

The Trouble with Christianity: Why It's So Hard to Believe It Injustice: Hasn't Christianity been an instrument for oppression?

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SCRIPTURE | James 2:1–17 (NIV)

¹ My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. ² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby 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: 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 insulted 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 slandering 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, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do 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, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

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FOR REFLECTION

Throughout history, the church of Jesus Christ has participated in various kinds of social injustice and passively acquiesced to more. Perhaps most notable is its participation in the African slave trade industry until the nineteenth century. Moreover, the church has been an agent of socio-economic oppression to the point that Karl Marx, who criticized the Christian church, famously stated that religion was “the opium of the people.”

Without question, oppression perpetuated by the church has caused many to question the validity and truth of Christianity. “If Christianity has been an instrument of oppression, why believe its claims?” they ask.

In this chapter, James validates the seriousness of the concern as he addresses oppression and injustice within the Christian assembly. He argues that such oppression is not grounds to disbelieve the Lord of Glory, but it does reveal that the church must dig deeper to understand its own faith claims more fully, particularly how those claims must manifest themselves in love, not oppression, of the poor. When oppression occurs within the church, perpetrated by those who claim to be kingdom heirs, the kingdom law of love and the proper relationship between “faith” and “deeds” are at stake.

1. In verses 1 – 7, James addresses a specific type of favoritism in the assembly based upon socio-economic factors. He also speaks generally of acts of favoritism. What other kinds of discrimination (active or passive) can be seen in Christian communities? Why does James condemn it?
2. In verses 8 – 11, the larger logic of James seems thoroughly Jewish as he draws on Torah (Lev. 19:15 – 18) to make his point. Compare this passage to Matthew 22:34 – 40. Do James and Jesus use the Love command (Lev. 19:18) in similar ways?
3. What do verses 12 – 13 say about how the law (presumably the “royal” law of verse 8) gives freedom? Freedom from what and for what?
4. In verses 14 – 17, James relates “faith” to “deeds” (particularly deeds done on behalf of the poor) and concludes that faith unaccompanied by action is dead. In light of this, how would you define “faith” according to James?