

Faith - The Genuine Article

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Date: 03 March 2013

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, let's pray together. Father God, we pray that today you would help us to hear your word, to respond to it with faith and obedience.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, the results of the census that was taken over a year ago now, are just beginning to filter in.

And let me tell you that I don't think they're that helpful in terms of Australia's religious beliefs.

However, some other helpful research has been done by the Bartelsman Foundation.

And let me tell you just a little bit about that. In 2008, they found that approximately half the population of Australia believes in God, something divine or even life after death.

45% would go further and claim that they are religious. 25% would say they are deeply religious.

Now, just think about what that means for a moment.

[1 : 02] Those studies mean this. They mean that as I go, you know, if I was to go up to the shops this afternoon and I was to wander around there, I can assume that on average, every second person I meet believes in God.

And that 9 in 20 people are religious. And that 5 in every 20 are deeply religious. Now, let me tell you something else. I can tell you that of all the people I meet every day, I would not think that. I would find it hard to believe that 41% of Australians are religious and that 20, even 25% are deeply religious. That is 1 in 4. And do you know why? It is because their beliefs don't appear to be reflected in their actions.

I'm not sure that you can tell by their words, their actions, the way they conduct their relationships, the attitude to what they do every day. Their external life, in other words, doesn't really give much away about their internal attitude to God.

It's hard to tell that they are a believer by their actions. It's not easy to see their faith in God in their actions. However, you know, it's very easy to be hard on other people and not be so hard on yourself.

[2 : 18] So let's be hard on ourselves as well. Let's be fair. Let's ask the question of ourselves. After all, most of us here are firm believers in God. And I wonder, rather than a self-analysis, try and take yourself out from yourself for a moment and ask yourself this.

How would the people that we spend most time with each week answer the question about us that we have asked of others? That is, do we give the appearance of being God believers? Can people tell by our words, our actions, the way we conduct our relationships, the attitude that we have to them every day and what we do every day?

Is our attitude to God displayed in our external life as well? Is our faith in God seen in our actions and in our attitudes to the people that we meet and the things that we find in life?

Now, those are very hard questions when you put it to us that way, aren't they? Let me say that they're not just my questions. They're the questions that God puts to us through this passage in James chapter 2.

It's what James is asking. They're questions he wants us to ask of ourselves. That is, is our faith genuine or not?

[3 : 35] Is our faith true faith? With that in mind, I want you to look at James chapter 2, verse 14. So have your Bibles open. It'll be important to do that.

And there's even an outline if that will help you as well. James begins with this question. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?

Now, I want you to particularly notice how this is worded. That is, James does not start off this way and compare what I say to what's there. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if a person has faith but has no deeds?

That's not what he's asking, is it? He says, what good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?

So James is clearly asking us, can you agree with a person who says, I have faith but I don't have deeds but they don't matter really? My faith is saving faith despite that.

[4 : 39] He's wanting us to ask of this person what we should ask of ourselves. Can that sort of faith save us? So that is what this passage is about.

It's not a criticism of faith in general. It is a criticism of a particular sort of faith. The sort of faith that says deeds don't have much part to play, if any.

Deeds are really very unimportant for the person of faith. And in the process, what James does is show us real, genuine, vital faith.

So that's the issue. And the way James proceeds is very interesting. He gives us four illustrations of faith. And we're going to look carefully at each of them. So let's start. But before we do that, I've got one more preliminary remark.

I need to make it clear that in our Bibles, often the words for faith and belief are in the original language exactly the same words.

[5 : 40] And we often try and distinguish between those two. But really, there's probably not much to distinguish between them. In the Greek, like I said, there's one Greek word for those two words, faith and belief.

So having said that, let's press on. The first illustration comes in verses 15 to 17. And these are verses about a hungry brother. And you see, in James's day, beggars used to wander around the city, perhaps of Jerusalem, asking for money simply to keep alive.

There's no social service system and so on. So they needed to get money from somewhere. So they begged for it. And it was a common thing that if you didn't want to give them money, you just said something like this, go in peace.

And with those words, you signaled not a generous act, but the end of an encounter. So imagine you're the beggar. You're sitting there and you're desperate to have some money that will enable you to keep alive.

Someone walks past and they see you and they say, go in peace. And off they go. And you think there are a few words. Easy to say, aren't they? Go in peace.

