

# Faith That Honours God

Honouring God, Part 1

James 2:14-26

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 6 August 2006

## Mingling with the crowd?

Do you know this church's mission statement? "Honouring God by expressing his love and making followers of Jesus." We're starting a new series today on honouring God. Are you living in a way that honours God? Nicky Gumbell, in the *Alpha* course, tells about a young police officer, who was taking his final exam at Hendon Police College in North London. He came across this question:

You are on patrol in outer London when an explosion occurs in a gas main in a nearby street. On investigation you find that a large hole has been blown in the footpath and there is an overturned van lying nearby. Inside the van there is a strong smell of alcohol. Both occupants – a man and a woman – are injured. You recognise the woman as the wife of your Divisional Inspector, who is at present away in the USA. A passing motorist stops to offer you assistance and you realise that he is a man who is wanted for armed robbery. Suddenly a man runs out of a nearby house, shouting that his wife is expecting a baby and that the shock of the explosion has made the birth imminent. Another man is crying for help, having been blown into an adjacent canal by the explosion, and he cannot swim. Bearing in mind the provisions of the Mental Health Act, describe in a few words what action you would take.

The officer thought for a moment, picked up his pen, and wrote: "I would take off my uniform and mingle with the crowd." I've been reading a book called *Revolution*, by George Barna, a pollster who researches trends and behaviour within the church in America. This is what he says in that book: "One of the greatest frustrations of my life has been the disconnection between what our research consistently shows about churched Christians and what the Bible calls us to be." Listen to this. His survey research indicates that:

- When asked what constitutes success in life, few believers define success in spiritual terms. Most describe outcomes related to professional achievement, family solidarity, physical accomplishments, or resource acquisition.
- Apart from church-based programmes, the typical Christian family spends less than three hours per month in activities designed to jointly develop or apply their faith.
- Churched Christians give away an average of about 3 percent of their income in a typical year – and feel pleased at their "sacrificial" generosity.
- Fewer than one out of every ten churched Christians donates at least 10 percent of their income to churches and non-profit organisations.
- Most churched Christians admit to having seen homeless or hurting people in their community or travels during the past year; a very small percentage says they interacted with any of those disadvantaged individuals.
- The typical churched believer will die without leading a single person to a lifesaving relationship with Jesus Christ.

In general terms, American Christians have taken off their Christian uniforms and are "mingling with the crowd." Their beliefs are not shaping their behaviour. How different are we? How can we make sure that our faith – and our life – honours God? Let's read a passage from the book of James: James 2:14-26 (p.1173).

## Faith and works

This passage is one of the most controversial and misunderstood passages in the whole Bible. Paul, in his letters, says time and time again that we are saved by grace through faith alone, and not by works. In Romans 3:28, for example, he says, "A person is justified by faith *apart from observing the law*." Yet here James says in 2:24, "People are justified *by what they do* and not by faith alone." It looks like they're contradicting one another. But are they? Paul and James were confronting two very different problems. Paul was fighting *legalism* – the idea that you had to keep all the Jewish laws in order to be saved. James is fighting *lethargy* – the idea that if we're saved by grace alone, then it doesn't matter how you behave, as long as you believe. So their focus is totally different. Paul was talking about how to *become* a believer. James is talking here about how to *behave* like a believer. They're both right. We're not saved *by* any good works we do. But we are saved *for* a life of good works (Ephesians 2:8-10). Real faith will produce a life that honours God. And in this passage James illustrates what that faith looks like. He gives us a kind of photo album with four pictures, four examples of God-honouring faith. Can you see them?

- The "**Christian**" who won't help a brother or sister in need (2:15-17)
- The **demons** who believe in God but shudder in fear (2:18-19)
- The patriarch **Abraham**, who was called a "friend of God" (2:20-24)
- The prostitute **Rahab**, who helped the Israelite spies (2:25-26)

What do you notice about these four illustrations? The first two are like photographic negatives: they show us in reverse what real faith does *not* look like. The last two show us positively what real faith *does* look like. But there's another way of looking at these pictures. The first and last ones both illustrate how our faith should affect our relationship with **people**. The central two examples illustrate how our faith should affect our relationship with **God**. Let's look at them in that order.

