

‘WHEN FAITH IS SEEN’ JAMES 2:14-26

[St Mark’s Northbridge, Sunday 6 November, 2022 – All Services]

1. An Unpopular Passage.

Very famously, the great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, referred to the book of James as an ‘epistle of straw’ because, quote, ‘it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it’¹. In particular he felt that James seemed to contradict the teaching of Paul about “justification by faith alone”- a doctrine that was at the heart of the Reformation project². And passages like the one we’ve read today were at the centre of Luther’s concerns.

Over the years many others have expressed similar confusion about the book of James. Why does the book make such little explicit mention of Jesus? Why does the emphasis seem to be on good deeds rather than on grace? And how do we make sense of passages like this one in the context of what the rest of the New Testament teaches?

All this is to say that you won’t find many people who would list James 2:14-26 as one of their favourite Bible passages! Down through the years it’s been plagued by unpopularity. But what I want to suggest to you today/tonight is that this passage might be unpopular for all the wrong reasons. Of course I do want to engage this morning/evening with the theological questions this passage throws up at us. They’re important. But more than that I want to engage with the sharp challenge these verses offer us as individuals and as a church! And it is sharp. This passage presses us into some searching questions. And what I want to suggest as we start today/tonight is that if this passage is going to be unpopular it’d be good if it was unpopular less for reasons of theological complexity and more because of how uncomfortable it makes us feel. After all, that’s what James was primarily interested in when he wrote it. He was interested in the lives his Christian readers were living.

But let’s start by considering what the passage actually says.

2. What The Passage Says.

And I want to take you through the passage by looking at in four main sections. And each section, or part, contains an assertion or two and an illustration.

¹ Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament I*, 362. Quoted here: [The “Epistle of Straw”: Reflections on Luther and the Epistle of James - The Gospel Coalition](#) (Accessed 4 Nov, 2022)

² See: [Did Martin Luther Really Want James Taken Out of... | Zondervan Academic](#) (Accessed 4 Nov, 2022)

- assertions and an illustration (in four parts)

vv.14-17

So the first section is verses 14-17.

[Read 2:14-17]

The assertion here is that it's no good to have faith without deeds. And it's no good because a deedless faith is not a saving faith. It's a dead faith. Clearly James is using the word faith in a particular way. He's referring to what someone might believe intellectually- what their stated convictions are. And he's suggesting that if a so-called Christian has beliefs that don't translate into actions, or if they have convictions that don't affect their life, then that person does not have a living faith at all. They can't actually be considered a Christian. They won't be saved by God.

And the illustration he gives here is of someone who encounters great poverty but who only offers platitudinous words rather than any real practical help. And James says that such words are useless. And his point is that, in the same way, to say you have faith when you don't express that faith in action, is useless. It's just platitudinous words.

vv.18-19

The second section is verses 18-19.

[Read 2:18-19]

Here James interacts with the idea that faith and deeds are the domains of different kinds of people. Someone might say "I'm a faith guy" and someone else might say "I'm a deeds kind of girl". But James rejects this kind of distinction. He says that people of true and living faith are always people whose faith can be seen by the things they do.

And his illustration this time is taken from the demonic world. He reminds us that even the demons have faith- at least in this most basic sense. They believe things. For example, they believe that there is one God. As do many people. But James' point is that that belief doesn't make someone a Christian. You can believe things about God without having any love for God. In fact, as this illustration shows, you can believe things about God and still be totally opposed to God. Monotheism is not the same as Christianity.

vv.20-24

The third section here is verses 20-24.

[Read 2:20-24]

He starts here by saying that it's folly³ to think that faith has value even if it produces nothing.

Then he jumps straight into his next illustration. This time it's the story of Abraham. And in particular he points to that most memorable time in Abraham's life when he expressed his faith by his willingness to offer up his son's life. You can read about it in Genesis 22. Talk about faith in action! James says that in this moment Abraham demonstrates how faith and deeds belong together, and how the deeds that flow from faith actually bring that faith to completion. And James points out that Abraham is declared righteous⁴ by God because of his faith- the faith that his actions demonstrated.

And so, he finishes with an assertion that the Abraham example proves. Verse 24, probably the most controversial verse of the chapter- a person is considered righteous by what they do, and not by faith alone.

v.25

And then we come to the fourth section which is verse 25.

[Read 2:25]

This time the assertion is implicit rather than explicit. It's the same assertion as in verses 20-24- that people are considered righteous on the basis of deeds not just beliefs.

But here James offers us a fourth and final illustration. The illustration of Rahab. You can read her story in the book of Joshua- chapter 2⁵. She risked her own safety to give shelter to the Israelite spies and to then help them escape from Jericho before they were caught. And in this way she put her trust in the God of Israel, and she, like Abraham, was justified because of the way her actions showed the genuineness of her faith.

