

August 23

James 2:14-26

Title Looking for God? Watch Out for Others

Core True religion requires embodying God-trust as neighbor-love.

Call Do something to provide for the tangible needs of someone else this week

Compel To feel joy in providing care for someone else as expression of trust and gratitude for the way God takes such good care for you.

James 2:14-26 NRSV

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. 20 Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? 21 Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. 23 Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? 26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

Intro: A quick-and-dirty explanation of Gnosticism.

It was not long after Jesus' resurrection and ascension that some people – in an effort to explain what this phenomena in a way that made sense to the Greek philosophical worldview – promoted the idea that there needed to be a sharp distinction between Jesus the human and Christ the spirit. This was largely motivated by the conviction that the material world, and our human bodies, were basically lesser, lower, and of lesser value than the spiritual world. By making these distinctions, people could say that the crucifixion wasn't really all that bad, as if it were merely Jesus' body suffered but his spirit was remained untouched and somehow above it. There was – and indeed there continues to be – a strong desire within humans to do this. It has strong ethical implications. It invites the idea that we can use our bodies any way we like, for whatever gratifications we want, but that as long as we keep our spirit's untainted then it all okay. Or as James is confronting it, it might lead believers to think that if they say words of blessing to someone then they have performed their religious duty.

You see what James is talking about, right?

“Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill” - 1st Century
equals
“Thoughts and prayers” – 21st Century

From this brief example, we can see that the influence of Gnosticism continues to show up in lots of surprising places. It even shows up in the church.

But we who believe in Jesus Christ believe in embodiment – the fullness of God, in the fullness of love, entering and experiencing the material world. **What God loves, God becomes.**

James has no patience for disembodied faith. And his impatience shows up clearly in this passage. What makes his impatience especially remarkable is that he is Jesus’ young brother! If anyone might be inclined to make a distinction between the Son of Mary & Joseph and the Son of God it would be James! Surely people came to him regularly asking, “Jesus couldn’t have been that great, that perfect, right?”

But James won’t have any of it. **James is all about embodied faith.** This is probably the idea for which James is most famous: Believing without acting on that that belief is meaningless. Faith without works is dead.

Review: Where we are to direct our attention/our gaze

Week 1: Look in the Mirror – religion is about reconnecting with ourselves, seeing ourselves the way God sees us and - from that place – reconnecting with those for whom God’s heart break: The vulnerable and at-risk or the proverbial “widows and orphans.”

Week 2: Look Them in Eye – From this reconnected place, we are going to honor all people by not showing partiality in any form. As we know ourselves to be beloved, so we treat everyone else as God’s beloved Child.

This Week, Week 3: Look Out for Others: The way to express your trust in a God you cannot see is to care for the neighbor you can see. **True religion requires embodying God-trust through neighbor-love.**

James uses three very “embodied” examples to make his point.

Three Examples: Demons, Abraham and Rahab

First, James illustrates how meaningless it is to talk about “belief” as intellectual assent – simply believing that something is true. If it was just about having correct theology or doctrine, then heck! – even demons can do that! Big deal. Knowing the right answers without aligning ourselves to them is, to use Jesus’ word – hypocrisy or play-acting. Remember that the goal of

the true religion James is calling for is congruency – having our actions match our beliefs, our inside match our outside.

Abraham and Rahab, however, put their trust in God into practice, and did so at incredible personal risk. Abraham expressed his trust in God first by leaving his home and heading out for a new promised land – without any kind of map! He left everything on God’s promise of, “I will show you...” But that is not the example James decides to use for Abraham’s faithfulness. Instead, James focuses on Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, the most embodied expression of God’s “I will make you the Father of many nations” promise. Obedience costs. Obedience requires risk. It is in the action that faith becomes real, relevant, and complete. It was in risking everything that Abraham’s faith deepened and matured. Likewise Rahab could have told the spies, “Best of luck... hope you don’t get caught!” but instead she put herself at risk for them because she concluded that the God who sent them was the One to whom she should entrust herself. Both Abraham and Rahab trusted God and then *acted* on that trust. They are considered righteous – not because of their lifestyle or how they were viewed by other people We see them as righteous people but because they made the courageous choice to trust God even at great risk. Their faith was fully embodied.

If we are grateful to God for taking care of us, then it is simply not enough to say, “thank you” or “I believe in you.” That gratitude finds its caring for others. It gets embodied.

Example: The Refuge Ministry

The Call

Do something to provide for the tangible needs of someone else this week.

The key example: Service Worship Sunday

Conclusion:

The Hardest part of loving our neighbor during a pandemic is that we are supposed to stay socially distanced from our neighbor! But while that may require more creativity on our part, it is as critical a part of our embodied faith as ever. Indeed, it is even more important!

Let us pray.