

## FAITH AND GOOD WORKS

A couple of Sundays ago we examined the importance of building a Community of Love and that this must be a deliberate intention which is guided by faith and works through love. The love of neighbour, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each of us. However, to be truly effective in a community the “love of those we come in contact with” must be well-organised, well-ordered and well-managed. This is where we need further clarity. Turn with me to James 2 and let’s read verses 14 to 26 together.....

The message of Christianity, like that of every religion, is that men are saved by good works. But the unique message of Christianity is that salvation comes by the “works of God” and not by human endeavour. The essence of our faith is that it is focused on the “good works” of the Lord Jesus alone, and is perfectly expressed in the opening verses of Romans chapter 5: ***“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.”*** Notice that it says, “Through our Lord....” And, “Through whom....” Our faith does not save us because it is imperfect faith; our faith did not obey God’s law; our faith did not die for us; our faith did not rise from the dead. That was Christ’s prerogative. He lived the loving life of obedience, a life we could never live. Every person in heaven (and that will be an infinite number), will only be there because of the “good works” of our Lord Jesus Christ, and not because of their own. Our faith, focused entirely on Him, is the channel through which His blessings become ours. The result of this is astounding, ***“In Him we live and move and have our being”*** (Acts 17:28). ***“We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us”*** (Romans 8:37).

Then what is James saying in this section of his letter?

- (1) Firstly, he is stating what the whole New Testament affirms, that every Christian saved through faith in the Son of God has this calling, to do good works. ***"We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"*** (Ephesians. 2:10). Notice, there is a necessity of good works as a mark of our union with Christ, and as fulfilling our obligation to our neighbour. The 'believer' mentioned by James (2:15) who ignores his starving siblings, might agree with that statement, but Christianity demands a change of conduct. Christian works are not a contributory offering to purchase our redemption (which is by the precious blood of Christ alone), but an evidence that we are the "redeemed of the Lord." We are saved through faith alone, but the faith that saves is never inactive, it's always zealous to do good works.
  
- (2) Secondly, when James uses the word 'faith' here he means an intellectual assent that has no effect upon conduct. Even demons have that sort of faith. James is deliberately shaming an intellectual acknowledgement of faith in God which doesn't touch one's daily living. When James uses the word 'justify' he is using it in the sense of 'vindicate.' He says (in verse 24) *"a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone."* The works of a person like Abraham vindicated his claims to believe in God. His conduct showed that he truly had faith in God. Jesus said on one occasion, *"wisdom is justified of her children"* (Matthew 11:19). So we don't need to boast about the importance of wisdom: it is vindicated by all who live wisely. Likewise, James is simply saying that, ***"faith without works is dead,"*** and not that faith does not exist! Faith is all around us, however, most of it is devoid of the life of God.

Let us look at the four cases brought out by James in this passage of scripture:

## 1. IGNORING YOUR NAKED STARVING SIBLINGS (verses 15-17).

This is the worst possible scenario! Here James uses an extravagant and obvious exaggeration to illustrate an important truth. He invites us to be onlookers on the daily life of one of these 'believers' whose faith does not affect his life at all. This religious miser treats his own brother or sister with contempt. He notices that they are half naked and they haven't had a meal for ages, and as a result, they are weak with hunger, but his response is, *"Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,"* and does nothing about his or her physical needs. How would you describe such a man? Would you call him a good Christian? Our Christian duty is to those who are destitute, and especially towards those who are in our own family. "What good is his faith?" asks James. "No good at all." Because faith if it is not accompanied by action is dead. What this man believes is acceptable enough, but if it doesn't affect his life it does no one any good. He may believe the right things, but so what! Even demons believe and that's what James points out.

## 2. EVEN THE DEMONS HAVE FAITH (verses 18-20).

This is the most alarming scenario. If the first example is an obvious exaggeration, then here we have irony. James imagines someone speaking out, maybe incensed by what he has heard concerning this 'believer' who remains detached when he sees his own brother or sister starving and freezing to death. So he cries to that man, ***"You have faith, and I have works. Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God? You do well. But even the demons believe that - and tremble."***

It may seem like an emotional outburst, but it makes very telling ethical and theological points. Here is an example of someone who is in total sympathy with what James is saying and is moved to denounce a faith that is devoid of works. What's the good of a profession of faith without any change of lifestyle and attitudes? There's a man in the book of Acts (chapter 8) named Simon Magus, a sorcerer, a boaster, with many fans whom he amazed with his magic. When he heard Philip speak he became one who professed faith and was baptised (verse 13), and he followed Philip everywhere. When Simon saw the Holy Spirit could be given at the laying on of the apostles' hands he offered Peter thirty pieces of silver saying something like, *"What will you take for the Holy Spirit? Show me your secret. I have plenty of money, and I know where there is plenty more."* *"Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 8:9).

