

Imagine, you get home from work and grab the mail out of the mailbox; you toss it on the table and get supper started and later, you finally have a few minutes to sit down and go through the mass of paper. Bills, credit card offers, the usual, but then – rare treat – an envelope hand addressed to you. It’s been a busy, busy long day – they all seem to be these days – how nice to have something personal in the mail. You sit down with your evening drink and open the envelope...it’s from church. Here in **James 2:1-10; 14-17** is part of that letter:

2 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?² For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in,³ and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,”⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?⁶ But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?⁷ Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?⁸ You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”⁹ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Let us Pray:

I.

In this passage, there are two major issues James sees as preventing his first century church members who claim to be Christians from actually *being* Christians or to use the phrase James borrows from Jesus: “doers of the word, not just hearers of the word.” The first problem is that James’ congregation is plagued by the sin of favoritism: that is, they are honoring those they see as important, wealthy, influential, who can afford styling clothes, more than they are honoring the poor. There is no room for that kind of behavior in the community of God. There are to be no distinctions among us because God does not distinguish among us. As the old hymn goes: “In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.” Christ abolished all distinctions between us, including the final division between life and death. **There are to be no divisions between human beings in God’s creation.**

The second issue for James is the disconnect he sees between people saying they are Christian, yet not doing anything about their faith. There are no Christian actions backing up their confession of faith.

So, there's the sermon. James is confronting the sin of Christians treating people unequally, and he's calling out Christians who do nothing or not enough for those in need. We too wrestle with the sin of favoritism, and we too struggle with true discipleship, and by discipleship I mean we struggle with how to actually follow Jesus in our day-to-day lives. My colleague Diana Bell who serves a church in California often says, "It's all that simple and it's all that hard." That's it. James would agree. But he doesn't leave it alone. James pushes and he pushes hard.

In no uncertain terms James asks his church members, "Are y'all really even Christian?" That's a pretty pointed question but the gospel he preaches is pretty confrontational. The gospel brings our sin into confrontation with God's grace. Grace wins. Justice, equality, compassion and acts of kindness for those in need are nonnegotiable when it comes to being a disciple of Jesus. In Galatians, the Apostle Paul (who is not really not in disagreement with James if you read him closely) says, "The only thing that counts is faith working through love," it's why we were made.¹

New Testament theologian, Charles Cousar, said that when we become followers of Jesus Christ we become aware of a community of believers and our faith is characterized by concern for others, *especially* those who are different from ourselves. James, Charlie said, "Is against a purely passive faith."² You can't have faith in the Jesus we meet in Scripture without works of charity; they go together. Asking which is more important—faith or works—C.S. Lewis said, is like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary.³

A passive and unresponsive faith is no faith in Jesus. Being a disciple of Jesus means we will be doing acts of kindness and charity for those who are in need.

Some folks look at suffering and then point fingers. How did this happen? Someone should do something about this. Maybe they even get angry and write a letter to their congregation... or a sermon. Some get overwhelmed, cynical and do nothing. Some are simply too busy or self-centered to notice or care. There are those who look at suffering and say, "Not my problem." Then there are some people, and this really gets James fired up, who try to cover their inaction with religious sentiments like, "we will be praying for you," "God will bring you through this," "it's part of God's plan," "pious benedictions," Beverly Gaventa calls them, when they are simply words to fill the space. She says, "Faith alone does not secure the well-being of those who are in need. Concrete acts are needed rather than pious benedictions."⁴

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters if you say you have faith but when a person who lacks what they need shows up you say to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm, [we'll be praying for you,]' and yet *you* do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" Does our faith in praying on behalf of the hungry and the poor and those who face violence actually matter when we ourselves could do more than pray yet choose

¹ Galatians 5:6b, Ephesians 2:

² Cousar, Charles, *Galatians*, 117.

³ Frost, Michael & Alan Hirsch, *The Shape of Things to Come*, 142.

⁴ *ibid.*

not to, or busy ourselves with other things, with perfectly reasonable excuses. What if God is answering folks' prayers for food, shelter, safety and friendship through you?

II.

Jim Armstrong and I were catching up over lunch at George's recently and I was asking him about his community up in Big Canoe. Jim was telling me about a close group of friends, couples, he and Betsy spend time with, watching movies, playing bocce ball, fun stuff. But they became aware there were folks up there in Big Canoe who didn't have the ability to get around and have fun like them. There are homebound folks, folks who are sick, folks who were in need of some community. Rather than just pray for those in need, the guys in this group decided they were going to *do something*. Even though Jim said he and a kitchen were about as far apart as you could be, the guys started making soup to take to these folks. They wear white aprons and chefs' hats when they deliver their meals and they call themselves, "The Soup Gang." They are putting their faith into action to help those in need.

For the 17 years that our brother Bob Coomes struggled with cancer, Bob became known, not for his illness but for his service, delivering food to seniors in need, through Meal-on-Wheels. Bob's obituary notes, "*he brought them cheer with his sincere interest in their lives. He formed friendships and lasting bonds that were very important to him.*"⁵ Being a follower of Jesus means having a faith that is lived out in acts of kindness and charity for others with a sincere interest in their lives.

Jim, Bob, and so many others in these pews, witness to their faith in Jesus Christ through their quiet, consistent works of faith, not because they feel obligated, but because they feel called and they are following Jesus.

