

James 2 - Rich and Poor; Faith and Actions

Kristin Jack

17 May 2015

So today we are continuing on our exploration & exposition of the book of James, which actually is a really remarkable book in the Bible for a couple of extraordinary reasons.

One of those, as Richard pointed out a few weeks ago when he started us off, is that James is an actual sibling of Jesus, his flesh & blood brother. How amazing this is when you think about it, that we have a document written to us by someone who grew up with Jesus, played with Jesus, rough & tumbled with Jesus, ate for thirty something years at the same table as Jesus, & in one sense knew Jesus of Nazareth better than any of the other writers in the Bible did, & when we read James closely, we see how much similarity there is between James' teaching & the teachings of Jesus in the first three gospels.

Another thing that I think adds to the potency of James' writings is the realisation that he, along with his other siblings for a period of time didn't actually really believe in Jesus. In fact according to Mark 3:21 they came to take charge of Jesus, for they said 'he is out of his mind'. But somewhere down the track James has his own conversion experience, & indeed we read in 1 Cor 15:7 that James has his own personal post-resurrection encounter with Jesus. Now we don't know at what point James' conversion took place, but we do know that he later becomes the leader of the Jerusalem church, & that by the time he writes this letter he is referring to his brother Jesus as 'the glorious Lord Jesus Christ'.

Before we dig deeper into the text of chapter 2, I want to stand back a bit & look at what this whole book is saying, & what it is saying in the context of the whole NT - because I'm quite concerned that often we miss the big picture of what Scripture is saying because we have this habit of just nibbling away at individual Bible verses, or focusing in on 2 or 3 verses here & there, instead of looking at the big picture that it is trying to tell us. So often in our churches, in our Bible schools & theological colleges, & in our own quiet times, we are so busy staring at each little verse - that is, at each little tree, in fact inspecting the bark on each little tree, that can we miss seeing the forest. And what is the forest? What is the big picture that the NT is trying to show us? We'll when we look at the start of Jesus' ministry, in Mark 1:15 we find that Jesus' first public proclamation is this : *"The time has come, the Kingdom of God is near. Turn around, change your mind, and believe this good news"*. When we look at the Lords prayer, the only prayer Jesus taught us to pray, we see that the heart of that prayer is to pray to God *"your Kingdom come, your will be done here on earth, AS it is in heaven."* And if we skip to the end of the Bible, to see how the story ends, & how history ends, we look at chapters 21 and 22 of the book of Revelation, we read that finally heaven descends down, merges with planet earth, to form the new heaven & the new earth, thus completing the fullness of Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated at the start of his ministry which we read about in that verse from the beginning of Mark's gospel. The New Testament begins with the inauguration of the KOG, & ends with the consumption & coming of the KOG. And it is this Kingdom, the NT teaches us between those two bookends, for which we are to be working for it to come, and praying for it to come, as we live out our Christian lives. Unfortunately, somewhere along the line, some of us have been taught to read our Bibles not as saying that we are working & praying for the Kingdom of God to come on earth, but rather that we simply waiting to escape this doomed planet & go to in this purely spiritual realm called heaven, in order to live there for ever & ever.

Now the book of James is a much neglected, a much misunderstood, and even a much maligned book in the New Testament. As Richard also mentioned a few weeks ago, Martin Luther, the leader of the Reformation, did not like this book very much at all. In fact he called it a tissue of straw, and wished it could be removed from the canon of New Testament Scripture. And the reason for this, I believe, is that Luther was making the same mistake that so many of us as Christians have continued to make down thru the ages, and that mistake is that we have spiritualised the gospel. Now what do I mean by 'spiritualised the gospel'? I mean this - many of us, particularly those of us who closely adhere to the reformed tradition flowing from Luther, have come to explain & understand the gospel as being a certain theological confession, or about four spiritual laws, or about a personal spiritual experience a person needs to have - all in order to be sure that our soul will go to heaven when we die. But actually that's not the gospel, its a very small part of the gospel, and I do believe when we die we will go to heaven, but only temporarily until heaven descends & fills the whole earth, but on its own that belief is far too small to be called the gospel. **The Gospel** with a capital G is the good news that there is a new King called Jesus, who has come to earth, and who is establishing a new Kingdom that is even now spreading across the earth, and which will finally reign in all it's fullness upon the earth when Jesus returns - as we read in Revelation 21 & 22. The Gospel (big G) is the good news that Jesus has forgiven our sins, that he has risen, that He is Lord, not just of those hearts that have invited him in, but that Jesus is Lord of the whole earth and in fact of the whole Universe, and that he is going to come back and wipe away every tear, abolish death, abolish war, abolish hunger, poverty, suffering, exploitation, oppression and every thing that raises itself up against the knowledge & against the love of God. The good news is not a little paper tract, it is the biggest & best story story this world has ever heard. And our part in this story - and we have a huge part to play - is that we join our selves with Jesus in the Kingdom work of wiping away tears & of working for & praying for a world, for a Kingdom, in which there will be no more death, no more war, no more poverty, hunger, suffering, exploitation or oppression. That's our job description (Do I hear an Amen?)

