

Gospel for Everyone: Seeing Social Issues through the Lens of the Gospel

Session 8

Lessn Summary

Main Passages

Luke 5:17-20; Ephesians 2:10; James 2:14-17

Session Outline

1. A Biblical Example (Luke 5:17-20)
2. Good Works Prepared (Ephesians 2:10)
3. The Purpose of Good Works (James 2:14-17)

Theological Theme

God's people are called to obey two great commands. The first is to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. The second is to love their neighbor as themselves. Both the Law and the Prophets are summed up in those two commands (see Matthew 22:36-40).



Leader Guide

Gospel for Everyone: Seeing Social Issues through the Lens of the Gospel

Introduction

- ❓ Has anyone ever done something for you that was so sacrificial that it shocked you? What was it?
- ❓ Why did they do it? How did you respond? How do you feel about it now?

Mark 2:1-12 contains the story of a paralytic who was lowered down to Jesus through a roof. How did this man get onto the roof in the first place? Who lowered him down? The Bible tells us he was carried there by a group of men. We don't know much about the men who carried the paralytic to Jesus other than the fact that they were willing to sacrifice to help this man. Not only would it have been physically taxing to carry the man, but they risked the anger of the homeowner, and possibly the rebuke of Jesus for their imprudence.


Despite the risk and trouble, they accomplished their intended task to get the man to Jesus. Once they placed him before Jesus, their job was over and we don't hear from them again. These men, however, may have been surprised by what Jesus said. They brought the man there so he might be able to walk again. Then, he would be able to work and take care of his family. But these things weren't paramount from Jesus's perspective. In our study today we will consider Christians' duty to love their neighbors.

Session Summary

The people of God are called to do good works. These good works are toward both God and man. We do the good works of prayer, Scripture reading, singing praises, and other acts of worship in obedience to God. We also heal the sick, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and visit the afflicted in obedience to God.

1. A Biblical Example (Luke 5:17-20)


In the Gospel of Luke, we find an excellent example of both physical and spiritual need. Followers of Christ are called to pray and labor to meet them both.

 What role did the paralytic in this account play in getting himself to Jesus?

It was impossible for this man to come to Jesus without the help of others. That's part of what makes the men's actions so intriguing. The paralytic didn't ask these men to simply lend a hand. He needed much more than a hand; he was completely helpless. In Luke 15, we find a parable with a similar image: a shepherd, upon finding a lost sheep, carries it home across his shoulders. Like the shepherd, these men took on the full burden for their friend.

What these men did for the paralytic reflects the gospel, what God has done for Christians. Colossians 2:13 says, "And when you were dead in trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made you alive with him and forgave us all our trespasses." The essence of the gospel is taking on a burden in order to do good for someone. The gospel is sacrifice.

This is a lesson for believers today. If we desire to live lives that reflect the gospel, we will look for ways to be the hands and feet of Jesus to those around them. We will carry out selfless acts of service for the good of another and patiently bear the detriment it causes them. This is possible when we are transformed people who have had our unbearable burdens carried away by another and they we experience undeserved goodness and have full assurance of unspeakable good in the life to come.

 How did the men finally get the paralytic to Jesus? What does this teach us?

We spend a lot of time and resources mitigating risk. That's not necessarily a bad thing because there is wisdom in carefully planning to avoid scenarios in which we find ourselves unnecessarily victimized or liable. However, living a gospel-saturated life means loving Jesus and neighbor enough to expose ourselves, our resources, our property, and our preferences to risk. These men literally tore the roof of a house! Who was going to pay for that?

We don't know more about these men because this account isn't about them. Their job was to point to Jesus and take whatever steps within their ability to get the paralytic to Him. We often talk about the work of Paul and other famous Christians throughout the history of the church, but we should remember that the gospel message went from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth on the lips of countless nameless Christians, whose motivation was gratefulness, whose audience was heaven, and whose treasure was laid up where rust and moth can't destroy (see Matthew 6:20).

The lesson we take from the anonymity of the paralytic's friends is that followers of Jesus ought to serve their King without seeking personal recognition and glory. Good deeds done for the approval and notice of men don't please our King and don't reflect the gospel.

- Application: Do you seek to obey the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself? What are some specific ways you do that?

2. Good Works Prepared (Ephesians 2:10)

God prepared ahead of time good works for His people to do, serving each other as evidence of His grace. Not only has He given you new life, but He also helps you walk in good works throughout this life and into eternity. You cannot do anything to earn salvation. Yet God means for you to produce good works through service.

