

Faith Acts

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 May 2014

Preacher: Andy Hunter

[0 : 0 0] A very good morning for myself. It's great to be here. Thank you so much for the invitation to join you in fellowship. We were here a couple of years ago as a family for one of your morning services and we're greatly blessed at that time. I've gotten to know John a bit over the years through various gospel activities and it's been a great blessing to make that connection and have that friendship with John. As John said, up until the end of last year I was working at Greenview Evangelical Church that we have some connections with. Delighted to take all responsibility for Neil, who's such a great servant of the church as the rest of his family are in Greenview. I was working there until last year and then during last year I was approached by FIEC, which is the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, about taking on a role for them in Scotland as their kind of Scottish worker and coordinator.

and after a lot of prayer and consultation we were delighted to take up that offer. So for the last six months or so I've been working for FIEC, going around Scotland, supporting the various churches that are part of that network, encouraging them, trying to get to know them and just being a bit of a flag waver really for that movement. Very briefly, I'm not here to do a missionary report on FIEC, but very briefly for those who don't know anything about it at all. It is what it says in the tin, it's a fellowship, not a denomination, it's a network of independent churches. We believe that churches are best run by the people who are in them, of evangelical churches, that those that are committed to a very strong body of gospel truth to the biblical gospel that's historically received and passed on by the church and churches like this one. And a network that we can encourage each other and things like pastoral support for church leaders, church planting and mission and training, and also in some practical ways, some legal services and others that the network provides. So if you want to know more about FIEC, then do speak to me at the end. I'd be delighted to share more about that. But it's been encouraging that it's a growing network. There's over 500 churches now across the UK are part of the FIEC family. And in Scotland last year, we were delighted, actually in Edinburgh, that Charlotte Chapel, just up the road, and Nidre Community Church, both affiliated. And just this week, Harper Memorial Baptist Church in Glasgow has voted to join FIEC. So it's encouraging times for the movement. Let's turn to God's words now. That's why I'm here. That's why we're here. And the main is to gather around God's word and to hear what God would say to us this morning. So if you have a Bible, I know there's some round about. If you turn to James chapter 2, that would be really helpful. And just to keep that open as we look at this passage from scripture today. James chapter 2, and we're going to read verses 14 to 19. And the title I've been given, which is very appropriate and fits with the passage, is Faith Acts. So let's hear God's words. James 2 and verse 14.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 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? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, you have faith and I have works. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe and shudder. May God bless you as a reading of his precious and inspired words. Coming to that part of James this morning, which I suppose has made the book of James so controversial through the centuries over the years.

[4 : 1 9] You'll be aware, if you know a bit about the book of James, that it was a New Testament letter that Martin Luther, the great reformer, described as an epistle of straw. And the reason that Martin Luther struggled with James, why it bothered him, was in large part because of the kind of things that we have just read this morning. It's a section that seems to jar with the great emphasis of

Martin Luther and others on faith alone as the basis of our salvation. For Martin Luther, Romans was the book.

That was the life-changing book for him that just gave him that great revelation of the way to get right with God, to be accepted and forgiven by God. Romans has that great declaration, doesn't it, of salvation through faith alone. Full stop, nothing more to be added. The truth that became the heartbeat of the reformation and is the heartbeat of our own evangelical faith today. The great truth that no one can be saved.

No one can get right by God or win God's favor by their good works, by law-keeping, by moral performance. But that only and entirely in Jesus, in the sacrifice that he made for sins, and in receiving his righteousness, can any individual man or woman, girl or boy, be forgiven and received by God and welcomed in to God's family, be made just in the eyes of God. It is a gift of salvation that is to be taken hold of and received entirely and simply and exclusively by believing.

The gospel message of faith alone that is so liberating, frees from the treadmill and the insecurity, even the occasional pride of trying to earn God's favor.

The gospel message that gives all the praise and glory and credit to Jesus Christ. This isn't a joint endeavor. A pat on the back for me and a pat on the back for Jesus.

[6 : 46] The gospel that invites us to rest on the knowledge that Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on the cross has dealt with our sins completely. Our debt, our guilt, the due punishment of our sins, cancelled forever.

So what a shock. What a swerveball to pick up James' letter and read words like verse 17, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Verse 20, faith apart from works is useless. What kind of heresy is this? Call the elders. Brother James needs a visit.