### **Serving others when we see a need**

I've got a few friends who watch rugby and talk about rugby, but never actually play it. They're just armchair sportsmen. The first example of faith that James mentions here is that of an "armchair Christian" (in vv 15-17). Someone who watches a brother or sister in real physical difficulty and then responds by saying, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well-fed" (or this phrase could be translated, "I pray that you will be kept warm and well-fed"). He says all the right words, but he actually never gets out of his Lazy-Boy to do anything to help. James says, "What good is it?" Faith like this, "if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." It's not really faith. It won't save you. It won't help anyone else. And it certainly doesn't honour God.

Real faith serves people who are in need. The positive example that James gives is that of Rahab (vv 25-26). You can read her story in Joshua chapter 2. She was a prostitute living in Jericho, a Canaanite city. She becomes convinced that the God of Israel is the one true God, and that her city would fall to the invading Israelites. So when two Israelite spies come into the city – at risk to her own life – she takes them in, hides them when the king tries to find them, and then helps them to escape. Real faith serves people in need. Isn't that what Jesus said in his parable about the sheep and the goats? At the end of time, when we stand before God, one proof of whether we really believed in him or not will be whether we cared for those who were hungry, thirsty, lonely, cold, or sick (Matthew 25:31-46).

During my recent study leave – not holiday, but study leave – I was researching how and why the early church grew so rapidly. Here's one of the answers. In 165 AD, a devastating epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. Some medical historians suspect it was the first occurrence of smallpox in the West. Whatever the actual disease, it was lethal. From a quarter to a third of the empire's population died. In 251 AD a new, equally devastating epidemic again swept through the Empire, killing millions. There were no known cures for these plagues, so the typical response was to flee the outbreak, to shun contact with those who were sick. Most pagans simply fled the cities whenever there was an outbreak, leaving their sick family and friends behind to die. But not the Christians. Risking their own lives, they typically stayed behind to care for the sick. With the simple provision of food and water, many who were ill survived. And were drawn to faith in Jesus as a result. God was honoured because his people put their faith into action. They were willing to take risks to serve people in need. This got me thinking. What are the epidemics or plagues in our world today? What are the pressing needs in our society that our faith calls us to address? Those needs are our opportunities to honour God. We can't meet everybody's need. But we can meet somebody's need. Is there someone in this church with a practical need that you can meet? Is there a neighbour or work colleague or classmate with a practical need you could meet this week? I came back from study leave to hear that several people in our church community are quite sick at the moment. But this week I've heard story after story about people from this church who have visited them, taken food to them, spent time with them. It's great to see. Because real faith, faith that honours God, expresses itself in how we care for others.

### **Obedying God in spite of the consequences**

But the central two pictures of faith that James gives us in this passage are not so much about our relationship with others, as our relationship with God. In v 19 he says, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder." Demons know all about God. They *believe* in God. But they don't *trust* him. There's a difference between intellectual belief and actual trust. Have you heard of Blondin? He was the famous French high-wire walker who once rode a bike along a tightrope across the Niagara Falls. The crowd of spectators cheered wildly. Blondin then pushed a wheelbarrow across, and everyone cheered. He asked the crowd if they believed he could cross the tightrope with someone riding in the wheelbarrow. Everyone cheered, "Yes! We believe you can!" But then Blondin asked for a volunteer to ride in the wheelbarrow. Absolute Silence. No one stepped forward. Faith in God means being willing to get into the wheelbarrow. In this passage James gives us the ultimate picture, the ultimate example, of that kind of God-honouring faith. It's the example of Abraham offering his son Isaac on an altar. Let's finish by quickly walking through that story in Genesis 22 (p.19).

