

## **James: Loving your neighbour as yourself.**

### Bad Faith

James spends a lot of time talking about faith without deeds being worthless! And we all know what that means, don't we! That if you don't go away and put into practice the stuff that we believe in, then our faith is not manifesting in the right kind of action, so it is worthless faith. So – we believe something, then we go away and strive to do it! And it seems that today's reading from James is an attempt to show the kind of action that we should be doing if we are good, Christian believers, solid and worthy, good men and true.

I would like to begin by showing you a cheque. It is made out to me for the sum of £3500! Well, that is good news, is it not? I received it because this week, I was selling my car on an internet site called Autotrader. And since the cheque is coming from overseas, it is actually made out for a sum that is more than two thousand pounds more than I am selling my car for. But, once the cheque clears – I simply forward that two thousand pounds to this chap's bank account – I get the rest – and everybody is happy. He had sent me an email saying that he hopes he can trust me with his money. And of course he can! I will send him the full amount as requested ... the day I have my brain exchanged for a rhubarb crumble.

The only problem with this, is that although the cheque will clear – and I will then send the money via an internet transfer, through an international banking system. But then, after I have sent that couple of thousand pounds away – the bank discovers that this is a counterfeit cheque! They subtract the £3500 from my account. And there is no way of me retrieving the two thousand pounds from my bogus customer.

But I have kept the cheque as a souvenir. No banks or police are interested because this is the kind of internet fraud that happens all the time. I have since had another complicated email offer for the car – which offered to send me £4000 this time. So I guess we should not be surprised. But this kind of cheque is precisely the example of faith that James is talking about!

Remembering that credit comes from the Latin word for Faith – this cheque is a statement of credit, a statement of faith. The credit of the person who wrote it. But of course, this is the kind of credit that will never deliver. It looks like the real thing. It would clear through a bank as though it were the real thing. But in the end, the value of this cheque, is worthless – it will never be credited in my account. Faith without deeds – Credit, without that credit ever becoming a reality. Faith without deeds is as worthless as this cheque.

### The Royal Law

So... it is worth reconsidering what we consider the reality of faith without deeds. It is not, oh, I have a Christian faith so now I had better go away and do some good deeds. The reading today is not a load of moral exhortations, telling us to go away and do something now that we are good Christians, upright and true. Today's readings are rather a thermometer – a measure of whether our cheque is valid, whether our faith is real. The challenge of James to people who do not act with impartiality is not, "hey – you – stop acting with impartiality". It's not a question of giving commandments to people that they ought to jolly well obey because they are Christians now!

I remember being accosted once by a Squadron Leader. He had been listening in on a conversation between me and my friend. And I naturally, was dressed in my cabbage coloured kit – and was talking about, now that I had washed it a few times, it was nicely faded! And this Squadron Leader popped up out of nowhere and said “Nicely Faded! Nicely Faded! You’re in the military now! There’s no such thing as Nicely Faded!”

That was far more of a condemnation of my taste in military clothing. It was an accusation that in my soul, I was not a military person! I took the rebuke as a compliment – not on my taste in clothes, but on my status as a human being! Actually – the Squadron Leader was a Christian who I came to know quite well, even to the point of attending Bible Studies in his house! But he was right. It was a flash point for me, because I realised I was not cut out to be this kind of person – it wasn’t who I really was.

This is the kind of thing that is taking place in this chapter. The condemnation of favouritism is not an exhortation to try harder. It is a declaration that your entire Christian faith is as valuable as this cheque. There is nothing that you can do to make this cheque valid by becoming a better person. There is only one thing to do with this cheque!

James is not law making. He is not exhorting. He is being prophetic – he is naming faith for what it is! But there is a law in the passage that we read. It is called the Royal Law, and it is the horizontal axis of the commandment that we looked at this morning: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your strength and with all your mind and with all your soul.... AND ... Love your neighbour as you love yourself.

There are a thousand ways of saying this. Love your neighbour as you love yourself. Some atheist ethicists call it the Empathetic Principle. In pop language it is “Do as you would be done to.” In James, it is the Royal Law! (I have no idea why it is called the Royal Law – and whilst I’m sure there are ten competing and fascinating and plausible theories – I don’t care what it’s called!)

But even this law can be turned into something as worthless as my bogus cheque: one of the popular producers of dietary fat-fighting schemes was interviewed on Songs of Praise a few years ago. And I will never forget that interview – it made my blood boil! It went along these lines: Ah, well, I believe my dietary books are good Christian books. Because, Jesus tells us that we should love our neighbour as we love ourselves. That means, that we cannot love our neighbours until we have learned to love ourselves. And with my book, people will lose weight, gain self esteem, learn to love their bodies and then learn to love other people.

Now – mmmmm – phhhh – I would love to hear what James would say about this. What would James say about turning this foundational Christian command into its very opposite! It’s not very wise to do this nowadays, but I may as well do it anyway. This way of thinking is not just one that will evaporate as we grow in the faith. This is not how faith works! This selfism masquerading as Christian obedience is a way of thinking that comes from a different faith to the Christian one! It is as valuable as this cheque.

This is not to say that we should hate ourselves. After all we are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. ‘Does the clay say to the potter, what are you making? Does your work say he has no hands?’ (Isa 45:9) It is important to have a healthy awareness of who we are before God. Even as sinners, we have our heavenly Father’s looks and are loved by him.

To be sure, the problem of low self-esteem is a very real and damaging one, but self love is not the answer.

The opposite of self-love is neither self-hate nor self-neglect but self-denial. Our perpetual lust for self-love should be nailed to the cross where it belongs. Only through self-denial will our uncluttered lives become open channels through which the selfless love of God may flow. Such agape love, as one theologian put it, 'excludes all self-love. It recognises no kind of self-love as legitimate.'

A church full of Christians seeking love is repulsive; a church full of Christians offering love is magnetic. The beauty of God's love for the Church is that we receive it most fully when we give it most freely.

One law!

So James declares that these examples of disobedience is the clothing of Christian righteousness, reveal that our entire Christian life is a shambles. That, it seems to me, is the point of saying that if we break one part of the law like this, then we break the whole lot of it! It is not possible, with genuine faith, for that faith to manifest itself in a few bad ways here and there – but for the rest of our lives to be okay! Let's be clear – this is not to say that if we slip up at some point – we are nasty horrible worthless people. It is rather to say, as James says, that there are some ways of being that speak more loudly about who we really are, than we might care to realise.

That, in the end, brings us back to the Shema – the command to love God, because the Lord our God is one God. That does not come to us as some Trinitarian mathematical conundrum. Nor even is to say – oh, there is only one divinity. It is rather to say this. That the whole of life, in all its complexity, is not divided up amongst different authorities, different Gods that require different kinds of faith. Every dimension of our life, every part of this world, comes under the Lordship of this ONE God. So you cannot, at the same time, ignore this God in one part of your life and acknowledge him in another. I'm not saying that you should not ignore this God in one part of your life while you acknowledge him in another. I am saying you cannot – not that you should not.

You cannot because your faith, our faith, is in ONE God – our faith is one faith. Either this cheque is valid, or it is not. Either our faith in God is worth something, or it isn't! It seems to me that in this passage, James is not simply giving us some good worthy moral instructions so that we can become more effective in living the Christian life. He is basically throwing a naked flame into the midst of our lives, to see what happens.

And were we to be exposed to this flame, since we are going to be judged by this law of freedom, if we were exposed to this flame, this judgement, how would we fare. Do we need to try and live the Christian life a little more carefully, or do we need to have a serious look at where we are in our walk with God. Because it is pretty clear that James is asking us the latter question!