

SUMMARY OF SERMON AT FBC ON SUNDAY 5/10/08 AT EVENING WORSHIP

This was the second in the series of five sermons on the five chapters of the book of James in the New Testament. The speaker was Grant Gibbs who dealt with James 2 : verses 1 – 26.

BACKGROUND

The Christians to whom James was writing were among the first of Christian believers but his letter has application for each one of us who honour the name of Christ.

OVERVIEW

Section 1

In verses 1 – 13 James addressed the new converts' unchristian practice of showing partiality to fellow-believers purely on the basis of appearances. The instruction to them was not to be selective in the way they adhered to the law. By observing the whole law, except for the way in which the rich in appearance were favoured over the poor at assemblies, they were infringing the whole law.

"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." (v.10)

Section 2

In verses 14 to 26 the writer deals with faith and the works that are necessary to demonstrate that faith. Works give outward expression to what would otherwise be invisible.

"You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." (v.24)

SECTION 1 : THE PRACTICE OF SHOWING PARTIALITY

There was no question for James that this practice constituted a contradiction of the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ : "Brethren," he says, "As believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favouritism." (James 2 : 1)

Grant asked the question of how often, if we look into our own hearts, we do this : based purely on outward appearances, we gravitate towards those who we think will enrich our lives and don't associate with the poorer-looking believer. Without even knowing his heart, we slip into judgement of him : "he's not my type; maybe he'll want me to give him something, ask me for money." So we avoid him.

James gives four reasons why we should not adopt this attitude and why it is a sin to do so:

1. We thereby dishonour those (the poor) whom God honours throughout His word. How foolish and perilous to treat with contempt those who are exalted in the eyes of our Lord and Saviour.

2. Also, by showing favouritism we honour those (the rich – not necessarily rich believers) who are the first to exploit and take those who cannot afford it to Court.
3. A third reason why it is foolish to show deference to the rich is that they habitually use the Lord's name in vain. Trusting their riches instead of the Lord, they tend to show less respect for the Lord in the way they speak.
4. Lastly, James says that showing favouritism violates "the royal law : love your neighbour as yourself." Certainly, we would not wish to be despised simply because we are poor. Our neighbour is any person in distress with whom we come into contact. The royal law is known by that name because it belongs to the King: He loved more than anyone. And because it is the king of all laws.

Moreover, the law is like a chain : if we break one of the links, the whole chain breaks. So, James writes, it does not help to keep the rest of the law and not the law against favouritism.

A question that arises in the context of James's letter is whether we are still under the law. Does Romans 7 : 4 not say we died to the law through the body of Christ? (See also Galatians 2 : 19 and elsewhere in the New Testament).

It is true that Christians are not under the law as a rule of life. Christ, not the law, is the believer's pattern. The penalty for breaking the law is death. Christ died to pay the penalty of the broken law. Those who are in Christ are therefore delivered from the law and its penalty.

But certain principles of the law are of abiding value.

That is why nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the letters. (Only the commandment concerning the Sabbath is not repeated because that commandment was ceremonial rather than moral). The nine repeated are not given as law but as instruction in righteousness for the people of God.

As it is put in the Emmaus Correspondence School publication by William MacDonald, to which Grant referred : '(James) is not saying "If you show respect of persons (favouritism), you are breaking the law, and (are) thus condemned to death." What he is saying is "as believers, you are no longer under the law of bondage, but are under the law of liberty – liberty to do what is right. You (are given the power, by grace, to) do (what is right), not through fear of punishment, but through love for Him who died for you....." '. Your profession of faith in Christ and your life as a Christian must match up.

So we need to test ourselves : do we show preference to those of a certain race or age or social standing ; or to those who are not infirm or so good looking" And let us remember as we do this that the way we treat the least of Christ's followers is the way we will be seen to have treated Him (Math. 25 : 40).

SECTION 2 : JUSTIFICATION BY WORKS?

this controversial section of James's letter seems to contradict those portions of Romans, by which we learn that our redemption is by God's grace, our faith, Christ's blood and God's power. However, this section of James is perfectly reconcilable with Roman : Our works simply give outward expression to our justification, which would otherwise be invisible. It is in this sense that we are justified by works.

James does ask the question : can faith without deeds save a man? This suggests again that we are justified by deeds. However, James is writing about say-so faith : Only the real thing will produce deeds to indicate it. The New American Standard Version emphasises this by translating James's question thus : "Can ***that*** (kind of) faith save him?" Faith without deeds is futile and lifeless. It is not that we are saved by faith plus works but by that kind of faith that results in good works. In other words, works are not the cause but the effect of salvation through the one and only cause, Christ Jesus. Faith can only be shown by good works. Believing in God above is not enough : even the demons believe in God and shudder at the thought of their eventual punishment by Him. What is needed is complete commitment to Jesus, which results in a changed life.

James gives two examples from the Old Testament of faith that works : Abraham ; and Rahab, the harlot. Abraham's preparedness to offer up his only son, Isaac, was the sort of practical demonstration of his faith that James is writing about. Likewise, Rahab, a Canaanite, identified with the victorious God of the Hebrews and in befriending the spies, proved she was a believer. These are the sort of good works that prove faith. Stripped of the faith that motivated them, these works would have been evil. These are to be distinguished from the sort of works some feel are required for salvation : paying charity, going to church, not lying.

CONCLUSION

Grant concluded by issuing the challenge to his listeners to question how real is their faith, what evidence there is to back it up. What evidence were they relying on : words/[professionsor actions? Our actions must back up our words. Our professions of faith on its own is useless.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Do we show partiality?

Do we show our faith?

The irony of James's exhortations to the dispersed tribes of Israel is that he portrays God as being partial to the poor. Are you ready to assume the mantle of God's favoured ones, renouncing the pursuit of material wealth – and blasphemy ; and demonstrating by deeds that you love your neighbour as yourself?