

COMMENTARY - JAMES - Cedar, Paul A.

Paul A. Cedar. The Communicator's Commentary on James, 1, 2 Peter, Jude (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984),

Do not merely listen to the Word (1: 22).

*But be **doers** of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*

Listening is terribly important. But it is not enough... To know the Word of God and not to live it is sin (James 4:17). Frankly this is the problem faced by many Christians within the contemporary church. They have become mere spectators who enjoy listening to the Word of God preached and taught Sunday after Sunday. Their heads are filled with Biblical knowledge and facts, but they ignore the translating of that knowledge into godly living. Their spiritual heads grow fatter and fatter while their spiritual bodies are wasting away from lack of use. They are spiritual freaks who are of little value to themselves, the church or the world. In the words of James, they are deceived. They have deceived themselves by merely knowing without "doing." ¹

Their spiritual heads are grossly enlarged with Biblical knowledge which has never been translated into lifestyle. They move from one Bible study to another or from one church service to another, but they never put the truths of God's Word into practice. They are deceived. They are hearers of the Word but not doers. ² Faith without works is worthless to James.

Perfect law (1: 25)

But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

Perfect law comes from God. "Every good gift and every perfect give is from above" (v. 17). Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or

¹ Paul A. Cedar. The Communicator's Commentary on James, 1,2 Peter, Jude (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 46.

² Paul A. Cedar. The Communicator's Commentary on James, 1,2 Peter, Jude (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 47.

the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17). .. Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. And the second is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these (Mk. 12: 29-31). This is the perfect law to which James is referring. Paul also presented this perfect law of Jesus which fulfilled all the law and the prophets. For example, he wrote, "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Ga. 5: 14).³

The perfect law has come from God and when we look intently into it, we see God. James says that the law is not only perfect, but also that it is the law of liberty or freedom. Only in Christ can we actually be free. Only when we know the truth through Jesus Christ can we be free indeed (John 8:32). Being only hearers of the Word can lead us into the slavery of spiritual malnutrition. But being doers of the Word can lead us to freedom in Jesus Christ.⁴

Looking into the perfect law of liberty is essential. But it is not enough. That action should become our lifestyle. We should put it into action by doing. We must listen closely to what he is saying to us. And then, by faith, we can be doers of His Word. We must follow him in active obedience.⁵

This one will be blessed in what he does (v. 25).

The word "blessed" (*makarios* in Greek) means happy, fortunate, or well off. This is the word Jesus used in his beatitude when He said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3-11). The person whose life is abiding is blessed person. The life of the doer is the good life in Jesus Christ. The doer enjoys life at its very best. He or she is set free in Jesus Christ to enjoy the life of liberty and

³ Paul A. Cedar. The Communicator's Commentary on James, 1,2 Peter, Jude (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 47.

⁴ Paul A. Cedar. The Communicator's Commentary on James, 1,2 Peter, Jude (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 47

⁵ Paul A. Cedar. The Communicator's Commentary on James, 1,2 Peter, Jude (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 48.

blessings.⁶

How to Be Authentically Religious (1: 26-27).

1. What pure and faultless religion is not (v. 26)

Religion (*threskeia* in Greek) has been defined as the outward expression of worship in ritual, liturgy, and ceremony. James believe that religious expression is worthless if someone is not able to bridle his own tongue.

However, James is saying that authentic religion is much more than outward expression of worship. As Jesus said, all of that can take place but our hearts can still far from Him (Matt. 15:8-9). We can simply be deceiving our own hearts if we think we are religious when we are not.⁷

2. What pure and faultless religion is (v. 27).

James presents a very concise definition of pure and faultless religion. This definition is not based upon human standards. He states clearly that this is pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father (v. 27). First, it is a religion marked by a personal ministry. An excellent definition of ministry in the Biblical sense is as follows: Ministry is responding to the authentic needs of others with the love of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. That definition describes the basic concern of James. He shares a specific ministry needs of his society. The Church has been neglecting her widows and orphans. James is calling the Church to accountability. He is teaching us that pure and faultless religion must be carried out in action. It is not enough to be "knowers." We must be "doers."⁸

⁶ Paul A. Cedar. The Communicator's Commentary on James, 1,2 Peter, Jude (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 48.

⁷ Paul A. Cedar. The Communicator's Commentary on James, 1,2 Peter, Jude (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 49.

⁸ Paul A. Cedar. The Communicator's Commentary on James, 1,2 Peter, Jude (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 49.

