

“Love in Action”

James 2:1-10, 14-17

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James is one of my favorite New Testament books. Obviously, this puts me at odds with the 16th century reformer, Martin Luther, who referred to it as “an epistle of straw” because it lacked the evangelical characteristics common in Paul’s writings. Luther questioned why it was ever included in the canon and wished it had not been. He placed it at the end of his translation of the Bible, along with Hebrews, Jude and Revelation, and failed to note its pages in the index.

It is true that James is not an evangelical book because, in my opinion, the author assumed his readers were believers. His goal was not to convert unbelievers, but to develop bold and faithful disciples.

As a result, it is an ethical smorgasbord that contains fifty-four commands. James was not shy about telling his readers what their duties were as followers of Jesus. He did not mince words or leave any doubt. As a matter of fact, he made his readers twist and squirm as he touched raw nerves. Today’s text is a good example of this.

“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a 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 God not 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? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

If you keep the royal law found in scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, 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 it all.

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says, ‘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” James 2:1-10, 14-17.

One thing is obvious when you read this passage and others in this epistle. **James took Jesus seriously.** There is little doubt that James was heavily influenced by the earliest accounts of Jesus’ teachings and good deeds. I am confident that he was familiar with the way Jesus expressed his values, arranged his priorities and lived his life. He knew what Jesus considered most important, love of God and neighbor. He was aware that Jesus was so passionate about building a just and peaceful world that he gave his life for this noble cause.

It appears that James adopted Jesus' mission. Through his writings, he became an advocate for those who were struggling, especially the poor, the vulnerable, the powerless victims of injustice and the disenfranchised. They are the main characters in his book and like the ancient prophets, he wrote about how they should be treated, with respect, kindness and compassion.

Following Jesus' example, he used his influence to mobilize believers to help those who were struggling. To do any less, in James' opinion, made a mockery of the faith he cherished. Without good deeds, faith was lifeless.

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” James 2:14-17.

So what did James encourage his readers to do? He told them to treat all people with respect, regardless of their economic or social standing. It appears that James was aware that Jesus treated the woman at the well with the same gracious dignity and respect he did Nicodemus. This was what he wanted his readers to do, too.

To James, showing favoritism or catering to people because of their wealth or influence was a sin that dishonored God because it led to cliques and divisions within the church. It undermined their highest calling, which was to adopt a servant mentality by meeting the needs of all people, including the least among them.

I must tell you that this was not the prevailing philosophy of James or Jesus' time. As retired Beeson School of divinity professor, Fisher Humphreys writes, “In that society, it was assumed that wealth and power signified the Lord's approval and the lack of these indicated the Lord's disapproval. Consequently, poor people were looked upon not only as failures, but as people whom God rejected. Jesus dissented from this view; he befriended sinners and said they will enter the kingdom of God before the self-righteous (Matthew 21:31). Jesus' radical welcoming of all people into God's kingdom, provided they would treasure the kingdom above all else and enter it as little children, upset the religious authorities of his society and led them to call for his death.”

What do you think James would tell us today, because I'm not sure our culture is much different from James'? *Wouldn't he begin by telling us to see all people as God's children and love them as we do our own children and grandchildren, regardless of their social or economic standing?* I think so. It is not up to us to choose which neighbors we'll love as we love ourselves.

I am confident James would applaud the actions of an elderly man in a church in Portland, Oregon that did this very thing. The pastor of his church befriended a student on a nearby college campus. He was a brilliant young man whose appearance was different from most, especially in this church. His hair was rarely combed, his clothes tattered and he never wore shoes, summer or winter.

One day this young man decided to attend the pastor's church. He walked into this refined church after the service had begun wearing his usual attire, a tee shirt, blue jeans and no shoes. No one said a word to him. Since the church was crowded that day, this young man walked down the aisle looking for a seat, only to find none available. So, when he came to the altar, he folded his legs and sat down on the carpet.

Suddenly, an elderly man began walking down the aisle toward the boy. Was he going to scold him? Would he ask him to leave? The tension in the air was thick as all eyes were on this man slowly making his way to the altar.

When the elderly gentleman reached the young college student, he said nothing. Instead, with some difficulty, he lowered himself and sat down next to him on the carpet. For the remainder of the service, he stayed there with his new friend. It was reported that there was no shortage of tears that day in church.

I believe James would tell us to do more than be nice to people, as important as this is, but also to treat all people fairly, especially those that are accustomed to being exploited. He would admonish us not to take advantage of them, but to make sure their voices were heard and their interests were protected. I am certain that James would remind us that the Golden Rule had no exceptions.

I think James would tell us that we need to be more concerned about what we can do for people than what we can get from them. Like Jesus, we need to adopt a servant mentality that never substitutes empty words for practical help.

I have no doubt that James would look at us today with our enormous wealth and influence and demand that we use our voice and clout to create a culture that eliminates the have-nots. He would tell us that it is our responsibility to build communities that ignore no needs and leave no one behind.

Are you familiar with the Millennium Development Goals? These are eight international development goals that 192 United Nation member states and 23 international organizations have agreed to achieve by the year 2015. They include reducing extreme poverty, reducing child mortality rates, fighting disease epidemics such as AIDS and Malaria, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, improve mental health, ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development. I encourage you to go online and read more about this noble cause and ways you can get involved. Your support is needed and will help you put your faith into practice.

Why should we take James seriously and accept his bold challenges, which are, for the most part, counter-culture? I believe he would quickly tell us, “This is what it means to follow Jesus. How could anyone be his disciple and do otherwise?”

When I read James, I am compelled to ask why he was drawn to Jesus. What part of the gospel attracted him? Why did he take Jesus seriously? Why did he adopt his mindset and lifestyle? Why did he become so passionate about creating a just and peaceful world for all people? Why did he care about those that most people ignored or exploited? One day, I hope to ask him these questions.

Perhaps something clicked in James’ mind when he read about Jesus life and ministry. It satisfied a longing deep in his soul. Following Jesus and mobilizing others to do so gave his life meaning and purpose as nothing ever had.

I sense the same thing happened to Millard Fuller. In many ways, he was a modern day James. When the founder of Habitat for Humanity heard the cries of the least among us, he could not turn a deaf ear and go on his way. He had to respond with a passion to help them that equaled their pain. He gave his all, not only to help them, but to mobilize people from all over the world to join him, and they did. Since 1976, almost 1.5 million no-interest homes have been built all over the world with the aid of volunteers

and the future occupants of those homes through Habitat for Humanity and the Fuller Center for Housing.

For me, Millard Fuller, who died last winter, embodied what Jesus did and James taught. In some small way, I hope I do, too. How about you?