

## More than words (James 2:14-26)

Just do it! (Simon Rea)

Sunday Morning 10:45am 28 October 2007

Today we're going to be continuing our series on the book of James by focussing on 2 of the most important dynamic duos in the whole Bible. That's right 2 duos. Now if you read last week's What's On you should already have some idea of at least one of those duos and if you've already read the passage in preparation for this morning, then you'll know about the second.

But just in case there's anyone here who didn't do either of these. I thought we could start with a quick dynamic duo quiz. I've tried to select famous dynamic duos from 3 different eras, just to give everyone an equal chance. So fingers on the buzzers for the first duo: [Prizes!]

Laurel (& Hardy)

Batman (& Robin)

Richard (& Judy)

The one thing they have in common is that they were never as successful on their own as they were together.

And now we come to one from today's reading:

Faith -> OR works / Faith AND works.

Let's listen to what James has to say about this particularly dynamic duo:

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

<sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

<sup>18</sup> But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. <sup>19</sup> You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

<sup>20</sup> You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? <sup>21</sup> Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. <sup>23</sup> And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. <sup>24</sup> You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

<sup>25</sup> In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different

direction? <sup>26</sup> As the body without the spirit is dead,  
so faith without deeds is dead.

Faith. And works. Our reading is one of the most controversial in the whole of the NT because some people think it means you can come into a right relationship with God just by doing the right things: like by being good and helping people. Let me make it plain from the start: that's not what James is saying. Remember, he's writing to people who have already made a commitment to Christ, if you like people who have already been born again as Graham was saying a couple of weeks ago. It doesn't matter whether they had had a real Damascus Road type experience like St Paul or whether they had grown up gradually into the faith - perhaps like James himself - after all he was Jesus brother! James is not writing about how people get saved, he's writing about how they can live lives which show they are saved. That's why his words are particularly important for anyone here today who would call themselves a Christian.

The way James does that is not so much to show a contrast FAITH or WORDS but to

show us the difference between 3 different types of faith: Dead faith, daft faith and dynamic faith. We're going to look at each of these in turn and as we do so we'll see how James challenges us to look at, think about and work on our own faith. You may want to keep your Bibles open at p1214 as we go through them.

Let's start where James does, with dead faith. V17: ...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Imagine the following scene: A vicar and his curate were walking along a road to a most important meeting where they both had some important things to say. As they were walking along, suddenly the earth cracked open - a bit like that new sculpture in the Tate London, and, let's say the curate fell in. The vicar looked down at his curate who was by now hanging on by his fingertips, took out his Bible and his prayer book, read some comfortable words, prayed and blessed him and then went on his way to that vital meeting...

James actually puts it a little

differently but he's making just the same point: v14-16

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?"

It's a no-brainer, isn't it: You don't need a PhD in theology or economics to answer James question: Faith like that is no good at all!

James paints a picture of a Christian brother or sister in real need. As we heard a couple of weeks ago, many first century Christians would have known real hunger and poverty because of their faith - just like millions of Christians in the 2/3s world do today. So James was writing about a real life situation, not just a far off idea. It wasn't that the poor Christians didn't have designer clothes, but that they didn't have enough clothes to keep warm and decent. It is not that they didn't have any food for the rest of the week, but that they didn't have

anything to eat that day. James shows us a Christian who knows just what to do about their situation? He or she says a prayer. The first part *Go, I wish you well*, is a blessing, 'Go in peace'. And the second part *keep warm and well fed* makes this blessing specific. It is pious. It's really religious. It's full of faith-God will provide. And it's theologically sound, too.

So what's missing? It's a no-brainer, isn't it: What's missing is for the rich Christian to go to their own wardrobe and pantry and get out their own clothing and food and sharing it with their unfortunate brother or sister. Because of this James says that such a prayer is a complete waste of space, time and energy. And, he concludes, so are all forms of faith which are not accompanied by action. This is where James' writing gets personal for us, too: We may believe that Jesus is Lord, but if we do not obey him that belief is just empty words. We may believe that God loves the poor, but if we do not care for them our faith is dead. *Our faith must include appropriate works*. Saving faith shows itself in appropriate works. That is what James is

saying to us. Faith that is only intellectual or cerebral is not enough. It's dead. In the same way, works that are done in the flesh are inadequate. They are just as dead. Can you hear James' challenge to you now: Is your faith dead?

Dead faith. Daft faith.

