

Lame Christianity

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 August 2008

Preacher: Jonathan Smith

[0 : 00] Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror.

For they look at themselves, and on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget, but doers who act, they will be blessed in their doing.

And if any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues, but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this.

To care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

[1 : 11] For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, have a seat here, please, while to the one who is poor you say, stand there, or sit at my feet, have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters, has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith, and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor.

Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

For the one who said, you shall not commit adultery, also said, you shall not murder. Now if you do not commit adultery, but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

[2 : 28] So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Well, it's great to be back here this week to keep preaching through James.

James is a great book, as we saw last week, and it's great to be doing a series on this book. We're in the second week this week, looking at chapter 2. Last week I was meant to finish at verse 19, and I just kept preaching through to the end of the chapter.

So we're just going to look at chapter 2, and we'll do the whole thing tonight. I've got a pretty simple sermon tonight. It's two points, which are really one point.

And the one point is summed up in verse 17, where it says, Faith without works is dead. So I hope you can stick with me tonight.

[3 : 37] As we saw last week, James goes all over the place. He just throws thoughts out onto that page, and we've got to try and gather them up and take what we can from them. And there is a lot to take.

But I've got a simple message for you tonight. And I pray that God would do huge amounts through it. I don't know about you guys, but I love making sweeping, broad, unfair generalizations about people.

And I'm just a simple person, and so I find it helpful to be able to box people in to very defined categories. And so with Christians, I reckon this is true anyway, but it's a generalization. With Christians, we tend to fall into two groups in terms of faith and works. Faith and works, that's what we'll be looking at tonight. So you've got people who like to come to churches like this one. You might call them evangelical Christians, rightward-leaning Christians. They love faith. They love belief. They love having very defined doctrines and theology.

[4 : 45] That's what we're like here. You need to know what you believe. You need to know what the gospel is. You need to know how it fits into systematic theology. We love that stuff. I love that stuff. Not so big on the work stuff, what you've got to do to be a Christian.

There's a whole other bunch of Christians. You might call them more liberal Christians. You might call them leftward-leaning Christians. They're right into what you do. Not so much about what you believe, doctrines and systematic theology, but about what you do.

Are you feeding the poor? Are you working at that soup kitchen? Are you getting involved in the community? James' point to us in this whole book, and we're going to see it particularly tonight in this chapter, is that he doesn't want us to be either one of those.

He wants us to be both of those things. He wants us to have good, solid doctrine that doesn't waver under the forces of culture and changing ideology, but he wants us to stand firm in the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he also, at the same time, wants us to be passionate about what we do with that faith, how it plays out practically, what kind of works you are doing to show, to prove your allegiance to Jesus.

[6 : 05] And so that's what we're going to see tonight. At the end of last week, I gave you three tests for true religion. They're really his, come in the last couple of verses of chapter one.

I asked you, do you control your tongue? Are you caring and compassionate? And are you polluted by the world? They're incredibly important questions to James.

And in his mind, and in this inspired book, how you answer those questions can determine whether you're truly a disciple of Jesus, or whether you're just kidding yourself, whether your religion is worthless.

So I've got two points tonight. It's really one point, but I wanted to make it easier for myself. First point, James says, your faith is proved by how you treat others.

Your faith is proved by how you treat others. And the other point, your faith is proved by whether it gives birth to works of love.

[7 : 17] Your faith is proved by whether it gives birth to works of love. And as I said, the verse that underpins both of those points, and really maybe the banner over at least this section of the book, and maybe the whole book, is verse 17.

Faith without works is dead. James, as we saw last week, is a practical guy. He grew up in the house of a carpenter, Joseph. Jesus adopted dad, and he's just a practical guy.

And he likes getting into the practical heart of our faith. So what I'd like to do is pray for us now that God would use this word to get to the heart of our faith.

The Bible says in Hebrews that the word of God is like a double-edged sword. It gets to the heart of things. And so I'm going to pray that God would really get to the heart of our faith tonight.

Convict us where we need to be convicted, and encourage us where we need to be encouraged.

So let's bow our heads together. I'll pray for us. Amen. Dear Lord, I pray that you would use this word, use this book of James, to change us into ever-increasing Christ-likeness.

[8 : 38] That our faith wouldn't merely be a bunch of assertions about who you are, about what you've done, but that it would prove itself in the way that we live.

Pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So let's start at chapter 2, verse number 1. This will give us the foundation for this sermon.

