

What does it mean to believe in Jesus, according to the most radical book in the New Testament?

James 2:1-4

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

October 24, 2020

We are departing slightly from our focus on the teachings of Jesus by moving out of the Gospels to one of the epistles. We will get to that in a moment. But we are still trying to see Jesus with fresh eyes, to see him again for the first time.

The title of this sermon as printed is: “What does it mean to believe in Jesus?” The actual title is a bit longer: “What does it mean to believe in Jesus, according to the most radical book in the New Testament?”

What is the most radical book in the New Testament? In my opinion it is the Epistle of James. Not coincidentally, it is also my favorite book in the New Testament.

One reason is because James is so plainspoken. You don’t have to have a history of first century philosophy on the bedside table when you read James.

John’s Gospel begins, “In the beginning was the Word,” the Logos. And you start rummaging through your old mental class notes. Which philosopher talked about the Logos? Philo, right? Jewish philosopher from Alexandria. Around the time of Jesus. Hey, that may be important.

Then John says that Jesus was “the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” And you think hard, and you remember the Essenes, the eccentric Jewish group out in the wilderness, they were into light and dark imagery. The children of light and the children of darkness.

James says things like, “You believe in God? Good for you. The devil believes in God. Gimme a break.” Not in those exact words, but pretty close. (2:19)

I like to think that James is the George Carlin of the New Testament. Coming from me, that’s high praise.

Another reason James is my favorite New Testament book is because it is common sense. “*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.*” (2:15-17) What don’t you understand about that?

James gives what may be the only definition of authentic religion in the Bible: “*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for widows and orphans in their distress, and to keep one’s self spotless in the world.*” (1:28) That’s it. No metaphysics. Keep it simple.

Which brings us to our text: James 2:1-4:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please’, while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there’, or, ‘Sit at my feet’, have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Later in this passage James levels this profound charge: *“You have dishonored the poor.”* (2:6) The poor should be respected and treated with dignity. You have dishonored them.

Here’s the setting. The earliest church drew members largely, but not exclusively, from the lower classes. Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians, *“Not many of you were powerful, not many were of noble birth.”* (I Corinthians 1:26)

Evidently, James had heard of instances where prominent people in a community had visited the worship services of a church, and they had been given preferential treatment. It wasn’t simply that they were guided to the best seats; poor people were moved to make room for the notable visitors.

You embarrassed them, James said. For what? The smile of approval from someone who wouldn’t speak to you on the streets?

In my senior year in college I was given charge of a tiny mission in a heavily Catholic village in South Louisiana – the Youngsville Chapel. This was in the early-mid-60s. Rural communities were often homogeneous in the extreme. The year before I arrived, a religious census showed that the village was 98% Catholic, 2% everybody else.

Baptists were virtually unknown. To the extent that anyone had ever heard of us, they lumped us together with Pentecostals. We wanted nothing more than to gain the attention if not the respect of the community. I guarantee you that if the mayor of Youngsville had surprised us by walking in the front door of the Chapel one Sunday morning, there would have been a mad scramble to make room for him/her. “Kids, go stand against the wall.”

That is what was happening in some early churches. That is what set James off.

The statement that stands out to me in James’ response is the very first verse. It is in the form of a question. But every parent knows that when you reprimand your kids, all questions are rhetorical, right? You’re making a point. You’re not inviting a response. James said to the church members, “When you discriminate, you call into question whether you really believe in Jesus.”

Wouldn’t you love to have been there when James’ letter was read to the congregation? I can see a stalwart member jumping to his feet, angry, insulted. “Who does he think he is, calling my belief in Jesus into question? I have believed in Jesus since I was a kid. I was baptized in the Jordan River, for crying out loud.”

“I believe in ‘Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father. . . . came down from heaven . . . became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human. . . . crucified for us under Pontius Pilate . . . suffered and was buried . . . the third day he rose again . . . ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. . . . will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead.’ I believe all that stuff. What does honoring the poor have to do with believing in Jesus?”

To which James would have responded, Everything.

I know I was reading the Nicene Creed back into the first century, but you get the point. Just as you get James’ point.

James was channeling his rich Jewish heritage. An ancient Jewish proverb says, *“Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.”* (Proverbs 12:31) Another says, *“Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord.”* (Proverbs 19:17)

In particular, James was channeling a verse from a great Jewish prophet, a verse that I confess I don't think I ever read, or if I read it, it never jumped out at me the way it did after I read our text in James. Jeremiah said, "*(Your father) judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is that not what it means to know me?*" declares the Lord." (22:16)

Again, a statement disguised as a rhetorical question. To know God, to know God in more than an academic way, said the ancient prophet, means that you care for, advocate for and defend the poor. That's what it means to believe in God. It follows, doesn't it, that if you do not care for, do not advocate for and do not defend the poor, if you oppress them, if you dishonor them, doesn't that show that you do not really know God?

That was precisely James' point. To believe in Jesus is to honor the poor, it is to treat all human beings with dignity and respect. It is to honor them. That's what believing in Jesus means.

Last Wednesday night members of First Baptist Church, Winston-Salem, met via Zoom to have a conversation about awakenings we have experienced regarding homosexuality. One woman recalled something one of our ministers told her shortly after that minister joined the staff. The minister said, "When you meet someone, before you say anything, remind yourself that this person is a child of God, made in the image of God, and should be treated with dignity and respect."

The Indian saying is, "The God in me reaches out to the God in you." Quaker founder George Fox talked of "that of God in every person." Genesis says that humanity was created in the image and likeness of God, (1:27) which entitles every person we meet to be accorded all the rights and privileges of the children of God.

James probably would not have been so diplomatic. He would have said, "If you do not treat everyone with dignity and respect, you just don't believe in Jesus. That's your problem."

I know that all this smudges the line that a lot of people like to draw around what it means to be a Christian. Everyone has their own definition, usually based on fine line doctrinal distinctions. How deep is the water? So be it. Not ours to judge.

Maya Angelou was a member of the faculty of Wake Forest University. One day, in a presentation, she recalled the time someone asked her, "Are you a Christian?" She was, as a matter of fact, a long-time, highly respected member of the Mount Zion Baptist Church. "Am I Christian?" she repeated. "Oh, no, honey. Not yet!"

Becoming a Christian is a lifelong process of being as he was, seeing as he saw, valuing as he valued, standing up the way he stood up, being in our world the way he was in his. We bandy the term around too glibly; the aim is to become Christ-like.

Let us commit ourselves or recommit ourselves to that lifelong goal. Amen.