Third Move: Faith in Action Brings Life

James is not contradicting Paul—he complements Paul. James has a different audience. Paul is the apostle to the Gentile. He is telling Gentiles that the death of Jesus is the first fruits of a new creation—Gentiles are being brought into the people of God. They don’t need to be circumcised and observe the kosher laws to be brought into the community. Through their baptism they share in Christ’s death by dying to their old way of living and rising to new life in Christ.

We preached Romans last summer for two months. If you will remember, the scholarship on the New Paul suggests that Paul was addressing God-fearing Gentiles in Jewish congregations who were attracted to the Law because they thought it would help them with self-mastery, controlling their emotions. They thought they didn’t need Christ, just the Law. Paul said, “No, Christ is indispensable.” The God-fearers had deeds without faith.

James has a different audience. James is the apostle to the Jews. He is addressing Jewish followers of Christ who are already in the people of God. The law is a great blessing to them. It reflects God’s virtues and God’s will for their lives. By following the law, by adopting God’s virtues, they are maturing in faith. James begins today’s text by telling them that they should imitate the faith of Jesus, who was

perfectly obedient to God's will. James emphasizes the life of Christ rather than the cross.

James is saying that there is a link between theology and ethics. He is talking about ethics in a similar way to Aristotle. Our ethics is driven by what type of character we want to have. For Aristotle, the cardinal virtues were prudence, temperance, courage and justice. These ethics are self-centered except for justice.

What virtues are important to us? That is the type of character we will have. If we take our virtues from the world, especially from our political parties, then we will be modeling self interest and self glorification.

Our theology matters. Our theology reveals what we think God is like. We take our virtues from God not from the world. If God refuses to show partiality to the rich and powerful and considers all people to be God's children, we should refuse to show partiality and we should recognize all our neighbors as our sisters and brothers. If God is merciful, then we should be merciful. If God cares for the vulnerable, the ones who are despised by the world, we should, too. If God is one, then we should be united. We are connected to each other by our faith. We should be single-minded—we should be centered on God's values instead of the world's values.

Christians have come to emphasize the teachings of Jesus, which are based on the Law, rather than the Law itself. The Sermon on the Mount is at the core of Christian ethics. It shows us the virtues that God embraces. Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek or gentle, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the merciful, blessed are those who have been persecuted because of righteousness.

Every Advent we celebrate four virtues: hope, peace, joy and love. These virtues reflect God's character and the gifts that God gives us. These are the Christian virtues that shape our character and that shape Christian communities.

James fits beautifully with these Christian teachings. God does not show partiality. You should love your neighbor as yourself, whether the neighbor is a rich man with gold rings or a beggar in filthy clothes. Look to the faith of Jesus. He modeled this during his ministry. He lived among the poor. Jesus says the same thing when he talks about caring for the least of these. When you care for the least of these, you care for me. Jesus spent his life among the least of these. When we reach out to them, it brings our faith alive.

Our criminal justice system discriminates in favor of the rich man. The rich man can afford the best lawyers. The rich man can post bail. Prison sentences for white collar crime are rare.

When we care for the least of these and visit the prisoner, we find that the prisoner is a beloved child of God, too. The beggars in the eyes of the world are rich in faith.

Julius Jones has been on death row for 19 years. He didn't have the rich man's lawyer. His lawyers rested at trial without putting on a case. Julius lives in solitary confinement, 24/7, though he is allowed to make phone calls. He lives in a cage. He wears handcuffs and shackles whenever he leaves his cell, even to go to the shower. The prosecutors and guards treat him like an animal.

We don't put animals in cages anymore. Our thinking on how we treat animals has been revolutionized in the last century. The zoo puts animals in native habitat. We are gentle when we train animals. The horse whisperer is our model. Meanwhile our prisons are relics of the 19th century.

I could not bear up under the burdens that Julius carries. Yet I never hear self-pity when I talk to Julius. I never hear despair. He always wants to know what is going on in my life. He wants to hear about how the world has changed in the last 19 years. He reads books. He writes poetry. He responds with a note of thanks whenever anyone writes him a letter. He is a bright, sensitive, caring man. Nineteen years on death row has not crushed his spirit. That says something about the human spirit, that it can endure much suffering and make it to the other side. That inspires me. It fills me with hope.

The odds are still against Julius. He would have been executed three years ago if the moratorium had not been put in place. He will be executed when the moratorium is lifted unless his attorneys find new evidence. Killing this man so full of life makes no sense. We all will be diminished. We will be crucifying Christ all over again.

Conclusion

God does not show partiality. God causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous.

In the Christian community, we should treat the rich man and the beggar as beloved children of God. The rich man may turn out to be Zacchaeus and the beggar may be Julius. Our lives will be richer for knowing both of them.

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