One day God said to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains" (v2). God is asking Abraham to give up what he loves most in the entire world. Isaac is not just his son, he's the fulfilment of a promise. It's through this

boy, Abraham's only son, that God has promised to form a new nation, a new community, that will bless the world. But the text says that early the next morning, Abraham saddled his donkey and takes with him two of his servants, and his son Isaac. Interestingly, Abraham carries the knife and the fire, but he makes Isaac carry the wood that will be used for the sacrifice. On the way to Mt Moriah, Abraham leaves the servants behind, telling them, "We will return." Why does he say "we"? Does he want to mislead them or hide what he is about to do (Abraham has lied before)? Does he think that maybe at the last minute he probably won't be able to go through with this sacrifice? Does he think that somehow, in spite of it all, God's promise will yet come true. We don't know.

What we do know is that Abraham's faith is not immune to doubts and questions. When God told him that he and his wife would have a son, even though their combined ages equalled 190, Abraham laughed at the sheer impossibility of it (Gen 17:17). He doubted. When, after 24 years, the promise was still not fulfilled, Abraham resorted to sleeping with his servant girl in order to produce an heir. Abraham's faith is far from perfect. It's riddled with doubt. But faith does not mean never doubting. It means remaining obedient. And ultimately Abraham does.

They come to the place for the sacrifice, and Abraham obediently builds an altar, arranges the wood, ties up his son's legs and arms so there will be no struggle in the end. Then, finally, he picks up his son – bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh – and holds the same body that he held on the first day it came from Sarah's womb, the little body that he used to feed and bathe and rock and tell stories to, the little body he would check on at night to make sure it was still breathing and hold sometimes as they laughed together. He holds that body one last time, then lowers it onto the wood, raises his knife ... Just as he's about to bring down that knife, an angel of the Lord calls out (v 11) "Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy. Now I know that you fear God – revere God – because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." That's faith. God-honouring faith. As someone once said, "Faith is not *believing* in spite of the evidence. It's *obeying* in spite of the consequences."

I wonder, is God asking you to obey him today? To sacrifice your time or talents to serve someone in need? Is he calling you to lay down something you love: a habit or attitude that dishonours him, a goal or dream that's not worthy of his name? Maybe you feel today like you're walking the dark road to Mt Moriah, your dreams broken, your faith not what it should be. And God is simply saying to you, "Just keep going. Keep obeying me. Keep trusting me." Well, if there's anyone we can trust in this life, it's him. Just look at the cross. We're about to celebrate communion, when we remember that just like Isaac, God's only Son walked to the place of sacrifice on a hill carrying on his back the wood on which he was to be put to death. But when Jesus was bound, no voice cried out to stay the nails. No other sacrifice was provided. This time, the Son died. This time, the Father grieved. Because God loves you and me more than we can imagine. And though we are saved for good works, we are saved by grace.

### Questions

1. Read Romans 3:28 and James 2:24. How would you reconcile James and Paul both say about faith?
2. Legalism or lethargy. Which of these do you think Christians in New Zealand most struggle with? How?
3. According to Galatians 5:6 what does Paul say "genuine faith" is? Record your observations on the table below.
4. What, according to 1 John 3:10, 17-19 is the evidence that we "belong to the truth"? Again, record your observations on the table below.
5. Record also what Jesus has to say about faith and deeds in Matthew 7:15-23, 25:31-46.
6. Add James' thoughts on the subject from James 1:27; 2:14-17. Looking across the table, what patterns do you see? Are they evident in your life?

Paul	John	Jesus	James

7. Can you identify some person, or maybe a group of people, with a practical need? How could you or your home group go about meeting that need?
8. "Faith is not believing in spite of the evidence, but obeying in spite of the consequences." Do you agree?
9. How is God calling you, like Abraham, to obey him?