

Walking the Walk

James 2: 1 - 14

I took up my own challenge (as a number of you did) earlier this summer to take on a more disciplined reading of the Bible. I signed up with one of the websites that I listed in the bulletin – it is a ‘through the Bible in a year’ program. It sends me emails every day with a reading - three chapters a day, and five on Sunday. It actually started me somewhere in the middle of the Bible – somewhere in Psalms. So I’ve read through half of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Isaiah. The day we left on vacation I began Jeremiah 1, and finished that book the day we arrived home. So, I spent two weeks on vacation reading chapter after chapter of messages of gloom and judgment, of the hardheadedness of the people of Israel who just refused to listen to what God was trying to tell them.

And in the end, the temple is burnt down, the city of Jerusalem is sacked, looted, and destroyed. The walls are breached, and everyone, save a few of the poorest inhabitants, were either killed or deported; the ones who were left were there to till the gardens and vineyards for the Babylonian conquerors. With the exception of a few chapters and isolated verses here and there, this is not an uplifting book! I was glad to finish Jeremiah. Except, then came Lamentations, which is Jeremiah’s expression of his profound sadness over what God had allowed to happen to his precious land. Also a tough read.

Yet, I’m gaining a new perspective in reading the Bible straight through – although it’s not the way I would recommend reading it for most people, especially new Christians. I’m pretty sure that I’ve read the entire Bible before, but I don’t think I’ve ever read all of it continuously. I took a course in Jeremiah in college, and even then, I read *parts* of it – books *about* it, etc. So, I already knew how it was going to end, I knew the focus of Jeremiah’s message before I began reading it this time.

But you kind of get into Jeremiah’s head a little bit as you read the whole thing... (I got the same sense in reading Isaiah straight through) you start to feel his frustration, his pain... I found myself seeing – and admiring – the relentlessness of his preaching, this message that no one

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wanted to hear. They kept giving him opportunities to change it, to soften it up a bit... but he wouldn't. He *couldn't*. You don't get a real taste of Jeremiah if you're just reading chapter 29 or some other verses as great as they are.

That sense of it all 'fitting together' has spilled over to me as I was reading the Lectionary epistle for today, which is James 2: 1 – 14. I've heard sermons on the beginning of this passage, and I've heard even more based on the *end* of it, the part about faith without works being dead.

But as I read it this week I began wondering what the end had to do with the beginning.

The chapter begins with James talking about discrimination – about begin careful not to cater to the rich in worship... a warning against making decisions, or judgments about a person's *heart* based on their clothes or some other aspect of their appearance. Assuming that a person's value is based on their financial *worth* or their appearance and treating the rich better.

And the passage ends with James' famous statement, one that he restates a few different ways throughout this short book, that "Faith without works is *dead*."

There have been some who have talked about a conflict between the teaching of James and that of Paul – I know pastor HeyYoung talked about this a bit last week. Martin Luther called the book "an epistle of straw" and wanted to remove it from the New Testament canon! He felt that its message was in conflict with the New Testament teaching on Grace.

But there really is no conflict, James and Paul are actually complimentary, although they emphasize different things – their perspective is different.

Paul's life teaching was that works (or good deeds) can not save us. They are useless in earning anything for us from God. Paul writes in Ephesians 2: 8

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves,

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it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

He's saying that we can't *do anything* to earn God's love. But the good news, says Paul, is that we *don't have to!* God's love is offered to all, freely, as a free gift. Grace is a gift.

But that is not all that Paul teaches! Bradley Nassif, a professor of theology at North Park University in Chicago said "Grace is opposed to merit, but it is not opposed to effort." In other words, just because we're living under grace doesn't mean that we're not supposed to do anything! In fact, there is a high expectation for change in a believer's life – something that we talk about frequently here.

The *whole* of Paul's message is not just that God's grace is free and it is always enough for all of our sin, but that God's grace then calls us – leads us - into a better way of life... God forgives us and releases us into freedom. Freedom to live as Jesus lived, to become "*Christians*" – 'little Christs' in this world.

The very next line in Ephesians 2 says this:

*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works,
which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Our new creation in Christ, according to **Paul**, is for the purpose of doing good works. Paul stands in clear solidarity with the rest of the Bible writers – Old and New Testament – in affirming (as Jesus did) that "we are known by our fruit". Or, to put it in more modern language, "If we're going to talk the talk, we need to walk the walk." You can't separate the walk and the talk.

Paul got himself into much trouble in his life and ministry by his constant proclamation of God's forgiving grace being available to everyone who asks. Like Jesus forgiving the woman caught in the act of adultery or forgiving the thief on the cross next to his, the Gospel teaches a grace that

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is independent from our works – as far as our *earning* it, or deserving it. It is free – based on the love of God and the merit of Jesus’ sacrifice. And perhaps we have so focused on that part of Paul’s teaching that we miss this other part which is, literally, *everywhere* in his writings: our faith doesn’t mean anything if there is no evidence, no fruit resulting from it.

Paul, as you may know, was arrested for his preaching. He looked at these arrests as opportunities to spread the gospel in new and high places. One such opportunity was Paul’s defense before King Agrippa II (the last in the family of Herod the Great).

