

James 1:19-25 & 2:8-25

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Preacher: Bruce Pass

[0 : 00] Thank you, Alistair. My name is Bruce, if we haven't met before. But some of you may remember some weeks back in a filler sermon between sermon series in the morning.

I preached on the opening of James' letter, the glorious vision of the future. Absolutely stunning, stunningly encouraging passage. And I mentioned at that time that I thought James kind of lends itself to these sermon fillers for these kind of slides, because he can delve in and out of James fairly easily.

James' letter is in some ways a bit like a grab bag of reflections on the Christian life. So as we grab back into James this evening for a filler sermon between two series, it's probably worth remembering that, at least to me, he seems like one of the most provocative preachers in the New Testament.

I think you wouldn't have ever felt comfortable if you were among the congregation in Jerusalem with Bishop James about to preach. And I think you often find yourself wondering whether you've just heard what he said, sort of clearing your ears out, and I think there's no exception for tonight. In fact, it's probably the most shocking of these examples. In the passage we just read, and we read that little snippet out of chapter 1 and then the longest snippet from chapter 2, because James kind of, he comes in and out and weaves back to certain themes.

[1 : 23] And so really he's talking about the same thing in both of these sections. He just gets distracted and off he goes on a tangent, as it were. But here James is asking us, is your Christianity any better than Satan's?

Somewhat astonishingly, that is in fact what he's just asked us. Are you more of a Christian than Satan is? You've got to admit, that's pretty good rhetoric, isn't it?

But it isn't just there for show. James is serious and he's addressing a problem which beleaguers Christian churches of any time and any place.

And we don't need to take it on faith that it's a problem for churches in the present day, because I'm sure some of us would recognize it. It's this problem of a Christianity that says it's a duck, but it doesn't actually quack or waddle.

It's a Christianity that claims to be real, but in fact it isn't. More seriously though, and this is where it really is more than just, oh, isn't he such an intriguing speaker, this brother James?

[2 : 30] It's a problem of a Christianity that cannot save you. And it's this bit which actually I think gives us a good reason as to why he would speak so provocatively, why he really wants to get our attention.

It's a problem because if your Christianity is like that, then it cannot save you. Have a look in verse 19 again in chapter 2.

James writes, You believe that God is one, you do well. Even the demons believe, then shudder.

I don't know if you've ever given much thought to the faith of demons. They've got one. They believe that God exists. They believe that Jesus died, that he rose again.

They even believe that he's coming back to judge the living and the dead. The demons would freely acknowledge all of this to be true. They believe this stuff.

[3 : 35] But given their allegiance to Satan, their faith isn't actually going to save them, is it? Now, if it were only demons who had this problem of a faith that cannot save, it wouldn't be so bad, would it?

I think we could close our Bibles at this point and go home feeling fairly assured. The problem is it's not. Many people have this problem.

Many people would believe that God exists, that Jesus died and rose again. They might even believe that he's coming again to judge the world. But their faith cannot save them.

I wanted to say here, watch out. It's easy to think of this problem as the problem you might recognise in other places. Perhaps the cultural Christianity that pervades some of the larger denominations in this country.

The problem of a faith that maybe extends only as far as weddings, baptisms and funerals. It's easy to think that this is this kind of problem of Protestant nominalism.

[4 : 42] Church schools, perhaps, the private schools that are sponsored by churches. It's the problem that's kind of in every other place except possibly in our church.

But if we start to think like that, we're going to fall into the very trap that James is so seriously concerned that we should avoid. There are, in fact, many people across Edinburgh who believe that God exists.

They believe that Jesus died and rose again. Yet they do not possess a faith that can save them.

And so that's why James wants us to ask ourselves this evening, am I one of them?

Is my Christianity, in fact, any better than Satan's? Now, the good news is that there's a basic litmus test that James goes on to tell us about to see whether we can actually answer this question in the positive or the negative.

It's kind of a relief, really, a very simple litmus test, a binary. I don't know if you remember back to school science. I don't even know whether they would use litmus paper anymore in school science.

[5 : 49] But at least back in the medieval era when I went to school, you'd have these solutions and these small coloured pieces of paper that you'd dip in them. And if the paper turns blue, it's an alkaline.

