

Scripture Readings for Sept 12, 2021

Mark 12:28-34 (NIV)

²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

²⁹ “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’

³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

³² “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him.

³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

³⁴ When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

James 2:1-18, 24 (NIV)

² My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in.

³ 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,” ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵ Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

⁸ If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

¹² Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

²⁴ You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

Sermon: Faith and Action

Last week I introduced wisdom of James¹ who exhorts his readers to be *quick to listen* and *slow to speak*,² and to not merely *hear* the Gospel message but *live it out*.³ As we all know, these things are often easier said than done. Nevertheless, James is emphatic that one's faith is demonstrated by *practical* action, and he reminds his readers that for our devotion to be truly authentic in God's eyes, we are to – in his words - “care for orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep ourselves unstained by the world.”⁴ Widows and children had no status in that patriarchal society and were often in need because they had no protectors. Mention of that fact seems to be on James' mind, because he goes on to the contrast between the rich and the poor, and to talk about *favoritism*.⁵ And that's where we begin this morning.

We are all familiar with favoritism and the damage it does within families and the workplace.⁶ It can also lead to nepotism and cronyism, and it underlies racism and prejudice. Justice is meant to be *blind* precisely so that she can treat each person fairly and not be prejudiced by someone's wealth, status, or the color of the skin. You might be surprised to hear that Leviticus 19:15 gives that very command.⁷ Even so, favoritism is still systemic, and it's been the way of the world for millennia, despite us all appreciating the lasting damage it does. Recall that Jesus himself criticized the religious leaders of his day for wanting the best seats in the synagogue and be honored at banquets.⁸ Jesus also points out those leaders chose their guests so as to be seen in the right social circles, and in the hope of a return invitation!⁹ He responds by speaking about the “last being first and the first last” in the kingdom of God,¹⁰ and he himself associated with those people the religious leaders thought were unworthy of God's attention, namely, children, the poor, the sick, and the excluded – even hated foreigners, such as Romans and Samaritans. That whole society function on a “honor and shame” system and those who were shamed by the elite were trapped as lower-class citizens. Such things may be more subtle in Canada today, but it is still present. Jesus levels the playing field because *everyone* is made in the image of God and worthy of God's love and grace.¹¹ With that background context,¹² James says: “As you

¹ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Character-Matters.pdf> .

² Jas 1:19. (See also Matt 5:22; 36; 12:32-37.)

³ Jas 1:22.

⁴ Jas 1:27. See also Mic 6:6-8; Matt 9:13; 23:23; Mark 12:33; Luke 11:42. As mentioned last week, “Widows and orphans” can and must be extended to *all* the vulnerable in society, especially those who are overlooked or forgotten and who fall through the cracks in our welfare and legal systems. Ethics matters! See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Ethics-Matter.pdf> .

⁵ Jas 2:1-13. Indeed, from Jas 1:26 - 2:26 is a coherent unit.

⁶ Such as classrooms, departments, etc.

⁷ And that justice is to extend to the foreign “alien” – Lev 19:33-34.

⁸ See Matt 23:6; Luke 14:7.

⁹ See Luke 14:7-24, esp. 13-14. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Upside-Down-Kingdom-of-God.pdf> .

¹⁰ See Matt 20:1-28, esp. 16.

¹¹ Some might say that Jesus does more than level the ground, he has a *bias* to the poor!

¹² Context that James does not mention explicitly.

practise the faith of our Lord Jesus, you must do so *without favouritism*.”¹³ There is simply *no place* for favoritism in the kingdom of God.

James, knowing how Christians will be inevitably influenced by the world we live in,¹⁴ realized that favouritism is also to be found *within* the Christian community. We can be too easily impressed by someone’s wealth or influence and overtly pay special attention to them while ignoring or denigrating the poor.¹⁵ Some Christians have further perverted this by regarding wealth as a *sign* of God’s blessing or favor. Recall the gospel story of the widow’s “mite.”¹⁶ Jesus saw the crowds putting coins in the temple’s freewill offering box and observed rich people were throwing in large amounts. He also saw a poor widow putting in a miniscule amount and Jesus realized she had given sacrificially everything she had, whereas the wealthy simply gave a portion of their excess. Luke recalls Jesus as saying, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”¹⁷ And James is aware of that tradition saying: “Listen, my dear brothers and sisters. Isn’t it the case that God has chosen the poor (as the world sees it) to be rich in faith, and to inherit the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?” James goes on to say that favoritism dishonors – or shames – the poor, the very people God values, and co-inheritors of God’s kingdom. He insists on equality in treatment, because God wants the church to reflect his generous, universal love.

