

# Can Such Faith Save

by George Verwer

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*The sermon explores the relationship between faith and actions, emphasizing that true faith is demonstrated through love and care for others, especially the poor.*

**Duration:** 43:29

**Scripture:** Romans 3:28, James 1:27 - 2:5, James 2:8, James 2:13-26

**Topics:** "James 2"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on James chapter 2 and addresses the issue of favoritism within the church. He begins by describing a challenging illustration in verses 2 and 3, where a rich man and a poor man enter a meeting. The speaker emphasizes that showing favoritism is foolish and goes against the central law of the kingdom of God. He presents four arguments against treating the rich and poor differently, including the example of Jesus, the way God has worked in our lives, the folly of such behavior, and the violation of God's law. The speaker urges believers to love their neighbors as themselves and not to discriminate based on wealth or social status.

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## Transcript

I was meeting with the trustees last night until about, I think about half past eleven, and we were just looking at the various things we've still got to get through before the conference ends, and we realised that we're really running late and we need to do a lot of work in a short time. So some of the brothers are meeting now to discuss various issues. If people are missing sessions through the day, it doesn't mean they're having a sleep, or doing some tourism in Nepal.

It probably means they're on one of these smaller groups. Let's turn then to James chapter 2, and we'll read the whole of this chapter. My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favouritism.

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and the 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? That 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 neighbour as yourself, you are doing right.

But if you show favouritism, 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. For he who said, do not commit adultery, also said, do not murder.

If you do not commit adultery, but you do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom. Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. 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. You believe that there is one God, good.

Even the demons believe that, and shudder. You foolish men, 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 and 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, in a different direction. As a body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

We pray that God will give us understanding of that challenging chapter from his word. Now if you were with us yesterday morning, we got to the key to understanding this little epistle of James, in the last two verses of the first chapter, where James gives us three proofs of the genuine Christian. And you remember those three proofs, they are three of many, which James could have chosen to give us.

The first was a controlled tongue, the second was concern for those who are in need, such as orphans and widows, and the third proof was holiness, or keeping yourself from being polluted by the world. And I said that in each of the next three chapters, two, three, and four, James takes one of these proofs, and he elaborates, he draws out the point which he makes in those last two verses of chapter one. And here in chapter two, he draws out, he elaborates this point, that if you are a true Christian, then you're really going to have concern for those who are in need in our society.

And he makes his point by doing two things. First of all, he gives us in the first 13 verses, a very, very challenging illustration. And then in the rest of the chapter, verse 14 down to the end, verse 26, he gives us one of the most challenging doctrines in the whole of the New Testament.

Let's look first then at the challenging illustration. The actual illustration is in verses two and three. It's a very real life situation.

I want you to reuse your imagination for a moment. You're sitting in your church, or your assembly, back home, and two people come into the back of the church. One has a gold ring and fine clothing, and I believe he wouldn't be allowed in, is that correct? One has a gold ring and fine clothing, and the other is a beggar.

And you go to the back of the church, and you say to the man with the gold ring and the fine clothing, look, I've got a very nice seat just up here, right beside me. I'd really like you to accompany me, and we can sit together throughout the service. And then you say to the beggar, look, over there in the far corner of the church, there's a very pleasant seat.

Don't you think that would be a very nice seat for you? You can see everything from over there. Just see it way over there, that seat. That's a fine seat for you.

Now says James, if you deal with the rich and the poor in that way, you are doing something extremely serious and extremely wrong. What is the Christian guilty of when he does such things? Well, the answer to that is in verse four. Have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil motives? The New English Bible puts it like this.

Do you not see that you are inconsistent and you judge by false standards? Now I said yesterday that inconsistency is one of the great themes of the epistle of James. Remember the sea coming in, beating against the rock consistently, but then the tide turns and back the sea goes. And here's another example of inconsistency in the epistle of James.

Inconsistency in our dealings with our fellow men. We deal with the rich in a certain way because they are rich. We deal with the poor in a certain way because they are poor.

We are judging in our minds, in our hearts, and we're judging by false standards. Now after making the point that this is wrong, James gives us four reasons why it's so wrong. And the first reason is there in verse one.

It's wrong because of the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Really as James is saying, how can you be a believer in Jesus, a follower of Jesus, who though he was rich for our sakes became poor, and deal with the poor in this way? It's just totally inconsistent to say that you're a follower of Jesus who gave his life for the poor and then to deal with the poor in this manner.

