

Sermon - April 30, 2023

James 2:14-26

“ What Deadens Our Faith?”

It is not known who wrote the letter of James. It was long attributed to James, the brother of Jesus, who was the first to lead the church in Jerusalem. But more recently, for reasons I won't bother with now, biblical scholars say that it could not have been written by him. But from the salutation at the beginning, we know that it was not written to a specific congregation but was likely intended to be circulated to many churches, as James addresses it to the twelve tribes of the dispersion. The dispersion refers to Jews who lived outside of Palestine.

The book has also not been without its controversies. For example, the great 16th century reformer, Martin Luther, advocated for the letter to be removed from the Bible. Why? Because it appears to contradict the idea of “justification by faith alone”, which was the cornerstone of his theology which he derives from the writings of the apostle Paul. But I believe that Luther was wrong on that count.

Throughout a large portion of Paul's letter to the Romans he writes about how we are justified by our faith and not by works of the law. In his letter to the Galatians, 3rd chapter, verse 11, he writes, “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “ The one who is righteous will live by faith.” But notice that James speaks of works but does not speak of works of the law. Paul and James were talking about two different things!

Listen to what James writes in chapter one of his letter. He says, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this; to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” When Paul speaks about works of the law he is talking largely about ritual matters - matters such as circumcision, or abstaining from foods, or anything that makes you ritually impure. James is talking about works of charity, works that have to do with care for those in need, works that strive for peace and justice in the world - in other words, works that respond positively and in obedience to the teachings of Jesus! And I don't believe that Paul would have disagreed with that.

James is insisting that faith and what we may call works of love are inseparable. As he says in verse 26, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead.”

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew the Risen Christ says to his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything that I have commanded you”. It is known as the Great Commission. Unfortunately, the later part of that sentence is often overlooked. You can't claim to have faith in Jesus yet ignore what he taught.

I remember some years ago watching an interview with a certain celebrity, whose name I will not mention, who liked to make a big deal about his faith in Jesus. At one point the interviewer mentioned that Jesus taught that we should love our enemies. The celebrity replied, "Well, I don't care what Jesus said!". How can you claim to have faith in Jesus and not care what he said?

There is a reason that some bibles print Jesus' words in red. They represent the essence of what it means to be a follower of him. Notice that in the Great Commission Jesus says, "make disciples of all nations". Well, what is a disciple? A disciple is one who learns from a teacher, in Jesus' case a rabbi, and orients their life in accordance with that which is taught.

Granted, living a life according to the teachings of Jesus is not easy, particularly a teaching like the love of enemies. But we have to at least try, as well as trying to understand the reasoning behind it - to break the cycle of violence in the world.

Or what about something like his insistence that we turn the other cheek? Which we should understand as more than having to do with a physical confrontation. It also refers to how we should respond when we are verbally assaulted. If someone insults you, do you respond in kind? It was Gandhi who said that the most destructive weapon in the world is the human tongue. People can be crushed by the things we say. He also said that an eye for an eye eventually leaves the whole world blind. Again, it's all about breaking the cycle of violence, both physical and verbal.

Was Paul right when he said we are justified by faith alone through the grace of God? Yes, he was! But James was also right when he insisted that works of love are a necessary part of faith. Without works of love faith is barren! Amen.

Let us pray: We praise you, O God, that by the life death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you have delivered us from the power of death, making us truly alive to serve you. Free us from pride of self that we may live in community with one another and with all your people. Free us from the fear of the principalities and powers of this world that we may live and speak with courage, guided by your Spirit. Keep us rooted and grounded in your love and fill us with the power of your Spirit. Be glorified in our life together, through Jesus our risen Savior. Amen.