

## Reflective worship talk – Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> June Wisdom in our attitude to what we do

### James chapter 2

Sadly, I have often heard people say things like “I’m not good enough to go to church” or “I’m not good enough to be a Christian”

And that is sad because as far as I can see one of the foundation stones of the Christian faith is that none of us is “good enough” (whatever that might mean). We all fall far short of what God would want us to be. None of us is able live a perfect life no matter how hard we try. We all struggle with the way we live. Even the great apostle Paul had this struggle – as we can see from what he wrote in Romans 7 – *I don’t do the good thing I want to do, but I end up doing the evil thing I don’t want to do.* That echoes with me – and I guess it does with many of us.

But the good news is that God welcomes us in. He wants us to be with him. The message of the cross is a message of forgiveness. Our future with God is not determined by how good our pasts have been, but by how much God loves us.

Jesus himself was all about meeting and interacting with those that most people thought weren’t good enough. Tax collectors, prostitutes, foreigners, those who were deemed unclean because of mental or physical illness. And he was constantly criticised for being alongside these kinds of people. It’s not that he condoned their behaviour, but that he saw that it was people like this who were most in need of the love and forgiveness of God.

So what are we to say?

Does ‘what we do’ matter, or is what is important ‘what God has done for us’?

In the letter of James, which we are looking at in these Reflective Worship services over the next couple of months, we see a distinct emphasis on the importance of what we do – perhaps particularly in chapter 2 that we had read earlier this evening.

So let’s have a quick look through what James is saying.

First he talks about favouritism. Rich people being treated with more respect than poor people. In other words he sees Christians living the way others live. His argument is that all are equally made in God’s image; all deserve equal treatment. His example on how to live here would have been Jesus himself.

Secondly he quotes what he calls the “royal commandment”, the one we recognise as coming from the lips of Jesus. Love your neighbour as yourself. He is saying this summarises the law. We cannot pick and choose which “laws” we obey. Holding this “royal commandment” will help us follow all the laws.

Then he addresses those people who say they are Christians but don't help the poor and needy. Surely, he says, our faith is shown to be real by the things that we do. It has an outward expression as well as an internal comfort.

And finally he looks at two Old Testament characters. Abraham, often seen as the example of the faithful person, is also shown as one who showed his faith by what he did. And perhaps surprisingly Rahab – a prostitute – someone we might easily write-off – is shown as someone who demonstrated her faith by what she did as she welcomed the Jewish spies and protected them.

So we see quite clearly that James is very concerned about how Christians live. He is not, as some might think, saying that it is 'what we do' that is the only thing that matters. He is not denying the centrality of a living faith in Jesus who died on the cross so that we might be restored in our relationship with God.

No, what he is saying though is something like this. It's not much good you only being able to say what you believe in – though that is very important. What really matters is that your faith - what you believe in - actually makes a difference to the way you live.

And this is a message that is consistent throughout the New Testament. We hear Jesus saying as he heals people things like *Your faith has made you well*. But elsewhere he also tells people to "*Go and sin no more*". Faith is only shown to be true faith when it is turned into action, when it makes a difference to who we are and how we live.

Some would say that the message of the cross is that we are saved from the past. But surely this has to be looked at together with the truth of the resurrection that there is fullness of life in Jesus. We are saved *from* the past and also saved *for* the future. Our lives – what we do – are as important as what we believe.

Paul says that if we have faith in Christ we become new creations. Everything old in our lives has passed away; everything has become new. This picks up the same theme as Jesus saying to Nicodemus that he must be born again. Simply believing is not enough – true faith affects the way we live. It is as if we are new people.

So does that mean we all have to try harder and harder to be good people? Does it mean that the struggles we have (like the struggles Paul had) will simply get worse? Does it mean we will continually berate ourselves for failing time and time again?

Last week in our Forest Church we were thinking about trees. We saw that trees are often used in scripture as illustrations to tell us more about God and what he wants for us. We read some words from Psalm 1

Blessed are they who have not walked  
in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor lingered in the way of sinners,  
nor sat in the assembly of the scornful.  
Their delight is in the law of the Lord

and they meditate on his law day and night.  
Like a tree planted by streams of water  
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither,  
whatever they do, it shall prosper.

God wants his followers to be like these trees. Planted with roots going deep down into a good and healthy soil, where there is plenty of water. With roots like this the tree's leaves will not wither, the tree will bring forth fruit. Our faith will be strong, nourished by the water of life, and our lives will bear fruit – they will be the kinds of lives God wants, following the example of the life of Jesus.

But a tree does not produce fruit of its own power. It needs the nutrients that come from the roots. These are what produce the fruit. And for us, this means that it's the power that comes from our faith in Jesus, our relationship with him. It means it is the power of the Holy Spirit deep within us that enables us to live more as Jesus wants. Paul talks about being transformed by the Spirit. Letting the Holy Spirit change the person we are and the way we live. It is us working in partnership with the power of God within us. It is not all down to our own efforts.

That should be an encouragement to each one of us. But it doesn't entirely let us off the hook. What it is saying is that we need to cultivate our relationship with Jesus. Through prayer, reading, time, silence and discussion. In other words, it's down to us to ensure that our faith is not a dead faith but one that is alive and fresh, life changing and life affirming.

And then, through the power of the Spirit within us, we will be slowly changed into the people God wants us to be. Our lives will begin to reflect the faith we have. We won't be perfect, we will still get things wrong but God will forgive the past and continue to help us live for the future.

James finishes his chapter 2 with the words *For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead.* He is saying the same thing. If we have the spirit living within us our faith will result in us producing good works, living as Jesus lived, bearing the fruit he wants.

So rather than it being an "either or" – an emphasis on either our faith or our works (the things we do), it is much more of a "both and". We need both faith and works – indeed our works – what we do, the way we live – flow from our faith. If our faith is alive and strong, we will learn to live as Jesus lived.