

Saving Faith?

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[0 : 0 0] We turn to our Bibles now, to our reading for this evening. You'll find it in the letter of James. That's page 1011, 1011 in our church Bibles.

Otherwise, right after the long letter of Hebrews and before Peter. And we're going to read from chapter 1, verse 26, down to chapter 2, verse 13.

So James says in chapter 1, verse 26, If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, you sit here in a good place, while you say to the poor man, you stand over there or sit down at my feet, have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

[1 : 3 9] Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which has been promised to those who love him?

But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you are called?

If you really fulfill the royal law according to Scripture, you shall love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you're committing sin and 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 he who said, do not commit adultery, also said, do not murder.

If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

[2 : 5 2] For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. Amen.

May God bless to us his word. Please turn to James chapter 1. And let me pray as we do that.

When the wonders of your love fail my bitter heart to move, draw me, Lord, your wounds to see. Bring me back to follow you.

Serve the way you want me to. Tell your praise eternally. Heavenly Father, may these things we've sung be true of us this evening in our desire.

And we pray that you would answer these prayers and work your good work among us for the sake of Jesus' name. Amen. Some people just go on and on, don't they?

[4 : 06] A couple of weeks ago, I was on a train. It was only two stops, but there was a person in the seat, well, a little bit away from me actually, but talking in a fairly loud voice who seemed to me to talk without drawing breath for two stops.

The train was going all the way to Alloy. Goodness knows what it would have been to be on that, like to be on that train all the way there. Some people just go on and on.

You may know people like that. You may be a bit like that yourself. Well, you could be forgiven for asking the question at the end of James chapter one, is James one of these people who just goes on and on?

Because in chapter one of this letter, much of what he's got to say in the rest of the letter has already been said. He's introduced himself to his hearers.

He's introduced the problems that the letter is there to deal with. He wants his readers to put away the kind of bad behavior they've been demonstrating to one another and start behaving properly to one another.

[5 : 09] And at the end of chapter one, he gives some examples of what that will look like. So let's look just at the imperatives and the examples at the end of chapter one. Look at verse 21.

Here's the great imperative of the letter. Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness. That's the bad behavior he wants them to leave behind. And receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

That's the gospel he wants them to keep on receiving. And then there's a warning, verse 22, that they mustn't just hear that message but do it, not deceive themselves.

And then at the end, in verse 26, there are some practical examples. Guys, if you're going to do that gospel word, this is what it's going to look like in relationship to one another.

If anyone thinks he's religious and doesn't bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, that person's religious is worthless. Religion that's pure and undefiled before God, the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

[6 : 20] And you get to the end of the chapter and think, well, he's settled, he's got to say, has he not? He's told them that they need to receive the gospel. He's told them they need to put away that bad behavior. He's told them that they've got to make sure they do something in response.

He's not left it up in the air. He's earthed it in behavior. Job done, you would think. Well, no. The job is not done. For James, well, like any good pastor, knows that the fact that you've talked about and identified the problem and told people the gospel and told them how they need to respond is no guarantee whatever that they've been listening to what you've been saying.

And so he goes on. And in chapter two, he gives two examples of the kinds of ways in which his hearer's behavior is still not like the sort of behavior that he wants to see from them.

And we're going to look at the first of those examples this week. Chapter two, verses one to 13. And we'll look at the next of them next Sunday morning. An everyday example.

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

[7 : 43] For if a man wearing a gold ring and a fine clothing comes into your assembly and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, oh, sit here in a good place, while you say to the poor man, you stand over there or sit down at my feet, have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

You see, he knows these problems are harder to root out than just saying it once and knowing it'll be done. And the everyday example here is people who believe in a glorious Lord, verse one, they hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

They believe the truth about Jesus, but on the other hand, they are driven by a different kind of glory.

He paints a little picture. Imagine, he says, imagine two people come into your meeting. One of them's splendidly dressed.

