

Exhortation – James 2 – Faith without works is dead.

Good morning brethren and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our readings are taking us through the small epistle of James. This epistle is generally believed to be written by James, the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was also one of the pillars of the ecclesia in Jerusalem. It is a wonderful little letter filled with all sorts of practical advice for both the readers in his day right down to us today.

In the chapter we have read this morning we find our brother James provides us with exhortation in two closely related areas. He reminds us that as faithful servants of our Lord Jesus Christ, we should be fair and **equal in our treatment** of our brethren and sisters. He then proceeds to show us the importance of **faith inspired works** in our lives.

James begins the chapter by reminding us that our example of faith is our Lord Jesus Christ, and for this reason, we should be impartial in the way we deal with our brethren and sisters. His mind for the first section of this chapter (**vv1-13**) appears to be in **Leviticus 19** quoting the 2nd greatest commandment, in v8 of this chapter – to love our neighbour as ourselves. And whereas this applies to all those we meet in our daily life, it particularly applies to those in the ecclesia. And it does not matter if they are rich or poor, influential or comparatively unimportant, male or female, educated or uneducated, etc. We should love all of our brethren and sisters as though they were ourselves.

If you read through Leviticus 19, you will see many echoes from this part of the law in this section of James. For example God tells Moses to tell Israel that they were to be holy, just as he was holy. And he constantly reminds Israel that he was the Lord their God (for example **v4,10**). He is telling Israel that the reason why they were to be holy in behaviour and consider others was because this was following God's example.

And so James starts this chapter by telling us that our faith is derived from our Lord Jesus Christ, and so we should not be impartial because this is not something that we find him doing. We do not find him attracted to the well dressed Pharisees with their righteous veneer. We never find him siding with the religious rulers of his day, despite their riches and influence. In fact, we find our Lord with the publicans and sinners because he knew that his work was with them. His work was to extend God's forgiveness to those who were less fortunate either materially or spiritually. And so we should follow his example in our dealings with others.

For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts? **James 2:2-4**

James outlines one of the problems that they were experiencing in his day in the ecclesia. There was a difference in the way they were treating rich and poor members of the ecclesia, giving those who were well dressed the best seats in the synagogue. And those who were not so well dressed were asked to sit up the back or even worse, under the rich's footstool.

This behaviour is typical of the Jewish legalist rather than those who were under Christ. And yet, the same could be said of us today. It is only human to look out for some external facet of others as a basis for judging them. In fact it is only human to want to judge others, rather than looking at ourselves and our own motives, which is something we find so hard to judge. It is our lack of ability to judge the motives of others that often causes us to use external things such as occupation or clothing to judge others. But it is this unnecessary judgement of others that is condemned by James. We become judges of evil thoughts and are partial in our judgements when we find ourselves judging after the sight of our eyes. Such attributes should not be used to judge the spirituality of others – it was condemned in James' day and so it should be condemned in our day. As our Lord Jesus Christ said, *Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.* **Matt 7:1-2**

We should not judge the motives of others, because as Jesus tells us, it will reflect badly on us at the judgement seat. Of course there are times we should judge the actions of others and tell them if they are doing something wrong – it is our responsibility as a brother or sister to do this. But we cannot and should never ascribe motives for the behaviour of others. Yet we often find ourselves falling into this trap. James must have remembered the words of Jesus when he wrote the following a little later in the chapter. *For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath showed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.* **James 2:13**

As James warns us, we will have judgment without mercy if we don't show mercy to others. We should show mercy to those whose circumstances in life have led them into a situation less favourable than the one we find ourselves, recognising that we might someday find ourselves in the very same circumstance. After all, we all suffer from the same frailties of the flesh. In the end, we all have to hope that mercy will rejoice against judgment in the day that we are asked to give an account to our Lord, because there is no possible way that we can ever hope to be judged righteous without God's grace and mercy.

Our writer now directs our attention to the necessity for our faith to be active. And true to form, James shows us that our active faith should be manifest in a practical fashion – helping those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? **James 2:14-16**

James' point in this section is that it is not really possible for a person to have faith unless it is seen in his works. Such faith is dead. It has no use for daily living. After all, what point is it for us to feel sympathy for others when it is within our power to help them with some or all of their needs, and yet we fail to help? There is no profit at all if this is how we express our faith.

James gives us two examples of faith in action. This is in line with what Paul writes in his own letters on faith. In fact the chapter on faith in our scriptures, Hebrew 11, is full of wonderful acts of faith. By faith Noah built an ark. By faith Abel offered a better sacrifice. All these men had a faith which was demonstrated in action.

It is interesting the example that James brings to our attention, that of Abraham, the father of the faithful. And in some ways, it appears that James is contradicting what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans. Paul tells us that Abraham was justified **by faith** because he believed God when he told him that his seed would be as the stars of the heavens, without number. In fact, Paul's point is that we are **NOT** justified by works otherwise there would be reason for us to boast and think that we can earn salvation. And this is simply not possible.

So what is James' point in this section? Was Abraham justified by works when he offered up Isaac? And why did God ask Abraham to offer up his promised seed?

These are all valid questions. After all, hadn't Abraham already been justified because he believed God, and God had counted it for righteousness? Did God think that Abraham really did not believe him and had to test him to see if this was really the case? Was God's request for him to sacrifice his son to give Abraham the opportunity to prove his faith?

*Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. **James 2:21-23***

You see brethren and sisters, Abraham's faith was **made perfect** by his works. It wasn't so much a case of God not knowing whether Abraham believed him or not, because God knows us better than we know ourselves. It was that God wanted to improve Abraham's faith, to try to his faith so that it would be perfected. It was for Abraham's benefit, not God's that God asked him to offer his son. Peter shows us the importance of developing a tried faith in his epistle where he tells us the following.

*Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: **1Pet 1:6-7***

You see brethren and sisters, our faith should not be stagnant and that is why God takes us through trials and temptations. It is to improve our faith so it becomes more precious than gold. And it is our faith that Jesus will see and it will be found unto praise and honour. And it is works, often performed under pressure and in the middle of trials, that both reveals and improves our faith. And the development of our faith is most favourably perfected when we are engaged in works which benefit those who need our help. As James tells us, it is far better for us to help those in need by offering them things that will answer their needs rather than offering them a few words of sympathy. This is borne out in his second example.

*Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. **James 2:25-26***

If you in your leisure read through Joshua 2 you will find that Rahab gives the two spies a wonderful confession of her faith when they came and visited her in Jericho. However, this confession, although it would have warmed the hearts of the two Israelite spies, would have done nothing to help them out of the situation in which they found themselves. They were in the middle of their enemy's city with the king's soldiers searching for them.

Although Rahab's confession was incredible, it was made perfect by her actions. Her decision to hide the two spies and then let them out of her window and send them to safety was one that put her own life in danger. Yet she did this, showing the two spies that she did indeed trust in their God to protect her, and at the same time, saved their lives. And so we learn this morning that as the body without breath is dead, so faith without works is dead. And we see this again so clearly in the one we come to remember this morning – our Lord Jesus Christ. His faith was certainly not academic. He did not just sympathise with our problem. His love and faith was shown in that he was prepared to lay down his life so that we could be saved.

And you cannot get a more active faith than that.

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