If it turns red, it's an acid. It's a litmus test. And James says that there is a test a bit like this for faith, and it's every bit as visible as a coloured piece of paper.

James is saying that if your faith is better than Satan's, it can be seen. The visibility, though, of a faith in Jesus that is a saving faith is a bit different to the visibility, though, of, say, other world religions.

And this is a point worth thinking about. For example, it doesn't become visible according to what you wear. You can tell, for example, if a woman is a Muslim because she may be wearing a hijab. You can tell a person is a Hindu if they have the red mark on their forehead. But faith in Jesus becomes visible in a very different way. Faith in Jesus becomes visible, according to the Scriptures, in what we do and say.

[7 : 00] This is why James says in verse 18 of chapter 2, Now, there's another moment where we have this incredible echo of James' half-brother.

When we looked at the first passage in James, there's these wonderful echoes of Jesus' teaching in James' letter. And we have one here. Can anyone remember where Jesus once said this?

He said, What Jesus is saying in Luke chapter 6 is exactly what James is saying here.

I mean, the difference is, of course, that Jesus is using a word picture. The person whose life yields briars or thorns doesn't really believe in Jesus, even if they claim to.

The person who yields figs and grapes, however, they really do. And you can tell by what you see. So both Jesus and James are simply saying that even though you can't peer into someone's heart and see whether their faith is genuine or not, their faith is, in fact, always visible.

[8 : 17] It becomes visible in what we do and say. So, it's a very simple point he's making. He says, absolutely nothing to see.

No good words, no good actions on the outside that can point to only one thing. That faith is dead on the inside. That's James' point.

Very simple, isn't it? He's a good preacher. It's very simple. If faith is dead, well, of course, that's why it's unable to save you. And it's no better, then, than the faith of demons.

And that's worth thinking a little bit, too. It's because faith in Jesus is not just this list of things that you hold to be true. It's something that is alive. It's an active power.

It's a bit like the batteries, I think, inside children's toys. I think that's a good way to think about it. When our eldest was a very young boy, it's hard to imagine now, he's almost as tall as I am. He was, in fact, inside a cot.

[9 : 17] You could keep him in there at that stage. And he had this terrific toy, but I can't remember whether we bought it for him or whether it was a gift. It was absolutely fabulous. But for that thing, for all the fishes to move around inside, it needed these massive D-sized batteries.

And what those batteries were to the mobile, which gave it such life, such a terrific toy, that's what faith is to the Christian. Faith is the animating power of the Christian life.

It animates a Christian. It makes them alive. So if someone says that they believe in Jesus, but there's no actions, then quite simply the batteries are dead.

And so this is why James says those words in verse 26, For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Now, have you seen someone who was dead? Not a question you'd actually have to ask 50 years ago, but nowadays that's actually an interesting question. I remember seeing my maternal grandfather shortly after he died, and I remember as a boy just being utterly struck by how different he looked.

[10:33] I actually only ever remember him having Parkinson's disease, quite severe, because he was quite old and he had had it for a long time. So he's already very, very weak, very weak and very thin.

But my mum remembers him as actually being quite fit and quite strong physically. But even though I'd never seen him like that, there's this enormous difference between my wise and old, weak Parkinson's grandfather and a dead grandfather.

Very, very strong memory when I saw him dead. And that's actually what James is saying about faith too. There's quite a difference between faith being dead and it actually being very weak.

A huge difference. A very visible difference. So if someone says they believe in Jesus and there's absolutely no movement whatsoever, it's quite simply the active power of faith is gone.

Like the demons, that person might acknowledge certain things to be true, but the active power that comes from the Spirit of God that makes them alive is simply not there. Because if it were, it'd be something to see.

[11:44] Very simple. So the James' point is that a faith that is better than the demons is a visible faith and it's alive and it's visible because it is alive and it's alive because it's animated by the Spirit of God.

This is the litmus test as to whether saving faith is present. So would your faith turn the litmus paper blue?

That's James' question. Are there actions on the outside that reveal what's there on the inside?

Before you answer, I want you to think again and look again at the example James chooses to illustrate his point because it's possible, even if you know this passage well, that you might have missed it.

