

James 2:14-19 'Faith And Deeds: Part 1'

Last week in James we looked at verses 6-13 of chapter 2, in a sermon I called 'Being Impressed By Wealth And Position.' James continues to address the sin of showing partiality towards people simply due to their appearance or the way that they're dressed! V6: "You have dishonoured the poor." Yes, they had robbed them of their honour, the little honour that was due to them.

I made the point that dishonour, disrespect is in plague proportions in our nation today at every level of society. Gone are the days when certain behaviours were, and were not tolerated. Disrespect and contempt exists and is condoned (and even encouraged) at every level of society. Towards teachers, police, and even towards ordinary folk just doing their jobs. And most disgracefully, towards those ones who should be worthy of our utmost respect: the older members of our society.

Worst of all was the character of the people the believers were enamoured with. The very ones who were oppressing the church! People such as Paul before he was converted. "Dragging the believers into court" v6, and "blaspheming the noble name" of Jesus v7. I said last week that surely this would never happen among the brethren? To honour those who "blasphemed the name" of Jesus, simply due to their wealth and position? But then I explained that this certainly does happen. Those Rockstar so-called Pastors living in their multimillion dollar mansions, and flying their private jets. While the "blasphemous" ways they run their services is reflected in their disgusting, opulent lifestyles. There is a special place in hell for them all!

I also made the point that each of us needs to be wary of the way we carry the Name of Jesus. "For the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name," the third Commandment says. V8-9: "Love your neighbour as yourself" It is called "the royal law," and showing partiality is the breaking of that law. V10-11: To break one of God's Laws is to break them all, because they are all part of the one whole. And to break any one of them separates us from God! So in verse 12 we are to "speak and act" not as "judges with evil thoughts" v4, but as those "who are going to be judged." Heaven already belongs to us, but our words and our actions will be examined by God!

Finally verse 13: "Mercy triumphs over judgement." So in the same way that God's judgement for sin was "triumphed over" by His mercy towards us at the Cross through Jesus, our merciful thoughts must triumph over our wicked thoughts towards our Brethren. As Jesus said Matthew 57: "Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy."

This week we pick it up in James 2:14-19 'Faith And Deeds. Part1'. Verse 14: "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" Now friends, although James continues with this dialogue as he seeks to get his parishioners to understand what genuine faith looks like, calling it "religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless," "looking after orphans and widows," "and keeping oneself from being polluted by the world" chapter 1:27.

Then in chapter 2:1-13, dealing with that sin of showing partiality or favouritism towards the well dressed and well to do regardless of their character. The theologian R.C.Sproul explains that at this point as we begin v14, we need to ask the questions: What problem is James trying to solve? And what question is he seeking to answer? And Sproul points us toward Matthew 11:1-19, where John the Baptist has been put in prison. And while he awaits his fate, even he falls into doubt and despair! This is not only astounding, but it also gives us tremendous insight. John was the cousin of the Lord

Jesus. He was the one who baptised Him. He was the same one who at that baptism saw heaven being torn apart, and heard the very Voice of God saying: "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." And who also saw the Holy Spirit descend upon and remain on him in the form of a dove." And yet again, even John had his own fears and doubts! So he sends some of his followers to ask Jesus v3, "Are you the one who was to come? Or should we expect someone else?" What is interesting though, is that when they arrive, Jesus doesn't actually answer the question. He instead says in v4 & 5: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor." This of course is the fulfilment of Isaiah 61, the very same text that Jesus preaches from in Luke 4, when He came to the local synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth! After He reads from the scroll He sits down and says, "This scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

But in Matthew 11, as John's disciples begin to leave, Jesus speaks of John, asking the people questions in v7-15. "As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John. 'What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in king's palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." I tell you the truth: among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist. Yet he who is least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear." So John is the real deal, Jesus declares. He is the last of his kind that have pointed to My coming.

Then we read in v16-19a: "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say he has a demon. The Son Of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." Yes, John is described as a demon possessed wowser, and Jesus is a drunkard, a glutton and the friend of sinners. Or in other words, a friend of those kinds of people that no self-respecting Jewish Rabbi would ever be seen with, or associate with.

And then Jesus utters these strange words: "But wisdom is proved right by her actions." And yet what does he mean? Well, that evil generation, (and surely our own generation today) might call John a "demon" possessed wowser. And they might even call the Lord Himself a "drunkard, a glutton and a friend of tax collectors and sinners," who is also born of evil.