There can be dangers associated with the good works God has prepared beforehand for those that He would save. First, good works become dangerous when they are carried out with the idea and hope that the doer will be in some way justified before God by them. These good works stem from an ignorance of the gospel, fear of judgment, and a high view of man. The Bible is clear that works cannot justify a person before God. They do serve as proofs of salvation, evidence of a justified and cleansed soul, but the works themselves are incapable of rescuing a sinner.

- Why do you think we are tempted to believe we can earn from God through our good works? How have you experienced this personally?
- How does it change your perspective to know these works were prepared by God before you even placed your faith in Christ?


God's Workmanship

"Workmanship" (*poiema*) is not just a result of effort or labor. It is a result of artistic skill and craftsmanship. If we could earn salvation by our own good works, we would not be a work of God but a work of our own selves. That cannot be and will not be.

Another danger also relates to a misunderstanding of the gospel. Some people who experience the grace and kindness of God fail to understand that true saving faith and repentance results in good works. This is what James was getting at when he said, “Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27). In fact, if good works fail to manifest in the life of a person who professes Christ, then it is fair to question whether a true conversion has taken place.

As much as we may think we have the option of doing nothing when it comes to service, especially service in the church, that is simply not an option Scripture gives us. One goal of salvation for us is the fruit of Christlike character and of good deeds. In other words, God made us to do something, and that something is serve Him and His church with the spiritual gifts He has given us.

What matters most about us is not what the world tells us, how people around us see us, or even how we see ourselves. Our identity is determined by what God says about us. While apart from Christ we were dead and hopeless (see Ephesians 2:1-3), in Christ we are alive, and we will never be dead again. When we begin believing what God says about us, we can find the freedom to walk in the good works He has planned for us.

 Application: In what sense is every believer in Christ a “minister”? If every believer is a “minister,” what would you say is your ministry? If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, what value do you find in serving others?


3. The Purpose of Good Works (James 2:14-17)

This passage from James has been the topic of debate for centuries as Christians have wrestled with its implications and how to rightly understand what James intended. Was he trying to say our faith requires good works? Did he contradict the gospel of grace? Or justification by faith alone? Did he disagree with Paul? All these questions and more often arise when studying this chapter. However, in only emphasizing the perceived contradictions, we miss the heart of James’s message.

 What was at the heart of James’s hypothetical questions posed in 2:14-16? Why might he ask this of his readers?

James asked a few hypothetical questions and presented a hypothetical scenario to the readers. The questions essentially ask how useful or beneficial our faith can be if it does not affect our actions. In other words, what is the point of faith if it doesn't move us to act, respond, and live out what we say we believe?


The word *faith* has the sense of trust in and commitment to Christ for salvation. The openness to receive God's grace brings redemption, and the redeemed live out that grace. *Works* refers to good deeds—actions on others' behalf that demonstrate Christ's love (see v. 8). James's question called for an obvious answer: an inactive faith accomplishes nothing.

 How does James's example point to Jesus's teaching in the Gospels? What are some examples of how Jesus demonstrated and taught about this kind of faith?

Jesus spent much of His ministry reaching out to, caring for, feeding, and healing those most in need. He indicted the religious elite of His day for neglecting to live out the law they knew inside and out (see Matthew 23:1-36). Jesus demonstrated—both in His words and His ways—what it meant for faith to work through love. He reminded His followers to demonstrate to others the love that had been shown to them (see Matthew 5:40-42; Luke 3:10-11; John 13:34-35).

James drew the parallel between words without actions and faith that produces no good works. Apart from works, such faith is dead in and of itself—inwardly lifeless and outwardly unproductive. Mere words, no matter how kind or well-meaning, are not substitutes for helpful actions. Destitute people need more than good wishes; they need practical provisions.

James knew the heart of his Savior and wanted his fellow believers to know this as well. He wanted them to possess a living and active faith. The faith they proclaimed had implications for real life scenarios like the one he posed in these verses. In this case, the scenario painted in 2:15-16 demonstrated what it looks like when faith is not working through love (Galatians 5:6).

 Application: In light of this passage, what responsibility do Christians have to respond to social issues in the world?

Conclusion

God has prepared good works to do for all His redeemed ones. Good works are an opportunity for Christians to adorn the gospel and glorify God.