And of course we know from the life and ministry of Jesus that his concern was always for those who sensed their need. Do you remember that great statement of Jesus? It's something I often think about. Those who are whole, Jesus said, those who are well have no need of a physician.

Jesus had very little time for people who thought they were well, who thought they were fine, who didn't understand and didn't realize their need. Those who are whole have no need of a physician. Why did Jesus go through baptism by John the Baptist? That baptism was for repentance and for the remission of sins.

And we all know that Jesus was a perfect man. So why did he go through the waters of baptism? Well of course right at the commencement of his ministry upon this earth, he wanted to identify himself with sinners. He wanted to identify himself with those who realized that they were in need and realized that they needed cleansing.

And we're told in the scriptures that the common people were the people who heard the Lord Jesus Christ gladly. He was a man who poured out his life for the common people, who identified himself with those who were in need and ministered to those who realized their need. And that's James's first argument.

You can't deal with the poor and the needy in this way and at the same time be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. And then his second argument is in verse five and verse six. And he's saying in these two verses, if you deal with the poor in this way, you are going against your own experience and you're going against the will of God.

Let me just read verse five to you. Listen my dear brothers. Hasn't 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? In other words, James is saying if God had dealt with you as you were dealing with the poor, you would never ever have been saved.

Because it was when we were without strength, it was when we were totally destitute that Christ died for the ungodly. If God had had no time for the poor, he would have had no time for us because we were spiritually poverty stricken until the Lord Jesus Christ saved us. Furthermore, throughout history, this is a very important point to realize, God has always dealt firstly and primarily with the poor.

He hasn't dealt exclusively with the poor. There have been rich men and women who have inherited the kingdom of heaven. But God's first choice, God's first choice is towards the poor.

You remember Mary's song, Luke chapter 1 and verse 52. He has put down the mighty from their seats. He has exalted them of low degree.

That was what God did when he sent the Lord Jesus to the earth. He put down the mighty. He exalted those who were lowly and poor.

Remember how Paul underlines that in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 26. You see your calling brethren, he says to the Corinthians. There were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble.

God has chosen the foolish things to shame the wise. He's chosen the weak things to shame those who are strong. He's chosen the base things of the world.

That which the world despises, God has chosen. The things that are not are his choice that he might nullify the things that are so that no flesh glories in his presence. One of the greatest commentaries on the epistle of James is the great commentary by Thomas Manton.

And here's Thomas Manton's comment on that verse 5. The first choice that God makes in the world is the poor men. Therefore we often read that the poor receive the gospel. Not only poor in spirit, but those who are poor in purse, so materially poor.

God chose fishermen to preach the gospel, poor persons to receive it. Very few were one who had any rank, any quality in the world. This was partly that we might not think that the wonderful increase and spread of the gospel came to pass through the advantages of human power, fleshly aids and props, but only by virtue of divine grace.

So that's the second reason why we should never treat the poor in this way. Number one, it's against the example of Jesus. Number two, it's against the way God has worked in your own life, and against the way that God has worked in history.

And then his third argument is in the second part of verse 6 and verse 7. This time he just tells them that they shouldn't do this because to do so is absolute madness. He says it's absolute madness if you treat the poor and the rich in this way. He says you are flattering the very ones who are dragging you into court.

Look at verse 6. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? What a foolish thing to do, says James. You're treating the very people who are trying to destroy you in a special way. Now I hope we get time to look at chapter 5 before the end of the week, but in chapter 5 you see particularly what the rich were doing.

Let's just have a brief look at how the rich were treating their fellow men. Verse 4 of chapter 5. Verse 6. This is what the rich were doing to the poor. They were mistreating them.

And they were even persecuting them. What madness, says James, therefore, to treat the rich in this way. It's obvious from the Acts of the Apostles that the rich often found it in their best interests to oppress the early Christians.

So for example in Acts chapter 4, the first three verses, you find it's the rich Sadducees who lay their hands on Peter and John. And when you get to chapter 13 and verse 15, it's the chief men of the city, the leading nobles of the city, who stir up persecution against Paul and Barnabas. Of course one reason for this was that the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ led to a decline in profit in certain industries.

For example, the slave girl with the spirit of divination in Acts chapter 16, when she was converted, those who owned her lost their living. When you get to chapter 19, you've got the silver makers who were making shrines of the god Artemis. They also lost their business through the spread of the gospel.

