

Read James 2:14-26

What – James, the brother of Jesus, wrote this book to Jewish Christians “scattered” among the nations. James’ themes of struggling against the rich and living out faith in the face of trials remind us of the struggles of Christians by the time this letter was written sometime just before 70 AD. In nearly all Roman provinces by this time, Christians were being persecuted for their faith and blamed for the increasing social ills that plagued the heathen and morally bankrupt Roman society of the late first century. Life was not easy for the Christians, and James, a powerful leader in the early church, wanted the church to understand that their suffering would lead to blessing if they stayed the course. Looking into the teaching laid out here showed several common themes. James made an urgent plea for the church to follow Jesus. His instructions did not wax on eloquently. He got immediately to the point. Also, James had a passion for practical spirituality. He showed that a faith that is spoken but not lived is worth nothing. This is the point he made in chapter 2, and it has become a cornerstone for church teaching for almost 2000 years.

Why – Chapter 2 has become even more important in recent years (the last 300 to be specific) as the church has moved into the “modern” age. Undoubtedly in James’ day, people spoke about their faith but did not act on it as a way of avoiding persecution. Today we fail to act for a very different reason. Since the “Age of Reason” began in the Renaissance, man has begun a steady trend towards the worship of “knowledge”. Those who get ahead, especially in the West, are those who “know the most”. This high priority on education (which I am very fond of but try not to worship) and an attitude of “worship” towards universities and centers of learning have shifted the historical understanding of what being a Christian means. Biblically, Jesus had “followers”. Now we often speak of “believers”. This dichotomy has infected the church with a bug. This virus causes Christians not to act on their faith. We assume that simply knowing who Jesus is should be enough for salvation. James reminded readers that the only way to see if proclaimed faith is genuine is action stemming from it. What is faith worth if it is not strong enough to affect your actions? James said that even demons have that kind of faith.

WOW – Jesus said that you judge a tree by its fruit (Luke 6). James said essentially the same thing. This is a WOW because this text has often been used to prove that our works are the essence of our salvation. James said that we are not justified by faith alone, but by what we do. Does this mean we are saved by our works? Certainly not, we know from other scriptures that we are saved by the cross (Romans 1:16). It does remind us, however, that while our faith is primary, it must have action to be valid. While we should not place our hope in our works, Jesus never separates faith from obedience. They go together like the chicken and the egg. You cannot have one without the other. James drove this point home when he said that Abraham’s faith was “made complete” by his actions. Faith without works is no faith at all. James also made an amazing statement when he said that faith without works is dead. It is not only useless, of no value, pointless and meaningless, it is dead. If we reflect on this it is rather scary. Dead means past the point of no return. Dead means not even recognizable, no longer able to be revived. This is a difficult thing for us to wrap our head around as we ponder a God of grace, but at a certain point, when we do not exercise our faith, it might die. We might fall to a point

where we are no longer able to recognize or reach God. God will never separate Himself from us, but we might forget who He is (see Romans 1). How far out of shape is your faith muscle? It might be worth checking.