James gets straight to the point. He says, This guy's a tough teacher.

James is a tough teacher. He'll kick you in the teeth if you let him, and it'll be good for you. He gets straight to the point. There are a bunch of people in a church who are displaying acts of favoritism, and it's a really broad set of terms there.

It could include many things, but we'll see. He gives an example of favoring rich people over poor people. We could talk about favoring one race over another race, one gender over another gender, one culture over another culture.

[9 : 52] He says, In doing that, do you really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

James believes that how you respond to people, how you treat people, proves or disproves whether you really have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So here's the scene. We'll read his example, and then we'll bring it closer to home. He says, Verse 2 to Verse 7. For if a person with gold rings and fine clothes comes into the assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes, and say, Have a seat here, please.

While to the other one who is poor, you say, Stand there, or sit at my feet. Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters, has not God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith, and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

[11:12] Stop there. So two people come in tonight. One guy is rich, maybe famous, maybe a celebrity.

And they've got all the trappings of being a rich person. I mean, they've got the coolest, latest clothes, and they're good looking, and I don't know, they turn up in a Ferrari.

And right behind them comes a poor person. Smells. Drunk. Staggering.

Maybe sick. Coughing. Generally being annoying. What are you going to do in that situation?

It's important to think about, because James says, this is a test to see whether you really belong to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[12:21] And the reason that he thinks this is so important, and this is key, it's not just about, you know, favouring poor people over rich people, or whatever.

The reason he's so keenly interested in our answer to this question, is because our answer needs to reflect God's answer. See, God doesn't show partiality, does he?

In whom he chooses for salvation. In election, when God chooses people to be saved by Jesus, he doesn't show partiality.

Check it out, verse 5. B. He says, has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

God chooses all kinds of people to become Christians. Do you think he chose you because you live in Doncaster and you've got a sizable bank account and clean clothes, freshly cut hair?

[13:39] No way. God chooses all kinds of people for salvation. He chooses terrible, evil people for salvation. He chooses people of different races for salvation.

As we can see in this very church, what a great representation of God choosing people out of different cultures for salvation. He shows no partiality, no favoritism in whom he chooses for salvation.

And so James says, you need to be like God. You need to reflect God's attitude to people, different kinds of people, even difficult people, even poor people, undesirable people.

Because that's what God does. And so this is, it's almost too simple for me to say from this pulpit.

It's a bit of a Sunday school lesson and that's why I love it so much and that's why James loves it.

He says, how do you guard yourself against partiality, against showing favoritism? See people the way that God sees people. You can see that coming home on your kids' Sunday school paper.

[14:53] Right? Just view people how God views people. He doesn't show favoritism and neither should we. You need to ask yourself when you come across a difficult person.

And, just bow out a parenthesis, someone in this room called me up last week and gave me a call and said, can we meet up? I need to talk to you about how to deal with difficult people.

And I was just, I was amazed that that person that called me up would be that concerned about wanting to love difficult people that he would want to meet and talk about and see how best he could serve and love these difficult people.

I was blown away. That's the kind of thinking James wants. And so when you see that difficult person or when you see that poor person or that alcoholic person, you need to say, would God love this person?

Or would God refuse to love them? have God chosen people for salvation who are like this? Would Jesus have shunned this person?

[16:05] It's a resounding no, friends. God would not reject that person, keep love from that person. Jesus would not have shunned that person. If anything, Jesus chose to be around those people more than he chose to be around religious people like me.

So we need to be the same. We'll skip over verse 8 to 13. But it suffice to say, we said last week that James has more allusions to the teaching of Jesus, half-brother Jesus, than any other writer of the New Testament.

I mean, it just reads like something Jesus would have written. And there's a lot of allusions to Jesus' teaching in that, about loving your neighbor as yourself, which is an echo of Leviticus, of course, and well worth getting into.

But I want to move on to the second point. Second point, that faith, your faith, is proved by whether it gives birth to works of love.

James says, what good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith, but do not have works?

[17:26] Can faith save you? I need to stop there. Yeah, I think we need to stop there. I think this is a bad translation. I keep coming up with these criticisms of this translation.

And I think it's a bad translation because it's a rhetorical question asking us for the answer, no. And clearly, the answer to the question, can faith save you, is not a no.

We know that faith is what saves us. And so really, and the grammar, the Greek grammar leads us here, it should read, can this faith save you, or can such a faith save you, reflecting back to the earlier part of the verse.