[6 : 45] Off you go now. Try not to starve. Do keep warm, won't you? Make sure you eat plenty. But I'm not going to help you. The speaker does nothing.

The beggar is left cold, hungry, unloved. So let's summarise what we get out of that. James is making a very potent point, isn't he? He's saying, you can see it in verse 17, he says, in the same way, faith by itself is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Now listen to him carefully. He's saying that faith that doesn't produce actions or deeds, faith that doesn't end up in you actually obeying God, is futile.

It is as empty and stupid as telling a starving person they're going to be okay and then walking away. Now let's look at our second illustration. It comes from a troubled demon.

And James imagines a couple of people talking about faith and deeds. And the first person speaks to the other in the first half of verse 18. And this first person says, you have faith, I have deeds.

[7 : 51] In other words, this person is claiming that faith and deeds are separate things. They are independent entities. And James replies back, and you can see it in the second half of verse 18.

He says, show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. James is challenging the objector to produce one example of faith which exists by itself without deeds.

And the implication, I think, is that no such thing exists. James agrees with the rest of the Bible. A belief in God which does not change the way you act is not faith, the genuine article, at all.

And so he goes on in verse 18. I will show you my faith by what I do. And then he illustrates it by talking about demons. Demons. I need to say that in the Bible, demons are often having some very solid theology, some very orthodox beliefs.

You might not think that, but it's evident in the ministry of Jesus. Think about the ministry of Jesus. Do you remember how often demons are confronted by Jesus? And they'd say something like this.

[9 : 00] I know who you are, the Holy One of God. That's very orthodox, isn't it? A very good theology, because that's exact, and in the context, it's very strange, because during his ministry, not many people are taking Jesus very seriously at all.

But demons do. And they bow before him. They confess orthodox beliefs. Good theology about him. However, let me tell you that even though they believe, they continue as demons. They don't do anything, you see. They're not saved. Their faith has no effect on the way they view or respond to God. In other words, demons have a sort of faith, don't they? But it is counterfeit in the end.

Instead of bringing them peace and security, it leaves them in terror. And I wonder if you can see what James is saying as a result. He's making the point that faith which does not issue in a changed attitude to God is useless.

Faith that is not reflected in deeds is useless. And he makes the point, look at the second half of verse 20. Faith without deeds is useless.

[10:09] Now, having said this, I should tell you that I regularly meet dozens of people who have faith that is pretty similar to that of the demons that James is talking about. Upon hearing that being a Christian means believing in Jesus, they say these sorts of things.

Oh, so that's what a Christian is. Well, that's okay then. I believe in Jesus. However, so often that belief doesn't change anything in their lives. It doesn't change the way they behave.

It's just a nice fact that they drag out every now and then when they want to feel safe. You know, perhaps they're threatened by hell or death or whatever. Every time death comes along or someone mentions hell, they drag out this good belief.

Blow the dust off it. Wipe it down and say, it's okay. I've got these facts about God stored up in my brain. I believe. Now, the words for foolish person that are there in the text could easily and literally be translated, oh, empty man.

Or if you like a bit more colloquially, oh, empty head or even more colloquially, oh, brainless one.

The point is clear. Faith that doesn't show itself in actions is empty.

[11:23] Knowing religious facts is not what believing in God means. And James leads us into the next section with these words from verse 20. Do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

That's where our third illustration comes in. And now we're going to talk about the great hero of faith, Abraham, the friend of God. Now, let me tell you that up until this point, James has left us asking questions, hasn't he?

For example, and the question I think prominent in my brain, if I read it, was reading it for the first time, would be this. How can I be sure that my faith is different to that of a demon?

How can I be sure that I really do have peace with God? And it's here that we get some help from Abraham. But in order to understand Abraham, I need to just give you a scenario of his life.

Chapter 12, he's chosen by God, called by God, given promises of land, children and blessing.

Chapter 15, he puts his trust in God's word and says he's going to live by it.

[12:27] He believes God and he's declared righteous or it's credited to him as righteousness before God. That's chapter 15. Chapter 17, God makes a covenant with him.

Chapter 22, God takes the child that finally, after many years, God had given him and says, I want you to go, Abraham, three days off into the wilderness, up to this particular mountain.

And when you get there, I want you to sacrifice this, your one and only son. And Abraham goes. It's a striking story.