James illustrates this point with a very specific example. James goes on to say, if a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food and one of you says to them, go in peace, be warmed and filled without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?

Now the specific example that James comes to land on is something you may or may not have anticipated. It's love, but it's actually not just love generally.

[13:08] It's love for the poor, but it's not just love for the poor generally. It's specifically love for poor Christians. James says, suppose a brother or sister is without clothes or daily food.

Now you can miss this kind of specificity because in our culture, speaking of somebody who's not your biological brother as your bro suggests that you might perhaps be into hip-hop.

As you can tell that I'm clearly not. In the Bible, however, it refers, it's the language of being a Christian, a fellow Christian. The Bible calls fellow Christians brothers and sisters because when you become a Christian, you get a family, whether you like it or not.

God becomes your father and because of that, then you have a lot of little bros because the Lord Jesus Christ is now your big bro. That's the humbling and extraordinary truth of the gospel.

So when James is speaking here of a brother or sister, he's actually talking about a fellow believer. But look again, James is not just speaking of a brother or sister who's short of a pound.

[14:19] He's talking about a brother or sister who doesn't have adequate clothing, a destitute fellow brother or sister. Now how many shirts do you own?

I've got about six of these coloured shirts. I remember particularly when I was in full-time employment, I think I had eight or nine because then you might skip the ironing or something for one week.

You could still be wearing the proper clothes. But that's five more than James is talking about.

James is talking about a fellow Christian who is cold because he doesn't own enough clothing to

wear.

That's destitute. That's poverty on a scale that you don't really even see in Edinburgh. So how many Christians' friends do you have that are that poor? Now some of us involved in Basics Bank, a terrific thing that this church does, they might actually be able to give a specific answer to a question like that.

Whether or not, though, we ever do actually come across Christians that are in this category here in Edinburgh is actually irrelevant. I want to suggest that it's ultimately irrelevant because we know that even in James' day, this care for destitute brothers and sisters extended much further than local congregations.

[15:39] One of the amazing things in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches, it relates this interesting story of when he met James in Jerusalem. He was getting this spiritual check-up to see whether his gospel was in fact the real deal or not.

And he relates this incident when James gives him parting words. James is completely convinced, by the way, of Paul's orthodoxy.

And as they shake hands and part, James gives him one word to remember. He says, remember the poor. And then Paul tells the Galatians that he actually didn't need this reminder.

And the proof of that, actually, is one of the things that comes out all through the New Testament, a hallmark of Paul's apostolic ministry. It was, in fact, a collection for the poor, the destitute Christians who are persecuted in Jerusalem.

And interestingly, he seemed to have quite a bit of accounting skill. He'd managed all these checks and balances to give confidence to the churches around the Mediterranean Sea who are contributing to this collection, protect himself, I guess, from accusations of fraud.

[16:47] And we read about this, actually, all through the New Testament, that this care for the poorest of Christians had almost had an international scale, a transcultural scale, from the very beginnings.

It was amazing. And so the question we need to ask, then, thinking about what James was saying, is, is that actually a feature of ours? A feature of our Christianity?

The point is, whether or not there may or may not be destitute Christians here in B.C. or even more broadly in Edinburgh, there are many brothers and sisters beyond these walls who are destitute in the way that James is describing.

And, you know, the amazing thing that I think about at this point is actually, at this point in time, more than ever in the history of the Christian church, we are closer to them.

With the click of a mouse, you can send a bag of rice and a copy of the scriptures for a poverty-stricken Christian in the highlands of Vietnam. Or with the click of a mouse, you can send money to rebuild a church that the jihadists have burnt down in Nigeria.

[17:58] Our reach extends incredibly now than it ever has in the history of the Christian church. I was reflecting on this and I was reminded of the old TV show, again, perhaps demonstrating my age, if that's a completely foreign image to you.

Just put that down to the litmus test example. But when I was a child, there was a British animation called Inspector Gadget and he had these go-go gadget arms.

And it makes me think that globalization has actually given Christians these go-go gadget arms that extend far longer than even long arms will reach. We can reach Christians around the world in a way that James and Paul could only have dreamed of.