- the final word (v.26)

Really, the assertions of these verses all amount to a single conviction. True faith is faith that can be seen. Everything else that might go by the name faith is not the real deal. True faith is faith that can be seen. But James makes the case with these four illustrations- the person who talks about love but doesn't do anything to love, the demons who believe things about God but who are actually opposed to God, and then Abraham and Rahab who both demonstrate what true faith looks like by their deeds. Two negative illustrations- showing what true faith isn't. And then two positive illustrations- showing what true faith is.

³ In the Greek the phrase here is literally 'you hollow man'- conveying the hollowness of the argument.

⁴ The "declaration of righteousness" here is an idea being used synonymously with "salvation" in verse 14.

⁵ See also Hebrews 11:31

But then finally, James finishes the chapter with a concluding sentence. Verse 26. And it's a cross between an assertion and an illustration. It's a simile. As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. No breath, no life. And deeds are the breath that gives life to faith. This is what this chapter is all about.

3. The Theological Challenge: The Relationship of Faith & Works.

So, let me take a few minutes to address the theological challenge these verses pose before I move on to address the more important personal challenge. And the theological challenge is all about the relationship of faith and works. It couldn't be clearer what James is saying here. True faith always issues in good works. True faith can always be seen by the way a person lives. And so, a person is justified, not just by believing some things about God, not by 'faith alone' as verse 24 says, but by what they do- because what they do proves the genuineness of their faith.

But the reason that Luther and many others have found this confusing is because a catch-cry of Reformation theology for the last 400 years has been that justification is by faith alone, and not by works. And that conviction is based on the sort of things the Apostle Paul teaches clearly in his letters. For example- Ephesians 2:8-9⁶.

[Read Ephesians 2:8-9]

So is there a contradiction here? And if not, how can we read these different passages in a way that's coherent? Well, if we start with the assumption that every part of God's word is his faultless truth- and that's always a good assumption to start with- how might we seek to be so clear on what both Paul and James are saying that we see the harmony that exists between them?

Well, I think probably the most important thing for me to point out is that James is using the word 'faith' in two different senses. Sometimes in today's/tonight's passage he's using the word in the same way Paul does- to talk about the living faith that saves a person. This is the case in the second half of verse 18 where James says he can show you his faith by his deeds. And this is also the case in verse 22 when James talks about Abraham's faith. But most of the time in our passage James is using the word faith in a different way, and in a way that's different to Paul's use of the word in Ephesians 2. Most of the time in these verses James uses the word faith to refer to a kind of 'raw belief'- the kind of faith which is nothing more than intellectual assent to certain propositions. He's talking about the faith of the person who "believes in" love but who doesn't help a person in need. He's talking about the faith of a person who believes there's one God but who is actually hostile to God. According to James this is actually not faith at all.

⁶ See also Romans 4:1-3, Romans 3:28, and Galatians 2:15-16.

It's important to grasp here that James is not comparing an ideal faith which is accompanied by deeds with a less than ideal faith where there are no good deeds to be seen. No, James is actually comparing true faith with something that's not true faith at all. He's comparing living faith and a so-called faith that's dead- entirely useless, no good to anyone.

So when James says that a person is not considered righteous by faith alone this is what he means. That saving faith is not just intellectual assent to some propositions. He's saying that true faith, living faith, is proved to be true by the life the person of faith lives.

Whereas when Paul says that a person is considered righteous by faith alone, he means that it's faith in Jesus that saves a person, and not their good works. He would agree with James that true faith always issues in good deeds. The very next verse in Ephesians 2 makes that point exactly- Ephesians 2:10. But his particular concern in Ephesians is to make it clear that salvation is not earnt by doing good. Rather, salvation is earnt by Jesus and the good he did. We simply need to trust him.

John Calvin, one of the other great Reformers, apparently once put it like this. He said: 'Faith alone justifies, but the faith which justifies is never alone'⁷.

So, I think we can conclude that there's no contradiction here. Paul and James are honing in on two different, though related issues. And their conclusions are not incoherent. Paul is insisting that salvation is a gift from God not a reward earnt. In this sense our good deeds are irrelevant. But James is describing what it means to have a living faith, and his point is that when it comes to recognising living faith, good deeds are everything. Paul is answering the question- 'how is a person saved?' James is answering the question- 'what is the nature of true faith?'. And their answers to those questions are both really important. I hope that helps.