He's really a fancy guy. He's got a sharp suit on, a shiny suit. He looks rich and famous. He behaves rich and famous. And everybody goes, whoa, we better pay attention to him. And beside him, just after him, walks in a guy, well, looking very ordinary, pretty shabby, bit down at heel, not terribly well dressed.

[9 : 09] It's so easy, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it be so easy to see the impressive looking guy coming through the door and saying, whoa, must attend to him and just ignore the other person coming in behind?

James says, if that little picture is true of you guys, verse four, have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Now, it's put in hypothetical terms here. If, verse two, and if, verse three, if those things should happen, well, then, verse four is what you've done.

It's put in, imagine this situation, but it gets very personal at the end, does it not? Verse four, have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Why does he use this example? Well, because he knows that his readers are very like this. This is precisely the sort of problem he's writing to them about. Despite the fact that they recognize Jesus Christ to be the Lord of glory, what impresses them most is the glory of the world.

[10 : 23] What motivates them is exactly what motivates the world around them. And how desperate is that? Because what God wants to see in the life of his children, 127, are people who don't value people the same way the world does.

Religion that's pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and keep oneself unstained from the world. We naturally, in this world, love people who can reward us in certain ways.

But God loves those who can't. The widow, the orphan, not people with great economic clout. and God loves it when his people are not just driven by the same aims that the world is driven by.

And yet, in chapter 2, we have an example of people who are driven by just the same aims as the world around them. There's an impressive person, let's be nice to them, you just sit over there while I'm being nice to him.

And in response to this, James asks a penetrating question and the question really that runs all the way through the rest of this section is this question.

[11 : 43] What is God like? How does God behave in relation to people? Think about that for a moment, he says. How does God behave?

Well, verse 5. Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he's promised to those who love him?

But you, you've dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you are called?

How does God behave? Well, he chooses differently. Think for a moment friends of how choosing works in this life.

How do people get chosen in this life? Let's take it back to the school playground or the sports field and remember the school playground at lunchtime or the games pitch in the afternoon.

[12 : 44] Do you remember being chosen for teams in football if that's the thing you played for at school or whatever it was you played hockey or whatever? How does it work?

We all know how it works. the best players are automatically the captains and they get to choose and who do they choose? Well, they choose the next best players and then the next best players and then the next best players until at the end there's a little group of people left who really want to play but nobody really wants them on their team and they choose them kind of reluctantly at the end of the line.

See, the way the world chooses is that the world honors the high. It honors the people who might be advantageous to us and it brings down the low.

The world maintains indeed exaggerates the differences between people by doing it like that all the time. And says James how unlike God that is.

We choose those who will benefit us most. God's choices are not based on how much he can get from his players.

[13 : 59] He's not like a football manager who shells out millions and millions in order to get a performer on his team. No, God chooses rubbish players for his team and then gives them great rewards.

His choices are not based on how much he can get from those he's chosen. He doesn't need anything. His players cannot give him anything that doesn't already belong to him. Says James God chooses people that the world thinks nothing of and makes them rich in faith.

Verse 5 and heirs of the kingdom which he's promised to those who love him. He chooses the sorts the world doesn't choose. He chooses the ones who'd be left at the end of the list in the prayer ground.

And friends isn't that an absolute relief looking around the room this evening. He chooses those who'd be left at the end of the list. Is that not a relief to you? If you're not a great performer in life?

It's terrific. God chooses those we wouldn't. Would you choose you to be on your team if you were God? Well not if you know yourself you wouldn't.

[15 : 12] God does not show the world's kind of fickle partiality in choosing people. He doesn't judge according to externals. He treats everyone the same, rich and poor alike, promising and unpromising alike.

This is important. It's not that God does things upside down from us. It's not that we choose the rich and we neglect the poor. God chooses the poor and neglects the rich.

No, he deals with everyone the same, rich or poor. Look at chapter 1 verse 9. James has already said this, let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation.

God lifts the in the world up and the rich in his humiliation. God brings the rich in the world down. The gospel is a great leveler. Everybody's treated the same.

