

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

One of the great challenges of our day is to understand how things can be real. We see clips and it gives us one perspective of things, but suddenly when we get the full angle or the broad picture of the story, we see things in a slightly different way.

I think that James 2 is one of those examples. For much of church history, this passage has been read in light of Paul's teaching that we are justified by faith alone and not by works. For this reason, people like Martin Luther would say that this was an epistle of straw and worry that this was not a true and superior letter of the faith. Thousands of articles have been written, trying to understand how James and Paul fit together.

But when we see that James is writing to Jewish believers about 10 years before Paul's ministry, then this passage doesn't have to be seen as being in conflict with Paul, but complementary. But it takes work to see things from a different angle. While I do not think that what I am saying contradicts what has been taught by many, I think that we need to see what James is saying in a different light. James wants us to have our faith mature through action, and that action means that we need to trust God when it feels hard to do so.

Show your faith (vv. 14-17)

It's important for us to remember the context of the book of James. He is writing to Christians who have had to flee for their lives because of persecution. As a result, many are without homes, jobs, food, and the basics of life. They have lost their position of influence. So when James writes and says, "Can that faith save him?" he is asking a question on two levels. First, he is asking what kind of faith can withstand persecution in this current world, and what kind of faith is pressing forward to heaven.

The first example James gives in vv. 15-17 is of a brother or sister who is without food and clothing. They are in need. And James now writes to other persecuted Christians who are without food and clothing. They are not having to give out of their abundance, but their lack.

This becomes important for a couple of reasons. First, how is it faith to give someone food and clothing? For some, they have taken this passage and made it all about works. You have to show your faith by helping the poor and needy. Social justice becomes the primary focus of their faith. But I want to ask, how is it faith to give someone food or clothes? A non-religious person can do that. What makes this distinctively Christian?

We have to connect these verses with what has just come before. In v. 13, James said that judgment without mercy will be shown to the one who has shown no mercy. In other words, faith acts mercifully to those in need. There is no air of superiority or pretentiousness. There is a reminder that by the grace of God I am where I am. I am not better than the person in need.

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Second, the context of James also helps us to realize that people were being asked to give out of their lack, not their abundance. This is faith. Faith is not giving out of your excess, but out of your need. Imagine that you have very little money or belongings. Someone comes to you and asks for some clothing or bread. What is the typical response? I've got to take care of myself! But it takes faith to give to someone out of your lack. Can God provide my daily bread for me if I give out of my need? Or will God forget me? This makes sense, then, why James despises favouritism. Hoping you can get influence with the rich is no faith at all – it is worldly. But showing your brother or sister mercy when they can't help you at all – that is a display of faith.

So these verses are calling us to show our faith not out of our abundance, but where we lack. Can we show mercy when we have been hurt? Can we give when it is hard to give? This is what faith looks like. And James will give two examples later on to help us see that faith gives when it means sacrifice.

Should we do work at a soup kitchen? Should we give clothes to those in need? Absolutely. But faith doesn't give out of abundance. Faith gives when it hurts, believing that God can supply all my needs according to his riches in glory (Phil. 4:19). This is why James begins and ends this section in vv. 14 and 17 with the call that faith shows itself, otherwise it is dead.

Don't separate faith and action (vv. 18-19)

Faith in action is what James is calling us for, and so he now gives a negative example. Separating faith and works is a foolish thing to do. Beliefs alone will not save us but condemn us. Just believing the right thing doesn't mean that there is genuine faith.

To make this point, James takes issue with the person who wants to separate faith and works. And the example he gives is the devils. "Look at them," James says. "They separate faith and works." At its most basic level, the confession of Israel was from Deut. 6:4: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." In a world full of many gods, to be a person who believed in one true God was to stand out. But James says, that's not enough!

To say that I have certain thoughts but they do not translate into action is no different from the demons. Demons believe that God is one. But the thing about demons is that their belief doesn't save them, but condemns them. This is the point of them shuddering.

You can know all the right things, you can have all the correct doctrine, and yet James says that this is not helpful. When you're losing your position in the culture and you are just loud about your beliefs, James says this isn't helpful. Being loud about your beliefs and telling other people how wrong they are is so mixed up. To confess that God is One is to confess that he is our Ruler. And when he is our Ruler, then we act as he acts – with mercy, kindness, and sacrifice. These are the displays of faith. Anything less is a hellish distortion of the Christian life.

