

Text: James 2:14-26

Sunday 2nd February 2020

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

This past week I was away in Perth for two nights at the Church of Scotland First Five Years' Conference – and yes, we did get snow as well. The conference is open to any minister who is in their first five years and it gives us newbies time to be together for support and to get some input on the dynamics of modern day ministry. Of course, whilst we're there we try our best to set the world aright, especially within the Church and maybe because I've been talking about the life of our denomination a lot this week, here's a question I invite you to **discuss with your neighbour**: what one thing would you blame for the current predicament of our national church?

Now this isn't a question we discussed at the conference, but it does do the rounds: what one thing would you blame for the current predicament of our national church?

So, if you're willing, turn to your neighbour for one minute and have a quick discussion.

(PAUSE)

The reality is that in all likelihood, every answer we've aired has played its part, and many more could be added to the list.

In our passage today, the second half of James chapter 2 doesn't offer us a silver bullet to our situation or an exact diagnosis of where it all went wrong. But I do think it poses us some questions and as we wrestle with them...

there are likely many points of application we could derive from the passage, yet they all centre around one key issue, which James drives home with four illustrations, **and it is this**: ‘faith without deeds is dead.’

This idea is repeated **four times by James**:

- ‘faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead’ (v17)
- ‘faith without deeds is useless’ (v20)
- ‘a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone’ (v24)
- ‘faith without deeds is dead’ (v26)

Yes, there is nuance a little there in the middle verses, but the point James is trying to get across remains the same: ‘faith without deeds is dead.’

He has one key issue and he has been building towards this from the outset of the letter, building his case that true faith is proven by the lives we live, and to make sure his readers are really clear on this, he now gives them four further illustrations.

Illustration 1 – in verses 14 to 17 here, James outlines a scenario wherein a fellow Christian is in need, due to lack of food or clothing. James probably begins with this illustration because he's been speaking about the poor in the earlier part of the chapter. In the scenario, James imagines someone within the Christian community replying to such a poor and **needy soul in this way**: “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs...” (James 2:16)

It would be like us saying, ‘off you go, try not to worry. Keep warm; eat plenty’. It’s an empty saying. In this situation, James asks: ‘...what good is it?’

Now, James’ point is not simply about ‘what good is it’ to the poor people, for obviously their needs are left wanting; to them there is no good, no benefit. But James is primarily highlighting the benefit of such faith to the individual spurning the poor believer, for James wrote:

‘What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?... faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.’ (James 2:14, 17)

And here is the predicament that James want his readers (and us) to grasp: if we claim to have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, if we claim to be a Christian, but then have no specific action, no distinctive lifestyle flowing from such faith, well then, that faith is dead, it is of no good, for it does not save you.

James probably still has the earlier thought from verses 12 to 13 in mind, of God's judgment, which we explored last week. **We saw last week that apart from the forgiveness and mercy available to us at the Cross of Jesus there is no escape from judgment; it's only when we ask God in faith to forgive us, because of the death of Jesus on the Cross, it's only then, that we come into right standing with God, forgiven of sin, the slate wiped clean. It's only then that we are saved.**

But if we claim to have such faith and claim to have such a status before God through Jesus, then as we saw last week, it should leave its mark, our lives should display His mercy and love. Conversely, a faith which appears to make no impact on your life, may be no faith at all. You may claim to have faith, you may be able to confess true and right doctrine, you may be a church member – but if your faith shows no mercy, if it bears no fruit, then James says it is no good, you are potentially not saved, you remain under the judgment of God, for in all likelihood your claim to faith is as empty as saying to a poor man, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed.’

So, let me ask you this friends: do you claim to have faith? Do you claim to have faith? And if you do, what can you point to in your life where your faith makes a difference in your life and in the life of others? For example,...

let's take James' reference to the poor and not just gloss over that. Where is your faith costing you more than nice sentiment to the poor? It's easy to become jaded to such needs; it's easy to come up with excuses. Living in a manse that is right behind the church helps people know where your house is, and they then come asking for money and food and help with the electricity. So, every now and again, the questions arise: does my faith make a difference here? Or is it, merely words?

