

If a Brother or Sister Be Naked
James 2:15-16

James 2:15-16 reads, “If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?”

As we have previously noted, within the immediate context of **James 2:14-26, verses 15-16** provide an argument of illustration in order to support the primary concept that a claim to a walk of faith that is not accompanied with works of obedience is a “faith-claim” of no spiritual profit. Indeed, the point of the illustration is simply that words without works are cheap and spiritually unprofitable. However, James did not choose this illustration at random. Rather, God the Holy Spirit inspired him to present an illustration that would carry the force of reality, and thereby would be more likely to grab attention. As outrageous as it may seem, it should be recognized that the events of this illustration could truly have occurred within churches of that time. Furthermore, as outrageous as it may seem, it should be recognized that the events of this illustration could still occur within churches of our time. So then, let us consider the rebuke of this illustration as a unit in itself.

In **James 2:15-16** we again encounter the case of the poor and needy. Already in **James 1:27** the exhortation has been given concerning pure religion, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” Already also in **James 2:1-13** believers have been confronted with the sin of showing disrespect against the poor in favor of the rich. In fact, showing such respect of persons against the poor in favor of the rich is presented as being in direct contradiction to the law of godly love; for **James 2:8-9** declares, “If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: but if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.” Even so, in the illustration of **James 2:15-16** believers are again confronted for their mistreatment of the poor and needy.

I. The Recognition of a Need

James 2:15 opens the case with the recognition of a need, saying, “If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food.” Herein we observe the entrance into the congregation of the church of a fellow believer who is obviously poor and needy. The phrase in **verse 16**, “notwithstanding ye,” wherein the plural pronoun “ye” is employed, clearly indicates that this event occurred within the congregation as a whole, and that the congregation as a whole took notice of their needy condition. Furthermore, these poor and needy individuals are presented as “a brother or sister,” not as total strangers, but as those who are known to be fellow believers in Christ. Thus their need could be recognized as a genuine need, and not as a possible deception. These individuals were fellow members in the same family of God and fellow members in the same fellowship of believers. They were known and their need was known. Now, although they are presented as separate individuals in the phrase, “a brother or sister,” the opening phrase of **verse 16**, “and one of you say unto them,” wherein the plural pronoun “them” is employed, appears to join them together as a couple. It is possible that

this indicates a fellow believer and his wife, or a fellow believer and his sister. It is also possible that this brother simply represents the class of all needy brothers in Christ and that this sister simply represents the class of all needy sisters in Christ. Finally, we observe the need of these fellow believers. They were “naked, and destitute of daily food.” They were clearly lacking in sufficient clothing and in sufficient food. They were clearly lacking in the “things which are needful for the body,” in the basic needs for daily survival. They may not have been “stark naked,” but they certainly did not possess adequate and sufficient clothing. They may not have been dying of starvation, but they certainly did not possess the daily supply of food that is required for healthy living. At the very moment wherein they entered the congregation their need was observable. At that very moment, it was obvious that they were cold and hungry. Yea, it was obvious that they had a definite and desperate need for material help. Indeed, they had a need for immediate and substantial assistance.

II. The Responsibility to Help

Having entered into the congregation of fellow believers, of fellow members in the same family of God, this needy brother and sister likely had an expectation that their fellow brethren would provide them with help in their time of need. Indeed, it is our Biblical responsibility of godly love before the Lord our God to help those who are in such a need. In **1 John 3:16-18** the instruction and confrontation is given, “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.” Again in **Galatians 6:10** the instruction is given, “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” Yet again in **1 Timothy 6:17-19** the exhortation is given, “Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.”