So, if you say you have faith, but do not have works, can that kind of faith save you? And the answer is, no. Because faith that is given by God, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, always gives birth to good works, loving works.

And so if you say that you've got faith without works, it won't save you because it's not saving faith as given by Jesus Christ and won by Him on the cross.

[18:46] So, I don't know how you feel about Bible graffiti. If you've got your own Bible, I would recommend slipping in this, can this faith save you, and arrow back to the sentence before.

Let's continue on. If a brother or a sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, go in peace, keep warm, and eat your fill, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. Keep going. But someone will say, you have faith and I have works.

Show me your faith apart from your works and I will show, I will by my works show you my faith. If you believe that God is one, you do well.

Even the demons believe and shudder. There's a massive problem in the early church. And the problem came about because Paul and James, I'd argue, and Jesus, the Bible, taught and taught rightly that we as Christians are saved by faith alone apart from works of the law.

[20:13] You can't do anything to earn salvation. And so what happens is, and I say this in my life, this is the big danger for me in my life, is that it can lead us to rely on grace and neglect the way we live.

So there are moments when I have a choice to sin, the choice is put before me to sin and to succumb to temptation as we saw last week in the middle of a trial temptation comes.

You can defeat it and grow as a Christian or you can succumb to it and give up the opportunity to grow. Well, when that time comes, sometimes the thought comes into my head, give in, you've been saved by grace anyway.

Has anyone ever thought of that? Had that thought occur to them? You're saved anyway, Jesus will forgive you, Jesus has forgiven you, so, whatever.

That was a big problem back, even in the early church, a cheapening of grace, an insult to Jesus, the taking advantage of the liberty that we have as Christians.

[21:30] Christians. And so, Paul fought against this. You've read about it in Romans quite a bit. And, I hate this, I hate this.

It's my biggest battle at the moment because it shows a distinct lack of fear for God. God, we should fear God and not want to even think about sinning because it's an insult to him.

And to hide behind the cross of Christ in order to sin is a disgraceful thing. And so, James is battling against that here too.

And what he wants to say is, it's not enough to say, I have faith and do nothing about it in practical terms. Not live it out in any way.

This is what nominal Christians do as well. Nominal Christians. James has no time for nominal Christians. He doesn't even know what a nominal Christian is. If you say, I have faith as a nominal Christian would and then do nothing to live that out, he says, your faith is dead.

[22 : 54] Which it is. He says, even the demons can say, Jesus is Lord. Even the demons can acknowledge that.

You know, Jesus casts out demons and they recognised who he was. But they're not disciples of Jesus and the same can be true of us.

Faith by itself is dead. The illustration, verse 15 to 17, is really key.

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. That's the test. The evidence that your confession of Jesus is true in your life, is genuine, is whether it's backed up with works of love.

[24 : 12] Let's carry on to verse 20 to 22. It says, Do you want it to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?

Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works and faith was brought to completion by the works. Repeat that, 22. you see that faith was active along with his works and faith was brought to completion by the works. I kind of had this wrong notion in my head that trying to figure out how this fits together with the fact that we're saved by grace alone through faith alone.

You might have been here for the ideas that changed the world course and we talked about this, the fact that God saves us despite ourselves, that it's through faith alone in Jesus and I was trying to match that up with James stressing to us the importance of works and I sort of thought, consciously or unconsciously, that maybe God saves us by faith alone.

That's the first stage. And then there's a second stage by which we sort of carry that through by doing good works. We sort of win our righteousness by doing good works and that's not the case at all.

[25 : 58] There's no two-stage process. Rather, the faith that we have, which is a gift of God alone, is the kind of faith, it's a certain kind of faith, namely, the kind of faith that gives birth to good works.

Good works come out of the faith. It's not a two-stage process. And so a lot of people have found it hard to match up James' teaching on this and Paul's teaching on this, because they seem to be very different, but you get a really good example of what James is talking about in Paul's letter. If you go to Galatians 5.6, you don't need to go there, I'll read it for you, you can if you like, but Galatians 5.6, here there's a bunch of people saying that you've got to be circumcised if you want to be a Christian, you've got to observe these certain laws if you want to be a Christian, and Paul says this, it's really important if we're going to understand how works and faith marry up in the Bible. He says, for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything. Your works don't count for anything. Christ Jesus in terms of works of the law, then he says the only thing that counts is what?

