

Prayer

Set a fire in our hearts, Lord God, which burns and never goes out. May it burn away the darkness of the world; may it burn with a zeal for the Lord's will; may it burn strongly with a flame of love which never despairs; and may it burn brightly to bring light to the world. Holy Spirit, set a fire in our hearts which burns and never goes out! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Look around your home and give thanks to God for everything He has done for you

On-going prayers

- **Pray this week** about agriculture. Pray about the regulation of food; the way it is governed will determine the regularity of its supply
- Pray about your country's future after the financial crisis
- Give thanks to God for His many promises and gifts given to you

Meditation

(A personal enquiry about prayer)

When do I pray?

Every hour? Every day? Once a week? Occasionally?

The Lord says: 'I'm open all hours'.

How do I pray?

In a word? The odd sentence? Set words? Form the heart?

The Lord says: 'Speak as you wish'.

Where do I pray?

At home? By myself? Only with others? At Church?

The Lord says: 'I'm always there'.

What do I pray?

About me? About my family? My work? What I should do?

The Lord says: 'Tell me all about it'.

Bible Study - James 2:20-26

²⁰ You idiot! Do you want proof that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹ Wasn't our ancestor Abraham made right with God through deeds when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You can see that his faith and deeds were working together, and faith was completed by what he did. ²³ The scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is put right with God through what they do and not just through faith by itself. ²⁵ Here is another example; Rahab the prostitute, was she not also made righteous because of her deed in welcoming the messengers, sending them out by another road? ²⁶ For just as the body is dead without the spirit, so faith is dead unless it is put into action.

Review

Here, James drives home the point he made in yesterday's text about 'faith' and 'works'. For him, the two were inseparable and unless faith was shown through what people did, then the claims they made about faith were questionable. James began this part of his letter (2:1ff) with a deep concern about the inappropriateness of showing favouritism to the rich; and he argued strongly that anyone of faith should demonstrate godliness in what they did. James spoke sharply because he saw this injustice within the church, not merely in the society of his day, and he went on to give examples from scripture (the Old Testament) and make his point plain.

First of all, he used the example of Abraham, whose faith was tested by God when he was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah (Gen 22). James made a simple case, which was that you cannot encounter this story and separate Abraham's faith from his actions. God tested Abraham's faith by asking him to do something inconceivable, to kill the son and heir God Himself had given him, the child who would bear the Covenant to future generations of God's people. James' point was that God did not accept from Abraham a 'faith' that was merely intellectual ascent to the existence of God. To demonstrate the strength of his faith, God stretched Abraham physically, emotionally and spiritually, and he was proved to be 'righteous' because of his obedience to the voice of God when he withdrew his hand from Isaac.

James' use of this passage of Genesis (ch.22) is helpful, but it is interesting to note that Paul used the example of Abraham in other places (Romans 4:3ff) as part of the same argument about the nature of faith and its priority over 'works'. Few would disagree with Paul's argument, because it is part of his classic description of Jesus' work of salvation (3:21-26, 5:1f.) and this is essential to our understanding of Christian faith today. How are we to understand the Bible then, if Paul says that 'works' have nothing to do with faith (see Romans 4:1-3), but James says that our 'faith' must be shown by 'works'?

The first thing we must do is accept that James and Paul meant different things when they used the word 'works'. When Paul said this, he meant 'works of the Law', which is his shorthand for the Pharisaic traditions of law built over the years and based on the Old Testament laws of Moses. His life was spent explaining, as Jesus had done before him, that these laws were fulfilled in Jesus' life and death, and that our salvation is to be found in Jesus alone (Gal 2:15-21, and see Matt 5:19ff). James, however, used the term quite differently, as meaning 'things done'. Quite understandably and with good support from Jesus' teaching, he said that there was no evidence of God's work of salvation in anyone unless it was shown in the things they did, in other words, their 'works'. In fact, James' teaching here is little different to that of Paul when he urged Christians to do good things as a consequence of their faith (e.g. Romans 12:1ff, Galatians 5:16ff, Colossians 3:5ff etc.). For example, you may recall the passage in Galatians where Paul says that those who are saved should live 'according to the Spirit' and demonstrate in their behaviour the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5:22f.); these are worthy actions that should flow from a life lived according to the Spirit of God.

Putting all this together, Paul said that because of the love of God shown in Jesus Christ we are saved through faith and not the works of legalistic religion. James adds that Christian believers, once saved, should show their faith through what they do, and measure up to the teachings of Christ; if they do not, then it should be questioned a person's faith was alive or dead. I doubt if Paul would have disagreed, and neither should we.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. The passage also mentions the example of Rahab the prostitute (Josh 2:1f, 6:17f). Look up this character and assess whether she helps James' point.
2. What does the life of Abraham say to you about faith (see Genesis chapters 15 and 21)
3. What things happen today which make you doubt people's faith? In the light of this passage, why?

Discipleship

Discipleship issue in this text

- *Showing faith through right deeds*
- *The integrity of scripture*

Personal comment:

Disputes in the church over issues such as this have often occurred because Christian leaders have not thoroughly examined and studied the Bible, and do not understand the relatively simple points made in the study above. One of my reasons for writing as I do is to try and make these things clear. There is no need for Christians to be divided over this issue of 'works' and 'faith'

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Take a look at your daily life. In what ways do your deeds demonstrate your faith? Over the course of a week, try to make a list of the things you do as a consequence of your faith. You may find this task impossibly difficult or far too easy, but it is worth doing.*

- *Pray for the church, divided as it is in so many ways. Pray that God's people will find the unity that He longs them to have in Him.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, You alone know when You will come again in glory and bring all this world's suffering to an end. Strengthen Your people who live through troubled times today, and save them, we pray, from the Evil One. In the midst of this troubled world, make Your people one in You; AMEN
