

## James Chapter 2

Some things are useless without a partner:

Car without wheels, Gilbert without Sullivan, Posh without Becks, treacle sponge without custard, Tom without Jerry, Pookie without Garfield, and here James says faith without works.

They only make sense in partnership. Without Pookie Garfield has no one to hug, without Jerry, Tom has no one to chase. Without wheels your car is going nowhere. Without the car, the wheels stand even less chance.

Without works your faith is dead. Separating the two is like separating body and spirit. All you're left with is a corpse! They have no life in them.

We're in a bit of a tricky spot this morning in this chapter, where what James writes seems to be a contradiction of what Paul writes, or visa versa. Paul's teaching particularly in Romans indicates that its by faith alone that we are saved.

Yet here is James saying faith without works is dead.

In these circumstances a good rule is to read carefully, tread cautiously, and do our best to understand what the writer is trying to convey before applying it to our situation.

I'm sure if you've ever lived in any part of the country other than Lichfield you'll know that the same words can have different meanings in different places. Think of a walkway between houses. Now I'm going to call it for sake of argument an alley way.

I grew up calling an alley way between two houses a 'cut'. On moving to Tamworth I discovered that the same word 'cut' meant canal. But its also something you get when you slip with a sharp knife!

In Tamworth an alley way is known as a gulley, but I thought a gulley was like a miniature rocky valley.

In the same way, Paul and James I think, are using the same words in their letters, but giving them different meaning.

So faith, in the sense that Paul uses it is complete openness to God. Its our readiness to let God have his way with us.

In that sense, it is by faith alone that we're made right with God, and from that faith flows our response of love.

James, by contrast, when he talks about faith is criticising belief that doesn't translate into action. So if you know all about God, all about Christ, but that knowledge makes no difference to how you live your life, then your faith has no life.

And the same again with the word 'works'. Paul and James mean different things. Paul when he writes about works usually means 'works of the law'. So when he writes in Galatians and Romans about people not being made right with God by works he means keeping the strict laws of Moses – things like dietary and purity rules. These are not, says Paul, the things that make a person right with God.

James on the other hand when he talks about works isn't talking about sticking to the letter of the law. He's talking about being involved in acts of love and mercy.

Anyway don't just take it from me. A chap called Leslie Mitton who wrote a commentary that Ian referred to last week sums it up much better than I can:

He says 'Paul's emphasis is this. A man is justified by faith in Christ, and this cannot but produce in him good works, that is loving actions to others.

James' emphasis is: True faith by which a man is justified proves itself in Christ-like conduct towards others, and if such conduct fails to appear, what claims to be faith is shown to be not faith at all.'

Okay, if all that's a bit heavy, lets talk instead about football. When I was at college and discussion from lectures spilled over into discussion at the dinner table or at the coffee bar, or wherever we were chatting, there was an unwritten and unspoken rule that whenever the topic got too heavy, too theological and our brains started to smoke we would change the topic to football.

I'm, as some of you know, a Sunderland supporter. I call myself a fan. I know about the club. I've got a shirt and a scarf and several different hats and books and programmes and old match tickets. I get a regular news feed from the website. But (and this series seems to be turning into confessions from the lectern), my supporting doesn't translate into action. Since having the children I don't go to matches any more, and I don't listen to five live biting my nails, and I don't keep looking up the latest score on the telly. By James's standards, as a supporter I'm pretty much dead, useless because I know all about the team, but I do nothing about it.

Paul would say that if I really was a supporter, then all those things like buying tickets, travelling to matches, and biting my nails would happen anyway because I wouldn't be able to help but do them.

James has tough things to say to the people he wrote this letter to. And tough things to say to us too. There's not really a nice way of dressing it up, of making it a less powerful message. Last week we heard that talking about discipleship means absolutely nothing if we don't get on and do it. This week its pretty clear from what we've read this morning that if we say we have faith but our actions don't demonstrate it, then actually our faith is dead as a dodo. No actions, no faith!

Probably at some point when you were a child you saw an adult do or say something that they'd told you not to do, and were outraged by it! As an adult there's a fair chance that you might have told a child off for doing something that you know you do! Picking your nose for example, or not closing the cereal packet properly. That familiar saying 'do as I say, not as I do' can be very useful in those situations!

James is pretty much saying 'look! if you don't do it, don't even bother to say it!

So here's the biggy this morning. Do our actions reflect our faith? Do we actually put our money where our mouth is? Do we do the things we say we believe in? Or is it all really just a load of hot air? Are we in danger of being (as the accusation against evangelical Christians is sometimes levied) 'so heavenly minded that we're no earthly use?'

Do we say to those who Eugene Peterson describes as 'dressed in rags and half starved' 'Good morning friend. Be clothed in Christ. Be filled with the Holy Spirit.'? When what they really need from us is clothes and food.

Look! Isn't it obvious, says James, that God talk without God acts is outrageous nonsense?

I'll leave that one with you....

Right at the start of chapter 2 that we read a few moments ago there's a specific example of faith translating into action that seems to me to be important for us here. This body of believers called Wade Street Church.

'If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes right in after him, and you say to the man in the suit "sit here sir, this is the best seat in the house!" and either ignore the street person or say "better sit in the back row" haven't you segregated God's children and proved that you are judges who can't be trusted?'

Now I trust that we're not so hung up on where we sit that being up in the balcony or down in the stalls depends on social status. In James' day getting a seat or not was a big deal. It was all about social status. James writes as a challenge to this that God's kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God, and look here at what you're doing, you're actually making the decisions, the judgements, of who is worthy and who is not. Its a classic case of believing one thing and doing something else. The recipients of this letter were obviously not reflecting their faith by their actions.

But before we feel all smug because we don't minds where we sit, because we would never discriminate on those grounds, I believe these words from James are relevant for us as a church as well as individually. Maybe where we sit isn't important, but perhaps how we dress, or speak, or our level of education, or position at work is. Perhaps we treat people differently on those grounds, maybe without even realising it. But none the less we do it. Perhaps the people we invite to dinner, and share fellowship with, and drink coffee with, and approach to take on particular roles in the life of the church are the ones James describes as wearing the expensive suit. Perhaps James' challenge to us this morning is to say 'in the light of what I believe about God's people, how do my actions need to change?'

Separate faith and works and all you're left with is a corpse. Once we know what we believe, and who we believe in, God calls us to action. To borrow that phrase from Nike 'Just Do it!'