Faith working through love. In Christ Jesus, the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

[27 : 33] Do you see that? How they're married up like that? intertwined. That's why you can't have one without the other. That's why someone will say, you have faith and I have works.

You can't do that because they're so intertwined they can't be separated. Genuine faith in Jesus gives birth to good works.

the evidence of genuine faith in Jesus are loving good works.

we've seen that play out in how these people have responded to the poor man and the rich man.

We've seen it in chapter 1 where he commends us not to just be merely hearers or even acceptors of the word but to be doers of the word.

And he's going to talk throughout this book. You're going to see it over the next five weeks. This is going to come up again and again because it's key if we're going to understand how to live as Christians.

[28 : 39] We'll move on to verse 23 to 26. Give some examples, Old Testament examples. I just want to summarize this for us and then I'll pray for us.

He says thus the scripture was fulfilled that says Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Likewise was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

that may be the most controversial paragraph in the Bible.

It's proved a stumbling block for a lot of people. I think it was probably that paragraph that led Martin Luther to call this book the epistle of straw. He was fighting so hard to trumpet the fact that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone.

[30 : 02] And then James has to turn up and say, verse 24, you see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And so you can either throw this book out as being secondary or resort to saying that there is contradictions in God's word.

Or you can see, as I hope we will see, that Paul and James are saying the same thing in two different ways. So it's clear that words have different meanings.

Words can have different meanings. Like the word rock. How many meanings does the word rock have? You can think of three. Stone, kind of music, what you do in a rocking chair.

And it's similar when we start talking about justification by faith with Paul and James. And I want to read out to you an explanation of this, just so I get it right, because this is key.

I might need to read it a few times, but when it comes to talking about justification by works, for Paul, justification by works, which he rejects, we're not justified by our works, which he rejects, means gaining right standing with God by the merit of works.

[31 : 33] He rejects that, and we reject that. You don't gain right standing with God by merit of your works. You gain right standing with God by the merit of Jesus' works on cross.

Am I right? For Paul, justification by works, which he rejects, means gaining right standing with God by the merit of works.

For James, justification by works, which he accepts, means maintaining a right standing with God by faith, along with the necessary evidence of faith, namely the works of love.

We read that again. For James, justification by works, which he accepts, means maintaining a right standing with God by faith, which he says in the book.

He agrees with Paul, it's by faith in Jesus Christ, along with the necessary evidence of faith, namely the works of love.

[32 : 47] And that's why he says faith without works is dead, because necessary to being saved by faith alone is the evidence of that faith, namely the works of love.

These two positions are not contradictory. Faith alone unites us to Christ for righteousness. And the faith that unites us to Christ for righteousness does not remain alone.

It bears the fruit of love. Is that clear?

If it sounds repetitive, it's because James is repetitive. He just goes over and over this. I think it's because we need to hear it. Faith without works is dead.

It's dead faith. You never had faith. Genuine faith proves itself to be genuine when it's accompanied by the necessary good works of love.

[34 : 09] I want this to be a really simple sermon. I want to finish it there. The take home message, if you remember one thing, is that very point. Two points I had with these.

Your faith is proved by how you treat others. Related to that, your faith is proved by whether it gives birth to works of love. So James says, faith without works is dead.

Let me pray for us. I'm just going to pray a prayer of praise to God for saving us by faith alone in what he's done and by giving us grace to love one another as a result.

Let's pray together. Father, it is a humbling thing again this week to know that you have saved us despite ourselves.

There is nothing inherently attractive about us, whether we're rich or poor, attractive or ugly, white or black, that you choose us despite any merit that we might have.

[35 : 38] And we praise you for Jesus Christ and his death on the cross, that it was powerful enough to win redemption for us apart from works of the law.

Lord, we thank you that there's nothing that we can do to merit salvation, but that everything has been done for us in Christ Jesus.

So, Lord, please, please, please, don't let us be a church who knows all the right doctrines, who's memorised the Bible, who sings the right hymn, and yet has no love for the world.

Lord, marry up to our good Bible doctrine, a sincere concern for the poor and the afflicted. Please make us a community that loves one another so much that new people are welcomed in, that sick people are taken care of, that grieving people are comforted.
Lord, help us to so reflect you and your love for the world, that the good works that we do would be irrepressible evidence that you have saved us and that we belong to you.
[37 : 27] I pray this so sincerely in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.