God is not calling us to save the world, that's God's mission. Nor is God calling us to save ourselves through our works, that's also God's mission. God is calling us to be disciples of Jesus, to have faith in him and put that faith into action. **It could be through your hands that God is answering someone's prayers and working miracles.**

The Gospel of Mark tells a story about a time great crowds that had gathered around Jesus. They were pressing in on him, desperate for his help. I think of those images in the news of the thousands of desperate refugees seeking help from folks in countries like ours. Thousands push in, on dangerous rafts, on trains, in the backs of trucks, too many, pushing, desperate for help. Jesus' disciples, saw, as we do, that the people were hungry and they encouraged Jesus to send the people away but Jesus had compassion on the crowd, he saw they were in need, and he refused to send them away. He said to his disciples, "Don't send them away; you give them something to eat." Of course they protested. "We don't have the resources to help all these people." Jesus said to them, and you can look this up in Mark 8:3 if you think I'm making this up, Jesus said, "But if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way – and some of them have come from a great distance!" [If I send them away, they won't make it.] The disciples protest Jesus more. Jesus told the crowd to have a seat. He took some of the little bit of bread and fish that they had, gave thanks to God for it – imagine – broke it and gave it to his disciples to distribute to the crowd. Their hands, the hands of his disciples, people who claimed to follow him, fed the crowds, with baskets leftover. This

⁵ <http://vahi.org/bob-coomes-passes-away/>

is the same Jesus we follow today. If Jesus worked through the hands of his disciples to serve, with compassion, those in need then do we not have faith that Jesus will work through our hands also, if only we let him? Can we really turn away the desperate crowds God has called us to serve? James asked, “Do you really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” Jesus asked his disciples later that day as they were together on the boat, “do you still not see, do you still not understand?” God will care for those in need through Jesus’ disciples, through us.

III.

Still, I’m left wondering why is it such a struggle to convince people who say they have faith in Jesus, to care and to act like they have faith in Jesus? Why are so many who claim to love the Lord so quick to make excuses for doing nothing or for excluding others? I think it has something to do with James’ first point: Divisions. We have created divisions among ourselves and we have created idols out of our divisions. We call our divisions America, Mexico, Syria, Gay, Straight, Christian, Muslim, Black, White, etc. Divisions are our idols, which we have carved out of maps and political systems and religious dogma and race and class. We defend our idols of distinction with greater religious zeal than we defend human life. Divisions do not exist in the Kingdom of God. Paul said there are no longer divisions, “no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; you are ONE in Christ Jesus.”⁶ God has destroyed all divisions among us and created one great fellowship of love.

Does this sound naïve? Maybe, but it’s the gospel. Unrealistic? Are we not disciples of Jesus Christ who was dead and buried but rose from the dead? We believe that yet we have folks going hungry in our city, we have folks shooting each other in our streets, we have refugees begging for help and we don’t believe God can do something about that through us? Really? I guess I could understand the hopelessness but we are the followers of a resurrected God.

IV.

After several years of civil war in Syria, stories and images of desperation and death, finally this week the world was provoked by a single image, the image of a three-year-old boy named **Aylan Kurdi**, lying lifeless on a beach in a resort town in Turkey. The death of Aylan, his brother and his mother, shocked the world into finally caring about the largest refugee crisis since WWII, though just this summer alone 2,000 refugee’s have already died in those same waters fleeing ISIS and the Asad government.

There have been many articles written on why this single image stirred the emotions of the world. Ellen Stockstill noticed that his little shoes were still on. It makes you think how his mother and father got him dressed Wednesday morning for this dangerous journey that was their last hope to escape the evil that had already taken over their home. I noticed that Lydia Grace sleeps in her little crib the same way he’s laying in the surf. The image of Aylan is so moving because we have finally identified him with us. He makes us think of people we know and care about. In him, for this moment, we empathize with humans and the divisions have melted away. Why didn’t we care about

⁶ Galatians 3:28

them before? One journalist noted in the picture Aylan doesn't look Muslim or Middle Eastern.

They are refugees. It is sad, but they are not us. Let's thank God for that and pray for them. James names it and he's spot on: "have you not made distinctions among yourselves?" Boundaries, borders, nations, nationalities, religions: Have we not made distinctions among ourselves? Imagine what the refugee crisis looks like from God's borderless, boundary-less view. Just humans, God's beloved, running for their lives, from their homes with their children in their arms, begging for help, for refuge, and another human standing behind a line they have scribble in the sand saying they can do nothing. Can you imagine what this refugee crisis looks like to Jesus Christ who sees no national lines, just humans in need of compassion, humans for whom he has already given his life and called his followers to serve? Jesus sees their suffering and says, "I'll send these desperate children to my followers because they will help, they must." How do we respond?

The U.S. will accept up to 8,000 Syrians next year, which is slightly better than the 1,400 we've helped in the last 4 years of conflict. It's commendable, but 12,000 refugees arrived in the tiny Greek island of Lesbos last Monday alone! Georgia, with all our Christian religious liberty, received just 15 Syrians families this year. 15! Our congregation could take care of 15 refugee families by ourselves couldn't we? Should we? But we've made distinctions among us and show partiality for those who are like us: Americans, and shrug our shoulders for those who are not. For some we say, "Please have a seat here," while to others we say, "you can stand over there." James cried: "You do well if you really fulfill the law of Scripture: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself!" but if you show partiality, you commit sin."

Look, I don't know the solutions here. I don't know what to do about evil like ISIS in the world, but God is the one who conquers evil, we are the followers of Jesus Christ who showed kindness and had compassion and refused to turn away the crowds and through the hands of his disciples worked miracles of compassion.

We are going to sing together the final words of this sermon. Let this hymn be our charge to follow Christ, to hear the words of James, and to bring our faith into action for the sake of those who need us to be disciples of Jesus. Let us stand and sing together, hymn 421, "The Church of Christ in Every Age."