James reminds us, that a claim to faith which has no impact on your life, which stirs little mercy or compassion, that is dead faith, it is of no good, your faith is just empty words, and empty words do not save. So, what does your life reveal? Is your faith alive or dead?

James now moves on to his next illustration. In verses 18 to 20, he introduces an imaginary interrupter; someone's got a question and they are jumping in. These verses have proved complex for interpreters and commentators to engage with because in the original Greek there is no punctuation and so we have to wrestle with the text to know where to put in English punctuation so that the text stays true to the flow of the argument but is also clear. I think the NIV does a good job here and its structure, shared by other translations, has led to several commentators pointing out that the interrupter here is probably not hostile towards James, but rather is simply seeking clarification about James' argument.

We can well imagine someone saying, 'You have faith; I have deeds. Both are equally valid methods...

of showing genuine Christianity, don't you think James? We're obviously not in favour of being unmerciful, it's just that, some of us do the deeds of mercy, whilst others of us encourage those that do the acts of mercy. Surely both are equally valid James?'

To such an interrupter, to someone who wants to allow space for both, James holds fast, because faith without deeds is useless, it is dead. His first reply is very much like his earlier case: 'Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.' (James 2:18b) – because faith without action is just empty words, it's just a claim, it cannot be demonstrated.

But then James takes it one stage further, for he says:

‘You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder. You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?’ (James 2:19-20)

Maybe James imagines the interrupter affirming that central truth about God, quoting from the Old Testament passage **in Deuteronomy: ‘Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one...’ (Deut. 6:4)**

And James responds with a quip that basically says: well, that’s all well and good, and very accurate, but even the demons believe that, they know that to be a truth. But here’s the thing, my friends, says James: the demons believe it, they know it to be true, and yet they still live in rebellion towards God, for the next verse after what **you’ve quoted is this: ‘...Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your**

strength' (Deut. 6:5) – and that is something a demon will never do, though at least they shudder, for at least they know the future that awaits them.

And so, James responds with: 'You foolish person...' (v20) You're a fool because you're like the demons, you're no more saved than the demons, because your claim of faith is no more than what the demons have – it has not led you to loving the Lord your God with your whole being and so loving your neighbour as yourself. Your faith is useless, it is dead.

Friends, when faith is true, when faith is living, we each can face up to the reality that we are broken people, we are sinners, and as such we each deserve an eternity separate from God. But when faith is true,...

you don't fear that anymore, you don't shudder like the demons, instead you come into a place of forgiveness and peace. You come to know yourself as a child of God, reconciled to your heavenly Father, still aware that you're imperfect, that it was your sin that led Jesus to be crucified, that He faced divine wrath because of us, because of me, because of you. But when you come in to living faith, you come to see the love of God at the cross, that for love He died for you, and so in response you love Him, and in that relationship of love all fear is gone, you don't shudder like the demons.

Friends, is your faith living? Can you face the reality that you are a sinner, deserving of judgment and wrath, but knowing that because of your living faith in Jesus,...

you're forgiven, you're reconciled to God? Do the words of the old song echo true for you:

'Mercy there was great, and grace was free;

Pardon there was multiplied to me;

There my burdened soul found liberty,

At Calvary.'

Does the cross of Calvary stir in you fear or joy? Is your faith living or dead?

It's at this point that James switches tack and speaks of two positive examples to illustrate his point. Why he mentions Abraham is anyone's guess – he is writing to Christians from a Jewish background, maybe that's his reason. It could be that James is aware of how the early church based its argument for salvation by faith alone...

on the passages from Genesis about Abraham. But for whatever reason, James switches tack.

It's at this point also that some have wondered if James contradicts the teaching of the Apostle Paul, for James summarizes his reference to Abraham **with these words: 'You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.' (James 2:24)**

But Paul said, 'For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.' (Romans 3:28)

It was because of such an apparent contradiction that Luther wanted to get rid of the book of James completely. So, which is it? Is there conflict here? Or is something else going on?

