

James 2:1-13 • Faith and Love

Introduction

Whenever we see the word “faith” in Scripture, whether it is derived from the Hebrew or Greek, to properly understand the whole meaning we can always substitute the word “faithfulness”. What James is often speaking to is our “faithfulness” or our faith as in our “Christianity” or spiritual walk. When we ask someone how they can prove the authenticity of their Christian faith, we are often met with theological definitions or doctrinal viewpoints. James establishes that our doctrine and theology – our notion of God’s Law – is proved by our personal application of Christ’s greatest commandment to love others. In scriptural terms, faith cannot be intellectually isolated as a set of beliefs; it must be proved from the heart by putting “the royal law” into practice. There is a scriptural tension we must keep in place between our obedience to the Law through the proper application of love.

¹My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. ²For 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, ³and 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,” ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?

[Read v.1-4]

Q: What exactly does “do not hold your faith” mean?

A: It means “do not practice”. James is speaking about the practical application of our Christianity in everyday life.

Q: So what can threaten the quality of our faith?

A: “...an attitude of personal favoritism”. (v.1)

Q: How does James provide his own personal example of defusing personal favoritism?

A: He addresses them all as “my brethren”, a reflection that we are all one family, equal children of the Father.

Q: What does James’ illustration reveal about the definition of personal favoritism?

A: It is based on making the same kind of distinctions the world makes as to external appearances and physical attributes rather than seeing things on a spiritual level. Although the difference between the earthly rich and poor is visibly distinguishable, the underlying spiritual reality could be exactly opposite.

Q: When such distinctions are made, what does it reveal about our personal spiritual condition?

A: We become judges in God’s place, establishing a false standard by which we are deciding who is “in” or “out”. Christ’s standard of qualification is “the poor in spirit”. (Mt. 5:3)

Q: Why do you suppose that James defines making such distinctions as evidence of “evil motives”?

A: It reveals judgment as coming from someone whose heart is still fixed on the things of this world.

Application: Biblical faithfulness is characterized by a heart which no longer makes evaluations according to the world’s standards.

⁵Listen, 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? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? ⁷Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?

[Read v.5-7]

Q: What is the greater principle that James is trying to convey?

A: Man may fixate on the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart.

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

— 1 Samuel 16:7

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality.

— 1 Timothy 5:21

Q: What is the irony which James points out?

A: The earthly poor are "rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom" whereas the earthly rich are poor in both respects; their positions are reversed spiritually. Whereas the earthly rich may enjoy an earthly kingdom, it is the spiritually rich who are "heirs of the kingdom" which is richer, more valuable, and lasting far beyond the limits of this present life.

Q: What is the greater evil which occurs in a church which caters to the earthly rich?

A: Their behavior is so contradictory to the teaching and example of Christ that it actually serves to "blaspheme" His name. In other words, their public testimony destroys the credibility of the faith.

*He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker,
But he who is gracious to the needy honors Him.*

— Proverbs 14:31

Application: Biblical faithfulness is characterized not by outward appearances but by spiritual standards applied to the heart.

⁸If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well. ⁹But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. ¹¹For 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.

[Read v.8-11]

Q: Why does James call this "the royal law"?

A: This is the "new commandment" given by Christ which does not simply meet minimum requirements for personal relationships, but fulfills the whole Law.

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

— John 13:34

Q: How does James connect this with the Law?

A: He quotes from Leviticus 19:18, 34 which Jesus said summarized all the Law which pertained to the second tablet governing our relationships with others. (Mt. 22:39-40)

Point: This teaching in James is the earliest of those found in the epistles which substantiate how the whole Law has now been summarized by Christ into the commandment to love others. Whereas the Old Covenant was characterized by

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the two tablets and every Old Testament Law was subordinated to either loving God (the first tablet) or loving others (the second tablet), Christ further condensed it into loving others as He loved. In other words, in order to prove we love God it must first be proved by our love for others.

This is proven by the fact that after Jesus issued this new commandment, no one ever quotes from the first tablet again. Beginning here with James, the Apostles only quote from the second tablet that we must love others as the fulfillment of the whole Law. In the course of his ministry Paul teaches...

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

— Romans 13:8–10

For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

— Galatians 5:14

And at the end of the 1st Century church John, the last Apostle standing, reaffirms in the end what had always been taught by the Apostles from the beginning...

By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother. For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another;

— 1 John 3:10–11

And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it.

— 2 John 6

No one ever again quotes from the first tablet because the whole Law (both tablets) is fulfilled through the requirement to love others.

Q: So what is James' point in v.10 about stumbling on one point of the law as it relates to "personal favoritism"?

A: In transgressing "the royal law" of love we are actually guilty of violating the whole Law.

Application: *Biblical faithfulness is characterized by keeping the royal law of love for others, which is actually the fulfillment of the whole Law.*

¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

[Read v.12-13]

Q: What is “the law of liberty” of which James now speaks?

A: This is another way of describing “the royal law” or Christ’s summary of the whole Law into His new commandment to love others. In other words, because the whole Law is now summarized into loving others it facilitates a “liberty” or freedom from the burden of the Old Testament Law. Whereas the Old Testament Law consisted for 613 commandments which were all derived from the main Ten Commandments originally given and summarized by the two tablets to love God and to love others, Christ’s new commandment condenses everything into one, single “law of liberty” of love in place of the myriad requirements of the Old Covenant.

Q: And how is “the law of liberty” to be applied?

A: Not just by the mouth (“so speak”), but from the heart (“so act”). In fact, practitioners are to speak and act upon it “as those who are judged by the law of liberty”. In other words, their faith is characterized by knowing that they will be judged by how they love others biblically.

Q: How does this final observation in v.13 wrap up the way this teaching began?

A: This teaching began by warning against those who are still judging things by the world’s standards and ends by stipulating to the consequences of so doing.

Point: *Those who have shown mercy will not be afraid of final judgment since they themselves will receive mercy.*

Application: *Biblical faithfulness is characterized by not just talking about biblical love, but putting it into practice.*

Overall Application

Each of the points of applications for this study were:

- *Biblical faithfulness is characterized by a heart which no longer makes evaluations according to the world’s standards.*
- *Biblical faithfulness is characterized not by outward appearances but by spiritual standards applied to the heart.*
- *Biblical faithfulness is characterized by keeping the royal law of love for others, which is actually the fulfillment of the whole Law.*
- *Biblical faithfulness is characterized by not just talking about biblical love, but putting it into practice.*

Whereas some might define Christianity as a faith defined by specific rules or doctrines, Scripture – which is the very definition of “the Law” or Christianity’s rules – defines it as the expression of biblical love in practice. The theology and doctrine of the faith of Christianity is proved by the degree to which its practitioners display the royal law of love.