

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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James 2:1-26 *Show Me Your Faith*

James is deeply concerned to get across to Christians how their faith in Jesus Christ should affect their attitudes and their actions. If that was an issue in the 1st C., it is clearly one for us today. Too often in American society Christians come across as critical, censorious, and self-righteous; everyone knows what they're against, but it's hard to know what they're for, especially with regard to the common good. James wants it to be clear that Christians are called to something far better – a “living faith” as opposed to a “dead faith.”

1) *No Discrimination*

In this section, James deals with an attitude, and the actions that flow from it, that should not exist in the Christian community - in a word, *discrimination*. “As believers in Jesus Christ, do not show favoritism.”

He illustrates his point with an exaggerated story – in the kind of hyperbolic language that Jesus was so fond of using – about two visitors in a meeting of Christians, presumably gathered for worship. One man has gold rings and fine clothes that mark him out as an aristocrat – perhaps one of the “equestrian order” in Roman society. He is welcomed enthusiastically, and given a good seat. Another visitor is in rags – a beggar – who is told “sit on the floor”! If this is the way your Christian fellowship works, says

James, “have you not discriminated among yourselves?”

Now we may laugh at the imagery, and pride ourselves that we would never do such things! Of course we welcome everyone who comes, no matter who they are or how they dress. Or do we? We should maybe examine our attitudes to people, to see if we do not in fact secretly prefer some over others. Of course, preferring to spend time in the company of people “like us” is as old as human culture – tribes and clans and guilds and clubs are ancient and universal! But here is something that Christians should know better than anyone that such in-groups are always tainted by the effects of the Fall, and too often represent the worst of human nature and not the best. The Church of Jesus Christ is meant to transcend all cultural divisions, and bring together in common faith all kinds of people who would not “normally” associate with each other.

The Church is not “a voluntary association of like-minded people,” the Church is not a club; but a community bound together by faith and the love that springs from faith, a people “called out” by God to worship and serve him, and to model the kind of human community that he intended. So discrimination of any kind is forbidden in the Christian community. James’ word to Christians is simple: there can be no divisions in the Church of Jesus Christ – over “race,” education, appearance, age, skills, wealth, or anything else that gives humans

“standing” in their sub-group. In short, stop judging people by the fallen standards of the world, and start looking at them as God looks at them. In his eyes, all are made in his image, all are alike, all are equal.

Now I mentioned last week that one way we know that God is good is that he always treats us better than we deserve. You may have said to yourself “Well, he does that to everyone, not just to believers.” That is true: as Jesus said, his Father in heaven “sends his rain and sun on the just and the unjust.” God is “no respecter of persons.” The difference for Christians is that *they know that*, whereas many other people do not! Because Christians know that God is gracious to them, it affects all their attitudes and their actions, especially the way they see other people!

So we should be aware of God’s grace to us, shown most abundantly in Jesus Christ who came to offer us reconciliation to God, and allow our minds to be shaped by that instead of by the value systems and hierarchies of the world. That means extending the same welcome to everyone – not just at the door of the church, but in the parking lot, around the tables at coffee hour, chatting in the Parlor. Nobody should come in and feel a stranger, feel alone, feel unnoticed and unwelcome – especially in a small congregation like this. In a big church it’s easier to get lost or overlooked or even to hide; but not here!

Now in case you think this is all obvious and we would never do such things, let me remind you that people have come and gone from this church over the years, saying they never felt at home here; people have dropped out and disappeared and wondered why nobody noticed or called or cared. And I know from experience that it is all too possible to act in just the exaggerated way that James describes with the rich and poor

visitors: I can never read this passage without a painful memory from 30 years ago.

I was a deacon in an affluent suburban church near Boston. It was Christmas Eve; the services were candle-lit and beautiful - much as ours are here - and the sanctuary filled up early. I stood outside the closed sanctuary doors with the ushers, directing people into the overflow area in the auditorium, when just a couple of minutes before the service a well-dressed couple approached the sanctuary. I recognized him immediately: he was a nationally known TV broadcaster who was a friend of the Pastor’s. Without a moment’s hesitation, I hissed to the ushers “find them a seat,” and showed them into the crowded sanctuary. I have never forgotten the shame I felt when I realized what I had just done.