We'll look over to chapter 4 verse 6. Very similar idea. It's a key verse in this letter. Chapter 4 verse 6. God gives more grace.

[16 : 17] Therefore, it said, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. It's not God opposes the rich but gives grace to the poor.

It's God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. He deals with everyone the same, rich or poor. Anyone who's willing to humble themselves before him, God treats with gracious mercy.

Anyone who is proud, God opposes. But in this example, James chapter 2, his readers do precisely the opposite of that.

In valuing what the world values, these people have given the best seats, not just to the rich but to the proud and they tell the humble to sit on the floor, not just the poor.

Look at verse 6. You have dishonored the poor man. The one, verse 5, that God has chosen to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. You've dishonored the one God's chosen.

[17 : 21] And who have you honored? Well, verse 6, the ones who oppress you, the ones who drag you into court, the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called. What you're doing is aligning yourselves along the lines the world does rather than along the lines that God does.

Now, of course, it's not that the rich are always the persecutors or that rich people are automatically persecutors of Christians. The point is that these people, and I think it must have a local feel here, these people are honoring those who are oppressing them, taking them to court, blaspheming the honorable name by which they're called.

These aren't just any old rich people, these are hostile rich people, and they're being honored while the ones God has chosen are being neglected. Now, we don't know exactly the situation, but I don't think James is talking just generally into the ether theater here.

I imagine that he knows some local knowledge, and that's why he's chosen this example. Particular situations where honored rich persons are behind the persecution of Christians.

But at the heart of this example is how God chooses versus how the world chooses. What's God like? Well, he chooses the sorts of people the world never would.

[18 : 54] And, says James to his readers, you guys, you choose like the world does. You don't look very like the Father at all. And you've got to ask yourselves questions about whether you really believe in the Lord of glory.

Now, it is very easy indeed, is it not, to let our behavior towards others be driven by things to do with what they can offer us.

Don't you find that easy? And to do with things about how the world values them, there are people we instantly categorize as being worth knowing, advantageous to be associated with, or not that worth bothering about.

And that's precisely the sort of thing that James is talking about here. At its most basic level, it's who we'll choose for our team in the playground, who we'll put ourselves out for.

different people get different things from us, and not always for good reasons. And what people get from us in terms of attention, or affection, or help, is often to do with very superficial things to do with them.

[20 : 23] And, says James, this discrimination between people shows the basic human tendency to set ourselves up as judges of who's who and what's what.

Chapter 5, verse 5. Sorry, 4. Sorry, chapter 2, verse 4. I'm sorry, my brain's gone. It's late in Sunday evening.

Chapter 2, verse 4. Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? It's an evil way of judging between people, says James.

And if we do that, that's a sign that no matter what we say we believe about God, being the glorious Lord, we're actually in charge of the judging people.

Impressed by the world's glory. God chooses differently from you guys, says James. Think about it. But it's not just how God chooses that's in view in this section.

[21 : 33] It's also what God desires. Look at verse 8. If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

You're doing well. But if you show partiality, you're committing 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 he who said, don't commit adultery, also said, don't murder. If you don't commit adultery but do murder, you've become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty, for judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. The question at the heart of this section is what does God desire for his people in the way they relate to one another?

And I think the answer to that is he desires indiscriminate love, if that's the right way of putting it. The point is this, the gospel that puts people right with God vertically has inevitable horizontal implications.

[22 : 52] You can't be put right with God the creator without having things changed horizontally in relation to other people. God chooses people to be in his kingdom, verse 5, and that kingdom has a way of doing things, a way of relating, a royal law he calls it, verse 8.

Now, in this section, James mentions a number of Old Testament commandments. Don't commit adultery, verse 11. Don't murder, verse 11. And the command, verse 8, to love one's neighbor as oneself.

And these, interestingly, are specifically commandments that Jesus deals with in his own teaching. And they are also commandments that as Jesus interacts with them in his teaching, he uses to get beyond the outward action to the attitude of heart that drives the action.