Yet I fear that many Christians, even in this situation, have turned a deaf ear, not just to their teaching, but especially to James' half-brother. Here again, we have another echo from Jesus' own teaching.

James tells us the poorest of the Christian poor is what makes our faith visible, caring for them.

That sounds a lot like what Jesus said at the end of Matthew's Gospel.

[19:16] Jesus said, When the Son of Man comes in His glory and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

He'll put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left. Then the King will say to those on His right, Come, you who are blessed by My Father, take what is your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me.

I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer Him, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you something to drink?

When did we see you a stranger and invite you in or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The King will reply, I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one, one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me.

[20 : 31] Then He will say to those on His left, Depart from Me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and His angels. For I was hungry and you gave Me nothing to eat.

I was thirsty, you gave Me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not invite Me in. I needed clothes and you did not clothe Me. I was sick and in prison and you did not look after Me.

They also will answer, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison and did not help you? He will reply, I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for Me.

Then they will go away to eternal punishment but the righteous to eternal life. Again, we have this amazing echo in James' letter of Jesus' own teaching.

You can imagine He would have remembered this from what He had heard of His brother. Jesus also says that saving faith shows itself in love for the poorest of one's brothers and sisters.

[21 : 41] A faith that shows no concern for the poorest of our brothers and sisters is in fact no better than Satan's and that's why Jesus says that those on His left are to depart for where?

For the eternal fire prepared for whom? For the devil. See, there's a direct connection to James' teaching. For the devil and his angels. A faith that is not better than Satan's brings people to the same destiny as Satan and his angels.

Now, I know that there are many here in B.E.C. who do show concern for our brothers and sisters and they do it in many meaningful ways and indeed in the most meaningful of ways in prayer.

It's a terrific thing to uphold our brothers and sisters in prayer because they are so desperately reliant on our prayers. The interesting thing though is James is kind of a step ahead of us and his teaching anticipates this and he goes directly to prayer.

Do our prayers resemble the prayers that James describes in chapter 2 verse 15? Do we pray, Lord, I wish them well, keep them warm and well fed, but then don't actually do anything about their physical needs because that's James' illustration of a faith that is not visible.

[23 : 02] In verse 15, James says, If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food and one of you says to him, Go in peace, be warmed and filled, without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?

So also faith by itself if it does not have works is dead. He gets quite a pointed comment that if we only pray for our brothers and sisters when it's in our power to actually help them, James says that that is suggestive of a faith that is in fact dead.

So if we really want to know the answer to this question, and I've been drawing it out to make the point that James is making as sharp as possible, we need to ask questions like, What do I give to the poorest of Christians?

Just as Paul arranged this collection for the Christians in Jerusalem, there are many people who give us those go-go gadget arms to reach the people that are beyond our reach.

I think one of the things that really helped me when I realised that this truly was the emphasis of the scriptures, the organisation Voice of the Martyrs became such an appealing group of Christians.

[24 : 13] It was an organisation formed some time ago by a Romanian pastor who spent many years in prison. And they have the most wonderful way of actually supporting churches in a spiritual way, encouraging their faith and very practically providing food and clothing, especially to some of the hidden victims.

So when a pastor is put in prison, usually that's a dreadful burden for the wife and the children. They have this wonderful ministry. And an organisation like that is something that has actually encouraged me over many, many years.

So if you have never heard of Voice of the Martyrs, let me encourage you that these are one of the absolute premier groups that are operative in the world who allow us to actually act on what James is saying.

When I personally started to see that this is such a huge emphasis in the New Testament, I began to include not just the needs of my local church or missionaries in financial giving, but also the poorest of brothers and sisters around the world.

And Voice of the Martyrs actually enables us to direct money specifically to that. So as some of you know, I'm a full-time student at the moment, but I'm very blessed with some very fat scholarships.

[25 : 25] But there have been times when I've had very, very little income or none at all. And so giving will often go up and down. Sometimes there's been money for my own food and clothing, especially as a musician before I was a pastor.

You can imagine that probably well. Alberto has probably got the same problem at the moment. But the thing is that one of the things that we can think about is modulating our giving according to our needs.

