

Pentecost 14 B 09 James 2:1-26

Faith without works is dead. You've probably heard this before. These words came from the pen of James. This is the favorite verse of those who would like to coerce good behavior out of you and whip you into shape in order to get you to earn your keep in the kingdom of heaven. But to speak this way is to get the word of God mixed up and misunderstood.

As we think about our own thoughts words and deeds it is essential that we maintain proper order. First we proclaim, then we exhort. We declare salvation, then we direct people to serve each other.

This book is a hotly contested writing. Many would like to use it as kindling for their fireplace. But before we call his letter "the epistle of straw" and label James a heretic, let's remember that though he was a little slow in coming to the faith, he was nonetheless embraced by the apostles and a witness of the risen lord. So let's at least give this book a look to see what we find.

Last week we heard Jesus speak about various gross public sins that are undeniable, "...sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice..." These sorts of things are dangerous, they're hard to hide and they are embarrassing. But this week we hear from Jesus' little brother James. James is concerned about hypocrisy, the sin of the religious. Not the big, bad ugly sins that the unbelievers out there are busy doing in the world, but the polite, acceptable, pious with hands folded sins that a congregation of believers does. Stuff like the unbridled tongue, all the gossiping that goes on behind the scenes in the church parking lot, all the backstabbing that takes place in the back rows of congregational meetings. Stuff like playing favorites with the rich, so when a guy rolls up to church driving a late model Mercedes and wearing an Armani suit, you escort him to the best seat in the house while a smelly bum in rags gets shown the door because the rich guy pays the bills that balance the budget, right?

James says "Wrong,". When you insult the poor, you insult the image of faith that Jesus described as he said "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort." The only way any of us are admitted into the kingdom, whether we're rich or poor, is to trust in the one who became poor for us. God doesn't play favorites when it comes to death and resurrection. Neither should the church.

Now just in case you think you can work your way into the kingdom, James raises the bar beyond reach. Even if you keep the entire Law, every single commandment, and yet slip up in just one teeny, tiny point, you're guilty of the whole Law. Go straight to outer darkness, weeping, gnashing of teeth. One point, one stray word, one lustful glance, one momentary thought. And in an instant all is lost. As Jesus said, "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect." The law is unbending, unmerciful, unrelenting. No sin will go unpunished. God is not impressed with our feeble attempts to be righteous in his sight. James helps us understand. Romans 3:19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. Through the law we see we are guilty. Galatians 3:24 So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. James gives us law that crushes us in order to direct us to the cross.

So far, so good, but it is the next section that really gets people riled up.

14What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? 15Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

When we look at James we have to remember who he is speaking to and why. He starts his letter by saying "2Consider it pure joy, my brothers." he refers to his hearers as his brothers 15 times. He is speaking to his brothers of the one true God, brothers in the faith, brothers of Christ. "2Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3because you know that the testing of your **faith** develops perseverance." he is assuming his hearers have faith. That is why you and I can take this letter personally, we have received faith and we constantly need his exhortation. We are saved through faith alone, but faith is never alone.

If you don't know the faith that "Jesus has rescued you already", then this letter is not for you anyway.

But it is for you. James says 18 [God] chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." James uses the same ideas that the other apostles use. Just as John proclaims, that we must be born of water and the spirit. James says this has been accomplished, as he tells us [God] chose to give us birth.

Listen to how close Paul and James really are. You probably already know, Ephesians 2:8-9 "8For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9not by works, so that no one can boast. 10For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." that's Paul telling you who you are and what your purpose is. James says 18He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. " James says the same thing. They both instruct us that the order is salvation, then service, grace then bear fruit, justification leads to sanctification. salvation is yours, and as a child of God, here is your purpose, your meaning, here is what you were made for.

James is instructing us in our purpose, to serve others. God does not need your good works, but who does? Your brother, your sister, your neighbor, everyone around you.

That's why he says 19My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. 21Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." The Word which is Christ is your salvation. It is already planted in you, it's yours trust it.

"22Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."

There you have heard the two concepts that James is talking about: proclamation and exhortation. James isn't telling people how they are saved; he's telling them how those who believe they are saved act. He's speaking to "those who hold the faith of Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." You are in the one true faith. You are brothers of Christ, children of God, therefore listen carefully. Our text says "As believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism." We are believers, and that is why we should make every effort to conform to our true identity, citizens of heaven.