

REAL FAITH / REAL LIFE SERIES

GENUINE FAITH

JAMES 2:1-17 | JUNE 20, 2021

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If I asked you what faith is, what would you say? Could you define faith for me?

The classic Bible answer is, “faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Belief without proof. A dictionary definition of faith is complete trust or confidence in someone or something, beliefs held with strong conviction. Another Bible definition is that faith is a gift from God that allows us to believe, and belief is all we need to be saved. Being saved because we have faith, because we believe, that’s our good news.

James, I think, would disagree. Or at least he would say that those definitions of faith are too small.

Today is our second week exploring James’ letter, and James is all about the shape of our lives and the shape of our faith, and how our “real” life and our faith life ought to be shaped the same way. But on the face of it, this part of the letter seems to be more about sin and missions than faith, and perhaps about being a good and decent person, too. The issue James presents to us is favouritism, although I think these days we’d call it prejudice or just plain rudeness.

It’s likely that this particular example was drawn from his own observation of church; it’s sadly all too relevant today in churches, in other organizations, and simply out in the world, as we go about our day. Prejudice is very present and at work in the church and in the world. I can’t see things being different all those centuries ago, so I expect this illustration for his letter was as pointed then as now.

There’s an appeal to the wealthy and affluent that James captures so devastatingly: please, sit here. We can almost hear the unspoken “right next to me!” There’s a tendency to be drawn to people with wealth, and quite often, a wealthy person will expect it. A poor person would not.

These days, good manners or a desire to avoid bad press would dictate that we not say something as appalling as “sit at my feet” to a poor person. Awkward silence or careful avoidance might happen instead. Dealing with a poor person in church is only one example of the kind of prejudice we struggle with, in church and in other contexts, too. Beyond social class, there’s race and ethnicity, mental unwellness, being differently abled, the extreme poverty of homelessness, addiction...even seemingly harmless differences, like being the new person in a church, being younger or older, having an unglamorous job.

It’s very easy, James would say, to be drawn to people like us, or to people that are who we’d like to be.

James follows up by reminding his readers of the law: love you neighbour as yourself, especially the neighbour in need. He holds us to a high standard: if you see someone in need, reach out. Do not be the kind of awful person who walks past someone in need of warm clothes or a meal, only acknowledging them enough to say, “have a nice day, hope you get a sweater and hot lunch!” Acting and speaking like that, in that kind of situation, James writes, is like having faith but not doing anything because of it; and faith without works is dead.

But remember how we defined faith? All of our definitions of faith, even our good biblical ones, were about belief without proof, belief that leads to being saved, which is good news for us. Nothing at all about a follow-up component of having to do something, too. Indeed, faith and the salvation that comes with it being free gifts, that’s an important part of our understanding of what God through Christ has done for us. We know that doing good things is important; but surely not that the absence of good works means that our faith is dead. And yet James would disagree, and say that our definition of faith is far too limited, because the faith that counts is the faith that’s at work in you.

Throughout his letter, James is deeply concerned about the practical outcome of Christian faith. The point he’s trying to make here is that if we can reduce our faith to a set of “I believe” statements, then living that faith can also be reduced to saying “have a nice day” to a homeless person. Because, as James will go on to write in v.19, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that...”

Faith must be more than just agreeing to a set of statements about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, like in the Apostles Creed; faith has to be more than simply assenting to some rules and ideas about God, and then carrying on our way, being the kind of people we already were...good and decent, perhaps, or prone to prejudice, or preferring to love one's neighbour only once it's clear they come from your kind of neighbourhood.

Saying "I believe" is the beginning of faith, but it's not a living, breathing, saving faith; that's what James is getting at.

The middle bit of our text this morning is, I think, the most perplexing. This far along in the Bible, "love your neighbour as yourself" is hardly revolutionary...or perhaps it still is. James' relentless practicality prevents us from loving our neighbour by way of a warm glow of sympathy in our hearts. If we say it, if we agree that it's part of what Jesus taught, then we have to really, meaningfully do it.