Now, and the writer notes, Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. But then he goes on to say something else. You see, and let me just try and illustrate it to you this way. Here's, here's, here's Abraham in chapter 12. God gives him promises. Here's Abraham in chapter 15. He believes God and God says you're righteous.

[13:27] Here's Abraham in chapter 17. He's given a covenant. Here's Abraham in chapter 22. And God says, go and take your son, your only and only son and sacrifice him to me.

Now, let me ask you a question. If Abraham had said to God that morning, sorry, God is just not on. I know you promised that it's through Isaac that my children, my nation will come. But I really, I'm not going to do it. What would that have indicated of his faith?

It would have indicated that his faith in God is a token faith, isn't it? You see, if he'd really believed God, he'd say, well, God, I've heard your word.

I've heard your promise. This makes no sense to me, but, I'm going to obey you. And that act demonstrates his faith to be genuine faith.

[14 : 29] Does that make sense? It's very important to understand that. And I think that explains what happens in the in verse 20. I think it's 23, 22.

Can you have a look at verse 22? It says, you see that his faith and his actions were working together and his faith was made complete by what he did.

In other words, his faith was explained, was demonstrated to be true faith because it flowed into his actions. Look at verses 23 and 24. James quotes Genesis 15, verse 6, and he says this.

And the scripture was fulfilled. That said back in chapter 15, Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. And he was called God's friend. You see, the person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

Now, I don't think Paul's James is having a go at Paul here. I think he's just saying that his faith that was faith that made him right with God was demonstrated in his obedience.

[15 : 34] If Abraham had not obeyed God in chapter 22, he would have been living a contradiction. So, with that, James moves on to illustration number four. And we've had, what have we had so far?

A hungry brother. We've had a troubled demon. We've had a friend of God. Well, we move into a whole other category of people now. We move into Rahab. And just think about Rahab and Abraham for a moment and contrast them.

Rahab, a minor figure. Abraham, a major figure in the Bible. Abraham, respected. Rahab, prostitute, disreputable.

Abraham, and in ancient society, this was how it went. Abraham, a man. Rahab, a woman. And although Rahab is very different in many ways from Abraham, she is very like Abraham in another way.

You see, she clearly believed in the God of Israel. And she demonstrated her belief by reaching out for and taking care of the spies, protecting them and looking after them.

[16 : 34] And regardless of cost to herself. When the Israelites were at risk, she looked after them. That's genuine faith. You see, that not only is expressed in confidence toward God, but is expressed in actions toward God and God's people.

Genuine faith reaches out in costly compassion for people at risk. Look at verse 25. And I wonder if you can see the point that's being made. You see, it's what a person does that reveals the nature of their faith.

Good works, good deeds reveal that a person's faith is a living entity. Now, that in mind, I want to tell you a story about the wife of Malcolm Fraser.

And many of you might remember this story. You remember her husband, Malcolm Fraser, was the prime minister. And you might remember the 1978 elections. They were being held.

And during that election campaign, there was a photo that made nearly every newspaper in Australia that I can remember at the time. It was a picture of Tammy Fraser. She's going through a shopping mall or somewhere.

[17 : 37] And anyway, there's a photo where she was caught unaware about to turn around and shake the hand of a clothing store dummy.

Now, that sort of thing is not very hard to do. You've probably caught it yourself at times thinking that, hang on, and looked twice to find out whether there was a real person there or not.

Sometimes they look really real in the shops these days. Imagine 1978. They look pretty real too, apparently, according to Tammy Fraser. But let me tell you a little thing about clothing store dummies.

No matter how real they look, there is no more life in them than in a coffin. Okay? And faith in God, which doesn't end up producing actions, is like a clothing store dummy.

Looks the part in one sense, but is not really the genuine article. Faith without deeds is no more faith than a clothing store dummy is a living person. Faith that doesn't result in deeds is not Christian faith.

[18 : 35] Faith not saving faith. It's not faith that makes you a Christian. It's not faith that demonstrates your Christian faith. It is dead. James and Paul agree at this point.

For example, at the beginning and the end of Romans, Paul talks about the gospel that he preaches. And he says that the goal of this ministry is to bring about the obedience of faith.

Listen to it. The obedience of faith. Faith is to issue in obedience in James and in Paul. They are agreed. And I'm sure that both James and Paul would affirm the words of the great reformer, John

Calvin, who said this.

