

We have moved into the 2nd week of reading through the New Testament letter called James. Many scholars believe that a part of this letter was written by the brother of Jesus named James prior to his death some 30 years after the death of Jesus. These scholars believe that this letter was finished by someone writing to Christian churches facing persecution some 20 to 30 years after that.

James is a controversial letter because of its focus on works. Part of what we will be reading today contains these words about faith without works is dead. The reformer Martin Luther in the 1500s thought that this book should be excluded from the Bible because he felt it contained too much focus on works and not enough of a focus on grace.

James was a leader in the early Christian church in Jerusalem. As a result, he has some very challenging words for the church that was organizing in the first century and for the church today. Words challenging us about where a Christian church should be focused and what they should care about.

Last week we read through the first chapter and today we are going to read through most of the second chapter. Pay attention to what James has to say to the organized Christian church today.

Read James 2:1-17

This is a passage of Scripture which makes me really uncomfortable because of something that happened this week in the parking lot of this church. A scene that happened right out here behind you.

Before I share this story, I want to be clear that I fully support the decisions that were made. I believe that our staff made the right call and I back them up 100%. They have my complete support. But in light of what happened I am not going to run away from this passage of Scripture that is in front of us.

This past Thursday my phone rang around 8 am but I was not able to answer it. It rang again a few minutes later but I was on another call, so I did not hear the voicemail until later in the morning. I arrived at the church around 8:40 and immediately prepared the sanctuary for preschool chapel which I lead beginning around 8:45 am. After chapel I was informed of what had happened earlier in the morning that the preschool staff handled.

When the preschool staff arrived early that morning they found a man sleeping on the front porch in front of the sanctuary. They informed him that preschool drop off would be happening soon and the staff was concerned for his safety. The man moved away from the front porch but then walked out into the parking lot where he laid down in the parking lot.

The staff was now more concerned that he could get run over by vehicles that would be arriving to drop off their children. Concerned for the safety of the families arriving and staff and of the man, the police were called. When I arrived, the man had left the grounds and the police had left also. I should have arrived earlier for work that day!!!

Our staff handled it exactly like they should have handled it. I am proud of them for the decisions that they made with all needs being taken into consideration. This group of women did what they needed to do, and they did it appropriately.

After chapel on Thursday I listened to my voicemail left earlier that morning on my phone which was from a concerned parent about this man and his needs. This parent had appropriate concerns about this man's physical needs and how we should respond to them.

We had no way to find the man at that point and help him out in any way for this was an hour after the earlier events. Through a series of events outside of anyone's control we were not able to offer this man any further assistance than a front porch for a night of rest.

After hearing about this incident, I then opened my Bible Thursday morning to begin my normal routine of studying the passages of Scripture that I had previously chosen to preach from for the upcoming Sunday morning. I turned to James 2 and read these words that we read earlier.

Words about how “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 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please’ while you say to the one who is poor, ‘stand there or sit at my feet’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves and becomes judges with evil thoughts?”

And then James follows this up with words about how God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that has been promised to those who love God. James tells the early Christians that they have dishonored the poor for it is the rich that oppress them and drag them into court.

I honestly don’t have any good answers to this text of Scripture. Like I shared earlier, our staff made the right call on Thursday morning. Anyone in a position of leadership who has vulnerable children under their care would have made a similar decision. But like Scripture does so often this is a text which leaves me very uncomfortable.

For James continues by saying that if you see a person in physical need but you do nothing about it other than to say that you will pray for them then your faith is worthless. Faith by itself without works is dead according to James.

This is the tension that many of us live under today. If we take our faith seriously then we will continue to be made uncomfortable by the Scriptures.

When we encounter situations where we feel as though our solutions are either/or, we should think to ourselves both/and solutions. In other words, when we encounter situations and we place ourselves in situations where we are faced with human need verses our own safety, we can begin to think of solutions that maintain our own safety and the safety of others. While at the same time finding ways to assist with the human needs of the person in front of us.

It's really hard sometimes because we encounter situations that we are not prepared for and we've never dealt with before. The situation on Thursday is rare for us but it does occur. We have provided food and helped provide gas for folks traveling through.

As we encounter these types of situations in our lives, we can think to ourselves: What is a solution here that provides safety to myself and to people around me as well as provides for the physical needs of the person in my presence? It's not either safety or helping but how can I safely help?

The other situation we can be thinking about in light of this scripture is to assess how we treat others around us when we know how financially well off someone is or is not. In other words, when decisions are made in the church do we give more authority to people who have larger incomes over those who do not? Do we in the church treat all employees fairly if they are full time or part time?

We can extend these beliefs into our business practices. Do we treat people differently depending on whether they have a big title or whether they collect the trash after hours? Does the security guard receive the same treatment as the president? Do we show more interest in friends who live in nicer neighborhoods?

When we analyze situations in the world do we give deference to the rich and powerful over the poor? Do we give deference to men over women? White over persons of color? Persons with certain accents over others with a different accent?

Everyone of us shows favoritism whether we choose to admit it or not. But James asks us to challenge our prejudices. To never feel comfortable when we show favoritism and to always seek to do better in the future.

Let us allow these words of James to challenge us when we make our choices. May we keep in our minds these words. "Do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?"

These are words which will stay with me. AMEN.

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-Given: September 23, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)