And then James goes on to make us really, really uncomfortable. Because any good and decent person can be moved with a charitable impulse, to help someone in need. These days, that's not uncommon; being generous feels good, there's even scientific research that shows an endorphin rush, an activation of the feeling happy part of our brain, when we give money or volunteer for a good cause. Faith demands more. If you really believe in Jesus, if your faith is in him, then you must also believe that loving your neighbour is important. And if you really believe both of those things, then you must also believe that it's important for you to do something about it.

Loving your neighbour has to be the shape of your life, because it is the shape of your faith.

James has a disconcerting way of pressing his point. He assumes that we're likely to talk ourselves into staying just as we are, within our comfort zones, keeping our old views, about, in his example, poor people and other prejudices we might have. He assumes that people might think, "Well, okay, I see your point. But I do pretty well on the whole, so don't bother me with this. I'll try to keep most of the Ten Commandments, and be a decent sort of person, and let the rest go." James wonders, "So which commandments don't count? Is one a worse breach of the law than another? Adultery is okay if you don't commit murder? Pandering to the powerful and the popular is fine, so long as you don't judge the poor and the powerless too harshly?"

This is a kind of half-hearted discipleship at best, shaped – not by belief in Jesus – but by our belief in the importance of our own desires: a desire to be comfortable, to see ourselves as good people, to experience only happy, easy things...the rich ones, who drag the Christians

James is writing to into court, are willing to go as far as they need to, to fulfill the demands of their faith in their own superiority and privilege.

And so the question becomes this: is the faith shaping your life faith in Jesus, or is it faith in something else?

In the early 1970s, Jim Wallis and some friends from seminary founded an organization that came to be known as Sojourners. These seminary students wanted to explore how their faith intersected with social and political issues of the day. They identified themselves as “a committed group of Christians who work together to live a gospel life that integrates spiritual renewal and social justice.” In his book, *God’s Politics*, Wallis describes the beginnings of Sojourners:

“In his first year in seminary, Jim Wallis and friends did a thorough study to find every verse in the Bible that deals with the poor and social injustice. They came up with thousands, in the first three Gospels one out of ten verses, in Luke one out of seven! They could not recall a single sermon on the poor in their home churches. One of them found an old Bible and began to cut out every single biblical text about the poor. Much of the Psalms and prophets disappeared. That old Bible would hardly hold together. They had created a Bible full of holes.”

Faith without works is a faith full of holes. In every moment of every day, we act and speak on the basis of what we believe to be true. So if we say one thing, like “I have faith in Jesus and I follow him,” and then do things that don’t reflect what we’ve said we have faith in, that break the foundational teachings of Jesus...well, it’s not the absence of faith. We’ve got faith in something; it just isn’t Jesus.

Last Sunday, when we reflected on James chapter one and the birth of our faith, we talked about who God is: the giver of every perfect gift, and the one whose Word – whose gospel good news – has the power to create life in us anew. We also talked about who we are in God and the dangers of forgetting, and of being first-fruits, created by God, and belonging to God.

If the Word of God created new life in us, then living that Word – letting it be what shapes both our faith and our life – that means eventually gifting that life to others. What we believe in, what we trust to be true...our faith in Jesus is what is active in our lives, actively giving life to us and to those around us. If it doesn't do that, then our faith is not in Jesus; or at best, it's a faith full of holes.

This is an unrelenting passage of Scripture. James does not hold back at all, and we are left reeling a little. Where is the good news in a passage like this? To be perfectly honest, I think we had our good news last week, in James chapter one, with our God giving us every perfect gift, up to and including creating new life in us by his transforming Word. This week, the good news is good news for our neighbours, not for us. We are challenged this week to examine the shape of our faith and the shape of our life, and to see if the two look alike and speak together of the good news we've experienced. But the good news for our neighbours is that this same good news experienced by believers can also move through each believer to the many others, our many neighbours, who need a tangible expression of God's grace. Thanks be to God! Amen.