

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
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James 2:1-10, 14-18

Straight Words from James

- 1. Christians don't play favorites**
- 2. Christians don't possess fake faith**

Hymns: 233 – 460 –
Closing: 499 (vv. 1-4)

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

James 2:1-10, 14-18 – My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

Many of you are probably familiar with the phrase, "Where the rubber hits the road." Where did that phrase come from? In an article online, John Paul Basile of Rubber Road Marketing states: "The genesis of the phrase is (unofficially) credited to a national advertising jingle used throughout the 1960s and 1970s by the former Firestone Tire and Rubber Company."

**Wherever wheels are rolling,
No matter what the load,
The name that's known is Firestone
Where the rubber meets the roads.**

He then goes on to explain that the phrase is now used to mean a variety of things depending on the context in which it is used. Interestingly, he lists the following examples:

1. When plans and convictions become actions
2. Where we go from "talking the talk" to "walking the walk"
3. Daily life and personal practice is "where the rubber meets the road" for religious followers

(Source: offrubberroad.wordpress.com/.../origin-of-rubber-hits-the-road)

Our sermon text today – and the whole book of James – could really use this phrase as its theme. Toward end of our reading, James says, "Someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do."

Today we focus on some straight words from James about genuine faith and our Christian life. If he would have known our modern day idiom, he might have asked, "Is the rubber hitting the road in your life?" So today, let's see "Straight Words from James." We will learn that:

- 1. Christians don't play favorites**
- 2. Christians don't possess fake faith**

1. Christians don't play favorites

Our reading began, *"My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"*

James used an interesting picture to make his first point. He described a man that might come into their synagogue as a visitor. Literally, he calls him a "gold-fingered man." The gold-fingered man comes in, James says, wearing "shiny clothes." You can probably picture the modern day man that James is describing. He has a big, shiny watch and a couple rings on his fingers. He has a shiny double-breasted suit and some stylish wire-rimmed glasses. James then described another man that came into their synagogue service. The NIV translates that he had "shabby clothes," literally the word even for "filthy." This might even have been a homeless person who didn't have the means to keep clean in daily life.

James' point was the reaction of the Christians in the synagogue. Would they treat these visitors differently? Would they find a fine seat for the wealthier man because of his flash and dash? And would they ignore the other man, or tell him to sit on the footstool that lined the bottom of their benches? Would they show favoritism? Would they discriminate?

James rebuked them for having such an attitude for a number of reasons:

1. *"Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?"* Exploitation! Even in James' day, it appears that the rich exploiting the poor was a common theme. How had he become rich? For

many, it was at the expense and cost of the middle class and poorer people.

2. *"Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?"* It also seems that in James' day it was a common theme for the rich and wealthy to talk and live blasphemously, thinking themselves to be independent of the God that rules all things. I don't think we'd find that concept to be foreign in our day and age. Think of the celebrities and Hollywood personalities that are pasted on magazines and yapping on TV talk shows. Are they the ones often noted for godliness and piety and for praising our Creator and Savior in heaven?
3. Then the most telling statement of all: *"Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him?"* James pointed to the way that God operates and the people that are often found to be his godly people.

1 Corinthians 1 says, *"Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."*

In his wisdom, God often chooses the seemingly foolish and despised to be his own and to serve his purposes. It was the way he often operated in the OT. He chose the runaway shepherd, Moses, to be the leader of his people. He chose the youngest son, David, the insignificant shepherd-boy, to be the next king. He chose fishermen and tax collectors to be his disciples. He chose a humble, young virgin to be the mother of the Son of God. Christ lived a

humble, lowly life on this earth, not even having a house to call his own. And the salvation of the world was won on a cross, a despised instrument of torture and death, as Jesus suffered and died for the sins of all people!

And now, James writes, you will show favoritism to the rich and despise the poor?

We see James' point even better when we look at how God continues to operate:

- He uses the simple Word and witness about Christ to work faith in people's hearts.
- He uses simple water and the Word in baptism to wash away sins and work the gift of faith in infants.
- He comes in bread and wine with his body and blood to forgive sins in his sacred Supper.
- And as far as coming to the poor and despised, he has even come to... YOU. For some reason he chose to want you in his family and has adopted you, so that you might have eternal salvation through Jesus Christ.

And now we will show favoritism?