Mature Your Faith (vv. 20-26)

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Now James gives us two examples, and these examples make the point that faith in action is faith that sacrifices by trusting in God in hard times, and that these trials are intended to mature our faith.

The first example is that of Abraham. God had promised Abraham that he would have a son, a promise that all the world would be blessed through him. Abraham waited and waited and waited for this son to the point that it was almost impossible that he could ever have a son. But when the promised son came, God asked him to go, leave his home, and go to Mount Moriah and offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Genesis 22 recounts the story of how Abraham went immediately. At the point where he was ready to obey God, the Lord provided a sacrifice for him. God had said that he was testing Abraham (Gen. 22:1).

And here is the point of this story that James wants us to see: Abraham was willing to obey God by giving up his one and only son – not the abundance of sons that he had, but his only one. In fact, Hebrews 11:17-19 tells us how Abraham responded in action by faith. (READ passage). Abraham believed that even if he offered up his son, God could raise him from the dead. And James says that this is evidence of how he believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. But that verse is from Gen. 15:6 – before Abraham acted in this way in Genesis 22. Why does James go back to Gen. 15 to make this point?

I think the reason is simple. We do not add works to our faith. Our faith simply works. When God gives faith, we act in ways that show we trust God and are willing to sacrifice because we love God. Faith is working itself out in love, as Paul would say later on (Gal. 5:6).

But I want us to notice what James says about Abraham's faith in v. 22 – his faith was completed by his works. I don't want us to rush over this idea. Because this is the idea that James wants us to get. This is the idea that James has been writing about since the beginning of the letter – to consider it pure joy when we face trials of many kinds because we know that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness, and steadfastness needs to have its full effect so that we would be mature and complete, not lacking in anything (1:3-4). James wants mature faith, and Abraham is an example of someone who was tested by God in the face of trial, stood steadfast, and what happened? His faith was matured. Tests are not meant to destroy you, but mature you.

Do you want more faith? Faith isn't asking God to do something with greater willpower. It isn't believing in miracles. We aren't those who believe in health and wealth if we would just have enough faith. Do you want to know what mature faith looks like? It looks like the person who is suffering and yet believes God is good and continues to do good to others. Faith doesn't have to have a miracle and be all healthy and better. Faith is actually best seen when we do the hard thing and keep going when it seems impossible to.

James gives one last example: Rahab the prostitute. We are told in Joshua 2:8-13 that Rahab had heard about all of the Lord's mighty deeds in bringing Israel out of Egypt and to the land of

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Canaan. So when she welcomed the spies who were checking out the land, she asked them to show mercy to her, even though the King of Jericho had demanded that she turn over the spies. In an act of defiance against the king of Jericho, she protected the spies, and her faith was considered the same as Abraham's (v. 25). And here is the point that James is making: in the face of persecution when Christians were probably being called to hand over their brothers and sisters, they should be steadfast and show mercy to one another, defying the political establishment. Why? Because in the end, what matters is not safety but steadfastness which will produce a robust faith.

You see, the examples of faith are not believing in miracles and then being disappointed when God doesn't come through, but being steadfast in the face of trial and not giving up. That's the kind of faith that we are being called to. To act in a way that believes that God is good when you're pressured to give up faith. This will mature faith, complete it. This is God's plan for our lives.

The reason we can endure trials is because God sent his One and Only Son and offered him up on that same hill as Abraham was called to offer Isaac. There God showed us that mercy triumphs over judgment. For the way of Jesus is our way as well. He grew in wisdom and stature, in favour with God and men as he obeyed his Father, endured the hardships, even to the point of going to the cross. He not only showed us what faith in action is like, but he made the way for our faith.

And this is good news. When you know you have not been steadfast, when you've failed, you can come to him and confess and find that his mercy triumphs over judgment so that you can be changed and act in faith. Because Jesus is not only our Lord and King, but he calls us friends, just as Abraham was called a friend of God. When you know that he is your friend who sticks closer than a brother, who walks with you and is working for your success by remaining steadfast, then you can see that it's not just about mere words and talk, but about a faith that acts with resolve and steadfastness.