

Christianity IRL Part 2

James 2

We started a series on James about 4 weeks ago and we are going to be continuing that for the next few weeks. You may want to go online and find Paul's first sermon on chapter 1 if you didn't hear it - or to refresh your memory - but because it was so long ago I had a listen during the week and I'll give you a few of his key points and a little general overview:

James is part of an old Jewish tradition called the Wisdom tradition. It comprises teaching on how to use God-given abilities to live well in relationship with God. It is like an ancient self-help book. Books such as Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes are earlier examples from within this tradition and like these books James contains themes of following God's law and of righteous suffering. James is the Christian development of Wisdom literature so whereas in the Old Testament Wisdom is lived to secure a happy and prosperous life, for James the purpose is to join with God as heirs of his new Kingdom. Where as Paul's letters are usually a coherent argument addressing a particular issue in a particular church, James is more a collection of good advice put together in a fairly loose structure for the benefit of any church anywhere.

The book of James promotes integrity, the consistency of belief and behaviour, walking the talk or putting your money where your mouth is. The book of James talks about what it means to be a Christian "In Real Life" (or IRL as it is apparently abbreviated now days. Paul and I were born in the same year but being a youth worker for so long has apparently kept him in touch with the current lingo).

To recap in Ch 1 verse 22-25:

"But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing."

Paul talked about how looking in a mirror can show you if there is something in your appearance that needs correcting but then you actually need to correct it. James goes on to talk about what a Christian should look like:

“If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Before we leave chapter one I want to start exploring one question. So if we look in the mirror, in the Scriptures, and we see something in ourselves that needs correcting, how do we fix it?

There are a few clues in chapter one but they seem to give some conflicting advice.

In verse 5, if you lack wisdom ask for it and it will be given to you (1:5) like a gift, not something that we have to strive for.

But we are commanded to endure temptation in verse 12 as if it is something we do by our own effort (1:12).

In verse 17 we are told generosity is a gift from above (1:17)

But in verse 21 we are to rid ourselves of wickedness and welcome the word that can save our souls (1:21). Here we do the action of getting rid of wickedness but “the word” saves our souls.

So do we fix the problem or does God?

There seems to be a complicated interplay here and I think the answer is “both”. Hold on to that thought as we look at a passage from chapter 2.

The passage we are looking at today comes from chapter 2 verses 14 to 26.

James 2:14-26 Faith without Works Is Dead

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’,

and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead."

This passage has been the source of much controversy over the centuries. When Martin Luther began the protestant reformation it was on the basis that people are saved "through faith alone" and this passage appeared at odds with that belief gleaned from the Apostle Paul's writings. Luther is quoted as saying the book of James should not even be in the Bible. This passage has been seen as an argument against Paul's assertion that we are saved through grace and not by the law. There is a difference though, between the law Paul talks about and the works described by James. The Law Paul talked about was concerned with circumcision, Sabbath observance and food rules that made Gentiles second class members within the church or excluded them altogether. James is not talking about having to observe certain rules to be acceptable to God, he is talking about good deeds that will flow from our faith and show others that that faith is there. Faith is "brought to completion" by the works. This is not directly opposed to the teaching of Paul but offers a correction to those who abuse Paul's teaching and take it too far.

James gives two contrasting examples of faith in action. Abraham was the father of the Jewish people and while it was his belief in God that was “reckoned to him as righteousness” he demonstrates that belief with his action. His faith is perfected when it is put into practise years after it is first declared. The story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son is a troubling one to say the least but as an example here it may be helpful. Abraham has faith in God and in God’s promise to make him the father of a nation. The promise to give Abram an heir is made in Genesis 15 and we are told “he believed the Lord and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”. Many years later Isaac arrives on the scene but Abraham is willing “to put his money where his mouth is” so to speak and give up the likely means by which that promise will be fulfilled. For Abraham faith is not about “hoping for the best in uncertainty” it is about obedience to God even when that increases uncertainty. Faith means stepping out from the known to the unknown to follow God’s leading and can mean sacrifice.

Rahab is quite a different example. She was a Canaanite prostitute living in Jericho. Her belief that God was giving Jericho into the hands of the Israelites led her to hide the Israeli spies and help them escape.

In both cases the person had faith in God that led them to act. In the words of Wesley “true faith produces works, and is perfected by them; that is, by the grace of God working in the believer, while he is showing his faith by his works.”

While preparing this sermon I found myself wishing I had a really dramatic faith-in-action story to share from my own life. We had Marty speaking last week and he has a really impressive one – taking the teachings of Jesus so seriously he would leave his life here and set up in Africa. I made an attempt once. I felt God calling me to move to Singapore and I packed up all my things into storage and said goodbye to everyone and I got on that plane – and it was a disaster and I was back 2 months later. I am still hoping one day God will reveal to me what was going on in that little episode. But while the two Old Testament examples James gives are of big faith decisions; the point he is making is actually about the everyday decisions. James has talked about

controlling our tongues and caring for widows and orphans, quite mundane tasks in everyday life.

A number of years ago I was studying at Bible college and we had a time of reflection in the morning and I wrote a great poem to God. I was on a real creative high. Then I had a three-hour break before my next class. A classmate had mentioned that though she lived a 10 minute drive away she would have to wait an hour for the bus to get home. I offered to drive her. No sacrifice for me I had plenty of time. Towards the end of my 3-hour break I was praying and I remembered the poem I'd written that morning and asked God "are you pleased with it?" and I felt him answer "I'm even more pleased that you drove your classmate home". That little act of love didn't give me any creative, emotional high and didn't feel "spiritual". It didn't seem like a big deal to me but it mattered more to God than my words on a page. I wonder if that is what this passage is saying to us here at Pittwater, there might be a danger for us to think that worship is the music and the singing and our praying. We shouldn't mistake what we do here in this building on a Sunday as our most important acts of worship. We may feel spiritual and close to God but in God's eyes mundane, dreary acts of love are at least as important if not more so. This is not opposed to Faith it is the outcome of our transformation.

Once a caterpillar has turned into a butterfly it flies. It most likely takes effort to fly and courage to take off but flying is both possible and natural. No healthy butterfly continues to crawl along leaves. Once a butterfly has been transformed it behaves in a new way. When we have been transformed by God we behave in a new way. We are transformed into God's likeness and God is love. We now behave in the way of love. We do things because they are the things that love does. Not to earn brownie points or convince people that we are right but because we have been transformed and transformed beings behave differently. So if we look at ourselves in the mirror of scripture and we are not matching up? If we are not different from the world and are not looking after those in need, not showing love, what has gone wrong? Either, we are not putting in enough effort - we need to look at that - or we need more

of God's transforming power in our life. We need God to change our hearts in line with his heart.

I'm going to leave you with a challenging poem By John Stott "An interpretation of Matthew 25 by a homeless woman" which I think is relevant

I was hungry and you formed a humanities group to discuss my hunger.

I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your church and prayed for my release.

I was naked and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health.

I was homeless and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.

I was lonely and you left me alone to pray for me.

You seem so holy, so close to God,

but I am still very hungry – and lonely – and cold.