But let's examine the evidence. What kind of fruit has been falling from those two trees? Remember, (Jesus may well have said) I have told you, "you will know them by their fruit." So "The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cured, the deaf here, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor." So yes, "Wisdom is proved by her actions." The word that Jesus uses in Greek for "prove hear, is *"edikaiothe"* and it means justified or vindicated. So, "Wisdom is (justified or vindicated) by her actions. The proof of a person, who they truly are at their very core, is vindicated, is revealed, (certainly by what they say to a point) but most clearly in what they do. What fruit do they yield? And this has been James point all along! The problem that he's being addressing and will continue to address: is simply that faith without the evidence of good deeds, actions or works in someone's life is falsehood. And it adds up to nothing.

And the question that he continues to answer is what does genuine faith in God through Jesus look like? What is living faith as opposed to dead faith? How is a person's faith proved, or vindicated? And so he says in v14: "What good is it my brothers", (notice he again calls them my brothers as he seeks to soften the blows that he is about to strike) "What good is it my brothers if a man claims, (yes claims) to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him?" Will his faith be proved? Will such a faith vindicate him come judgement day? Friends let's remember that in v8 he uses the "royal law," "Love your neighbour as yourself," and the keeping of the same as a good indication of genuine faith.

But now in v15-16, he again gives us an example of hypocrisy, or false faith. "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes or daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go in peace, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" And interestingly, the word that James actually uses in both verse 14 and 16, for "what good is it," is "*ofelos*," and it literally means "to profit." What will so called faith profit that person who professes that faith? And indeed, what will it "profit" the person who is in need? Absolutely nothing and no one, on both counts!

I can just hear this kind of thing playing out in my head. Can you? Maybe it would go something like this. 'Hi Joe, how are you going?' 'Well to be honest Jim, things are really difficult right now. The cupboards are empty, I've got no money coming in since the accident, so I don't really know where our next meal is coming from. And all of our clothes are basically threadbare.' 'Oh that's really tough mate,' says Jim to his friend. 'I tell you what I'm going to do. I'll keep praying that God sends someone to help you out with food and clothes. Hang in there. I'm sure God will provide. Give my regards to the wife and kids. See you later Joe.' It doesn't add up, does it? That person's faith isn't "proved," it isn't vindicated. No, "Wisdom is not proved right" in that person's life! As Thomas Manton explains: 'The poor will not thank you for your good wishes. Neither will God for only saying you have faith.'

Now please don't get me wrong, we can and we must pray for those in need. But we must also do! Matthew 16:27: "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done." If we don't have the means ourselves, we can phone around. We can pass the hat around, so to speak. We can make a trip to the Op shop on their behalf. And of course the church has funds for those in need!

And look at how powerfully James qualifies v16. v17: "In the same way, faith by itself if it is not accompanied by action is dead." Notice that he doesn't say that it is new faith, or immature faith, or lukewarm faith. No, he says it's "dead." The Greek word is "*nekra*," it literally means to be devoid of life. In v20, he calls "faith without deeds useless." It's the word *argere*, meaning barren, empty. In v24, he says a person is "justified by what he does and not by faith alone." And then in v26, he again gives us his conclusion: "so faith without deeds is dead," each lifeless! Yes "dead," "barren," and "dead" is the faith that is not accompanied by a deeds or actions. But the problem that we have here is that throughout many of Paul's letters he affirms, that it has nothing to do with deeds or actions. It's all of God's Grace. His free gift to us of His Son.

For example, Ephesians 2:4-5: "But because of his great love to us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions, it is by grace you have been saved." And in v8-9: "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast." Yes, over and over in many ways Paul declares that true faith comes from God, and it comes to us only through God's Grace by Jesus! So we receive faith, it is given to us. We do not earn it in any way. And by faith here, Paul means trust in

Christ alone for forgiveness of sin, reconciliation to God and heaven's glories, coming to us, not by deeds or actions. But all by Grace. God's free gift to us! Indeed the word Grace, occurs in the New Testament 113 times in the NIV concordance alone.

So how do we reconcile the theology or the teaching of Paul, with that of James before us? When they seem to be, (only seem to be mind you) but yes when they seem to be saying two different things? Well, in Ephesians 2:10, Paul gives us a clue: "But we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." So true Christian faith then goes hand in hand with a transformed life. And that transformation is evidenced in the way that we live! As James explains, it's no longer for self and self-interest!