It’s recorded in Acts 26. Just one line of his defense, where he is summing up his entire message:

First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds.

Isn’t this what James is saying? Isn’t this what James means when he says,

I will show you my faith by my good deeds.”

So in today’s passage, we have this statement by James that has caused so much controversy and discussion in the Church over the ages that we may lose sight of what *else* he may be saying.

In the beginning of this passage, remember, he is talking about discrimination. So, again, (after getting here in a round-about manner!) let’s think about this: what does the beginning have to do with the end of this passage?

James’ statement, [¹⁴ *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them?*] comes right *after* his discussion of the way some treat the rich as opposed to the poor in the Christian community.

I think that the key to this, the unifying factor in this passage, may be the word ‘deeds’ (sometimes translated ‘works’). What are works? We tend to think about ‘deeds’ in the Christian faith, as specific good things that we do – i.e., helping someone with a financial need, or taking

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time to care for someone who is hurting... and these *are*, in fact, what good deeds are.

So, at least one thing that James is saying in this passage (and it's pretty obvious) is that we should be doing good deeds. His immediate example is of a person with physical needs:

'Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

So the works here are the obvious things: saying "God bless you" to a hungry person and walking away is about the same thing as saying "good luck", it doesn't mean anything, really.

But the beginning of this passage is *also* teaching us something about works, about what James is thinking of when he mentions *good deeds*. And I think it might be saying that not only what we do is important, but who we do it *to* is just as important; and in fact, if we are missing this point, our faith then may be in danger of falling into the category of 'dead and dieing'.

If our 'good deeds' – even if they are entirely motivated by our faith – if they are only directed to a select group of people, James says we're missing the true fruit of faith. Now, this may be difficult to hear... I think if we're honest, we have to admit that there is some kind of 'sliding scale' describing our ability and willingness to offer our 'good deeds'. You know what I'm saying?

It's easier for us to 'love' (in terms of Christian conduct) some people than others. And, in fact, there are probably (again, let's be honest here) some people that we might find almost impossible to show grace to! There may be a certain group of people that we have so little interest in, or consider so despicable that we *don't even see them*.

Here's an example... (I'm not sure if this is a good one or not!) A couple of weeks ago there was a great buzz nation wide, but especially in Philadelphia, over the Eagles signing of Michael Vick. There were people – I'm sure some of you – who feel very strongly that this was a bad thing, that he shouldn't be allowed back into the NFL because of the terrible things that he did to

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all those dogs.

As a dog lover, (and as an avid Eagles' fan) I have to admit I had mixed feelings about this myself. And a number of people asked me what I thought about this signing. My response was basically that I have a huge respect for Tony Dungie, a former Super Bowl coach, and a deeply Christian man of high integrity... and there was Dungie at the press conference announcing the signing. And he was saying, "This man understands what he has done, and he is trying to change his life." And he vouched for him.

So, to mix my sports metaphors, let me throw you a curve ball here.... and ask you this: (because even for us fans, the Eagles play a *game*, and ultimately it's not that important!) What if Michael Vick shows up next week in one of our services? Would he be welcome? Its an interesting question – because it addresses both sides of James' teaching, doesn't it?

Would we ostracize him because of his past? Or would we fawn over him because of his fame, or (potential) riches? So the larger issue here is 'where does our compassion end?' Where do we draw the line and say, "This person, or this kind of person is *not* someone that I will care for"?

The mission statement of this church for well over 10 years now states that we are here to share the love of Jesus Christ with a hurting world... through words and actions. I guess the question that I'm asking us to consider this morning is something like this: how wide do we cast that net? Who is included/ excluded in our 'hurting world'?

James writes about excluding the poor. There are congregations who are excluding others who are hurting, others who need to hear and experience the love of Christ Jesus, and they don't even realize it. Maybe because of economics... maybe because of the way they dress or how many piercings that they may have, or the color of their skin, or where they've been in the past, or their political views...

Philip Yancey, in an article in Christianity Today hits the nail on the head

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As I read accounts of the New Testament church, no characteristic stands out more sharply than [diversity]. Beginning with Pentecost, the Christian church dismantled the barriers of gender, race, and social class that had marked Jewish congregations. Paul, who as a rabbi had given thanks daily that he was not born a woman, slave, or Gentile, marveled over the radical change: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

One modern Indian pastor told me, "Most of what happens in Christian churches, including even miracles, can be duplicated in Hindu and Muslim congregations. But in my area only Christians strive, however ineptly, to mix men and women of different castes, races, and social groups. That's the real miracle."

Diversity complicates rather than simplifies life. Perhaps for this reason we tend to surround ourselves with people of similar age, economic class, and opinion. Church offers a place where infants and grandparents, unemployed and executives, immigrants and blue bloods can come together. Just yesterday I sat sandwiched between an elderly man hooked up to a puffing oxygen tank and a breastfeeding baby who grunted loudly and contentedly throughout the sermon. Where else can we find that mixture?

When I walk into a new church, the more its members resemble each other—and resemble me—the more uncomfortable I feel.¹

James writes:

¹² Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment... ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

May the Holy Spirit grant us understanding to not only hear... but to act on his word.
Amen

¹ Philip Yancey, "Denominational Diagnostics," Christianity Today (November 2008), p. 119