Have you seen Paul's email? He's going through the roof. Is James contradicting Paul? Is he undermining him? Presenting some kind of alternative gospel?

A gospel of getting right with God that requires good deeds. A Jesus plus kind of Christianity in which what we do becomes an essential component of getting right with God.

[7 : 59] Well, let me say very simply, no. I don't think James is proposing or suggesting anything of that kind. Rather, he is a pastor, as John has reminded us this morning, who is dealing with real people in the real world and sees that there is a danger of them using faith in a way that abuses the gospel.

In this regard, I think James is actually very like Paul in the kind of provocative statements he makes in his letter. Remember how in Romans, how Paul outlined the absolute bankruptcy of law-keeping as a way to find salvation.

Romans chapter 3. You might just want to flick back to it. I don't have PowerPoint this morning. It's just like the old days. Romans chapter 3.

These are well-known verses, but they're important. Paul writes, And then he goes on in Romans in chapter 5 to explain how futile law-keeping is.

In fact, the law actually only really served to provoke and to increase sin in the world. But that God in his mercy through Jesus Christ has overcome all that sin and provided grace in Christ to be forgiven.

[9 : 47] In fact, he says in chapter 5 that Christ's work in dealing with sin is all the more glorious when you consider just how much sin there was to be overcome.

But Paul's not stupid because he's a real pastor speaking to real people and he knows exactly what his readers are going to start to think at this point as they read through his letter.

Someone has said, You know that you're understanding Romans as you read it when you get to one of Paul's rhetorical questions and it's what you were starting to think yourself. You know you've been following his line of argument.

He knows where our thoughts inevitably will start to lead when we're told those kind of things. And so in chapter 6 verse 1, he preempts his readers and he cuts off the error which is the big danger that we're going to fall into.

Chapter 6 of Romans verse 1, What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? You know if sin just actually shows us and displays in some way the greatness of Christ and trying to not sin can't save us, then is this not just a ticket, an invitation for us to sin away to our heart's content?

[11 : 09] In fact, we're making Christ look even better the more that we sin. We're making his sacrifice all the greater. And Paul, of course, goes on in chapter 6 to say, No means, God forbid, was the old AV translation.

By no means, don't you know, that those of us who have been made dead to sin can no longer continue in it? That Christ and his sacrifice has died so that you might die to sin and live with him that resurrection life of righteousness?

To think that you would carry on sinning just because Christ is the only way to deal with your sin would be to misunderstand the gospel, to misunderstand the very reason that you have been saved, the very life that you have been brought into by grace, by Christ.

And this is exactly what James is doing in chapter 2 of his letter. He is tackling the issue of what does faith properly understood look like?

You see, it seems very clear, doesn't it, in verse 14 that even for James to pose the question, can faith save him, can that faith save him, presupposes that among his readers there was the assumption that it would or it could save them in that sense that faith was the basis of their faith?

[12 : 40] You see, James is writing to well-taught evangelicals, I think. People who rightly saw faith as the basis of salvation. Unfortunately, just like Paul's readers in Romans, they were in danger of thinking that saving faith was something that could be of no consequence to then how you subsequently lived.

Let me put it like this. If Paul's question in Romans is, does faith mean that sinning doesn't matter for a Christian? James' question is, does faith mean doing good doesn't matter for a Christian? And in verse 14, the opening question, of course, of our text today, it very much assumes that it does. It does. What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works, can that faith save him?

Now notice that this is about a profession of faith. If someone says he has faith. So we have a claim to faith here, but a claim which seems to be detached from any practical demonstration of that faith. It's the kind of claim to faith that we would say today is, all talk, fine-sounding words, but devoid of substance. It's the kind of faith profession that James wants us to know in our lives and the lives of others should be a big concern to us.

[14 : 16] After all, when a person becomes a Christian, when a person genuinely trusts in Jesus Christ, when they bow the knee of their heart and they open their heart to the lordship of Jesus Christ and repentance and faith, the Bible is very clear that they become, in that moment, a spirit-filled child of God.

That they become a new creation. There begins a renewal of heart and mind. There is a change, a spiritual realignment, an adjustment.

So we would expect to see some kind of effects being manifest in their lives. Character, attitude, desires, relationships, priorities.