Verse 18: "But someone will say: you have faith; I have deeds." This is James presenting to us his hypothetical situation. And where he says "faith" here, Blanchard explains he means scriptural or doctrinal truth and assurance, as opposed to actions. *'You've got biblical assurance'*, someone might say, *'well that's all well and good. But I have my assurance in what I do. That's my Christianity.'* *Yes you're concerned with scriptural truth and authority, but I'm living out my faith!*

Now James' point is not to suggest that good works or actions are the evidence of true saving faith. No. But the absence of such things, are the evidence of the absence of faith. There is an eternity of difference. He is saying that if his faith, (his doctrinal positions) were called into question, the evidence of his transformed life would still bear testimony to the validity of his profession! Friends there are indeed those who claim that their deeds (meaning their works or their actions apart from Jesus) are indeed evidence of their faith in God. So what they do will hold them in good stead when they stand before Him on the day of judgement. And it does sound very similar to what James is actually saying. What we do is evidence of who we are. And for the believer, (the true believer) that is James' argument. The problem of course that these others have, is that they have not begun from the right place!

In the Christian classic the Pilgrim's Progress, true pilgrims must begin by entering through 'Yon wicket gate.' And they had to stay on the path, having received a particular scroll, that was proof of their authenticity as pilgrims, travelling to the celestial city to see the King! And if they deviated to the right or to the left from the road, they encountered grave dangers. And they would have to then go back to that point where they left the narrow path. They couldn't just scramble over the fence near the end of the journey, no. You had to travel the whole way up on the correct path. Otherwise the King will say Matthew 7:23: "I never knew you, away from me you evil doers!" You see, those that say that the things that they do are going to justify them before God, apart from Jesus, haven't come through 'Yon wicket gate,' The Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

John 14:6: "I am the way and the truth and the life no one comes to the Father except by me." If we don't begin with Christ, no matter what we do, we will end up in the wrong place! In the second part of v18, James is basically asking the question: in what other way can we demonstrate our doctrinal assurity, if it is not through what we do? The great reformer Martin Luther didn't even accept the book of James for many years, and for good reason. Luther had been rescued out of Roman Catholicism, which is all about what you do, and only about what you do. It has nothing to do with Jesus. And that left him in darkness and despair! But he would later go on to make the statement that we are justified, (meaning proved or vindicated) by faith alone. But not by faith that is alone!

The commentator tells the following story. Two men are being rowed across a river having this very argument, about which is most important: Faith, so Biblical assurance, or works, meaning actions? Is it about faith, or is it about actions? Upon hearing the conversation the man doing the rowing says,

“Gentlemen, if I may? Let's call one of the oars faith and the other deeds. We will pull the deeds oar up out of the water and see how we fare.” And so he did, and of course they went around in circles using the faith oar only! Then they put the deeds oar in the water and pulled the faith oar out. And of course the very same thing happened. That it was only when both faith and deeds were working in unison and harmony, did they make any forward progress towards their destination. And so it is within the Christian life. True faith and Christianity (meaning understanding and actions) is “proved” or vindicated, is evidenced, within the fruit that a person’s life produces. Again, as Jesus said, “By their fruit you will recognise them.” Yes “Faith without action is dead.”

And we read of just such an evidence in a person’s life in Luke 7:36-39: “Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is, that she is a sinner.” Yes, this woman personified everything that James is talking about. “Faith without action is dead.” By her action, she “proved” her faith of a transformed heart!

Now as we seek to bring this section to a close, (which really is the theme of the whole letter) we need to remember that James is challenging those people who are claiming to be Christian, while there was the absence of that vindicating evidence. Their boats were all going around in circles! In v19 James makes the statement of how empty is a mere profession of faith which is not “proved.” “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that and shudder.” And we will see the two examples that he uses of this genuine faith in both Abraham and Rahab the prostitute. But that's for next time.

So how do we draw these things to a conclusion today? Well, very simply really. If we would be like our Master, and like His servant John the Baptist “who prepared the way before Him,” our faith must be attested to by our life. As I’ve said before, if we were taken to court having been accused of being Christian, would there be enough evidence for us to be convicted? Can we truly say with Paul: “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain?”

Let’s pray!