- ❓ How can you sacrifice yourself for the good of others? What are some specific ways you can give of yourself to bless others today?
- ❓ What should be our priority in serving those around us? Why are both spiritual and temporal needs important?
- ❓ How might the good works of the church give opportunity for gospel conversations with others?

Prayer of Response

Ask the Lord to give you a true and deep love for Him and a godly affection for your neighbors, especially those who are of the household of faith. Ask Him to help you meet both the physical and spiritual needs of those around you.

Additional Resources

- *Crazy Love* by Francis Chan
- *Radical* by David Platt
- *Out Live Your Life* by Max Lucado

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



DxD This Week

Call To Action:

Begin to pray for God to make you more alert of needs in your area. Take steps to actively help those who are living in poverty.

Group Emphasis or Project:

As a group serve with a ministry partner whose initiatives are meeting social and humanitarian needs. For example, a local food pantry, a ministry to refugees, or a ministry for vulnerable children. (We have a lot of these, so ask missions to give you of list of them)

For Next Week

Memorize

In the same way faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself.

- James 2:17

Historical Context of James

Purpose

As a general epistle, James was addressed to a broad audience (Jewish Christians) rather than a specific audience (e.g., Christians at Ephesus only). There is an obvious concern to address internal and external difficulties being faced by Jewish Christian congregations. Externally they were facing trials (1:2), particularly oppression of various sorts exerted by wealthy landowners. It does not appear that the oppression was religious in nature. Internally it appears that dissension was caused by a lack of self-control (1:13–17), uncontrolled speech, and false teachings that led to a misunderstanding of true religion (1:19–27; 2:1–4; 3:1–8), favoritism toward the wealthy (2:1–13), and selfish ambition that led to murder and criticism (4:1–12).

Author

James is named as the author in 1:1. A number of New Testament personalities were named James, but only three are candidates for the authorship of this book. James the son of Zebedee died in AD 44, too early to have been the author. No tradition names James the son of Alphaeus (Mk 3:18) as the author. This leaves James the brother of Jesus, also called James the Just (Mk 6:3; Ac 1:14; 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1Co 15:7; Gl 2:9, 12), as the most likely candidate.

This James is identified as the brother of Jesus in Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3; and Galatians 1:19. Though he was not a follower of Christ during his earthly ministry (Jn 7:3–5), a post-resurrection appearance convinced James that Jesus is indeed the Christ (Ac 1:14; 1Co 15:7). James later led the Jerusalem church (Gl 2:9, 12), exercising great influence there (Ac 1:14; 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1Co 15:7; Gl 2:9, 12).

Setting

James was probably written between AD 48 and 52, though nothing in the epistle suggests a more precise date. James's death in AD 62 or 66 means the epistle was written before this time. Similarities to Gospel traditions and Pauline themes are suggestive. If Mark was written around AD 65 and time is allowed for the events of Acts 15 and 21 to have occurred between Paul's first and second missionary journeys, a date between AD 48 and 52 seems most likely.

Special Features

The book of James is a wonderful companion piece to the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the four Gospels. James has a strong ethical emphasis that is consistent with the moral teachings Jesus gave to his disciples. James also mirrors the sometimes harsh denunciations that Jesus spoke against religious hypocrisy. Like Jesus's teachings, the book of James is both a source of exhortation and comfort, reproof and encouragement. Finally, James is known for being extremely practical, yet it contains some of the most profound theological truths of the New Testament.

Extended Commentary

Luke 5:17-20

5:17–20 The Pharisees were the legalistic Jewish religious party. The teachers of the law of Moses were also known as “the scribes.” They functioned essentially as lawyers who worked closely with the Pharisees. These leaders had heard about Jesus’s preaching and power to heal, and they decided that he needed to be observed carefully. The persistence of the paralyzed man’s friends to get him into the presence of Jesus reflects strong faith. But Jesus focused on the man’s greatest need—forgiveness of sins through faith in God’s Son.¹

Ephesians 2:10

The work of salvation is a display of divine handiwork. Good works are the fruit of our salvation, not the cause of it. Also, good works are not incidental to God’s plan; they are instead an essential part of his redemption plan for each believer. Good works are demonstrated in gratitude, character, and actions.²

James 2:14-17

2:14. Two rhetorical questions here expect negative answers. Three features of the questions are important. First, they accept the reader’s claim to faith, but do not assume that the claim without works represents saving faith. The absence of deeds of obedience in this person’s life makes the claim highly suspicious, if not outright wrong!