Christians – do not show favoritism, do not discriminate. When we do, we bring shame on the name of Jesus Christ, and we keep people away from him, judging them to be less worthy than we are of a place near Jesus at his table. If we would truly realize how gracious God has been to us, it would impact our attitudes to other people.

2) *Show Me Your Faith*

James’ second theme in this section is one we have heard already – that true faith will show itself in “good works.” Here he is less practical and more rhetorical: “What good is it if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?” Or in an imaginary debate: one says “I have faith, you have deeds;” James, we assume, answers “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.” In fact, James insists, “faith without deeds is dead and cannot save you.” What’s more, your deeds have to be real ones, not pious wishes – it’s not enough to

say to a needy person "Go in peace, God bless you, I will pray for you." We're supposed to help people in concrete ways.

Now if you have an ear for New Testament language, you know that this is a passage that so many readers over the years, especially Luther, have thrown up their hands over – saying James is here contradicting Paul's clear teachings of "justification by faith alone." And there has undoubtedly been a great deal of confusion within and among the churches in understanding Paul and James.

What is at issue here? What James and Paul would immediately *agree* on is that no amount of human good deeds can ever be sufficient for anyone to present themselves for approval before God. *Nobody* is reconciled to God by having done so much good that God finds himself obligated to them – on the contrary! Nor does anyone do enough good deeds to compensate for the bad ones they have done. Paul, quoting Isaiah, says "there is no-one righteous, no not one." James says "anyone who breaks any one of God's laws is guilty as a law-breaker."

Now there has been plenty of confusion over this. If you were brought up, as I was, in a church that hardly mentioned the saving work of Jesus Christ, but constantly emphasized how your good deeds would please God, you came away with the impression – whether this was the official church doctrine or not – that you better work hard to do good, so that when one day God weighed your pluses and minuses, he would give you a passing grade! Even if their official doctrines say they believe in "justification by faith," too many churches leave the impression that what they mean is "become acceptable to God by good deeds." It has therefore been an unbelievable release for many of us to come to the Bible, and read

that God does not treat us according to our balance sheet of good and evil, but according to the atoning work of Jesus Christ, who gave himself to reconcile to God anyone who puts their trust in him and not in themselves.

What then of faith and good deeds? James says *one should lead to the other*. Paul says no amount of good deeds will justify you before God. There is no contradiction. Paul was talking about obedience to the Law of Moses being inadequate if we want to be right with God; James is talking about the ethical life of a person who has come to faith in Jesus Christ, and wants to know what difference that should now make to his or her life. Paul says it clearly in his letter to the Ephesians (Eph 2:8-9): "*It is by grace you are saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.*"

Now this is standard fare, which many Protestants and all Evangelicals can quote. Far too few go on to the next sentence, where Paul says: "*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*" Here you have the whole picture: God's grace, God's gift of faith, brings us salvation in Jesus Christ. No amount of "good works" weigh in on our behalf at that point, so "none of us can boast" that we deserve God's favor, and there is no room in the community of Christian believers for any feelings of superiority, favoritism, or discrimination. But once we have received that grace, and that gift of faith, our calling is to do the good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do.

People of faith show it; they show it by their attitudes to other people, and they show it by their good actions. If not, says James, they are like dead men walking; their faith is as good as dead. So here is his warning – do not separate what God has joined together:

as the body and the spirit make up one person, and when they are separated, you have only a corpse; so faith in God and good actions together make up a Christian, and when they are separated, you have only "dead faith."

You and I have lived through almost two generations of American church practice where faith and action were too often separated, and we wonder why the church seems so powerless? Liberals claimed to be full of good works, but their faith was in what exactly? Conservatives made big claims to faith, but seemed not to care much about helping anyone. Thank God that is now changing, on both sides. Our calling is to have faith in Jesus Christ, and not in our own deeds; and then to allow that faith to shape our attitudes to other people so that we not only value all people equally, but serve them in any way we can – because that is what Jesus Christ did, and has called us to do. "We love," as John says in his letter, "because he first loved us."

Let us pray...