**James 2:18-16 Faith & Works**

The letter of James is a manual of practical Christianity. If we want to know what our life should look like as a Christian –we should read James. It is full of down to earth instruction about how to live out our faith.

When we get to chapter 2 (the first part of which we looked at last week) we get to the heart of James’ letter – the tension between faith and works. Christians have always had great difficulty in understanding this relationship. The early church in particular struggled with it - especially those believers who had Jewish roots.

It was to these Jewish Christians that James was writing. These people had been taught the message of grace that we read in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph\_2:8-9).

But like us, they faced the challenge of relating faith to works in their daily Christian lives. In the early church they ended up with two extremes. On one hand, there were the Judaisers who taught that in order for someone to be an authentic Christian, that person first had to become a Jewish convert and then be converted to Christ – they were still bound by the law. Then on the other hand, there were those who felt that because they were saved by grace, they could just coast along, living in compete disregard to the law; that because they were saved, they had nothing to worry about!

As far as Paul was concerned, Christians bringing themselves back under the bondage of the law was plain heresy! His letter to the Galatians meets this false teaching head-on.

You foolish Galatians! (says Paul) Who put a spell on you? Before your very eyes you had a clear description of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross!

Tell me this one thing: did you receive God's Spirit by doing what the Law requires or by hearing the gospel and believing it?

Paul went on to teach that, “the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. (Gal\_3:24-25).

We have our share of ‘Judaiser– types’ today. There are denominations within Christianity that are full of rules – rules about what you can and can’t wear, rules about what you can and can’t do, rules about what you can or can’t believe. Before I met Jay, I went out with a guy who belonged to a particular church in Sydney where I was expected to cover my head when I went to worship, and in an era of miniskirts, to wear mine below my knees.

On the other hand, to take God’s grace for granted and to live without regard to the law Paul saw was just as heretical. In his letter to the Romans, he said, “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Rom 6:1-2

In James’s day as in ours, there were those in the church who were simply ‘passengers’. They’d made a profession of faith, which perhaps they sincerely meant at the time, but before long, they were just relying on their intellectual understanding of the faith, rather than living it out. In v19, James is scathing towards those who just profess their belief intellectually, without living it out. “Even the demons believe” he says “and shudder”. Then he goes on to remind them of the stories of Abraham & Rahab and how their faith was expressed through their deeds.

I read of a young Christian guy who was working with teenagers involved in gangs in one of the high-crime areas of New York City. Through his ministry, scores of those young people came to a personal faith in Jesus Christ and were set free from the slavery of crime and violence.

As this community of faith began to grow, those new Christians began to reach out with love to their former gang members. Whenever one of those tough gang members would profess to receive Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, the more mature Christians would be concerned about whether they were really sincere in their commitment. They would share this message with the new converts. "Don't tell us that you are a Christian; we'll tell you!" In other words these young believers couldn’t just say they were Christian; they had to prove it by the way they lived.

These young people were saying just what James is teaching in this chapter of his letter. Authentic Christianity is not just saying you believe; it is *showing* you believe in appropriate action! We will be known as Christians not simply because we *say* we have faith, but by how we *demonstrate* that faith in our lifestyles.

James says that faith professed without appropriate deeds is worthless. He puts it very bluntly in v26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

So - It’s not good enough to just believe the Christian message with our minds –We need to make sure that our lives are living examples of what we believe. But it’s not easy, is it? Our natural bent is to resist putting ourselves out. We don’t like being uncomfortable or inconvenienced. We prefer not to be stretched or strained. We don’t like to be an embarrassment to others, and we certainly wouldn’t want to offend them. We’re all for a peaceful life.

Let’s look at this concept of ‘deeds’ for a moment. Other translations say ‘works’. Faith without works is dead. The word translated ‘deeds’ or ‘works’ comes from the Greek word *ergon* which comes from another word *ergo*, which means to work or toil, or an act, or a deed or doing or labour or work…. you get the idea.

There are two categories of deeds or works described in Scripture. There are the works of people done in the flesh, and there are the works which are done with the assistance of the Spirit which bring glory to God.

The works of the flesh are mentioned quite frequently in the New Testament. For example, Paul lists some of the works of the flesh in Gal\_5:19-21, which include adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contention, jealousy, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambition, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, and revelry. He concludes by saying that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal\_5:21). Paul also teaches that we are saved by grace through faith and not by our own works (Eph\_2:8-9). And people’s own works can actually be *good* in comparison to the previous list. But if our good works do not come from a heart cleansed before God, they are tainted with sin and just as worthless as the previous list.

The works of the Spirit are completely different. They don’t originate with us. They do not come out of our fallen humanity; they flow from the Holy Spirit. Paul teaches that we were created to live by these good works (Eph\_2:10). In contrast to the works of the flesh, Paul enumerates the works or "fruit" of the Spirit in Gal\_5:22-23, which include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Now the thing I find encouraging as we think about faith and works – is that as a Christian, there needn’t be any striving to produce the ‘works’ that please God. If we think of works or deeds in terms of fruit – the fruit of the Spirit – then all we need to do is provide the right conditions for growth and the fruit will come. Jesus spoke in terms of a vine and branches. “Abide (or remain) in me”, he said, “and you will bear much fruit.”

However, abiding or remaining in Jesus is an active process. It involves our whole being – our body, our mind and our spirit. Paul tells us what to do with our bodies and minds in Rom 12:1-2 “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your **bodies** as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your **mind**. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” And spiritually - we need to keep tuned in to Jesus – through prayer, and meditation and study of his Word. In a nutshell – we need to be completely surrendered to Jesus, at all times, in all places, responsive and obedient to him.

As we actively abide or remain in Jesus, the vine, the fruit will naturally appear. We will *find ourselves* wanting to serve Jesus wherever we can. It will be a *natural outcome* of being fully his! The works will emerge without us needing to sigh or grit our teeth.

However, living a life of surrender to Jesus will not always be easy – because it will bring us into continual conflict with the world, the flesh and the devil. At times it may be very costly. This is where Jesus is coming from in our Gospel reading this morning. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Our lives as Christians, if they are authentic and vibrant, will always carry within them an element of tension – tension between the flesh and the Spirit. To live lives which demonstrate our faith will not always be easy. At times will find ourselves at odds with our own human desires; at times we will find ourselves at odds with the world; and at times we may even find ourselves at odds with those whom we love. Yet as we continue to abide in Christ, the Holy Spirit within us will gradually transform us, degree by degree, into his image.

It’s not always an easy journey, but as Jesus said, For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

Let’s pray.