

## **“The Unity of Faith and Works” based on James 2**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sept. 8, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

A year ago in August 2023, the Public Religion Research Institute conducted a national survey. They asked the question, “Do you agree with the following statement? ‘Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.’” Nearly a quarter of all those surveyed said they agreed. People on all sides of the political aisle said they agreed. People of every religious background said they agreed.

What caught my attention most was that among the major Christian demographics, in most categories, between 20 and 31 percent of respondents (1 in 5, to 1 in 3) said they agreed with this. It reminds me of a meme I saw several years back with the face of a cowboy that read: *“The time is coming when good men will be forced to do bad things.”* The implication was the same – things were so off track in the U.S. – that the use of violence and murder could be justified, by Christians, if good men just destroy evil ones.

This is not unlike the circumstances into which James wrote his letter 2,000 years ago. As we discussed last week, this letter was likely written in from 45-60 AD in a time of great unrest and a rising revolutionary movement. The zealots who longed to see the overthrow of Roman rule, were not all the same, but generally, they tended to see themselves as the moral purists. They tended to see themselves as the ones who wore their faith as an outward badge of their own “goodness.” They saw the pagan Romans and Judeans who accepted Roman rule, or made compromises, such as the conservative Sadducees and liberal Pharisees as inherently evil, and worthy of death for their sin.

James is speaking to an audience that seems to agree with the zealots that there was moral decay that needed to be opposed. But James seems to be concerned that they might also, unfortunately, agree with the zealots that there may be a need to murder. He reminds his readers that the one who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” is the same one God who said, “You shall not murder.”

Now, the word translated adultery here encompasses not only cheating on a spouse, but sexual promiscuity and in some contexts, idolatry. We might read this text and think: “Isn’t that obvious?” Clearly murder is wrong and so is adultery. We might even flip it the other way. But is it obvious? The zealots were gaining recruits from among the many disparate groups. I believe James is writing to Judean Christians to remind them of their faithful duty.

James says that anyone who keeps even all the law, except one thing, is guilty of all violations. It’s easy to receive this as a hard line – a call for every person to be sinless for salvation. It’s easy to take this as a work’s righteousness comment, after all, we know that at the end of this passage, James will say, “faith apart from works is dead.”

But if we look at the whole section which our bibles label Chapter 2, and consider what comes before and what comes after, We can begin to see that something else is at play. What’s more, if we are reminded of James’s audience, whose passions are being stoked, in the lead up to a civil revolt, then something more, something greater is visible.

James says that in the faith of our Lord Jesus, favoritism, partiality, or prejudice, is evil. It is wrong, he says, to look upon a rich person, or someone of high status, and judge them worthy of the best

seat, but look upon a poor person of low status, and judge them of worthy only of sitting beneath a footstool. Remember that in this time, there was no capitalism and there were no bank accounts, so rich meant high status and poor meant low status. James says you have sinned if you judge, or pre-judge among people, making distinctions, or discriminating, between them. James sets us up as the reader, for a gut punch. True faith in Jesus requires a real commitment.

Essential to understanding James is recognizing what some scholars claim is absent from this letter. Many scholars claim that James lacks a Christology, a discussion of who Jesus is and what he did for us. They say this because Jesus is named explicitly by James only twice. First in the first verse of Chapter 1, introducing himself as a servant of Jesus, and again now, in Chapter 2, to those who hold or claim to hold the faith, or faithfulness of Jesus.

However, his letter is clearly steeped in Matthew's gospel, specifically, the Sermon on the Mount. Notice also James's use of the term, "royal law." He points to Jesus as the Messiah, the human king of Israel who is also God, the true king of all. For James, the challenge of the Christian life – observance of God's laws – is rooted in Jesus's interpretation of those laws.

James presents for us a faith that is impartial and open to all people. Remember, in Acts, it was James who wrote the letter of the Jerusalem council. On the advocacy of Paul, the council said gentiles, or people of the nations, would not be forced to take on a Jewish identity via circumcision, in order to be counted as members of the way of Jesus. And so, the first major decision of the early church was to say that markers of a cultural identity are not ever to be a measure of Christian faith.

I believe that for James, he is making clear that being identified as a "good guy," by what you've done up to now in keeping the law, your moral purity, or your intellectual ideas – none of these are actual markers of the faith of Jesus. Faith is seen only in how we love others. Faith about not being "double minded" as we read last week, but singularly focused on being a servant of Jesus.

We should seek wisdom while knowing all gifts – to us, or from us – are ultimately from God, who is generous to all. We should see the value in our humility, of enduring the trials of this life without anger, to listen to others, to speak only with love, and to care for widows and orphans – who are the poor, the humble, and marginalized.

Essentially, if we really have faith in who Jesus is and what he did for us, we should act like it. If we are to follow Jesus, we should follow the pattern that he laid out for us. This is not an easy pattern. That pattern shows the eternal Son of God, fully one with God, coming down to share in our humanity, to be the long-awaited Messiah, or anointed King. And yet, live not as a king, but as a humble servant sharing in our humanity, sharing in our humanity to serve the poor and outcast.

The pattern is of Jesus laying down his life for us, crucified and shamed on a Roman cross, after he was betrayed by his people. The pattern is self-giving love. You see, James says he is a servant of this Messiah, and the pattern Jesus set for us.

