

Sermon “Faith and Obedience”

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I was listening to Hillsongs worship while driving on a busy highway in Hawaii. The worship was beautiful! The lyrics, musicians and singers seem to create the perfect worshipful experience. And then...someone abruptly cut me off on the highway. I was shocked at how angry I became. I wasn't just angry because of the other driver's reckless behaviour; I was also angry because they disrupted the “worshipful” experience I was having. They broke my connection to this beautiful experience.

C. S. Lewis, in his book entitled “The Weight of Glory,” seems to explain this tendency in us to desire a connection to beauty. He said,

“We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.”

But is this desire to become a part of religious beauty faith? Are we really worshipping God when we listen to worship and appreciate its beauty? In today's passage, James is going to remind the new followers of Jesus that faith isn't just appreciating the beauty of God. Faith isn't just knowing His glory. Faith means that these new followers will follow, obey, the words of Jesus and the guidance of the Spirit he has given. Faith without deeds is not the faith God seeks to grow within us.

Last week we learned that James was concerned that the new followers of Jesus were rejecting their freedom in Christ. They were rejecting or ignoring the words Jesus had planted in their hearts. They were resisting the Spirit that was given to them to guide and empower them as they obeyed.

The fearful new followers were rejecting God's guidance and instead were relying on their own judgments. They looked at the rich and influential and thought they should prefer them over others. They thought they would be safe under their protection. But they had fallen into a trap they set for themselves. They gave themselves to the ones persecuting them. Following their fear and their flesh, they submitted themselves to mere men and their love for others dried up.

James rebuked them, telling them that they **MUST NOT** show favouritism because God doesn't. God is not the author of favouritism. In today's passage, James is instructing the new followers not to only hear the words that God has given him, but to obey them, to walk in the Spirit's power to show others God's love for all. His lesson starts with a fuller definition of faith.

1.) Faith Without Deeds is Useless

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or a 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? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

In James 2:14–17, James continues his warning against favouritism. He continues to warn the new followers to be filled with the Spirit of God and show His mercy to everyone. His warning is a call for obedience. James isn't trying to just teach the new followers a definition of mercy. His goal isn't to illustrate what mercy looked like in the past. James is calling them to be merciful to everyone. He is calling them to obey God and stop showing favouritism.

James gives the example of the importance of obeying the call to be merciful. He asks them to suppose what they would do if they noticed that a brother or sister were without sufficient food or clothing. If they saw their family member suffering would they only say, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed?" Of course not! People would give food and clothing to their family members who were suffering. James then holds up a mirror to the new followers and says in affect, "so be merciful! God doesn't just expect you to know that He is merciful, He expects you to be merciful with Him through the power of His Son and guidance by His Spirit.

This is an important lesson for new followers. In their fear of persecution, they may have redefined discipleship, the following of Jesus. They may have thought it was sufficient to be identified with the church, to be considered a member, but without having to obey the words of God, without having to do what Jesus was asking. If you asked them if they were Christians, they might have said, "Yes! Of course, I'm a Christian." But when it came to showing God's mercy, they were no longer being followers of Jesus. At Pentecost they were called Christians by others because they obeyed Jesus. Later they called themselves Christians without having to obey.

2.) Everyone Knows the Importance of Deeds

18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

In James 2:18–19, James seems to illustrate his point further. He seems to say, "anyone, even those outside of the church will say to you that deeds are vital!" Even those outside of the church will look at the new followers testimony of Christianity and say, "You have faith; I have deeds. You say you have faith, but they are without deeds. Your faith is worthless! I will show you what faith is! My deeds illustrate my faith. They cannot be separated! You say you Christians believe in one God? Fine! Does that merit some special admiration from others? Even wicked demons believe God is one!

James is saying to the new followers, "Do you think you are being a light to the world around you because you believe God was merciful to the world by giving His Son? Do you believe that God is glorified because you believe He was merciful to you at Pentecost?" James is saying, "Faith isn't only remembering what God has done. Faith is doing what He is calling you to do today." The new followers have started off at Pentecost with faith that obeys. They put their trust in Jesus and obeyed his call to share their possessions and gifts with each other. But their persecution and the fear that it caused has caused them just to remember and believe what God had done without obeying it. The faith of the new followers had become no better than the kind of believe that demons had!