These are heart-revealing commands. love for others. And I think the big point of this section is that love for others from the heart is what the gospel looks like in its horizontal applications.

That's what God wants. He loves, and he wants his people to be lovers too. The law of the kingdom summarized in love your neighbor as yourself, tells what the king desires, hearts, and shows what the king is like.

[24 : 24] Now, in the first part of today's section, we had verse five, God is like this, verse six, but you aren't.

And here we have the same, verse eight, there is a royal law, this is what God desires, verse nine, but if you show partiality, you're not like him.

And the point is simply this, the dividedness in the way these people relate to one another, shows that they don't have the father's desires at heart.

For the father desires loving your neighbor as yourself, but that's not the way they're behaving. God is a lover of all sorts, and he expects his children to be the same.

In a church I used to belong to, there was an elderly man. He'd been a prominent city businessman. He was, by the time I knew him, quite old and a bit dodderly.

[25 : 30] He was upper crust, wealthy, respectable, and slightly shaky on his feet. But, every time somebody weird looking came through the door, you know, with green hair and a nail through their nose, that kind of person.

Ronnie Wilcox was the first person, the first person to shake hands. Every time. Because, like God, he was a lover of all sorts, not just people like him.

That's what God wants for his people. That's what God desires. Now, look at verses 9 to 11. These are rather tricky verses. I wonder if I, now, if this is a warm evening, now is the time to pinch yourself, or your neighbor, or both, and wake up and concentrate for a few minutes, because this is quite tricky.

Let me read verses 9 to 11 and see if you can work out what's going on here. What's the argument? But if you show partiality, you're committing sin and are convicted by the law's transgressors, for, whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it, for, he who said don't commit adultery also said don't murder.

If you don't commit adultery but do murder, you've become a transgressor of the law. You got that? Well, it's not so straightforward, is it? I think the point is this.

[26 : 57] Any reader with a Jewish background, as James' readers probably were, would have known that you cannot pick and choose your commandments. It's no good saying to God, I did really well on the not committing adultery thing this week but I had a bit of lapse on the murder front.

Why does that not go down well? Well, because God is behind the whole of the law. Everything, and especially all that stuff about people relating rightly to one another. And if you want to live under his loving rule the way he wants you with other people, you can't just pick the commands you fancy and do them and ignore the ones you don't fancy or happen to be inconvenienced at the time.

The whole thing is a reflection of his loving character. Now here's the point. Just as 10 to 11, you can't pick and choose your Old Testament commandments, so verse 9, under the royal law, the present law of the kingdom, the love your neighbor as yourself law, you can't pick and choose your people.

You can't pick and choose your commandments, and you can't pick and choose your people. Why? Because God's interested in them all.

That, I think, is the point that's being made here. It's no good at all saying, if you want to live like the Father, to reflect his character, it's no good at all saying, well, I love that one really well, but I treated that one disgracefully.

[28 : 30] Will that do? It doesn't go that way, does it? Because God is interested in all of them. Now, James is not saying here that favoritism is the same as murder or anything quite like that.

He's simply saying that picking and choosing your people is the same inward dividedness at work as picking and choosing your commandments. Can't be done.

God's behind them all. So, how God chooses? Not like James' readers.

What God wants? Well, not the divided behavior of James' readers towards one another. And, of course, the real problem that's being raised in this section is that these people who, to one, hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ actually very significantly don't reflect God's character at all in the way they relate to one another.

God is like this, but you guys, you're not really like this at all. Your favoritism demonstrates that you know better than God about people.

[29 : 48] You've made yourselves judges. You may be claimed to be believers in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ, but your behavior gives the light of that. Now, can I say to the sensitive conscience here, who is thinking to themselves, well, I know I don't treat everyone the same.

I know I don't. I'm absolutely guilty of that. That is not the same as saying there's a person over there that I can be bothered to deal with and a person over there who, frankly, I couldn't care less about.

That's what James is talking about here. People who are just callously indifferent to some while frantically interested in others. Well, now, let me summarize and then we'll draw some conclusions.