Now James is saying here it's total folly to treat the rich who despise you in a special way. Why do it? Now one thing we must appreciate is that James is not saying tit for tat, if you understand that expression. He's not saying be difficult with people who are difficult to you.

That would certainly be against the teaching of the New Testament. But he is saying use your common sense. He is saying use your common sense.

It's not good to discriminate at all, but it's certainly totally foolish to treat in a special way those who are despising you. So that's his third argument. It's total folly to treat the rich in this way.

Then his fourth argument, and that's in verses 8 to 13, and that is to live in this way is against the law of God. Look at verse 8 again, just to underline that point. If you really keep the royal law found in scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right.

We have become citizens of the kingdom of heaven when we became Christians. And what's the central law of the kingdom of heaven? What's the royal law of the kingdom of heaven? Well it's love God with all your heart, isn't it? And it's love your neighbor as yourself. So you can't become a citizen of the heavenly kingdom and treat your poor neighbor in the way that this illustration at the beginning of the chapter suggests.

So that's the four arguments which James brings against treating the rich and the poor in this discriminatory fashion. Number one, it's against the example of Jesus. Number two, it's against the way God has worked in our own lives and in history.

Number three, it's totally foolish. And number four, you're breaking the very central law of the kingdom. You pretend to be a member of.

Now James just deals with one possible excuse in verse 10 before it arises. Look at verse 10. Whoever keeps the whole law and yet offends in one point, he has become guilty of all.

You see someone might excuse themselves by saying, well we all have our strong points and our weak points, don't we? Some Christians talk like that. You know, it's not my upbringing to deal with the poor in this way. I was born being brought up in a certain way in a particular class and I find it so much easier to relate to the rich.

And we all have our weak points, don't we? And we all have our strong points. So it doesn't really matter. And there was an idea current in these days, according to Thomas Menton, that if you were obedient in some aspects of God's law, then that made amends for any neglect or disobedience in other areas.

That was a fashionable idea. You didn't really have to keep the whole law as long as you were strong in some points. Then that made up for your weakness in other areas.

But James says the law of God is not like that. Now listen to this. It's a lovely illustration from Alec Motyer.

The law, he says, is not like a heap of stones whereby you can pick up some and leave others. The law is like a sheet of glass. If it's broken, it's utterly smashed.

Isn't that a very powerful illustration? You can't pick and choose with the law of God. You can't say, well that's a strong point for me and that's a weak point for me. If you break any part of the law, then it's totally smashed.

It's not like a heap of stones whereby you can pick up some and leave others. It's like a sheet of glass. The moment it's broken, it's utterly destroyed.

So don't make excuses, James was saying. Then he moves on in verses 12 and 13 to show that the Christian is subject to judgment by the law. Now this is a very important point which many many Christians don't understand and possibly you've never understood this before.

We rejoice of course that the law no longer leaves us condemned. We know that from Romans chapter 8, there is no condemnation because we are in Christ. But though we're freed from the terror of the law, we're not freed from the duty of obedience to it.

It's my duty to obey the law of God. It's my duty to take the Ten Commandments and to make them the standard of my life and the law of the New Testament which in some ways elaborates on that Old Testament Commandments. It is my responsibility to keep that law and says, James, I am going to be judged one day, verse 12, by the law that gives freedom.

I'm going to stand before the judgment seat of the Lord Jesus Christ one day. So are you. We're all going to stand and we are going to be examined in accordance with the law of God.

The law that gives freedom. It's a beautiful law for us, isn't it? It doesn't condemn us anymore. It gives us freedom.

It was once illustrated like this. Imagine you buy a new car. It would be a marvellous imagination for some of you who drive around in OM trucks.

Imagine one day you bought a new car. And when you get a new car, you're given the maker's instructions. Now I don't know anything about cars at all.

But I'm sure that one of the maker's instructions is that you must put petrol in a petrol engine. Yes? I think that's bound to be right. And you pick up the maker's instruction and you say, diesel is cheaper than petrol.

Therefore I will not keep the maker's instruction. I will put diesel in the petrol engine. You're not keeping the law of the maker.

What does it do? Very soon you will find, I would imagine, that you won't get very far. You're brought into bondage, if you like, by breaking the law. But if you keep the law, it leaves you free.

That machine will run perfectly. That machine will run efficiently if you keep the law which the maker gives you. Now the law of God is like that.

God knows how we are to live. He knows how we are to most effectively live. Why do we keep the law? Not because we're afraid of it.

Not because of the terror of the law. But because we know the law is right. And we know the law is good.