4. The Personal Challenge: Three Sharp Questions For People Like Us?

But as I said at the start, the theological challenge these verses pose is less important than the personal challenge that's here for us. If these verses are going to be unpopular, they'd best be unpopular for this. Because of the sharp questions they ask people like us to answer. And I see three in particular.

- Am I really a Christian?

This is the first. Am I really a Christian?

I would argue that this is the sharp question that's really at the heart of the passage. James was writing to Christian communities in which there were people who really did

⁷ I can't find a reliable reference for this but I've often hear it attributed to Calvin.

follow Christ genuinely alongside those who just said they followed him. And this has been the case in most churches right down through history. So there's every chance that this accurately describes our own church too. Within our fellowship are many sincere and fruitful believers. But there may also be some who claim Christian faith and who hold certain propositions to be true, but whose lives are indistinguishable from the lives of unbelievers. These are people who say they are Christians but who don't live the kind of fruitful and good lives that show they are. So, you can see why this is such an important question. This is the difference between being justified before God and being guilty before God. It's the difference between salvation and wrath, heaven and hell.

So how do we know? James says, you can tell whether a person is really a Christian or not by how they live their lives. It's not about what you hear them say, but about what you see them do. It's not about what things they believe in their minds but how they live their lives.

And this clarification is important for all of us.

Imagine a man named Eric. He comes to church most weeks. He would definitely say he's a Christian. But when you talk to him after a Bible Study he seems a bit impervious to the provocations of God's word. It would be hard to describe him as soft-hearted. And you notice that his social media posts are often quite unsavoury. And you can't recall seeing him after church on Sundays ever going up to talk to the new person, or the socially awkward person, or the person who seems a bit lonely. And you're not aware of him taking any initiative to serve the needy people around him, even if he might occasionally give to an appeal of some sort. And you're also conscious that you've never heard him say he'll pray for people, even when they've shared things that burden them. And sometimes in his dealings with others he seems to lack gentleness and compassion and patience. It's hard to think of how Eric's life is any different to the lives of the non-Christians you know in your area. So is Eric really a Christian? It wouldn't seem so. He isn't showing his faith by his deeds. So what Eric needs is to really take some time to consider who Christ is, and what it means to repent of his sins and to start following Jesus.

But I also want you to imagine a woman named Erica. She too comes to church most weeks. And she happily calls herself a Christian as well. But in a quiet moment Erica will tell you that she really struggles with doubt. Sometimes she wonders whether the Bible really does hang together coherently. Sometimes she finds it hard to believe some of the things the Bible says have happened. Occasionally she finds it hard to make sense of how God in his sovereignty can allow the suffering she experiences and that she sees others experience too. Sometimes she struggles to explain to her friends how the commands of God really are good for people and she feels the weight of their skepticism and criticism when it comes to Jesus. But nevertheless Erica really does want to follow Jesus and she prays humbly and earnestly. She listens to God's word in Bible Study and really seems ready to apply things to herself. She serves in various

ways at church. She loves her family and her friends and her neighbours and colleagues, even those who are difficult or who don't always love her as they should. And she cares about those who are far from God and she does what she can to point them to Jesus. Is Erica really a Christian? Absolutely she is. Because notwithstanding the fact that sometimes she wishes her convictions were stronger, you can see she follows Jesus by the way she lives her life. So what Erica needs is to rest in God, and to keep turning to him, and to keep trusting him, and to keep persevering. But she doesn't need to worry about whether she belongs to God or whether she can be sure of going to heaven. Those who know her can see very clearly that she belongs to the one who saved her.

James' teaching here is a sharp question for all who are like Eric. But it's also a great reassurance for all who are like Erica. It's a huge help to us that James brings such crystal clarity to the nature of true faith.

- Am I neglecting the poor?

That's the first sharp question. But here's a second. Am I neglecting the poor? Because I don't think it's a coincidence that when James looks for an example of someone who claims to have faith but doesn't put it into practice, the example he reaches for is of someone who neglects the needy. That's what we see in verses 15-16. And I don't think it's a coincidence because this is a major issue in James' letter. He touches on it repeatedly. Remember 1:27?

[Read 1:27]

And remember too the example of favouritism we read at the start of chapter 2 last week? James spoke of the kind of favouritism that prefers the rich over the poor.

It would seem that James thinks that one of the most obvious ways you can tell who the genuine Christians are, is the way they care for those in need. {Certainly that was true of Macrina who we heard about before, wasn't it?}.

{Sadly, the care of the poor has become very politicised in our society. And people on the left and right of the political spectrum often end up with different views. And I would say that those on the right often do risk presuming that this is someone else's problem- it's something for our government or foreign governments to solve, or perhaps even that it's the responsibility of the poor themselves to find their way out of poverty. But by the same token I would also suggest that those on the left risk talking about the poor more than actually doing things for the poor. In my view, right across the political spectrum our concern for what the government does can distract us from our own opportunities to love our neighbours.