This is a very down-to-earth example. And the thing that James is going on about here is, have you got it? Have you got it yet? Have you got it yet? Do I need to go on?

Evidently, he does need to go on. He goes on for a lot longer. He uses the example of different behavior towards different people.

[31 : 07] And he follows that trail of clues back to God. How does God choose? Well, not like that. What does God desire? Well, not that. Whatever you people may think, James says, your faith in the glorious Lord Jesus is not as secure-looking as you might think it is.

Do you really understand the character of God? Says James. Well, so what? Well, the so what is found in verses 12 and 13.

Here's what James wants his hearers to do as a result of this example. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

For judgment is without mercy to one who's shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. It's short. It's pithy.

Let me say three things about it. First, anybody who reads this passage and doesn't realize that they need mercy needs to wake up.

[32 : 19] Verse 13 suggests that everyone needs mercy. I suppose you could read this example and just think, well, I need to do better.

I need to do better. But that is to demonstrate the kind of proud independence that James is getting at. You can't read this example and say the solution is I must do better in relation to other people.

For anybody who knows a little bit about what they're like, knows. Do we not know that we treat people differently based on things that are entirely superficial and unimportant about them?

Often because they can offer us different things. Now the right response to this passage is first of all to say to God, I know I need your mercy.

Second, notice that speech and action are highlighted in verse 12. So speak and so act as those who to be judged under the law of liberty.

[33 : 39] Worth asking the question, how is my speech towards people? Do I need to think back over this last week and ask myself, does my speech to or about others look like the speech of someone who knows that they've been shown massive mercy from God?

Or is my speech quick to condemn, quick to tear down, slow to be merciful and generous?

The person who knows what they've received will speak and act differently towards others as an inevitable result. Third, there is both a warning and an encouragement in verse 13.

The warning is that the way we relate to others shows very clearly whether we've accepted our own need for mercy or not.

Judgment is without mercy to one has shown no mercy. It's not, of course, that by being merciful we earn God's mercy. It's simply that if we've grasped what God's mercy is, it's going to modify the way we behave to others.

[35 : 07] And if there's no evidence of that, well, one's got to think. But there is an encouragement. And the encouragement, I think, is in this slightly enigmatic last phrase.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. Just as judgment is not the only word or the last word in relation to human beings, so it is possible for mercy to triumph in our own lives, both in relation to God, we can receive mercy from him and not judgment, and also in relation to other people.

And I suspect that's probably what this verse means here. That it is possible to relate mercifully to our brothers and sisters, rather than judgmentally in the way that these people are.

And it's possible because the gospel is a powerful force for change in people's lives. We've begun to understand what we've been delivered from and how merciful God has been to us.

then mercy can triumph over judgment in our behavior towards others as well. It is possible to turn around from this kind of bad behavior, says James.

[36 : 35] Let's pray that we might do that too. Let's pray together. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

For judgment is without mercy to one who's shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. Let's just have a moment in the quiet to reflect on these words.

Perhaps to consider our own words and acts over the last week in relation to others. Perhaps to think again of the mercy that we have been shown in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

we Bon filing in our ■ prop ■■ 0 of the image. We believe in the spirit of God, but how we believe in the truth. We believe in the spirit of euro Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?

We thank you, gracious God, for your amazing kindness towards us. We thank you that you have chosen sinful people to be the recipients of mercy and grace, to be inheritors of your kingly rule and of all that comes with it.

[38 : 35] We thank you that you have not dealt with us as our sins deserve. And we pray that that gospel message would work its way ever deeper into our lives.

We pray that it would work itself out in transformed relationships with one another. We pray that we might speak and act as those who believe that we've been delivered from a terrible judgment and set free a great price.

If there are things that we have said or done that we need to turn away from and make amends for, we pray that you'd help us to do that urgently.

If we're cast down by our failures, we pray that you'd help us to take hold of the Lord Jesus Christ again, eagerly.

Hear us, we pray, in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.