Consistent Living September 26 2021. James 1:21b-27; 2:14-26

Leo Tolstoy told the story of *Two Russian Pilgrims*. These men set out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem intent on getting there for the Easter festivities. One was intent on getting there as quickly as possible, he was intensely focused and could not be side-tracked from proceeding onwards. The other one, as he proceeded along came across a variety of people along the way who needed some assistance. In the end he spent so much time and money on these people he never actually reached Jerusalem. “But something came to him from God which the other missed; and something came through him from God into the lives of men which the other failed to find in the great Easter celebration.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Jim Wallis who has been a prophetic voice within the Christian church for decades stated, *“Genuine faith is a faith that works”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

In the ministry of Jesus, as we have it recorded in the gospels, we read much about his actions and attitudes, not just his words. His faith was lived out before his disciples. The passages we have heard today focus on the importance of having a congruence between what we believe and what we do. James uses an image, some illustrations and an analogy to make his point.

The image in the mirror

The image of a mirror highlights the concept of reflection. Glancing in a mirror is of little value. The value of the mirror comes from considering its image carefully, studing it with a view to responding. They need to reflect on what is seen. Likewise James wanted the church to recognise that hearing or seeing was insufficient, unless there was action. The significance of the reflection in this mirror could be interpreted in various ways. The image in the mirror could point the church community to recognising what God had made them to be, and illuminating how they had not allowed God’s image to be shaped in them. Alec Motyer has said, “True freedom is the opportunity and the ability to give expression to what we really are. We are truly free when we live the life appropriate to those who are created in the image of God.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Alternately the image could remind them of their own failings, their sins, and the reality that they had not done anything about their sin. Forgetting the image in the mirror, relates to their self deception. They were not prepared to take the time needed to really consider the image and how they should respond. It was easier to forget, to pretend, to ignore that there was something they needed to address. The allure of procrastination has always been a challenge for humanity, James reminds his readers of the importance of prompt, decisive action when they gain new insights into their lives and their workings as a community. (Given the insights which James himself was sharing with them this is quite poignant).

The contrast is portrayed to the audience in the context of people who look intently into God’s law of liberty and then act upon it. These are the type of people who humbly welcome and respond to the word God has implanted within them. They are truly receptive, ready to be transformed by the power of God.

Inseparability of faith and works.

A little later in this letter James again challenges his readers regarding incongruities between their faith convictions and their actions. He appears quite incredulous that his readers needed convincing regarding the inseparability of faith and works. He even accuses them of being senseless.[[4]](#footnote-4) By way of contrast, he draws their attention to two heroes of the faith.

Firstly to Abraham, who is commonly known as the father of Israel. Abraham’s faithfulness incorporates various incidents including him offering hospitality to strangers. (Gen 18) Abraham’s faith was a working faith, demonstrated in obedience and trust towards God and in acts of kindness and mercy towards other people. James describes Abraham’s faith and works in this way, *“You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works”* James 2:22 NRSV Scot McKnight has said, “Faith finds its intended shape when it is working … being brought to its full realization, its divinely -intended design and form.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Abraham was recognised as a friend of God. His trust and obedience towards God flowed out of his relationship with God.

The second example was of Rahab a much less likely choice, in the context of the various patriarchs and prophets who had greater prominence in the life of Israel. However Rahab was another example of one who offered hospitality to strangers, and was affirmed for these actions. The inseparability of faith and works in the life of the Christian was illustrated by the analogy of the body and the spirit. The faith that is owned and confessed demands expression through actions.

Consistency, congruence and integrity are affirmed by our society. To be accused of hypocrisy is an affront.

However some Christian politicians on both sides of the political divide affirm sentiments such as *“It’s good we have people in public* *life with religious faith. It can and should be an inspiration but it shouldn’t dictate what you do in public life.”* [[6]](#footnote-6) These types of comments do not sit well with the emphasis of this letter or with Jesus’ teachings. Jesus didn’t just inspire his followers to adopt different beliefs, he challenged common views and practices of the day. Jesus faith was earthy, grounded in reality and deeply practical. He spoke strongly against hypocrisy, he certainly wanted his followers to live with integrity.

Consistent Living - faith and works

This integrity is demonstrated by hearing which is completed by doing, seeing which is completed by doing and speaking which is completed by doing. James encouraged them to be inspired by God’s gift of wisdom, and to activate their faith through actions motivated by love.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thomas Wilson has said, *“Faith is the root of good works. A root that produces nothing is dead”[[8]](#footnote-8)*

Our natural inclination is to prize being comfortable, privileged, so when this is challenged we can resist, often even before adequately considering why we are doing so. Though we recognise that to scorn or ignore the poor is inconsistent with the faith we are called to embrace, yet making the church’s *“response to the poor a touchstone for testing the authenticity of it’s faith*”[[9]](#footnote-9) may also be challenging for us to embrace in practice. In the 12th Century our Jewish forbears affirmed that *“[a] community which has no synagogue and no shelter for the poor must first provide for the poor.” [[10]](#footnote-10)* James encouraged the development of “communities, gathered by the faith of Jesus in which the poor were honoured and cared for” often by others who would have also been viewed as “poor” in the eyes of their communities.[[11]](#footnote-11)

He calls this community to a life shaped by Jesus teaching, by deeds of compassion towards those in need. They need to intentionally apply themselves to identifying the actions that they are able to take, and to the steps they will implement to bring their intentions into reality. Scot Mc Knight has said, *“works may well indicate the presence of faith, but the absence of works proves the absence of a faith”[[12]](#footnote-12)* The challenge remains for us to consider what shape our actions should take as followers of Jesus in this age. So it is important to consider

In what ways are our actions demonstrating love towards those whom others may ignore or reject?

How are we practically sharing the blessings of God with the poor and marginalised?

What things are we passionate about? It could be a good idea to take some time to identify three things you are passionate about. Then think about what actions you have taken recently because of that passion.

Our openness, receptivity to God is always so important. As God speaks to us, God also equips us to respond to the challenges God brings to us. “Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” James 3:13 NRSV

1. William P. Merrill, in Tony Castle (Ed), *Complete Quotes and Anecdotes,* (Suffolk, England: Kevin Mayhew Publishing, 2007) 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jim Wallis, *Faith that Works: Lessons from the Life of an Activist Preacher,*(New York: Random House Publishing, 2000) cited in McKnight, *The Letter of James,* 146 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alec Motyer, *The Message of James: The Bible Speaks Today,* (Nottingham, England: Inter Varsity Press, 1985) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. James 2:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James: The New International Commentary on the New Testament,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011) 252 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Greg Sheridan, *God is Good for You”* (Crows Nest, Australia: Allen and Unwin Press, 2018) 225 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. J. H. Elliot, “The Epistle of James in Rhetorical and Social Scientific Perspective: Holiness-Wholeness and Patterns of Replication” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 23 (1993) 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thomas Wilson in Tony Castle (Ed), *Complete Quotes and Anecdotes,* (Suffolk, England: Kevin Mayhew Publishing, 2007) 338 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Letter of James: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck et al. (Ed) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1998) 200 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jewish Teaching (Twelfth Century) in Tony Castle (Ed), *Complete Quotes and Anecdotes,* (Suffolk, England: Kevin Mayhew Publishing, 2007) 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Johnson, “The Letter of James, 200 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. McKnight, *The Letter of James,* 228 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)