Now the problem is when we have a small & spiritualised gospel, one that's only about disembodied souls going to heaven, then a piece of Scripture like the book of James doesn't seem to make a whole lot of sense (eg to Luther). I mean, in this entire book, James doesn't even mention once the idea of going to heaven, or anything about our souls. And in fact, in this book he is not concerned with heaven at all. Instead he is concerned with how we should live out our lives here on earth with one another. This book is a call to action, to deeds, in the here & now on planet earth. So lets look at some of the earthly themes it deals with:

I would argue that central theme of James, the theme that the book revolves around is the question of how we live out the command to **love our neighbour as ourself** which James brings up in verse 8 of chapter 2. Jesus has already told us that this command, combined with the command to love God, constitutes the greatest commandment, and that all 613 OT Laws & everything the Prophets said, is summed up by this one command. And Paul of course says exactly the same thing in Galatians 5:14. So then this command, & fleshing out some ways we can live out this command in community, is the central theme of this letter, and James is urging us to be a people who take action to love one another, rather than just being those who read about it or talk about it, or theologise about it.

So the six practical issues of love that James then brings up are these (PP, don't read)

1. **Patience in the face of suffering; endurance in the face of trials** (James 1:2-18; 5:7-12)

2. how rich and poor Christians should interact with each other; **how rich people should treat poor people**, and how we must choose to share resources with each other, rather than economically or socially exploit one another (James 1:9-11, 27; 2:1-13; 5:1-6)
3. that **faith without actions is dead** (James 2:14-26)
4. James also spends quite a lot of space in this letter on how we use our tongues, **how we are to speak to & communicate with one another (James 1:26, 3:1-12)**
5. He then expands that in to a discussion of **how we as a community of believers can live in genuine peace and harmony with one another, instead of in conflict (James 3:13 - 4:17)** - & these last two themes (of good communication & peace making) I hope to pick up on & talk more about with you next week.
6. Then towards the end of his letter, James spends time on how we can bring **healing and forgiveness (James 5:13-20)** to one another in a community, and he very much does link those two things, healing and forgiveness.

So again, you can see that these are very much this-world topics, it's about living in community rather than as an autonomous individuals, & its about how we can live better together in this life - these are not spiritualised or abstract spiritual teachings.

I want to start with the second half of chapter 2, from verses 14 to 26, where James' talks about the relationship between faith and works. And the reason that I want to start here is because I think this is another area where our reformation heritage can trip us up - & I'll get to that in a minute.

Well James puts it pretty bluntly here doesn't he, by telling us that faith without deeds is dead, like a body without it's spirit - in other words like a corpse. Now I am absolutely certain that everyone of us in this room today wants to have a spirituality & a relationship with God that is alive, and vibrant and passionate - and not like a corpse.

But unfortunately, if we were to go out onto the street (up George St) and were to ask your average Kiwi what they thought of Christians, what they thought of the church in general - vibrant, passionate & alive are probably not the words they would choose to describe the church as they see it.

But if you were to go out on the streets, & were to ask most Kiwi's what church they do admire, or that they think has credibility - which one do you think they'd name?

That's right - the Salvation Army. Why? Because they have works, they have good works & people can see them. And so they have street cred.

And of course this is exactly what Jesus said should happen, isn't it? You remember the passage in the sermon on the mount about being salt & light right?

But for us Protestants, a major confusion & ambivalence about good works has existed ever since the reformation, and it's this. In the reformation tradition, starting with Luther, as soon as anyone starts talking about doing good works, Ephesians 2:8-9 is immediately quoted, where Paul says

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— it is not by works, so that no one can boast.

But lets be very, very clear once & for all now : in this passage in Ephesians, & in every other passage where Paul warns against relying on works to save, he is not talking about good works, but in fact is talking about religious works such as circumcision, and sabbath

keeping, religious legalism and religious law-keeping. Paul never once speaks against the doing of good works - only religious works. And indeed, at the end of that passage I just quoted from Ephesians chapter 2, Paul finishes by saying *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared for us to do (Ephesians 2:10)*. Paul actually says that you & I have been created to do good works, that it was the very purpose for which you & I have been created.