Furthermore, in **Proverbs 14:20** the truth is revealed, “He that despiseth his neighbour sinneth: but he that hath mercy on the poor, happy is he.” Again in **Proverbs 14:31** the truth is revealed, “He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth his Maker: but he that honoureth him [that is – he that honoureth his Creator God] hath mercy on the poor.” Again in **Proverbs 19:17** the truth is revealed, “He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD; and that which he hath given will he pay him again.” Again in **Proverbs 22:9** the truth is revealed, “He that hath a bountiful eye shall be blessed; for he giveth of his bread to the poor.” Again in **Proverbs 28:27** the truth is revealed, “He that giveth unto the poor shall not lack: but he that hideth his eyes shall have many a curse.” Again in **Proverbs 29:7** the truth is revealed, “The righteous considereth the cause of the poor: but the wicked regardeth not to know it.” Again in **Proverbs 31:20**, concerning the virtuous woman, the truth is revealed, “She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.” Finally, in **Psalms 41:1** the truth is revealed, “Blessed is he that considereth the poor: the LORD will deliver him in time of trouble.”

III. The Rhetoric of Compassion

So then, in the illustration of **James 2:15-16**, what was the response unto the poor and needy brother and sister in Christ? That response began with the words, the rhetoric, of compassion. A member in good standing with the congregation steps forward as the spokesman for the entire congregation, saying, "Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled." At that time the phrase, "Depart in peace, was a common Jewish farewell and a common Biblical blessing. It was intended to express kindness and friendliness toward another, and to pray that the Lord God might favor that other with peace and blessing. In addition the phrase, "Be ye warmed and filled," served as a form of prayer that the Lord might provide specifically for their needs of clothing and food. Certainly, such words of compassion that the needs of this poor brother and sister in Christ might be met are of value as an expression of care and concern for their needy condition. Certainly, such words of compassion, care, and concern would have been of value to encourage and refresh the heart of the poor, if such was all that the speaker had the ability to provide.

IV. The Unrighteousness of Failure

However, although the response of the congregation to their poor and needy brethren begins well with the words of compassion, it then proceeds to the unrighteousness of failure. Even so, **James 2:16** continues, "Notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body." Herein the use of the plural pronoun "ye" indicates that the entire congregation is included in this rebuke. Although all of the members in the congregation clearly observed the need, not a single member of the congregation actually gave anything at all to meet that need. Yet it appears by the rebuke that some members of the congregation did have some ability to meet the need. Indeed, words of compassion have been spoken; but the works of compassion were completely lacking. As such, the words of compassion were revealed to be words of hypocrisy; for they were not truly rooted in a compassionate heart that helped through a compassionate hand. The needs of the poor and needy brethren were not met, but were ignored. The things which were needful for the body were not given. Instead of the food and clothing that they needed, the poor and needy brethren only received empty, worthless words of "well-wishing." While the words of compassion appeared at first to be an expression of care and concern, it is now revealed that they were simply an expression of callousness and cruelty. Those words, without any works of loving help, became nothing more than mockery against the desperate condition of the poor and needy brethren. No real help was provided, and thus no real love or compassion was demonstrated.

So then, what does this profit for righteousness' sake? It does not profit for righteousness' sake at all. Rather, it is the behavior of unrighteousness. Indeed, it is the behavior of hard-hearted selfishness, wherein the convenience and comfort of the members in the congregation were more important than the needs of the poor brethren. It is the behavior of wicked hypocrisy, wherein cheap words are substituted for genuine care, and wherein the welfare of others can be completely disregarded while a façade of concern is maintained. Indeed, far too often we believers offer mere words of compassion, when the Lord our God has called us into the situation in order to provide works of helpfulness. Yea, far too often we

communicate words of concern, such as, “I will pray for you,” when we have no sincerity of concern at all and do not actually intend to engage in prayer for the other. My brethren, these things ought not so to be; for it is sinful unrighteousness before the Lord our God when we withhold help from fellow believers unto whom it is in the power of our hand to give it. Even so, **Proverbs 21:13** proclaims the warning, “Whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself, but shall not be heard.” Rather, let us open our open our hand wide unto our brethren who are poor and needy. (See Deuteronomy 15:11)