It's God's best for us. And as we keep that law, it truly sets us free. So there's the challenging illustration and the implications.

Let's move on to the second section because time is beating us. In the second section of the chapter, verses 14 to 26, the challenging illustration is followed by a challenging doctrine. And that challenging doctrine is epitomized in that verse which I mentioned to you yesterday morning.

Verse 24. You see that a person is justified by what he does. And the authorized version has by works and not by faith alone.

Now of course that verse and in fact a large section of this chapter seems at first reading to be directly contrary to other scriptures. One scripture it would appear to be in contradiction with would be Romans 3 and verse 28. There the apostle Paul says, we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

That's quite clear isn't it? Paul says a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. And James says no no, a person is justified, verse 24, by works and not by faith alone. So poor old Martin Luther who had spent years struggling with justification by works and eventually found tremendous liberty and a marvelous salvation in the epistle of Romans.

When he got to the epistle of James, he rather lost his temper and he was prone to do that. And he actually said the epistle of James is an epistle of straw. He said it's a right strawy epistle.

And what do you do with straw? You burn it. Luther believed that the epistle of James should be burnt. He wasn't very keen on second Peter either and he had certain questions about Hebrews.

But he was just coming out of centuries of Catholicism. So you can understand why James just couldn't really appreciate, or why Martin Luther, just couldn't appreciate the epistle of James. Let's try and understand the contradiction and confusion.

The authorized version of the Bible is responsible for a lot of the confusion at this point. You'll forgive me brethren and sisters, but it is nevertheless true. And the confusion which the authorized version has left us with is found in verse 14.

Because the question at the end of that verse, according to the authorized version, is can faith save him? Anybody got an authorized version? That's true isn't it? Can faith save him? That's not the question which James asked. If you look at any of the modern translations, you'll see that it's not the question James asked. The question he asked was can such faith save him? Or can that faith save him? And the emphasis is on the word such, or on the word that.

James is not asking can faith save? He is asking can the kind of faith which does not result in works save? Can such faith save him? Can that faith save him? And the answer which he gives us in the whole of the chapter is no. Such faith, faith which does not result in works, can never save a man. Now the apostle Paul also believed this of course.

I'd better let John turn over because if we miss a sentence at this stage, it could be vital. The apostle Paul also made the same point. The man who argued in Romans chapter 3 that you must be justified by faith alone, made the same point as James is making here in chapter 2 in 1 Corinthians 13.

He said you can have the kind of faith that moves mountains, but if you don't have love, if faith doesn't show itself in love, then you have nothing. That's exactly the same point as James is making here in chapter 2. Now after pausing the question, James gives his answer with some powerful illustrations. The first is in verses 15 and 16.

Here's a brother who's naked and hungry and you meet him in the street and you say to him, ah well it's been nice to meet you, go home, get warm, fill your stomach and you don't do anything to help the man. You've got heat in the house at home, you've got food in the pantry and yet you don't give anything to the brother in need. Is that the act of a genuine Christian? Faith, verse 17, if it doesn't have works, is dead.

Now it's very, very important for us as evangelicals not to sidestep the challenge of that illustration. Faith exposes its true nature. True faith is seen not by our words, not by our testimony, not by our smiling faces, not by the lovely songs we sing, particularly here in Nepal, but true faith is seen by our reaction to human need.

You can sing songs until you're blue in the face, you can give your testimony time and time again but if you walk past a brother in need and you have the resources to help and your heart isn't moved and you don't do anything, James says the reality of your faith is under question. Now the apostle John, in case you think James was an extremist on his own, the apostle John makes the point even more powerfully. You remember 1 John 4 17, whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother in need and his heart doesn't go out to him, how does the love of God dwell within that man? That's exactly what James is saying here and in a world of one billion hungry people, this is an enormous challenge to evangelical

Christians in the 20th century.

Let me just read to you David Watson's preface to Ronald Sider's book, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger. Certainly, says Watson, there are numerous issues that call for our attention in the church at this present time. There's confusion over basic doctrine, questions of ordination, patterns of ministry, the role of women, the unity of the church, the place of spiritual gifts, methods of evangelism, the vital needs for renewal.

These and many other matters hammer insistently on the doors of the church. Nevertheless, while we continue to have an internal theological dialogue within our ranks, the harsh inescapable fact is that this very day about 500 million men, women and children throughout the world are literally starving and double that number are undernourished. If that's true physically, it's even more true spiritually.