And that's exactly what Paul encourages. So one of the things that I did was keeping one of the last things off the list, one of the first things back on, was the Christian poor, precisely because of what James and Paul and Jesus teach about what a high priority it is in the Christian life.

Now naturally, I don't have any idea about your finances and whether you contribute to BEC with the obligations that we have here to support our pastors and the work here or to the work of foreign missions.

They're two stories that are kind of separate sermons entirely on their own. I have no idea whether you're very limited financially or whether in fact you're very wealthy. although all of that really affects in very fine detail what specifically God is telling us tonight through James' message, I can make a few suggestions to help you let what James is saying move from this kind of abstract principle, the very concrete application in your life.

[26 : 56] And so the very first place I need you to think about is the money that you have at your disposal and your financial obligations. that you might already have and that includes BEC and Christian missions.

And I simply want you to ask a very simple question is your faith visible in the way that James describes in the very specificity of what he says? Ask yourself whether your faith can be seen and then perhaps consider whether you can investigate some of the ways that it can become visible if it's not visible.

I'd really encourage you to look at the website of Voice of the Martyrs or some of the other organisations that do this amazing work of giving us these go-go gadget arms to reach poor brothers and sisters.

I take it that our Christianity is quite a bit better than Satan's. I take it that you've gathered here tonight in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that you don't just believe that he exists but that you love him and that you worship him.

I take it that you believe that he didn't just die and rise again but that he died and rose again for the forgiveness of your sins. I take it that we do share in a faith that is able to save in other words.

[28 : 14] That we've embraced Jesus for ourselves that we've been born again by the Spirit who gives us this life this animating power of faith. So if that's the case let me urge you to make the faith visible in the way that James, Paul and Jesus is saying.

Let our faith be visible among our brothers and sisters here in B.C. Yes, keep doing that through words of kindness deeds of service even through the harder words that have to be spoken from time to time but let's not forget what James is saying.

Let me encourage you to put time aside tonight to actually reflect what James is saying time before you go to bed on whether your faith is visible in care for the poorest of your brothers and sisters because there will come a time when we shall meet them at the resurrection of the righteous and can you imagine what it would be like to have some Vietnamese woman thanking you perhaps even crying thank you so much.

It was so difficult for that 20 years we were so poor but those people gave us rice we would have died can you imagine what that would be like?

It's certainly no hardship to share in that kind of joy and if this is absent in your life so too will that joy in the last day when we are gathered with a host of brothers and sisters who have paid such a heavy price for their confession of Christ.

[29 : 46] It's a joy that is absent in your life and it is a joy that James seeks to share with us not a naked obligation an interferer like Graham said so helpfully this morning is a joy that James is seeking to add to our lives.

So let me encourage you to pray for wisdom to discern how you can be fruitful in the type of international concern that has always characterized the Christian church from its very beginnings for the very poorest of our brothers and sisters.

That really just takes you to I can't tell you what to do because I don't know what you are doing. But let me say that if you are actually already involved in this kind of love please be encouraged to keep being visible.

Visible perhaps not to the person sitting next to you but it's certainly visible in the eyes of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let me encourage you to keep going because that is often the hardest thing in the Christian life when your house is in order to keep going.

Take courage. God will always provide for you in the same way as that he calls us to provide for others. So let me encourage you to keep going. If God's word has illumined something new for you tonight don't let it go.

[30 : 59] Think further on it and allow your faith to become visible in action. Will you join with me now to pray that the Spirit of God will let our church abound in the kind of visible faith that James enjoins on us in his letter.

Loving and merciful Father we thank you that you sent the Lord Jesus Christ. Lord Jesus we worship you as you are seated at the right hand of the Father restored to the glory that you had with the Father from before the creation of the world.

We worship you that you became poor so that we could become rich. We ask Lord Jesus for grace to see what it is for faith to become visible and we ask that you would stir in our hearts the love for our brothers and sisters who are hard pressed and we ask Lord that you would meet their needs according to the riches of your glory and that you would give us the privilege and the joy Lord to be a part of them.

Let our faith be visible here in BC here in Edinburgh and indeed to the ends of the US. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.