The intoxicating love of notoriety (fame) had taken such a hold of Simon that he simply could not live outside of centre stage. He must be in men's conversation; he must always have a crowd around him! However, Peter the former fisherman, could hardly control himself; *"May your money perish with you ... your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you."* Simon was a 'believer,' but not from his heart, which was not right before God. He had been stirred by all he had seen - the crowds, the signs and the wonders - and he professed his faith, yet he had not been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. He was still *"full of bitterness and captive to sin"* (verse 23). He had a deficient faith, likened to the faith of demons, and it soon showed itself in sinful works. Notice, James says, *"the demons believe and tremble"* (verse 19). Non-saving faith is not necessarily non-emotional faith. With all the despair of fallen angels, they await their sentence in fear and trembling. They shudder at the certainty of what they are still to experience. In contrast, our faith looks ahead with joyful expectation.

### 3. ABRAHAM'S FAITH (verses 20-24).

This is the most memorable scenario. James, having done this demolition job on mere professions of faith (which lack any credibility because there is no change of life), reminds us of Abraham. In the Scriptures it is Abraham who introduces to mankind a way of responding to God, that is, the way of faith. God's choice of Abraham and his 'believing reaction' makes him the father of all the faithful. The Lord said, "Leave your country," and in that stark choice it meant abandonment. Abraham had to leave everything in order to follow God.

There was a promised land whose character and worth only God could guarantee. Abraham knew nothing about it. He would have no friends there but one - the Lord. God said that he would give Himself to Abraham as his unfailing provision. *"I have chosen you to be my friend, and I am going to be your God."* God and Abraham are in covenant. Abraham is called the friend of God and the Lord is called the God of Abraham. Abraham left his land and showed what he believed by his obedience. That was Abraham's faith in action.

It was by faith in the faithfulness of God that Abraham had the energy to obey. The fact that nothing was impossible with God spurred Abraham on when he was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. We are told in Hebrews 11:19, *"Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead."* So he clung to the promises of God and went ahead trusting the Lord. All he was and all he had belonged to the Lord. That is saving faith, and this is why Abraham is the father of all who believe. God has also called us to follow him in this way, and the secret is to trust and obey. When we are moving in obedience, God too is on the move to fulfil his word! Our faith makes way for God's works!

#### 4. THE FAITH OF A PROSTITUTE (verses 25-26).

This is the most unusual scenario. What a contrast! Abraham, a massive figure in the Scriptures, and Rahab a tiny player. The story of Rahab is in Joshua 2. It's the time the Israelites were entering the promised land, and the spies crept into Jericho to see its defences. The authorities learned that they were in the city, and searched for them, but Rahab "gave them lodging," hiding them in the roof and convincing the authorities that they had gone. Why did she act like that? Because she had a word about their God. She did not see - she simply heard and believed (Joshua 2:10-11). She did not see the waters of the Red Sea drying up. She did not see the destruction of the kings of the Amorites. She heard the word and believed that the God of Israel is the only God in heaven and on earth. Her faith is acknowledged in Hebrews 11: ***"By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient"*** (Hebrews 11:31). She identified herself with the people of God. There is no indecision anywhere, and she lets the men down over the wall and "sent them off in a different direction," says James (verse 25), while she remains in the doomed city. The men give her a scarlet cord which she hangs in the window when the Israelites enter the city as conquerors. She and her family are spared.

The past of people like Rahab does not matter, in all its ugliness and shame. The only important factor is the present - are you now a believer in the Lord Jesus? Are you showing you are a believer by how you live? We are not asked for perfection of faith or life. We are asked for newness of life. Rahab was considered righteous for what she did. Rahab heard the word and believed it, and from then on the God of Israel was her God and the people of Israel were her people.

James concludes, faith without deeds is dead - like the body without the spirit. Do our lips and lives agree? Is what we profess seen in our actions? Paul tells us that Christ's love for his church is displayed in a believing husband's love for his wife. Peter tells us that a wife's conduct before her unbelieving husband can be effective enough to win him over, without a word. Don't claim that you know God unless your life begins to show it. Our works must vindicate our faith. Without them our faith is dead - lifeless and of no use to anyone!