James highlights 2 type of daft faith. The first is so ridiculous that he doesn't bother going into detail about it: Faith in works alone. Remember he's writing to Christians when he says: v18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Well, that's just plain silly: deeds without faith become what Paul would call works of the flesh. Deeds for deeds' sake are not going to get anyone anywhere. They'll just tire you out. They might advance you in the eyes of some people - for a short time, perhaps - but they won't advance the kingdom of God and advancing the kingdom of God is surely what Christians should want to do, rather than advancing themselves only. Faith in deeds alone is like trying to have the kingdom of God without God as the king. In fact if you

try to have the kingdom without the king, sooner or later everything will go pear-shaped from your perspective - as it has done for Communists in Eastern Europe since the early 1990s. Can you hear James' challenge to you now: Is your faith in deeds?

But there's another sort of daft faith, too: That's the faith of demons. And believe it or not, that sort of faith may be a whole lot more common than you might expect! Now that doesn't mean that you should suddenly start looking for demons round every corner and blaming them for all your problems. No, James is making a much more practical point than that. What do demons believe in? They believe in God, of course. And they know how powerful he is, too. "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder."

Demons believe in God - like around 70% of the UK population if we are to believe the statistics - but just believing in God is not enough to save them because it doesn't change their lives. The demons shudder because they have rebelled against God and they know that they're

going to hell. Perhaps, James implies, those who claim to have faith without deeds should be shuddering, too. You see, James isn't only writing about demons here: His words challenge everyone whose faith is based on the shema, the basic prayer of the Jewish faith. You know the one which starts like this: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." (Dt. 6:4-5). All Jews are supposed to repeat it twice daily. But just saying the words, just believing the theology isn't going to save anyone, James, says. And don't forget that that prayer is at the centre of Christianity as well (Mk. 12:28-34; Rom. 3:30; cf Acts 17:22-31) 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. It is missing the mark; it is falling short of the glory of God. Christian faith must show itself in action. Can you hear James' challenge to you now: Is your faith like the faith of a demon?

Dead faith. Daft faith. Dynamic faith.

Faith in action is dynamic faith and that's what James comes to next. He uses

two examples to show what biblical faith means. *Biblical faith means active obedience*. And he uses this dynamic duo to make his point: [OHT Batman again - Oops sorry]

[OHT Abram] and [Rahab] Not Abraham and Sarah, his long suffering wife but Abraham and Rahab.

Abraham (vv. 23-24) and Rahab (v. 25). But what a pair! Abraham was the paramount patriarch, the founding father of the 3 great monotheistic faiths and Rahab was a foreign floozy, a very "welcoming" lady who was famed for her "hospitality" - to all those who had the right cash with them! Know what I mean, eh? Welcoming? And to cap it all, she wasn't even a Jew! You couldn't get a more mismatched pair. Everyone knows all about Abraham. His story takes up 14 chapters in Genesis while Rahab has about 25 lines in the Book of Joshua. Abraham was prepared to leave behind his home, his family and everything he loved to follow God's call. God made a covenant with Abraham. Rahab was born outside that covenant. What did she do? She hid a couple of Jewish spies under some reeds

on her roof in Jericho, lied about them to some soldiers and then she sent the spies away in safety. And she got well paid for what she did: It saved her life when the walls fell and the town was taken. The people were different and their deeds were different but in God's eyes, the faith was the same. They had both been saved by their faith and that's what their deeds showed the world.

Abraham and Rahab didn't just talk about faith—they acted it out. They didn't only believe in God, they believed what He said and what He promised them. They responded to Him in appropriate active obedience. They did what God had asked them to do. They practiced "live" faith. And of course we know that they weren't alone: throughout the ages Christians have done the same, from William Wilberforce (abolition of slavery) and Lord Shaftesbury (elimination of child labour) to George Mueller and the Bristol orphanages, from Mother Theresa on the streets of Calcutta to Desmond Tutu on the streets of Johannesburg, and to all of you who took part in MerseyFest 2007 when we took our worship through action to the streets of this town - and beyond

- and all who will be taking part in Hope 08. It doesn't matter if you identify more with Rahab or Abraham, or any of the others in Heb 11, God is still calling you to show your faith through appropriate deeds.

Can you hear James' challenge to you now: Is your faith dead, daft or dynamic? If you can hear that challenge, then ask God to help you find the right way to meet it. But be careful when you do so: remember God hears - and answers prayer. AMEN.