He is calling to the highest of godly lifestyles in which we would not have a single spot of the world visible to others. We find John supporting the teaching of James when he writes, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him (I John 2:15)."⁹

James 2:1-26 **How to Live with Faith and Works**

Christians have always had great difficulty in understanding the relationship of faith and works. The early church struggled a great deal with this tension - especially those believers who had Jewish roots. Of course, it was to these people - Jewish Christians - that James was writing. They understood the message declared by Paul to the church in Ephesus, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). ... Paul writes in deeply theological terms regarding the fact that Jesus Christ came to set us free from the impossible demands of the law. ..Paul taught that , "The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under the tutor (Gal. 3:24-25). That very teaching became central to the Protestant Reformation. Justification by faith along, *sola fides*, was the focus of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other leaders of the Reformation. ¹⁰[It was protesting against Catholic practice of selling salvation with money].

However, since Luther's day, Lutheran scholars and other Reformation and biblical scholars have come to understand that the teaching of James regarding the relationship of faith and works is correcting those who were distorting Paul's teaching. In fact, they believed incorrectly that Christian faith is merely a matter of "profession" and not "possession." In other words, they "talked" about Christian discipleship, but they didn't "live" it. [Example: If we set free from

⁹ Paul A. Cedar. The Communicator's Commentary on James, 1,2 Peter, Jude (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 50.

¹⁰ Paul A. Cedar. The Communicator's Commentary on James, 1,2 Peter, Jude (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 51.

slavery of our sin and destructive behaviors we must help others experience freedom from slavery of sins.] Authentic Christianity is not merely a matter of talk; it must show itself in appropriate action. We will be known as Christians not simply because we *say* we have faith, but by how we *demonstrate* that faith in our lifestyles. Professed faith without appropriate deeds is worthless.

¹¹Example: rich and poor. How they treat the poor.

Quote other scholars

For Wesley, “God justifies the ungodly by faith alone, without any goodness or righteousness preceding. The teaching of Paul means there is no righteousness *before* faith, but not that there is no righteousness *after* it. Holiness cannot *precede* purification; but not that it need not *follow* it.” ¹²

“The aim or goal of justification is the production of justice; just person, just societies, a just earth. God does not speak of justification while leaving us in our sins or speak of resurrection of the dead that left us in our graves. We cannot become more like God by withdrawing ourselves from the world that God created, from the poor and despised whom God in Christ befriended.”¹³

Moving from Grace to Action

Many Christians believe God’s grace is given to us freely to meet our selfish personal needs or to keep in our hearts. Blount stresses: “We want so badly for Christianity to make us feel good. Grace like syrup; we want it warm and gooey and sticky, so that it not only makes us feel good when we see it and feel it on the outside, it makes us feel spiritually good, in God’s good graces, on the inside. But to seek a Christianity that makes us feel good is to miss the powerful reality of what was happening to Jesus. And if we miss that, we also miss something

¹¹ Paul A. Cedar. *The Communicator’s Commentary on James, 1,2 Peter, Jude* (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 52.

¹² Watson, *Proclaiming Christ*, 121.

¹³ Jennings Jr., *Wesley*, 32-33.

special about ourselves. Jesus was hanging up there on that cross because his faith wasn't feel-good faith but a do-good and a be-good faith."¹⁴

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Definition of works: The Scripture speaks about works in two categories. There are works of persons which are done in the flesh, and there are works which are done with the assistance of the Spirit which brings glory to God.¹⁵

The works of the flesh are mentioned quite frequently in the New Testament. For example, Paul enumerates some of the works of flesh in Galatians 5:19-21, which include adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contention, jealousy, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambition, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, and revelry. He concludes by saying that those who practice such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God (Gal. 5:21). Paul also teaches that we are saved by grace through faith and not by our own works (Eph. 2:8-9).¹⁶

The works of the Spirit do not originate with us. They do not come from our lust or flesh; they flow from the Holy Spirit. Paul teaches that we are created to live by such good works (Eph. 2:10).¹⁷

In contrast to the works of the flesh, Paul enumerates the works or "fruit" of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22 and 23, which include love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Of course, it is the works or fruit of the Spirit to which James refers when relating faith to works. He is not calling us back to live in the flesh nor to try to appease God or win the favor of God with our own works which are done in the flesh. He is instructing us to walk in the Spirit by faith and, as we do, our lives will manifest the works or fruit of the Spirit. Without these deeds of the Spirit, and faith is dead.¹⁸

¹⁴ Blount, *Run the Risk*, 112

¹⁵ Cedar. Communicator's Commentary on James, 61.

