

---

## Prayers

### To God

*Weekly theme: the history of God's people*

Dear Jesus, You came into the world as a time when people were uncertain about the future; the Empires that ruled were harsh but apparently benign, and people had all manner of beliefs about God. In the midst of all this, You showed the truth about God to a world that was desperate for healing, for comfort and for true knowledge. We praise You for what you did in the first century, Lord Jesus, now come and do this same work today. **AMEN**

### For myself

*Pray for zeal. Pray for the fires of enthusiasm to burn brightly within your soul, not to make you into an extremist, but a truly committed believer who is prepared to do whatever God requires of You.*

### For others

*Pray for sportsmen and women, who sometimes endure considerable pressure especially if their incomes are not as high as those who are at the forefront for their respective sports. Pray for any you know who are in the world of sports or who are trying to break through into premier sporting activity.*

## Meditation

(A personal enquiry about prayer)

When do I pray?

Every hour? Every day? Once a week? Occasionally?

The Lord says: 'I'm open all hours'.

How do I pray?

In a word? The odd sentence? Set words? Form the heart?

The Lord says: 'Speak as you wish'.

Where do I pray?

At home? By myself? Only with others? At Church?

The Lord says: 'I'm always there'.

What do I pray?

About me? About my family? My work? What I should do?

The Lord says: 'Tell me all about it'.

# Bible Passage

## James 2:14-19

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people say they have faith but do not show the evidence of it? Can such faith save them?

<sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and no daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat well," and yet you do not give them what their bodies need, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup> Therefore faith without practical deeds, is, by itself, as good as dead.

<sup>18</sup> But someone will say, "You have faith and I have practical deeds." So then, show me the faith you have that is separate from your deeds! Instead, I will show you my faith through what I do.

<sup>19</sup> It is good you have faith in one God; even the demons have faith, and tremble in fright!

## Review

It seems as if James has been boiling up to this outburst since the beginning of his letter, but what he says here in chapter 2 has caused controversy throughout the life of the Church. The simple principle that lies behind this passage is that for any person, unless faith is demonstrated in the doing of good deeds then it is questionable whether faith truly exists. James is not doubting the doctrine of salvation by grace, but he is certainly doubting that someone can be saved without it making a difference to what a person does. He is also questioning the faith of those who claim to be saved, but whose deeds are opposite to the values of God's Kingdom; for example, like those who treat others with favouritism (2:1-7).

Certainly, James' letter is rather blunt, but his concern about what Christian people do is not really different from that of the other Gospel writers. Paul, for example, wrote most of his letters to correct or chastise Christians in the various churches he had founded, because of their failures. Mostly, while claiming to stand firm in faith, they had begun to do things that were not commensurate with the life of Christ, or with truer faith. James' letter here is little different, and together with the other great letters of the new Testament, it is a strong hint to God's people about the failings of the Church. Christians are indeed a people saved by Christ, but the Church has always had problems putting the teaching of Christ into action.

Earlier in chapter 1 (1:22-25), James made the same point about the need to show Christian faith in action. In our study of that passage, we highlighted James' insistence that faith was not a religious addition to everyday life, like a means of nurturing the spirit alongside exercise to keep the body fit! His illustration there was of someone responding to an image seen in a mirror, and this helped him make his point about deeds arising from underlying beliefs. Here in this passage, he offers a new illustration of the need for faith in action, giving the example of helping people who have no shelter, food or clothing. His observation is cuttingly critical of self sufficient Christians who are unwilling to put faith into action; *'faith without practical deeds is, by itself, as good as dead'* (2:17).

Right at the beginning of this passage however, James asks a very pertinent question; *'what good is it ... if people say they have faith but do not put it into action? Can such faith save them?'* (2:14). At first sight, James seems to question the very doctrine of salvation by grace alone; he seems to say that faith, at least in part, is dependent upon 'doing good'. Now the

traditional understanding of 'salvation by grace' is that salvation is won through no merit of the believer, meaning that people cannot obtain this salvation by their own efforts. But we should be very careful. James is not saying that salvation can be achieved by doing good deeds alone. He is merely expressing doubt that a person's claim of 'salvation by faith' can be real unless this godly transformation of the soul is shown in subsequent good deeds. James is not arguing about the way salvation works, rather he is complaining about the way people put faith into practice, to the point that if it is not 'practised', he challenges whether it really exists!

