



Session 4 – James 2:14-26

FAITH LEADS TO ACTION

Our salvation is by grace through faith. We cannot earn our salvation by being good or doing good works: we can only receive it as a free gift of God's grace; we can only receive it through faith in Jesus. But James seems at first sight to contradict this. So we need to look carefully at what he says about the relationship between our faith and our good works.

Two things that faith isn't

1 Faith isn't just about warm words towards other people (v.14-17)

v.15-16 paints a rather humorous picture of someone who speaks empty words. And similarly, if someone professes faith in Jesus – saying all the right things – but does absolutely nothing, it shows that their words about their faith were empty. We expect our faith to lead to action. There will be situations in which we just don't know what we can do to help; but our basic desire is to show Christlike compassion that leads to action.

If you have faith but it doesn't lead to good works, then, says James, that faith of yours sounds pretty lifeless.

2 Faith isn't just about pious words about God (v.18-20)

"You believe that there is one God" (v.19). "God is one" was a fundamental belief for the Jewish people – very important when they were surrounded by pagan nations who believed that there were any number of Gods. It was a statement of what the person believed to be a fact; but the danger was that it could stay just as that and not make any difference to them. Even demons would agree with the statement, but that certainly doesn't mean that they have a faith that saves them.

Faith isn't just about pious words about God. It's about putting our faith into action. When we say a Creed together in church, this isn't a statement of bare facts that we believe to be true; they are facts that we put our trust in – we are choosing to let them affect the way we live. Faith isn't just a matter of what we believe with our intellect; it must affect our attitudes and our actions as well.

Two Old Testament pictures of what faith is

1 Abraham (v.20-24)

Abraham had a saving faith – a faith that was so great that the Bible describes him as “the friend of God” (v.23 and see 2Chron 20:7, Isa 41:8).

His faith had led to action as he left his home not knowing where God was leading him (Gen 12), and as he trusted God to give him a son even though it seemed impossible (Gen 15). Then he heard God's call to be ready to sacrifice Isaac, the son he had promised (Gen 22). How could God promise something, give it, and then take it away again? But such was Abraham's faith that he obeyed, and made the preparations to sacrifice Isaac. We are all relieved when God provides a substitute – a ram will be sacrificed instead of Isaac. It is a mysterious story, but a story that shows the way in which Abraham's faith led to obedience and action. If he had refused to act, his faith would have been shown to be unreal.

2 Rahab

Rahab was completely different from Abraham: she was a woman, a gentile and, to make matters worse, a prostitute.

Prior to the battle of Jericho, Joshua sends two men into Jericho to spy out the land; when the king of Jericho sends his men to find the spies, Rahab hides the spies and keeps them safe. When the coast is clear, they climb out of her window and, by following her directions, get back safely to Joshua. (See Joshua 2, and the conclusion in Joshua 6:22-25.)

Why did Rahab do that? Because she recognised that, “The Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (Josh 2:11). It was on the basis of that faith of hers that she took action, dangerous though it was.

James's message

James's repeated message in this passage is that faith leads to action – faith and works go hand in hand (v.17, 20, 26). He is not for one moment downplaying the importance of faith; he is simply saying that faith that isn't accompanied by action is highly questionable. He has already given us examples of the sort of action that should arise from our faith in 1:27.

This is a message which is found consistently in the Bible – eg Isa 58:7-9, Mat 25:31-46, 1John 3:17-18.

Mark 2:1-12 tells the story of four men who lowered their paralysed friend through a hole they had made in the roof of the house where Jesus was. "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralysed man, 'Your sins are forgiven'" (Mark 2:5) and the man was healed of his paralysis. In the action of those four men, Jesus saw their faith.

Our faith and our works

A person's actions – their good works – can never save them. When someone becomes a Christian, it is their faith in Jesus – their trust in what God in his grace has promised us through Jesus – that saves them. And the Holy Spirit, who has led them to the point of putting their faith in Jesus, continues to work in them, enabling them to grow as a disciple of Jesus and put their faith into action. The good works that they do will be evidence of that past and present work of the Holy Spirit.

If we have doubts about our faith, we can remember that faith is God's gift to us. We can pray like the apostles who said, "Lord, increase our faith" (Luke 17:5); or like the man who said to Jesus, "I believe; help me with my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

If we have doubts about our actions – whether we are doing enough – again we can pray that the Spirit will work in us, giving us the fruit of love for our neighbour and helping us to grow more like Jesus in our actions.

We are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone. And our faith is to be lived out in action; there are good works for us to do. The love of God which saved us is the love which we want to share with others as our faith and our actions go hand in hand.

For homegroups

- Read Isaiah 58:7-9, Matthew 25:31-46, 1John 3:17-18. What do these passages say about the actions of those who have faith?
- Many of us receive large numbers of requests for money by junk mail from charities. We agree that they are deserving causes (we wish them well) but put them in the bin (do nothing). How do you think James would want us to deal with all these appeals?
- In v.15, James refers to helping a brother or a sister. Paul says that we should do good to all, “especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal 6:10). Should we, in our actions, give preference to our fellow Christians?
- Sometimes we say the Apostles’ Creed – “I believe in . . .” – and sometimes we say it with the response, “I believe and trust in him”. What is the difference between “believing” and “believing and trusting”?
- How much should right belief (doctrine) matter?
- Tell the group about people you have known whose faith really did result in action. What might we learn from their example?
- Can you give examples of occasions when you (or someone you have known) have, like Abraham, done something which seemed foolish to others or, like Rahab, done something risky?
- There is no suggestion in either Joshua or James (or in Hebrews 11:31) that Rahab gave up her prostitution. How would you react to someone with an overtly sinful lifestyle doing good works or being commended for their faith?
- Are homegroups places where we focus too much on our knowledge about God? Can they be catalysts for good deeds too?
- We tend to think of James’s words in this passage as applying to individual Christians. Can we apply them also to churches?