I'm not saying the political questions are irrelevant. I want our government to use a good percentage of our taxes to care for the most vulnerable in our society. And I would

love to see our government being much more generous when it comes to foreign aid. And there's real value in us advocating for these things politically, and real value in giving weight to these things when we vote.}

{But} we mustn't miss the many opportunities we have to care for the poor and needy every day. {Pausing} How much of your annual income do you direct towards the needs of the poor around the world? What do you do when you walk past someone in the street begging for money? How do you respond when you hear of a friend or family member who's doing it tough for whatever reason? How are you likely to react if you hear one of our church leaders mention a need- whether close to home or further afield? I suspect one of our issues here is just the blurry rush of life. So let me add one more question. Are you even stopping to think and pray about how you can use your wealth to serve those who have much less?

{I loved that line from the sermon of Basil the Great that Pat read out earlier: 'The excess bread in your board belongs to the hungry. The extra cloak in your wardrobe to the naked; the shoes you let rot to the barefoot; the money in your vaults to the destitute'. Do you believe that? If so, what does this look like in your life?}

In an email exchange during the week someone said to me that they think St Mark's has an excellent reputation for many commendable things. But they weren't sure that a commitment to Biblical social justice was one of those things. I'm not sure what you think about that but it's a challenging question to ponder isn't it? And it makes me just want to keep on praying that God would stir us as a church to give away more and more of what God has given us to others in the world who are materially and spiritually poor. My prayer is that we would be known for the kind of radical generosity that would be a great spur to other churches if they were to hear about it. And my prayer is that every individual and family at St Mark's would put their sincere faith into practice in many ways, of course, but always including this way. I pray that we would not neglect the poor.

- Do I have an unhealthy dependence on "good theology"?

But the third and final sharp question James has for us today is this one. Do I have an unhealthy dependence on "good theology". Of course, the inverted commas around "good theology" there are very important. Because I'm a massive fan of good theology! And I don't actually think you can have too much good theology in your life. Properly understood and properly embraced, good theology is the ground in which all true faith and all good deeds are planted, nurtured, and grown.

But the kind of unhealthy dependence I'm talking about is a kind of contentment in having "good theology" as if that's all there is to the Christian life. I'm talking about a kind of complacent reliance on "good theology" as if that's the main thing we need. And that's certainly a danger for people like us, in churches like this, in circles like ours. This is a church that takes theology very seriously. I hope that's true for you as an individual

too. We care about the truth. We think sound doctrine is essential in order to be faithful to Jesus. But we must be careful to always remember theology's true purpose.

A couple of weeks ago when Pat was preaching on James 1:16-27 there was a line in his sermon that was very striking, at least to me. It arrested my attention and I suspect if you were listening carefully it might have caught your eye too. I was actually surprised Pat didn't get asked about it in the Question Time afterwards. At one point he was talking about the Bible and how it's historically interesting, and literarily brilliant, and theologically rich but how if we approach it only as history, literature, or theology we miss the point. Because these are not its purpose. Did you catch that? Did he mean to say that? Sure- history and literature- that makes sense. Interesting and beautiful but not really the point. But theology? Really? Is theology not the purpose of the Bible? Well, I'm pretty sure Pat meant to say exactly that. And I agree with him. As does James who wrote this letter. Yes- God teaches us good theology through his word and that's a significant and precious thing. But God's ultimate purpose for his word is the transformation of people for the glory of Christ.

And sometimes churches in our circles are, tragically, famous for good theology but not much else. And that is a tragedy isn't it? Just like it's a tragedy if we're not known for our generosity towards the needs of the poor. So I trust you can see why this is such an important passage for a church like ours in our moment of history. Precisely because it's asking questions about things we're not famous for. But oh that we might be! Oh that we might be famous for the kind of faith that translates into an abundant wealth of good deeds, especially for the sake of those in need. And oh that we might be famous for the kind of rich theological depth that transforms people profoundly- so profoundly that they are known everywhere for the evident love that directs every step of their lives.

In a few weeks I'll share with you my final Pastoral Letter for our church. But apart from that this will be my final sermon to you. And I honestly couldn't think of any note better to end on than this. Because there's nothing more basic, more essential, more important to know about being a Christian person, and being a Christian church, than this. That God has given us his word for the purpose of remaking our lives. And he remakes our lives through his word by growing in us the kind of living faith that everyone can see. Living faith that everyone can see! May that be true of each of us here today/tonight. And for as long as there is a St Mark's Northbridge, may that be true of our church.

[Read 2:26]