It’s been said that we live in a world of judging “machines” – we *all* judge. We seem to be wired this way and so to do otherwise is radically challenging, even impossible. Perhaps the connection between favoritism and judging was on James’ mind because he then reminds his readers of an ironic fact: it is the rich who are the *oppressors*! They are the ones who can not only afford to sue you and take you to court, but they can even rig the legal system to their own advantage.¹⁸ The poor, on the other hand, simply have to put up with things. And James is talking about rich *Christians* here who are oppressing their fellow Christians, who are baptized in the same name of Jesus;¹⁹ James regards this as blasphemy!

Favoritism is therefore condemned by the principle of equality. For scriptural support, James doesn’t directly appeal to the words of Jesus, but to the “royal law” – as he puts it – from Leviticus 19:18, where it says: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”²⁰ James goes on to say, “It’s no good saying that you haven’t committed murder or adultery, and so think you’re a righteous person. If you show prejudice or discrimination, you have violated the law of Moses.”²¹ James, like Jewish rabbis of the day, saw the mosaic law as a package deal; breaking *just one* law meant a person was condemned however good

¹³ Jas 2:1, NTE (adapted). Paul also says that God has no favorites: Rom 2:11; Gal 3:28.

¹⁴ He warns against that in Jas 1:27b.

¹⁵ Jas 2:2-4. There is nothing subtle in this example; this is a *public* display of favoritism! Moreover, this is one reason I do my best to deliberately remain ignorant over donors in church finances.

¹⁶ See Mark 12:41–44, Luke 21:1–4.

¹⁷ Luke 6:20-21. Matt 5:3, 6 spiritualizes those words.

¹⁸ They can hire the best lawyers, and perhaps even influence the judges – possibly bribe them!

¹⁹ Jas 2:7 (NET). It could also refer to Jews trying to use the courts against Jewish Christians.

²⁰ Lev 19:18 (also quoted in Matt 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14).

²¹ Jas 2:11.

they may think they were in other areas. That's a scary and sobering thought! James' point is simply that favoritism is the opposite of "loving your neighbor as yourself." He then concludes with a short saying that sounds harsh and Old-Testament-ish: "For judgment is merciless for the one who has shown no mercy. But mercy triumphs over judgment."²² It deserves unpacking a little.

I mentioned last week that we are to reflect on the character or nature of the God we believe in.²³ Many Christians see God as authoritative, judgemental, and punitive. This makes God like a stern parent, someone to obey out of fear. Our view of God will also influence the way we live, including our own parenting style. If that is our view of God, we will tend to be rule-keepers ourselves, valuing social order, individual responsibility, and certainty.²⁴ And we will likely be aligned with political parties that have such authoritative values. Jesus tells the shocking parable of the prodigal son, with the father representing God.²⁵ One of the surprises in that story is the way the father deals with the wayward son. He is *not* judgemental and punitive, but that doesn't mean he is permissive - saying "anything goes." Rather the Father is *nurturing* and relational.²⁶ From this parenting perspective, God demonstrates acceptance, empathy, cooperation, open-mindedness, and supports choice.²⁷ There is much more to be said about this observation, but it again reminds us that our view of God affects us and how we relate with others. Now both views of God are presented in the Bible, and James, despite Jewish tendencies, understands that "*mercy triumphs over judgment.*" Not only is that embodied in how the Father treats the prodigal son, it arises the conversation Jesus had with a religious leader that we heard about in our gospel reading.²⁸ A religious leader quizzes Jesus as to what are the most important commandments, and Jesus responds, "Love God and love your neighbor." The Jewish leader naturally agrees and adds, "loving your neighbor as yourself is *more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.*"²⁹ The man not only knew the mosaic law, but he also knew that the later minor prophets Hosea and Micah had qualified that law, reflecting a transition from an authoritative to a nurturing God who values love more than strict obedience to religious duty. Mark writes: "When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."³⁰ Understanding the true heart of God is a step closer to being in his kingdom.

Moving on, in light of the royal law to "love your neighbor as yourself," James points out the misguided thinking of knowing someone is in need and doing nothing about it but mutter platitudes.³¹ "What good

²² Jas 2:13.

²³ This was in the context of Jas 1:13 – that God is the source of our trials (of evil).

²⁴ Note too that most of the Ten Commandments are written in the negative: "Thou shall *not*." This can lead to a parent's default response being "no"!

²⁵ See Luke 15:11–32, <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Parable-of-the-Man-with-Two-Sons.pdf> .