Now some things might be gradual, they might be faltering, they might be embryonic, but we would expect to see them in some measure, in some way. Remember at the beginning of 1

Thessalonians, Paul writes to that New Testament church that he had had to leave so hurriedly and is rejoicing and hearing that they have continued in the faith.

And he reflects back on his visit to them back in Acts chapter 16. And he says in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 and verse 4, he says, For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

[15 : 53] You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake, and you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction.

See, Paul's writing and he says, We know that the gospel we preached to you was effective because it had effects.

Because you started to change. We know that the faith that you embraced was real because actually we can see and hear about what has happened in your life since that would be evidence of the reality of it.

But for the person who says, I believe, I have faith, but nothing changes, James' question is, what is the nature of that faith?

Can that faith, can such faith save him? Or in other words, is that kind of faith, is that profession really saving genuine biblical faith?

[16:55] And in verse 15, James gives us an illustration. James is great, gives us an illustration, saves a lot of work for preachers. And he gives an illustration of meeting a destitute fellow Christian, a brother or sister.

And there they are and they're shivering in their lightweight jacket and it's the middle of January. Or they're hungry. What do you do? Well, if your faith is no more than just a linguistic formula, then you can pat them on the head with a few pious words and say, go in peace, be warmed and be filled.

Verse 16. Sounds really spiritual, doesn't it? Oozing with faith. Unfortunately, James wants us to know, it's a very unbiblical understanding of genuine saving faith.

Because it makes faith, Christian faith, into some kind of magical spell. Whereas real Christian faith, James wants us to know, acts.

For example, how do we know that God loves us? How do you know that? I mean, every Christian would say that was true. What's the reason for our confidence in believing that God actually loves us?

[18:12] Well, it's interesting, again, we won't look to it for the sake of time, but you go back to Romans chapter 5 and Paul makes that great declaration of God loves us, but he doesn't say he loves us just because he told us so.

Although, because that's God, that would be enough. But actually, he gives an example of that love. He says, we know that God loved us because while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

That God's love is not just a platitude, but it was demonstrable, it was evidence, it was worked out in history in a very practical way in the giving of his son.

Now, there's another point in James in this section, and it may be the main one, actually, of these particular verses. And that is, considering this example of this destitute, hungry, shivering brother or sister in the faith and our response to them, James is raising the fact that we are not to delegate back to God the responsibilities that he has delegated to us.

Somebody has said that God never does anything that, first of all, he can't get people to do. That is, God, of course, could preach the gospel directly from heaven.

[19:35] A sort of speaker system coming down from the clouds. But he has delegated that to you and to me. God could plan or organize churches directly from heaven, but he has delegated that to us.

God could send an angel to visit old Mrs. Jones, but he has given that responsibility to us. There's a great little example or window into this in Mark chapter 5.

Remember that well-known story of Jairus' daughter being raised from the dead. Amazing miracle. And Mark notes at the end of that incident that after she is raised, Jesus tells the people there to give the girl something to eat.

It's a kind of curious detail, isn't it? Why didn't Jesus just raise her up fully energized, fueled up for the day, complete in every way in that moment?

Why did he wake her up, bring her back from the dead and she's actually hungry? Maybe he feels a bit faint, needs a bit of nourishment. Don't know, maybe it's just a little example in Scripture that God will do what we can't do, but what we can do, he will leave to us to do.

[20:57] So when people come to us for help or we see a practical or physical need, we're not to send them off hoping for a miracle down the road. What good is that?

Verse 16. But as we are able, we are to meet that need ourselves. That will be a demonstration of real biblical faith. You see, verse 18.

James is very clear, isn't he? You have faith and I have works. Show me your faith apart from your works and I will show you my faith by my works. In other words, if you've got real faith, show me the money.

Because biblical faith is never abstract theory. Believing in Jesus is not an academic pastime. One of the examples we sometimes use in explaining about Christian belief to people in our Christianity explored courses in Greenview is we talk about the difference between believing on the one hand in something like the Loch Ness Monster and saying you believed in, say, the Labour Party or Barack Obama.

On the one hand with the Loch Ness Monster, you're just saying that you think there might be some kind of odd creature swimming about in that water up there in the north of Scotland. But it's just a kind of statement of possibility if you like.

[22 : 21] But when you say I believe in the SNP or I believe in David Cameron or Barack Obama, you're not saying you believe they just actually physically exist. You're saying something more than that, aren't you?