Second, the topic is not faith in general but a specific kind of faith, one which has no deeds. Such in the NIV text implies this focus. The question is not, “Can faith save the lost?” Of course, faith saves the lost. The question is, “Can a faith without deeds save the lost?” The answer to that question is “no.”

A verbal testimony alone is not an adequate evidence that true saving faith is present. Only works of obedience can prove the presence of genuine faith. Verse 15 provides an example of such deeds.

Third, save refers to acquittal at the final judgment. The question is, “What type of faith can guarantee a favorable verdict in the final judgment?” Only a faith that produces works can provide security in the final judgment.

Prospective drivers of automobiles and trucks must pass a written test on road rules and a skill test on the road. Lawyers must pass the bar examination, and accountants must pass the CPA exam. Students in all institutions must show their knowledge on examinations. It is only reasonable to realize that our profession of Christianity demands a test. That test is the production of works. Without works to demonstrate faith our claim becomes false, and we show our deception.

2:15–16. These verses offer a parable in miniature, illustrating the person who has the type of faith that cannot save. Verse 15 pictures people who needed clothes and food. Cold and hungry, these believers desperately needed the necessities of life!

Verse 16 shows how the person who claims to have faith approaches these needy people: with an offer of good wishes but no practical help. Go, I wish you well offers a good-bye to the needy person. Apparently, the speaker could have helped, but he chose to do nothing except offer kind expressions. Both John the Baptist (Luke 3:7–14) and Jesus (Matt. 7:15–27) condemned professions of piety without action.

Sympathy is valuable when this is all a person can give to the suffering. This speaker, however, had the ability to feed the hungry and clothe the needy. First John 3:18 gives us the proper response, “let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” James concluded his illustration by wondering aloud, “What good is a faith which can only give pious wishes but no practical help?”

2:17. Verse 17 concludes the matter. Good wishes consisting of mere talk are empty of all reality and lifeless. Offering only good wishes to the cold and the hungry serves to depress further those who are starving and chilled. They need more than good wishes. They need practical help.

A faith not accompanied by action, that is faith alone, having no works to distinguish it, is dead. Anything with life produces fruit. The living are the acting, creating things that reveal their nature and character. Faith in Jesus produces actions revealing the nature and character of Jesus. The dead lie still doing nothing. So faith that lies still, inactive, proves it is dead. True faith brings salvation and life, not death.

Christians should show works of love to prove their faith is real. When Paul warned that a person could not be saved by “works,” he referred to the works of obedience to the Jewish law (Rom. 3:20). When James called for deeds, he was not suggesting that these deeds resulted in salvation. He was calling for Christians to do what living faith naturally does: show care and concern for those in need. Acts 6:1–4; 9:36–43; 20:34–35; Romans 15:25–27; 1 Timothy 5:1–16; and many other Scriptures show Christians and churches in action meeting needs. This type of loving, caring interest in others made early Christians distinctive. Likewise, today people who show loving, caring interest in others stand out as visible representatives of Jesus Christ.³

References

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2. *CSB Study Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
3. Thomas D. Lea, *Hebrews, James*, vol. 10, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 285–287.

Author Bio

Thomas Lea (Hebrews, James)

Thomas D. Lea (Th.D. Southwestern Seminary) is the author of numerous articles and the coauthor of commentaries on 1 Corinthians and 1-2 Peter, and Jude.

Francis Chan (Crazy Love)

Francis Chan is the best-selling author of *Crazy Love*, *Forgotten God*, *Erasing Hell*, *You and Me Forever* and the host of the *BASIC*.series (*Who Is God & We Are Church*). Currently, Francis is planting churches in the San Francisco area and recently launched a countrywide discipleship movement called *Multiply with David Platt*.

David Platt (Radical)

David Platt is the author of three New York Times bestsellers, including *Radical*. He is lead pastor at McLean Bible Church in metro Washington, D.C., the former president of the IMB (International Mission Board), and founder of Radical Inc., a global center for the unreached that serves churches in accomplishing the mission of Christ. Platt received his master of divinity (M.Div.), master of theology (Th.M.), and doctor of philosophy (Ph.D) from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He lives in Virginia with his wife and their children.

Max Lucado (Out Live Your Life)

Since entering the ministry in 1978, Max Lucado has served churches in Miami, Florida; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and San Antonio, Texas. He currently serves as Teaching Minister of Oak Hills Church in San Antonio. He is America's bestselling inspirational author with more than 140 million books in print.