It might be easy to say, "OK, I've got it, pastor!" but think for a moment about where the rubber hits the road:

- Which visitors to church do you talk to on Sundays? Those that "catch your eye" naturally because of something outwardly? Or worse yet, would your answer be, "Oh, I don't talk to visitors at all, pastor. I only talk to my clique."
- Who would you invite to come to worship with you here and meet Jesus? Only those like you? Or more desirable in your eyes, who "bring something to the table?" Or worse yet, would your answer be, "Oh, I haven't invited anyone to visit our church in a year or more. I just don't do it."
- Do other outward things drive whom you might show favoritism to or socialize with?

- Does age matter? Are some of our older folks loathed to get to know our teens? Or vice versa?
- We have a number of people of different races in our congregation and even a Korean church that stands on its own. Do those lines divide you from others?
- Or differences in wealth? Or outer appearance?

May God help us to view others as he has viewed... YOU! He has saved you when you were a rotten sinner. He has invited you. He has adopted you into his family. May God's attitude permeate your thinking toward others!

2. Christians don't possess fake faith

There's more straight talk today, as James continues in our reading and elaborates on the importance of good works in general in a Christian's life. Listen to what James says: *"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do."*

This section of James has raised the eyebrows of Christians down through the ages. Does James really mean this, as he gives his "straight talk?" Doesn't this even contradict the teaching of Scripture that we are saved "by faith alone?" After all, Romans 3 says, *"A righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."*

Let's look at this more closely. First, consider James' audience. He was writing from Jerusalem to the Jews who had been scattered

by persecutions to areas outside of the Holy Land. He was writing to longtime, even lifetime believers. And he was writing to people who had become rather lukewarm and indifferent to the urgency of living the faith and doing good works. (Does that sound familiar, that there could be longtime Christians who have become lukewarm in their Christian life?)

Look at the picture he uses to illustrate this second point: A fellow Christian is in need. He is (literally, as James says) naked. He has no clothes. He also has not eaten for the day. James wonders how a believer could look at a fellow church member in this condition and not do anything. Instead, the person says, "Go in peace. Be warm. Be filled with food." But he does nothing tangible to help. James says in very straight talk, that this person does not have real faith. We would call it counterfeit, or fake, faith.

If we would have read further in this chapter, we would have heard James illustrate his point in three ways: *"You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."*

James' point is not that we are not saved "by faith alone." His point is that if you have no Christian life of good works that follow, you don't have the faith described in "by faith alone." It is not genuine. It is not like the faith of the father Abraham or Rahab, the ancestress of Christ. Works don't save, or earn forgiveness. They simply reveal whether faith is genuine or fake. It would be like saying, "I am fire, but I'm not hot." Or, "I am water but I'm not wet." That's not real fire or water.

I'd submit to you today that this actually squares with what the Apostle Paul and the rest of Scripture says about the necessity of good works. Listen to other places besides the book of James where we hear the same teaching:

- *Eph 2 - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*
- *1 Cor. 5 - (Christ) died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*
- *Titus 2 - (Christ) gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*
- *1 John 3 - This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.*
- *John 15 - I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*
- Think also about the parable of Christ in Matthew 25, where he describes how he will judge the world on the Last Day. His basis for judgment is "you gave me something to eat when I was hungry, something to drink when I was thirsty, visited me in prison," etc. He points (as the book of James does) to the good works that revealed genuine faith. Whenever they did those things for fellow believers ("brothers"), this served as evidence in God's courtroom that they had true, saving faith in Christ.

Again, the temptation might be to say, "OK, I've got it, pastor!" and leave it at that. But what about an honest look at your behavior and your life of good works?

- What about that pet sin that you just can seem to let go of?
- What about that sin of weakness – anger, addiction, greed, etc. – that you keep committing every day?
- What about that sin of selfishness and stinginess that keeps you from helping a fellow Christian in need?
- What about the apathy toward breaking the laws of the land or the rules at the office?

When we honestly examine ourselves and our lives like this, we will only have one place to go. We can only flee back to the cross. We can only go back to Jesus our Savior, who has died for our rotten sins and our apathy in doing good works. And we can rejoice in the fact that we have full and free forgiveness in him and his sacrifice for us. And then we can go in peace, looking to do those good works that we naturally want to do anyway because of the real, living faith that is inside us by the grace of God!

So ends James straight talk to us today. Straight talk can have two effects on a person. Either a person takes it to heart and sees the benefits of tough words and tough love. Or a person turns away in disgust and goes their way without them sinking in.

I pray that God through his Word changes our sinful, apathetic hearts through this straight talk today:

- 1. Christians don't show favoritism**
- 2. Christians don't possess fake faith**

May God work this in us for Jesus' sake, and help us to show "where the rubber hits the road" in our Christian faith and life! Amen.