What would James have said to the Christian church in 1984? That's his first illustration. Can such faith, the faith that says to a hungry man, go home, get warm, get your own food, can that faith say? No, says James, it's impossible. The second example is in verse 19 and it shows how utterly foolish it is to believe that a faith which doesn't result in works will save a man.

Why, says James, even the demons have got that kind of faith. They believe in God but they tremble. Now there you see another evidence of genuine faith and that is peace.

The demons believe but what does their faith lead to? It leads to terror. They shudder. The Christian believes and a glorious peace floods his life.

Romans 5.1, therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. So there's James making his point strongly. Two examples of spurious faith.

Now just to give the balance, James was a very balanced writer. He brings the chapter to a close with two examples of genuine faith and the first is the faith of Abraham which he introduces us to in verses 21 to 24 and it's here you can see the reason for the great confusion over this passage. Because Paul in Romans 3 and 4 argues the case for justification by faith alone by using who as an example? He uses Abraham doesn't he? He says if you want to believe, if you want to understand justification by faith alone, then you need to look at Abraham.

And then James comes along and he says look, if you want to understand that a man can't be justified by this kind of faith, you want to look at Abraham. They use exactly the same person to make their particular points. Let's just look at it carefully.

Go back to Romans chapter 4 and verse 20. Romans 4 and verse 20. Abraham did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God but he was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

This is why it was credited to him as righteousness. So James is saying Abraham was justified by faith. When God said to Abraham, you're going to have a child even though Sarah is barren, Abraham believed what God said.

He had faith in God and says Paul that faith saved, that faith justified Abraham. And then go back to James chapter 2 and verse 21. Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous, not because of his faith, but because of what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar.

Now here's the key. James and Paul both illustrate from Abraham but they illustrate from different periods in the life of Abraham. Paul says Abraham was justified by faith when he believed that God was going to give a child.

James says Abraham was justified by works when he took that child and he put that child on the altar, believing of course that God would raise that child from the dead. How do we know? How do we know that Abraham really believed God could give a child? We really know that because of his works, because he was willing to kill the child, slaughter the child, believing that God would raise him from the dead. Now that's not bad theology is it? That's the theology of the New Testament.

How do you know faith is real? By its fruits. By their fruits you shall know them, said the Lord Jesus Christ. So there's absolutely no contradiction between Paul and James.

They'll stand together in heaven and they'll tell you about their unity in the spirit and that they accept exactly the same theology. I can assure you of that. There's no contradiction whatsoever that together they make the point that it's by their fruits that true faith is known.

Let's have a look at the final illustration and that's the illustration of Rahab, verse 25 and verse 26. There's one interesting difference in this example and Alec Mathia pointed out like this. Abraham's faith was productive God would.

Because of his faith he was willing to hold nothing back from God, even his son. Rahab's faith was productive man would. Because of her faith she was ready to put herself in a position of great personal danger in order to receive the messengers.

So James in these final two examples is showing us the beautiful balance of scripture. Yes faith is the living God. Faith is taking God at his word but it's more than that.

Much more. We can sing. We can't sing take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee.

If we're not willing like Rahab to reach out when necessary at great personal cost to those around us who are in great need. Faith will be seen God would. It will be seen that we believe in God and we believe in his word.

But faith will always be seen man would as well. It will be seen by the fact that we are ready to reach out even at great personal cost to those who are in need around us. So that's the second chapter of James.

One great proof of genuine faith verse 27 of chapter one is that religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless is this looking after orphans and widows in their distress. If your religion if my religion is that which God our father is going to accept it's going to be seen in a faith towards God but it's going to be seen in a practical day by day concern for those who are needy for those who are broken in our society and I pray that God will deliver us all from the inconsistency of that opening illustration judging by wrong standards and will give us the heart of Christ that heart which was broken for those who were broken in society in his generation. Let's pray together.

Father we again thank you for your word. We thank you that it is a very practical word here in James chapter two. We thank you Lord that it speaks to us about the way we live about the way we spend our time and our energy and the resources which you give to us.

Lord give us that heart of Christ we pray that heart which was broken for the blind the deaf and the dumb and the poor those who realized their need. Give us oh God a desire to reach out to the spiritually needy and the physically needy in our world. We pray oh God that our faith will not just be God would we pray that will be man would as well seen in our reaching out even if great cost is involved to those who are in need in our day and age.

Lord we do pray that you might write these words upon our hearts and upon our lives in Jesus name amen.

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