¹⁶ Cedar. Communicator's Commentary on James, 61.

¹⁷ Cedar. Communicator's Commentary on James, 61.

¹⁸ Cedar. Communicator's Commentary on James, 62.

[I would like to understand these deeds as one produced by being inspired and motivated by the Spirit as a fruit by our living in and according to the will of the Spirit].

Now that we have defined faith and works, now let us examine the teaching of James regarding the relationship of the two. James proposes three major arguments concerning faith and works and shares at least one practical illustration to substantiate each of his arguments.

1. *Our faith must include appropriate works.* He uses a very sensitive illustration. “If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?” (2: 15-16). It is inconceivable for a person who is walking in the Spirit to say that he has faith if that faith is not translated into appropriate works of the Spirit in reaching out and responding to the needs of a brother or sister. Saving faith responds with the appropriate works of the Spirit. “Genuine faith must include appropriate works – even being available to be awakened in the middle of the night in order to respond to the needs of a brother or sister.”

2. *Our faith must be accompanied by action.* *The New English Bible* has an excellent translation of the seventeenth verse of chapter 2: “So with faith, if it does not lead to action, it is in itself a lifeless thing.”¹⁹

He refutes [disprove] those who would argue against him by sharing the ultimate spiritual futility [uselessness] of possessing a faith which is not accompanied by appropriate action. First, he refutes those who say, “You have faith, and I have works.” He responds by saying, “Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (2:18). Then he shares his ultimate argument by stating, “You believe that there is one God. You do well. The demons also believe –and tremble” (2:19). In other words, merely believing in the existence of God or even in His mighty powers is not adequate for saving

¹⁹ Cedar. Communicator's Commentary on James, 62.

faith. Even the demons have that kind of faith. The faith which God requires must be accompanied by appropriate action. To believe in God and to not obey Him is the very essence of sin. Our faith must show itself in action.²⁰

3. *Faith without works is dead*. The “bottom line” of the arguments of James is this one which he repeats three times in verses 17, 20, and 26. It is that faith without works is dead. To substantiate his contention, James shares there vivid illustrations. The first is that of Abraham. His faith was demonstrated when he offered his son, Isaac, on the altar (2:21). What remarkable works were required of Abraham in order for him to put his faith into action. Indeed, this was “live” faith –not dead! For additional support of his contention, James quotes from Genesis 15:6, “Abraham believed God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness” (2:21).²¹

The second illustration is that of Rahab the harlot. James contends that she was “also justified by works when she received the messenger and sent them out another way” (v. 25). This impelling story is recorded in the second chapter of the book of Joshua. Rahab sheltered the two spies whom Joshua sent into Jericho. She saved their lives, and as a result, she and her family were spared when Jericho was defeated by Joshua and the children of Israel. Even more remarkable is the fact that Rahab is mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus found in the first chapter of Matthew. Her faith was not dead; it was demonstrated by good deeds. And she and her family, and her descendants were blessed by her “live” faith – active obedience. [If she just had good faith in Israel God and didn’t help the spies by hiding them Joshua couldn’t win the war into Jericho. Without her faith in action the remarkable result couldn’t have happened].²²

Third, James shares very practical and vivid example. “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (2:26). Everyone can easily

²⁰ Cedar. Communicator's Commentary on James, 63.

²¹ Cedar. Communicator's Commentary on James, 63.

²² Cedar. Communicator's Commentary on James, 63.

understand the difference between a body which is dead in contrast to a person who is alive. The body is but the temporary dwelling place of the real person. When the spirit is absent, life departs and an empty, dead body is left. That is what James is saying to us. Faith that is only intellectual or cerebral is not enough. It is dead. In the same way, works that are done in the flesh are inadequate. Also they are dead! But the Spirit brings life. And works done in the power of the Holy Spirit bring dead faith to life. Abraham and Rahab did not merely talk about faith –they act it out. They did not only believe in God, they believed what He said and what He promised them. They responded to Him in active obedience. They practiced “live” faith.²³

Often, we have mouthed the correct confessions and mastered the orthodox theology, but our faith has been dead. Jesus described this dilemma well when He quoted the prophet Isaiah in saying, “These people draw near to me with their mouth, and honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (Isa.29:13, Matt. 15:8). There is a solution to this problem. We must move from deadness to life. We must not only believe in God; we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34). We must follow him with active obedience.²⁴

²³ Cedar. Communicator's Commentary on James, 64.

²⁴ Cedar. Communicator's Commentary on James, 64.