This is an essential and Scriptural argument. Throughout, the Bible insists that God wants His people to do good deeds, and though Jesus saves people for many reasons, one of them is so that they will do God's good work. They are to work for Him in the world and in His Kingdom, for this is what it means to be a disciple (Luke 14:27, Matthew 10:12f. 28:19, Mark 16:15 2 Cor 9:8, Col. 1:10 etc.)!

James' description of Christian inactivity is cringing; *'if a brother or sister has nothing to wear and no daily food, and one of you says ... "Go in peace, keep warm and well" and yet do not give ... what is the good of that?'* (2:15). How easy it is to read such Scriptures and imagine in our hearts that we would never do such a thing! But the truth is that Christian people have continued to do this for centuries. Some today believe that the poor are only poor by their own choice, and in a free world, they should buck up and get on with life; I know this having had it said to my face. This Scripture forever stands in the way of their hoped for clean conscience about the poor.

As James continues, he describes a situation in which someone claims to live by 'good deeds' while another has 'faith'. James responds to this with a resoundingly clear summary of his position, which is that *'I will show you my faith through what I do'* (2:18). No one can resist the logic of this Scripture, which is that if faith is real then it will show through what the believer does.

But if you try to read this verse carefully (2:18), you will find that it is rather more complex than we imagine at first. In today's world, the one who challenges James here seems to be like someone who claims to be a 'non-spiritual' Christian who is nevertheless a good worker; it is a claim often made today. Surely, it is said, good works are adequate for redemption, and why would God reject someone who does what is good? Why would the 'boss' have nothing to do with a good worker? But James will have none of this, and he objects fundamentally to the separation of faith and deeds, because for him, the two are locked together. This verse therefore confirms that despite what he has just said about the need to put faith into practice, James is firmly in the camp of those who believe that merely doing good is not of itself what Christianity is about. For him, and for all believers, believing and doing good go together, without question.

In the Roman world of the first century AD, people thought of existence as a combination of 'physical' and 'spiritual', to the extent that these two worlds were utterly different. There was therefore a danger of some thinking that 'belief' and 'action' were completely separate entities. In his day, James fought this 'dualist' philosophy of life, and it is interesting that in today's world, so similar to that of the Roman world of multiple religions and philosophies, his words still have power today. If we handle his words with care, James' teaching is a vital ingredient to Christian teaching today.

# Discipleship

## ***Application***

### ***Dealing with poverty***

James does not purport to have all the answers to the world's problems, except in the heart of one who knows the compassion of Christ for those who are marginalised by the world and suffer accordingly. We live at a time when the poor of the world are increasing; a short while ago the UN trumpeted its program for providing education to ALL children everywhere by 2015. The nearer we get to this date, news reports say that the numbers of millions of children who have no education is now rising rapidly; the current market forces of depression destroy humanity just as well as the market forces of growth enrich them.

### ***Faith and works***

Unfortunately, I have often been involved with discussions on this passage amongst Christians which have failed to find common ground. This is largely because those who insist on a certain understanding of salvation by grace alone have refused to accept that the saving work of God bears any necessary consequence in the life of the believer. They see this as a purely spiritual act between the believer and God through Jesus, unrelated to how a believer lives or what a believer does, past or present. I regret it if I have failed to convince people that as Scripture plainly teaches, faith and action go hand in hand.

There are many passages of Scripture that refute such a separation of ideas. The Bible as a whole never separates the 'spiritual;' from the 'physical' as if they are two different things. After all, Jesus Himself was both God and human being, both spiritual and physical in one. If God and His salvation was a purely spiritual matter, then why did Jesus have to come into the world to achieve it? As Paul puts so eloquently,

*'Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave ...' (Phil 2:6,7)*

## ***Ideas for what to do***

- Audit what you spend your time doing each day. How much of it reflects your faith, and how does it do this?
- Are there any people who you know who tend to object to James' stance here? If so discuss this with them in the light of reading this study.

## ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Are these words of James helpful to people today? Is James still misunderstood?
2. Do people believing that the 'spirit' is the unseen bit of us, and the physical is the 'seen' bits? Why is this so, and why is it wrong?
3. How do you imagine that James' letter would be received today in some of our very different churches?

## Final Prayer

My Lord; keep me purposeful in faith. Do not let me wander where the world would have me go, and so through roaming fail to meet You where I ought. Make me conscious of Your purposeful guidance and thankful for its direction; for I know I will never be lost, in You!  
AMEN