Christ, therefore, justifies no person without also sanctifying them. Or again, if I was to paraphrase. We are not justified without works.

And yet we are not justified by works. Friends, as Jesus indicates, you can tell from the fruit where the tree's root is.

[19 : 42] And what the tree is like. True belief will bear the fruit of true obedience and good deeds. So if that's true, what is the nature of faith?

James has made it clear, hasn't he? A faith that is not followed up by a genuine effort to live up to itself is not the genuine article at all. And if you're claiming you can have faith that doesn't need or issue in a changed life of obedience, then you are very badly mistaken.

Your faith is, in fact, counterfeit. And it isn't even worth the name faith. And it's useless to say, James, Jesus, Paul, they're agreed.

Genuine faith must produce deeds. It must affect what I do. And for the rest, I need actually to get my little prop now at this point. So, the prop is this.

Now, friends, I have been led to believe that there is a bomb that is set to go off in that bag in 15 seconds.

[21 : 03] We've got about five left. In the five seconds left, I want you to think, did I really believe it or not?

I know you didn't believe it. Because you didn't get out of the room, did you? I didn't believe it because I didn't get out of the room. And we both made this assessment of each other.

And we said, neither of us really believes it. Because you could tell our belief. Because if we did believe it, we would be out of here. Unless I was crazy. I hope you could put that aside.

I've put it aside as far as you're concerned. Now, friends, running out of the room is not faith, though, is it? No, running out of the room is a response to what you believe.

It's clear evidence of your faith. So let's think about this and apply it to being Christian for a moment. A faith, we're told in the book of Hebrews, is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen, like the bomb in there.

[22 : 14] Okay, not seen. But convinced about it. If you're convinced about it, you'll do something. So, you can weigh up how convinced you are by the response you have to God and to others.

Responding to others is not faith, but it is clear evidence of faith. God's pronouncement of salvation doesn't come because you have obeyed. It comes when you believe, just as it did with Abraham. But you see it to be the genuine article when you respond and do something. And, friends, having said that, it would be wrong for me to stop at this point with this more sort of technical explanation of the meaning of the passage.

Technical explanations, I think, are part of what is the problem here. Let's face it, the situation in our day amongst Christians is not that different from that in James' day.

And James has some very hard words for us, doesn't he? He denies that we can claim to be Christians and yet live immoral or ungodly or hypocritical lives.

[23 : 21] And yet many of us, I think, claim that we can. I know many Christians around the world think they can. And they say something like this to themselves, perhaps not consciously, but this is what's going on.

It's okay. I believe in Jesus. I'll make it into heaven. I bought my ticket. God will forgive and accept me. So what if my life hasn't changed?

So what if I still have no concern for the immoral life that I live? So what if I'm not growing in godliness? So what if I don't have mercy as God has had mercy on me? If I don't accept as God has accepted me?

I don't forgive as God has forgiven me. So what? It's believing in Jesus that gets me into heaven and I've done that. I'm okay and hell can't touch me. Hell's a place for demons.

Not for me. With all their right theology, of course. And James says to us, You fool. You empty-headed fool.

[24 : 22] That sort of faith is as lifeless as a corpse. The fact that your life doesn't back up your faith may be showing that you do not really believe. Faith that isn't evidenced by a changed life is not faith at all.

So what do we do if James strikes at us here? Well, I assume that James has a go at us here in order to drive us back to the gospel.

He criticizes us in order to show us where to go. And he's already done that way back in chapter 1. And we should go back to the word of the gospel. We should listen to the promise of mercy and forgiveness found in the message of Jesus, which he talks about back in chapter 1.

He talks about it as us receiving the word implanted, which is able to save us. That's the place, the only place to go when convicted of sin.

Not to try and work up obedience as something that will then get you into heaven. No, we are saved by faith in Christ. So we should go back to that and believe it and accept it and then produce the fruit of it in our lives.

[25 : 38] In lives of obedience that comes from faith. Let's pray together. Lord God, please form in us.

The obedience of faith. Please form in us deeds that spring from the fact that you have saved us. Please, Father, forgive our contentment with wrong acts, wrong deeds, godlessness, ungodliness. Please, please drive us back to the gospel of your son. And then please, take our mouths and use them to proclaim him.

Take our hearts and make them wholly his. Take our hands, Father, and use them in the service of the Lord Jesus. And Father, we pray this in Jesus' name.

[26 : 45] Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.