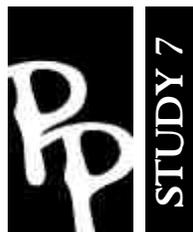


DEFECTIVE FAITH



James 2:14-19

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: Faith
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

We are discovering that James is not following a logical argument, but his method is to allow one theme to suggest another. In these verses there is a continuing theme of love for others, but the immediate connection is with James' words in verse 12, "Speak and act." Here the thought is that talking about God's law while not obeying it is wrong. This leads on to the folly of saying that we have faith, whilst we are not doing anything about it. James uses practical love to those in need as a specific example of how this faith is to be demonstrated. This call for action as a proof of faith applies to every aspect of the Christian life worked out in love for others.

What these verses mean

Verse 14

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

Some people have wrongly thought that James is here teaching that the possibility of salvation, acceptance with God, is on the basis of what we do. James is entirely in harmony with Jesus (John 6:47) and Paul (Eph.2:8-9) in his assertion that we are saved through faith. The point he is bringing to our attention is that it is important to be sure of the nature of the faith that saves,

and that his readers possess it. In this verse James requires us to examine ourselves. If we claim to have faith, but this does not affect the kind of life we live, he challenges us to ask ourselves if this is true faith, saving faith. Our deeds (often referred to as "works") are not the means that bring us salvation but they are the evidence of it. James in raising this matter of faith and deeds does so in the form of two questions. He will give us an answer in the form of three arguments to emphasise the importance of faith and deeds working together.

Verse 15

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.

To help us understand the question and to arrive at the right conclusion, James gives us an illustration using the necessities of everyday life. We are left to assume that the person here is a Christian and that the action is within church life. This practical demonstration is his first argument and deals with the emptiness of good wishes.

Verse 16

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?

James' thinking is often centred on care for the needy (2:8), and here he is compelling us to see that a profession of faith that is not accompanied by practical concern for the needs of others is completely without value. What good is it? This is teaching by one who is very familiar with principles laid down by Jesus Christ (Matt. 7:21), and who is in complete harmony with the apostle Paul (Gal. 5:6). As someone has said, "The belly is not filled with words." If our thoughts are to be of any value then they have to be accompanied by action. Words may show that we have knowledge; the accompanying action shows that we have understood the truth and that our hearts are in harmony with the faith we profess with our lips.

Verse 17

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Now comes the second line of argument in answer to the questions posed in verse 14. It touches our hearts and consciences. Here James is making a clear distinction between something that is called faith but is not saving faith. The key word is "dead". There is an intellectual faith in which people believe the facts about the Christian faith without having a personal faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. The difference between them is the difference between life and death. Saving faith unites us to Jesus Christ; it is energised by his Spirit and issues in a life of love toward God, his people and the world at large. In comparison with this intellectual faith is dead. James gives us an illustration of this in the next verse.

Verse 18

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

It is difficult to be sure how this verse is to be understood. There were no punctuation marks in the original Greek manuscript, and we are dependent on the translators to use their skill to help us. Even then, they cannot tell us who “someone” is, or exactly what these words mean. The best we can do is to suggest that the “someone” is an imaginary person that James is using for the sake of argument. This imaginary person is saying that we do not need to put faith and deeds together. One has faith, another his deeds, and we should not criticise one or the other. What is James’ answer to that idea?

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

In reply to this imaginary person, James is saying, “The kind of faith you are talking about is useless. I am writing about something that is entirely different and that is completely inseparable from the kind of life to which it leads.” He is also saying that if it could be proved that anyone is not living a life of love to others, then he or she does not have saving faith. The absence of deeds proves the absence of faith.

Verse 19

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.

Here is James’ third line of argument to the question of verse 14 of the person who claims to have faith but has no deeds. It deals with our relationship or communion with God. Whatever kind of faith we have, it is grounded in something or someone. There are many people in the world who reject idolatry and the worship of man-made or natural objects, such as the sun or the stars. Many believe in a creator God who is all powerful and all wise. This is good, so far, but it does not have the dynamic to lead to a life of love to God and to all humankind. James underlines this by showing that such “faith” is no different from that possessed by evil spirits. We can confirm this by reference to Matthew 8:29. In that text we see that evil spirits believe in God, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that there is a judgement to come. Here is an implied warning that if we do not have a living, saving faith, but only a basic belief in God and nothing more, we too should tremble, for we are, in that case, under God’s condemnation (John 3:36).



Summary

We learn from these verses that faith and deeds are both required, and that their order is equally important. James’ main point is the necessity of deeds that confirm the existence of faith; faith alone is not enough. But it is also true that deeds without faith are unacceptable to God. The life that pleases God is one that is energised by faith and gives God the glory. So we see that faith must come first and that it is confirmed by a life of love to God and to all humankind. We have also seen that James’ teaching is entirely in harmony with that of Paul; there is no contradiction.



A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

Theme: Church members should be true Christians

In our zeal for our church to increase in numbers, we need to take great care that those we receive have true faith.

I The evidence of true faith

Trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour will show itself –

1. In zeal for the worship of God in prayer and praise and love for his church.
2. In love for God’s people expressed in fellowship and in caring for those in need.
3. In love for the unconverted expressed in good deeds and gospel witness.

II The importance of this evidence

If we receive those who do not show this evidence –

1. We deceive them into thinking they are Christians when they are not.
2. We endanger the life of the church with worldliness, differences and disunity.
3. We fail to show the world the evidence of true Christianity and we will fail to make an impact on the thinking of the ungodly.



Focus Point:

Faith

Faith consists of three elements –

- The knowledge of the facts
- An acknowledgement that the facts are true
- A personal trust and commitment to the fact that those facts are true

Biblically, faith is the conviction that God exists, that he is completely reliable and will do everything he has promised. This faith obeys God, who requires us to accept Jesus Christ as his Son and our Saviour. This acceptance is to trust what God says about his Son in his Word (Bible) and believe these facts about Christ. No one can be a Christian without this faith. It is through faith in Christ alone that sinners are put right with God.

If we are to understand what James is saying in the passage of this study, we need to be clear as to what he means by faith that anyone may claim to have. It is possible that not all three elements are present. So we find that there are a number of different kinds of faith, which are not the faith that can save a person.

We may speak of *natural* faith. We exercise this when we trust a chair enough to sit on it, or we trust a bus enough to travel on it.

We may speak of an *historic* faith. We exercise this when we believe all the Bible tells us about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but we do not come to trust in Jesus Christ for salvation (John 2:23-25).

We may speak of an *intellectual* faith; this is when we believe in God and that he created all things, but do not come to faith in Christ.

We may speak of *superstitious* faith. This is when people say, “I have faith” and believe that somehow their problems will end and that God will receive them.

We may speak of a *religious* faith, when people go through religious ceremonies and rituals, believing that this will earn for them some eternal reward.

We may speak of *saving* faith. This is the gift of God and it means that we are trusting in Jesus Christ alone, his life, death and resurrection. We are sure of God’s pardon and being rescued from the wrath of God. The evidence of this faith will be a life of love.



Over to you

Examine your own heart and what you believe. What kind of faith do you have?

How do you encourage your people to declare their faith? Is it based upon the emotions and feelings at the end of a service? If it is, how will they have come to that conviction of the facts they have heard, to accept and trust in them?

Does your teaching set out the facts of biblical truth for your people to hear?

It is possible to make the process of entry into a local church so easy as to admit the unconverted, or so hard as to exclude genuine believers. Does your practice fail one way or the other?