

JAMES—WEEK 2

FAITH AND WORKS



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is St James the Minor by Peter Paul Rubens (1577 – 1640)
On display in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain*

In this “faith without works is dead” chapter, James lays out a case for the importance of works, and how works and faith are inseparable.

He’s right.

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James, Week 2 — Faith and Works
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1 James 2:1–7

My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a good place,” and say to the poor man, “You stand there,” or, “Sit here at my footstool,” have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?

This is easy to say but hard to do. We are marinated in a culture of status.

This is most obvious in television commercials, where we’re told we must have the right clothing, or the latest phone, or a cool car to be accepted. At least we no longer have to smoke the right cigarette.

This is also why some schools have uniforms—to prevent students from displaying their status through their clothing. This extreme approach counters the brutal way that adolescents often treat each other.

Adults are more restrained than teens, but the sin DNA is still there. We tend to discriminate, though often subconsciously.

So, James commands us to fight this sinful tendency and to give equal treatment to all. To bolster his argument, James points out that the rich tend to be oppressors. Note that “*drag you into courts,*” is about civil lawsuits. Criminal cases are “dragged into courts” by the authorities.

Frankly, in Biblical times, oppression was normally how people got rich. There was no patent law and no industrialization. The modern ways with which one person can legitimately create great wealth didn’t exist.

Instead, all wealth was generated by hard labor. For people to get rich, they had to garner the wealth produced by the labors of many people. Good management mattered, but only to a limited extent.

And people tend to fight over money, just as they battled for status in their school days.

With adults, this often ends up in court.

Wealth works differently now, but the principle is the same. *My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.*

James reinforces this view by noting that the poor have a spiritual advantage. *Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?*

Beware, you can miss out on a lot by not paying attention to what the poor have to say.

2 James 2:8–13

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Obviously, the people we might show partiality towards (or against) are our “neighbors.” So, the “love your neighbor” bit isn’t only about the folks that live on your street.

James’s point here is, “*if you show partiality, you commit sin.*” Do not miss how strongly James is saying this. Partiality is the antithesis of loving your neighbor. It’s on the level with adultery and murder.

James uses a bit of humor to make his case with the example of someone who thinks he’s hot stuff because he doesn’t commit adultery, even though he’s a murderer.

That’s ridiculous. James is poking fun at our tendency to excuse our weaknesses while exalting our strengths.

Those of us who show favoritism likely think favoritism is a minor sin compared to marquee sins like adultery and murder.

But it’s not.

This is one of those bits of Biblical teaching that we all memorize and can dutifully recite when asked but don’t really take to heart. Are all sins really equal?

No, and James isn’t saying that. What he is saying is that favoritism is one of the big ones.

If that seems extreme, consider this—“What separates the major sins from the minor ones?”

Two things come to mind: the sin’s impact on others, and its relationship to pride. This first is like a force multiplier; impacting others enables one sin to spawn other sins in a chain reaction.

The second is about its relationship with the root of sin. CS Lewis’s description of pride says it all: “*The essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the ultimate anti-God state of mind.*”

Favoritism scores high on both points. It obviously impacts others in a way that can embarrass the LORD, plus lead them away from faith. And favoritism’s connection to pride is almost as strong.

Why favor the one with worldly status, if not to boost your own?

3 James 2:14–17 (ESV)

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 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? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

This isn't about whether salvation is by faith alone. Of course it is. This is about, “What is saving faith?” Here, James is making it clear that faith without works is not saving faith.

Okay, but why?

Gaining saving faith is much more than just changing your mind on an issue of doctrine. It's a Holy Spirit-driven transformation. A transformed person acts like a transformed person. Someone who doesn't act transformed obviously isn't transformed. Okay, but transformation of what?

Character, self, sense of self, attitude. It's a total transformation.

Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. — Ephesians 4:22b–24 (ESV)

This wouldn't be such a confusing issue for Americans if we hadn't watered down the gospel so much. We tend to think of the sinner's prayer as some kind of magical phrase that saves. That's not what it is.

It's supposed to be a sinner announcing his change. The change is from self-focus to kingdom focus. “Jesus is Lord” is an announcement of loyalty, not merely a statement of fact. The *new self* is a team player with a team agenda. “Looking out for number one” no longer means what it used to mean.

So, you can tell who's changed just by lookin' at 'em.

Then James goes nuclear. *So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

‘Scuse me, but isn't faith eternal life? Isn't faith, even without works, at least moving towards eternal life? Can't such a person be “getting close” or something like that? Can't the works get going as the new Christian grows in maturity?

James explicitly shoots that idea down. Faith without works has no life in it at all.

Okay, but doesn't something grow? Should we really look for the same kind of works in a new Christian that we look for in mature ones?

Yes, something grows, and no, new Christians don't have the same kind of works. In fact, the works of a new Christian can be downright amusing. Sometimes they even induce face-palms in mature believers.

But that's not what matters. If they have the right “team spirit”, they're team members.

4 James 2:18–19 (ESV)

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. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

As if James’s argument isn’t already strong enough, he takes it up another notch by noting the demons have faith too. Yet they aren’t saved—and they know it.

And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” — Mark 1:23–24 (ESV)

This cannot be a legitimate confession of faith. But why isn’t it? Is it that the demon didn’t exactly say the words, “Jesus is Lord.”? Is it that the demon had faith without works?

The answer is that the demon effectively said that Jesus is **the** Lord but he didn’t confess Him as **his** Lord.

The demon knew that Jesus is the king of a kingdom, but he declined to join it. He chose to not be a member.

In fact, the demon’s words are the exact opposite of a confession of faith. They’re cleverly scripted to oppose Jesus’s agenda (by revealing His deity).

So, the first thing Jesus does is silence him.

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” — Mark 1:25 (ESV)

Jesus has the power to force the demon to do His will because He’s the Lord.

And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. — Mark 1:26 (ESV)

But the demon clearly doesn’t want to obey because Jesus is not his lord.

Being a member of a kingdom means pledging fealty to the king.

This has always been the case for a kingdom.

Do not miss how harsh James’s point is here. He is directly comparing demons to people who have faith without works.

Don’t get me wrong; James is not saying that those folks are just as bad as demons.

He’s saying that they’re just as unsaved.

5 James 2:20–26

But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

This is the “gotcha” passage for anyone who doesn’t subscribe to “sola fide.” But consider this.

Suppose Abraham’s faith wasn’t rock solid. What would have been different? Would he have still gotten up early in the morning to chop the wood? Sure.

Would he have taken Isaac to the mountain? Would he have built the altar? Would he have tied Isaac up?

Yes, yes, and yes to that and more.

So, what would have been different?

The moment when he raised the knife. That’s when faith and works became one. Was he really going to do it or not?

Yes means faith. No means bogus.

In that moment, was Abraham being tested by God or was God being tested by Abraham? We know the answer.

But if Abraham didn’t have rock-solid faith, he would have been testing God. He would have been waiting to see what happened next.

But he wasn’t waiting. How do we know? Because God knew.

*“I, the LORD, search the heart,
I test the mind,
Even to give every man according to his ways,
According to the fruit of his doings.” — Jeremiah 17:10*

Psychologists have a simple way to explain this—“We always do what we choose to do.”

Works is what we do.

Faith is what we choose to do.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. How do we still show partiality?
2. What can we do to train ourselves away from favoritism?
3. What is most notably different in a new believer?
4. How can the demons be that stupid?
5. Are there times when faith and works do not connect?