And there's another crucial reason why the doing of good towards those with the greatest needs - which is what James has been urging us to do - is so important. And that was read to us by XX in the reading earlier from Jeremiah 22:13-17, where the prophet is comparing Shallum - a not so good king - with his father Josiah, who was a very good King. And in this comparison he rebukes Shallum and says *your father defended the cause of the poor and the needy AND IS THIS NOT WHAT IT MEANS TO KNOW ME?* In other words, by committing ourselves to acting with justice and mercy, we get to know God better, we grow in our relationship with God. This is an echo of Micah 6:8 where the prophet says : *he has shown you, O man, O woman, what is right, and what the Lord requires of you - to act justly, to love mercy, & to walk humbly with your God.*

Good works - acting with justice & mercy towards those most in need - are essential for our spiritual growth. Here's a little pithy quote to take away.

The soul honours God by the doing of just deeds. The soul is only as strong as its works.
Hildegard of Bingen (12th century Abbess)

I like that - 'the soul is only as strong as its works'.

And of course James would agree with Hildegard here. Hildegard says that the soul is only as strong as its works. James goes even further & says that a faith with out deeds, is like a corpse.

OK now lets skip back & look at the theme of the first part of chapter two, where James lays out what it means for a church to apply the commandment of loving our neighbour as ourself, in the midst of a world that is made up of haves and have nots, of rich and poor.

And in the first part of the passage, from James 2:1 - 13, he proclaims the radical equality of the Kingdom of God, & how that should be reflected in the radical equality of the church.

In this section James is proclaiming the absolute equality of rich and poor, & warning the church that we need to treat the two groups the same, without any sense of favouritism or privilege towards those with the most money, or the nicest clothes, or who are the most physically appealing.

As we're seeing, James sticks really close to the teaching of the gospels, and he is doing so so again here. For three of the central issues that Jesus addresses and confronts in his teachings, are the issues **of power, of status, and of wealth** - and the corrupting influence each of those three spiritual forces will have in any of our lives if we let them - and James is confronting the same three issues & forces.

This is tremendously challenging for those of us who are well off people living in a well off land. And I certainly include myself in this challenge from Jesus & from James, as much as I don't like to think of myself as rich, in global terms, I really am - as are most of us in this room. Compared to how most people around the world are living, and even compared to

many people who are struggling here in NZ - I am very well off. And I think that the struggle I have to see my self as wealthy is the same struggle that most of us have. Because, we all have this natural human tendency to look up at the people who are doing better than us - anyone on the rung above us, anyone who has a flasher car or a bigger house - & say "well they're wealthy, but I'm just getting by". For some reason we find it much harder to be aware of the people around us who are struggling, and to acknowledge how much wealthier we are than them. Our comparative wealth is something we humans seem to find it hard to get a realistic perspective on. In 2005 a survey of multimillionaires was carried out in Australia which asked these millionaires if they would describe themselves as 'prosperous' - and you know what, only 5% were prepared to describe themselves as prosperous. The majority of these multi-millionaires were only prepared to describe themselves as 'reasonably comfortable', and many described themselves as 'poor' or 'just getting by'. I think Jesus said something about the 'deceitfulness of wealth' didn't he?

One of the tools I have found useful for helping me gain a sense of perspective on just how wealthy I am, and therefore how much I can afford to give, is a wonderful wee website called www.globalrichlist.com . You go to this website, & you simply enter in your annual income, and it will tell you where you rank in terms of global wealth - if you are in the top 6% or 4% or whatever. I'd encourage you to go home & try it. If your struggling it'll make you feel better about yourself, and if you are not struggling, well it'll make you feel like giving some money away!

OK I'm going to wind this up now, but you know James in Chapter 1 has already warned us not to look into the word of God, then walk away without doing what it says. And so I am going to set all of us some homework, and that is to look up this website, so that we do get a global perspective on our comparative wealth & how much God has given us, and having done that, to ask God about where he'd have you and me give away some of that wealth this week to where there are people struggling. That might be to one of the four mission areas that Leith is focusing on this year. Or it might be giving to the firewood drive Shane and his team are running, that also enables firewood to be given away to those who can't afford it. Or It might be to Nepal. Or you might decide to sponsor a child through Tear fund or Compassion. I certainly don't want to be prescriptive at all, but I do want this reading of God's word to result in action for each of us - so that we grow, and so that God is glorified. And so on the table at the back of the church I've left a pile of flyers with web sites etc that you can type in if you want to give yo any of these causes that are working with the poor, either in our city of further afield. This flyer also has that global rich list address on it to.

How wealthy am I?

www.globalrichlist.com

Ideas to give to:

The Nepal earthquake appeal http://www.tearfund.org.nz/nepal_earthquake.html

Child sponsorship http://www.tearfund.org.nz/cs_index.html

Orphans Aid International <http://www.orphansaidinternational.org/get-involved/>

Rock Solid Youth Development <http://www.rocksoliddunedin.co.nz/donation.html>

For the firewood project, Burkina Faso, Henry & Anna (Myanmar/Burma)
(specify which when you give)

Bank: Westpac
Acc name: Leith Valley Presbyterian Church
Account number: 03-0883-0620501-00