Jesus did not cozy up to those of high status who could protect him politically. Instead, Jesus lived out the complete law, his royal law, as a wanderer. He went out to the people who needed him most, serving them regardless of how they might respond, or what they might have to offer him.

What's more, the pattern of Jesus was not a show of piety, or a pride in his Judean culture. For this, he was rejected by his own people as a lawbreaker, a violator of the law, even though he did not

come to abolish the law, but he came to complete every bit of it. He did not seek to be called good – but chose to live with goodness. He loved God with all he had, and he loved his neighbor as himself.

Likewise, the pattern of Jesus as Messiah – the King who would deliver God’s people – was not to build an army, raise up weapons, and destroy evil by fighting fire with fire. No, the one who could have called down angels to destroy the Roman army, and could still call down angels to destroy any modern army as well. He chose to end the cycle of violence – not to join it.

Instead, Jesus had no status in the Roman world, or the Judean hierarchies, and had no army. He went to the cross for us and not because it benefited God in any way. He went to the cross on our behalf out of love for us, and on the third day he rose again for us. He ascended for us, and God sent the Holy Spirit to live in and among us.

Again, this was not done for God’s own sake. God would be fine without us. God is still complete. Yet, despite our sin, God’s mercy in Jesus spoke louder than God’s judgment.

James does not say that adultery is not wrong, or that we should only be concerned about murder. He does not say that we should be allowed to do whatever we want. He says sin is real and we are all sinners in need of the loving mercy of God. We are urged not to be “double-minded,” claiming we love God while still chasing after false gods.

James’s chastisement of those who value sexual purity, but ignore murder, is not to condone sexual promiscuity. It is to say that those who would resort to murder, in order to stem the tide of moral decay, are equally violating the royal law.

But here’s the kicker – It’s because they act without mercy. They do this when mercy is central to who Jesus is and what he did. Jesus loved humanity as he loves himself, even though we have not done anything to deserve his love. Everything in the person and work of Jesus is about his love for you and his mercy. James says that to act without mercy warrants judgment without mercy. He says we must recognize that in the royal law mercy speaks louder, or as the King James put it, Mercy rejoices against judgment.

If we say we have faith, but do not have mercy – what ends up happening is we justify our own sins with excuses, and then we condemn the sins of others as worse than our own. This is not faith.

Likewise, If we see someone in need, but only show them faith by offering to pray for them, when what is the benefit of that? James says we must try to meet those needs. This echoes Jesus saying in the Sermon on the Mount, “Give to all who ask.” That’s an impossible standard. This is not an easy task – there is so much need in the world around us. Yet, if we fall short of this too, are we not then still violators of the whole law? This is why mercy is so important to understanding this text. We must then resist the urge to favor those who benefit us, giving without expectation of getting anything in return.

Uniting our faith and works is difficult, but it should be our goal. If we are honest, we do not trust in Jesus if we fail to work toward all of these commands. We must strive to tear down prejudice in our own hearts, and lead by example. We must try to avoid the temptation to seek popularity. We must not justify violence as an answer to the world’s evil. We must try to meet the needs of the poor around us. In all of these things we will have success, but also we will fail a lot. So remember what we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us as we have forgiven.”

Today we baptized Max, and we made a promise in regard to him. We promised to guide and nurture him, by word and deed with love and prayer, sharing with him the good news of the gospel, helping him to follow Christ, and grow in the family ties of the household of God. We've got it on video – ya'll said you would do this. But it's not just him, but all of our children, adults even.

So, let us take the words of James to heart and be a good example. We can't be perfect, but we can strive to be consistent, upholding the royal law of loving our neighbor. This means that we must strive to turn away from sin – all kinds of sin. It also means that we must be merciful to those who struggle, especially those who struggle with sins, even those we find it easy to overcome.

On a side note, it's amazing how many people see me and think I've never even thought about losing weight and give dieting advice and talk of my sin of gluttony. They act as though I've never been on a diet in my life. I've only ever been on diets in my life and it's real easy for the person who has never been overweight to judge. Think about that when you consider the sins you look at in other people and cannot believe they do that, when you've never been tempted.

There is no time for “good men and women to do bad things” as if they do them for God's sake. When we do bad things we not only cease to be good, but we also become a bad example. Our kids need to see us speaking well of our enemies, without fear of them. They need to hear less gossip and politically inflammatory speech.

Likewise, they need to hear us speaking the truth with love, with humility, patience, and gentleness, seeking unity. They need to see us speak about our faith in Jesus, without regard to how people will honor us for it, or fear that they will dishonor us for it. Our kids need to see us serving the poor and those of low status and marginalized. They need to see us being faithful in our lives. They can't just hear us talking or listening. They need to see us act.

It's not easy. It's not. But we need to do this and strive to do this, because this is what it means to follow the faith of Jesus. This is what it takes to move beyond just being hearers of the word. Simple belief in God is a faith no different than a demon knowing God exists, or religious zealots justifying violence and sin in the name of God. Osama bin Laden knew God is one, and yet still did heinous acts of terror. Just believing in God is not enough. That's not faith.

Rather, we need to unite our works to our faith, and the triune God we believe is with us by the Holy Spirit. We need to repent when we make mistakes and show mercy for others in their mistakes. We need to respond to the love God has for us by loving one another. That is when our faith is truly alive. Amen.