In that sense, you're saying that you have a confidence. You have an investment. You have a sense that these people can deliver and do something and provide something and enable something in your life or in your country that you think would be beneficial and that you would be supportive of and that you would look to in a very positive way.

That's the difference between believing that Jesus exists and believing in Jesus Christ. Because for the Bible, any belief in Jesus that doesn't affect us, that doesn't change us, that doesn't have some impact on who we are, the decisions we make, isn't really, from the Bible's point of view, real biblical belief.

It's just the possession of data. Now, of course, verse 19, that data might be impeccably orthodox. You believe that God is one, you do well.

Even the demons believe and shudder. You see, the demons cannot be faulted in their doctrine of God. But it's not of any profit to them.

[23 : 51] Their profession is not one that will bring them any comfort. It's one to make them shudder. I think it may be very significant that James is using this particular doctrine, the doctrine of God's oneness, in this place.

Just turn with me back to Deuteronomy chapter 6 and verse 4 and 5 where that great declaration of God's oneness was first made to Israel.

Verses that every Jew will have memorized, have them pinned to their door, will touch them when they go into their house. Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one.

You shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. See, it's a great declaration of God's oneness that God is whole, he is unified, he is complete, he is exclusive.

But the implication, the follow-on, the application there from God's oneness is therefore you should love God with your whole being. You should be one in your devotion and love and approach to God.

[25 : 14] And of course I'm sure you've covered this already but one of the great themes of James is double-mindedness. You know the person that is half this way and half that when it comes to faith and belief.

And this is another example of don't be double-minded. Don't have the faith compartment over here and then their life compartment over here and never the twain will meet.

Every part, every facet of you should be given to God because he is one, he is exclusive, he is whole and therefore you should be absolutely whole and united in yourself in terms of that relationship and how you respond and follow and love God.

There's not just bits of you that are to respond to God. Faith and works are both to respond to God. there should be an integrity and a oneness in our faith.

Christians are not people who have been forgiven, can call God their father and look forward to the joy of eternal life and a renewed and sinless creation because they do good works or for that matter are just nice guys.

[26 : 30] that's how we started and I want to make that point again. You will not get to heaven, you cannot get to heaven because of your good deeds.

Christians are people who are simply trusting in Jesus Christ, believing that when he died on the cross he took the punishment they deserved for the rejection of God that in and through Jesus alone everything, everything, capital E, in bold, underlined, necessary for them to be accepted by God has been provided and to which they can add nothing when it comes to getting right with God. Your best efforts cannot save you, your good works cannot keep you, your good days and your purest moments cannot make you any more loved than you already are by God.

We are called to rest in joy and be thankful in Christ for that salvation completely and entirely provided for us.

And James and Paul want us in resting and enjoying and thanking God for that salvation to live the life that we were saved for.

[27 : 56] to love, to care, to show kindness, to serve, to provide, to comfort, to show others the kind of mercy and blessings that we ourselves have received from God in Christ.

Christ. And let me say this morning as we finish, if that's not your heart, if you are a professing Christian this morning, if you are somebody who would say, I have faith and that's not your heart, that kind of call to live it out, to love and to care, to demonstrate it, just leaves you kind of cold. if faith in Christ for you is just a set of statements or a prayer that you made many years ago a weekend away, if it doesn't affect you, if faith has just become an excuse for sin in your life, just a get out for not making an effort, then it might be that you have faith that is dead, faith that can offer you no assurance, faith that is not saving, and if so, ask God to open up and soften your heart this morning, ask God to work again in your heart and in your life so that what you know will show, let's pray, let's pray, let's pray, let's pray, let's pray, let's pray, let's pray, let's pray, Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gospel, we thank you for the gospel of salvation by faith alone and Christ alone, we thank you that our confidence is entirely upon the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us, and Father we thank you that in receiving Christ and following Christ we are brought in to that new resurrection life, to the life of faith, the life that enables us to be a blessing, to work out in our lives the kind of care and love and compassion and gentleness for others that you have shown to us in overwhelming measure. So Father may these words of scripture come and just find a place in our heart, may you search us out and may we be people of faith, of that exclusive trust in Jesus and yet people who go forth from this place to live it out, to show it, to demonstrate it, that in every part of our lives you might be fully glorified and we ask these things for Jesus' sake.

[30 : 42] Amen. . . .