3.) Deeds are a Mark of the Faithful

20 You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21 Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the

scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. 24 You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

In James 2:20–24, James tries to shake the new followers from looking at the heroes of faith as idols. James points to Abraham, a great man of faith. By bringing up Abraham, maybe some of the new followers would recall God’s great promise to him. God called Abraham to leave his country, people and even his father’s household. God then said to Abraham, “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you” (Genesis 12:2). God later repeated His promise saying, “You will be the father of many nations” (Genesis 17:4). Later God reminded Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child even in their old age. Sarah laughs at this, thinking she is too old! But finally Isaac, their son is born. And then God tells Abraham, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you” (Genesis 22:2).

The account says that when Abraham and Isaac “reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son” (Genesis 22:9–10). The account then says that an angel of the Lord stopped him. James is telling the new followers that Abraham was a man of profound obedience! His deeds spoke clearly about his faith. Abraham didn’t just know about God, he followed, he obeyed, His word.

By pointing to Abraham, it’s possible that James is reminding the new followers to be LIKE Abraham and not just a respectful admirer of him. It’s not enough just to know about Abraham or to respect his contribution to the nation that became Israel. It’s possible that James remembers the account when Jesus confronted the Pharisees in John’s Gospel. Jesus had said that they didn’t know the truth about God and so were enslaved. The Pharisees protested and said, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone...(they repeated) Abraham is our father” (John 8:33, 39). Jesus’ reply was about the obedience of faith. He said, “if you were Abraham’s children, then you would do what Abraham did” (John 8:39).

If James remembers this account, he is trying to instill in the new followers of Jesus the same principle. Do not just identify with the Abraham, do what he did! Don’t treat Abraham as a kind of idol. Don’t think that by simply admiring him or calling upon his name is what God requires. God does not want his followers to respect heroes of faith. He wants them to follow their example. It was the deeds of Abraham that revealed his faith in God, and that kind of faith was credited as righteousness.

4.) Deeds Over Idols

25 In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? 26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Finally in James 2:25–26, James makes a point that real faith is the issue and not idols. It’s easy to see how Abraham could become an idol for the Pharisees and for the new followers. Abraham is the one called by God, and it is through him that the nation is born. He has become in some form, the father of the nation. All of Israel could claim Abraham as an ancestor. God had fulfilled His promise to make Abraham’s name great among the nations. Having a great name, it is easy to see how others hope to attach themselves to him, to gain their self-worth by being in some way identified with him.

But, says James, faith that obeys is the key. Look at Rahab the prostitute! James shows how the faith of Rahab is “in the same way” like the faith of Abraham the father of the nation. When this prostitute, this non-Israelite,

this citizen of a people set for destruction by God, when she suddenly feared God and His will, she hid Israel's spies and gave them lodging. She repented and obeyed God's will and it was credited as righteousness. The father of the nation and Rahab the prostitute were brother and sister in faith. They were brother and sister because their faith was made perfect in their deeds, in their obedience.

Application

1.) Milford is longing to see the deeds of Jesus

As a pastor, what do I want my reputation to be in Milford? Do I want to be known as a nice person who encourages others? Do I want to be known as a person who was engaged in community development? These are good things, but do they reflect a fully mature faith in Jesus?

I was speaking with a Muslim friend who talked about his religion's practice of fasting during Ramadan. He talked about their fasting in order to place more of their trust in God. He talked about their fasting in order to discipline their bodies. He talked about things that Christians talk about during Lent. But isn't following Jesus more? Wasn't heaven itself revealed in Jesus on earth?

Encouraging others, being engaged in community work, fasting...all can be Christ's call for me. But there is more of what I know of Jesus and his words to me. He is the Son of God who is the perfect image of his Father. What if I took steps in following, obeying Jesus in ways I already know but don't put into practice?

When I received Alan Jamieson's email as I was reading today's passage, I knew I had to follow God's call to partner with Alan and NZBMS. Recently we've had someone attending our church who is keen to share their faith, to evangelize. After reading today's passage, I knew God wanted me to follow Him by partnering with this person to share with others in Milford.

How about us as a family? How is our faith as a whole? What is Jesus calling us to do that we already know, but have not yet taken a step of obedience? Is it to not show favouritism but to serve everyone as we read in James' letter last week? Is it not to seek our safety in idols? Are we relying too much on our knowledge of famous Christians we identify with or too much on our knowledge of what God has done in the past? Do we look down on others and say, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers" (Luke 18:11). Or do we look at everyone as equals in the sight of God and say, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner"? These are words we are being called to say!

Are we only looking at what God has done in the past, or are we looking at what God is doing today? God's word says, "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is (His) faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22–23). Jesus said, "...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). May we be a family that obeys these words today and in the week to come.

Conclusion

1.) Milford is longing to see the deeds of Jesus