Well, what we need to realise is that James and Paul are writing at two different periods of history, James was likely first, and they are writing to deal with different issues. Paul was writing to argue against a false teaching which said deeds of the law in addition to faith lead to salvation; his opponents argued for reliance on something as well as faith to secure salvation, in particular circumcision.

But the scenario for James is quite different – he’s not saying we have to add something to faith to be saved, he’s not even saying that faith by itself is deficient when he says that Abraham’s faith had to be made complete.

All James is arguing for is that true living faith always – it always – results in good deeds, in a radical obedience...

to God. Which is what we **see in Abraham's life**: his willingness to follow God's command, to the letter, by being willing to offer Isaac in sacrifice that showed Abraham's faith to be real, and by his obedience his faith matured, it was made complete, it was given fuller meaning, as it was put to the test of obedience.

And Paul is not against such an understanding of faith, for **he himself wrote**: 'The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.' (Galatians 5:6)

Paul also argued for a changed life, a life that loved God and loved neighbour because of faith in God, of right relationship with God. Paul would affirm everything that James has said, it is simply that James looked at the experience of Abraham and saw there that the willingness of Abraham to express his faith...

through obedience ratified his claim to a living faith. Because living faith should lead to radical obedience, or it is dead.

A similar point is brought home with Rahab – for though she was different in nearly every way from Abraham: him a man, she a woman; he respected, she unscrupulous; Abraham rich, Rahab poor; her a foreigner, him the father of Israel – but in both a living faith that was seen in how they lived, for their faith led to radical obedience.

The aid which Rahab gave to the Israelites would have risked her life, would have risked even her family. But living faith is more than a private transaction of the heart; it is a life of active, costly obedience to God, wherein...

we share, at personal expense, we share in the purposes of God, holding nothing back from Him.

So, where might God be calling us to radical obedience? Where might God be calling us to costly risk-taking as we put our living faith into practice? Where is God calling you to share in His purposes today and not simply give a verbal claim to be a Christian?

The application of this could be as numerous as the people here, but if I may draw upon Rahab's experience, in particular, can I ask: where are you serving the purposes of God?

Maybe this comes to mind for me because every month, if not nearly every week, I hear of the need we have...

for extra volunteers to sustain and develop our many ministries. At present those needing help especially include the Friends of Jesus group, the Sunday School, our uniformed organisations, but I'm pretty sure every group would welcome some new help.

Now this year we as a congregation have responded sacrificially towards the purposes of God with our finances; and I am blown away by how greatly you have increased your giving.

But we need to serve as well, within this congregation, and that might raise some queries in your mind. **Firstly, you might say that you serve elsewhere already, and that's great, but if you want this congregation to have a future, we all need to be involved in some way.**

Secondly, you might say you're too old, but being too old to do does not make you too old to pray. And if we could gather together 10, 20, 40 people who will commit to praying for the ministry of this church, and specifically give me their name so that I can give you updates and specific prayer needs, then you'd be putting your faith into practice and you'd be underpinning everything we do here. I have my friend, Dick Anderson, I've mentioned him before, now in his 80's, still sharing his faith, but also praying for me and praying for us here at Brightons. If you're too old to do, will you sign up to pray?

Thirdly, you might say: "I'm too busy, I'm too busy to do anything beyond work, family and coming here on a Sunday." Now some people do have very severe circumstances and if that's you, then this bit isn't for you,

so you can switch off. But for the rest of us, let's remember Rahab, let's remember Abraham – willing to count the cost so as to share in the purposes of God, putting their faith into practice. And that's relevant for us because in our culture today, it seems like everything else comes first and God gets the leftovers – a few minutes here, a few minutes there. But Rahab and Abraham's example, calls us to give of ourselves towards the purposes of God, to radical obedience, because that's what living faith does.

Thinking back to my earlier question, there's really no point in blaming the past; we can of course learn from it, but our focus should be on today. Because if a church, a congregation, could arise where all having a living faith accompanied with radical obedience, then...

that's a body of people who could transform society, changing the lives of the poor, as well as raiding the dominion of darkness for great things would be seen in them and through them.

I wonder, if we are willing to resolve to be a people of living faith that we might then share in the purposes of God today. So, is our faith dead, or is it living?

Let us pray.