²⁶ See John Sanders, *Embracing Prodigals* (Cascade, 2020).

²⁷ Nurturers will be politically more liberal too!

²⁸ See Mark 12:28-34; (Matt 22:34-40); Hos 6:6; Mic 6:6-8; Heb 10:8.

²⁹ Mark 12:33.

³⁰ Mark 12:34.

³¹ Actually, James is speaking of someone within your Christian community, but this can be extended out beyond that!

is that” exclaims James! *Faith and good deeds must go together.*³² It is inauthentic faith to refuse to help those in need; indeed, James concludes that faith without action is dead.³³

Since this letter was written *after* Paul wrote Galatians and Romans, some have considered this is as James’ critiquing Paul’s message of salvation as a gracious gift of God. But most scholars reject that view and regard James as pursuing his own agenda, not reacting to Paul’s. After all, James is *not* talking about salvation as such, because he has previously declared that God has *already* implanted his truthful word within this Christian community, and that word has power to save.³⁴ They have *already* been “born again,” so to speak, and the issue now is to put into practice what they had previously heard. James doesn’t see these good deeds as acts of obedience, but as works of faith.³⁵ In this James agrees with Paul, who himself writes: “In Christ Jesus . . . the only thing that matters is *faith working through love.*”³⁶ Divine Grace and human works are both vital, but for different ends. We are saved by God’s grace *for* good works within the Christian community and beyond.³⁷ Paul and James would agree that the word of truth brings both salvation *and* transformation. Faith is belief in action.

What else might this mean for us today?

That faith must be translated into practice seems pretty obvious – why does it need saying? It seems that there is something deep within us that leads us to presume that saying we *believe* in God is sufficient to make us OK before God. Both James and Jesus say that to merely acknowledge that God *exists* is not enough, our belief needs to be translated into active trust³⁸ *in* God, and that trust can only be demonstrated by practical action. What precisely that practice may mean depends on our circumstances, both as individuals and as a church. But one key aspect is loving our neighbor, and that means social justice. Stereotypically, Christians have been characterized as evangelicals or liberals, the former concern themselves with salvation and the latter with social justice. James is critical of Christians who, knowing someone is in dire need, merely respond by saying “I’ll pray for you” when practical action is both appropriate and possible. So-called liberals focus on social justice but often fudge to faith bit. Not only is faith “belief in action,” we are to love *God* and our neighbor. It is therefore *not* either salvation *or* social justice, but *both*! So, for starters, let us reflect on where we are weak and seek to strengthen that aspect, and – if we are able – do more of the other that we seem to favor.

³² Jas 2:14, 18, 20, 26. In Jas 1:22 – 25 he insists that his readers are not only hearers of the word but doers.

³³ Jas 2:26. Some have also argued that there is a difference between belief and faith. Belief can be seen as intellectual assent. You believe in God? That’s nothing special, so do the demons! (Jas 2:19). Belief on its own is totally inadequate; faith is belief in action. Faith involves trust.

³⁴ See Jas 1:18, 21. “New birth” has already occurred.

³⁵ Not “works of the law” (Paul’s language.)

³⁶ Gal 5:6; 2 Cor 9:8. For Paul, faith without works is inconceivable! FYI: Paul *never* says, “faith alone” (*sola fide*); the two words *only* appear together in the New Testament in Jas 2:24 and in the negative! It was Luther who added the word “alone” to Rom 3:28 to counter (his view of) James!

³⁷ See also Rom 3:8; 6:1-2. Ethics also matter for Paul! (Re-read Acts 15.)

³⁸ The connection between “faith” and “trust” is explored here:

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/In-God-We-Trust.pdf> .

Second, note that James does *not* encourage his readers to rail against an economic system that oppresses the poor, because challenging the mighty Roman empire was not a prudent option for minorities. Instead, he calls for Christian communities to honor and care for those who are vulnerable in society.³⁹ We have to consider whether we have we clung to our safe orthodoxy and ritual rather than open our hearts to those who are different - and perhaps threatening or unsettling of the status quo. That is the challenge of the kingdom of God. The weekly visit to the Boarding House is one important example of St. Andrews' opening its heart - and there are others too. There is much more we could do in the locality, beginning with an open-hearted, non-judgemental welcome to those who are *not* like ourselves. Let's not merely *hear* the Gospel message but *live it out*.

Finally, unlike in James' day, we *do* have a voice in our country in the way we vote. Please use that wisely. Amen. Let us pray.

³⁹ Remember what Luke says, the poor have been chosen by God to be heirs of the kingdom (Luke 6:20-21).