

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: God's Work, Not Ours

Scripture:

September 5th, 2021

Last week we talked about the hearers and doers of God's word and talked about needing to be both to express our faith fully. This week we continue in the Book of James as we will throughout the remainder of the month. This week we look at James' argument that we must live out our faith in the world and not be caught up in the glitz and glamour as we build the kingdom of God. Our question is how do we how do we practically live out our faith? When we interpret the Bible, we must understand there is not one singular viewpoint in which to interpret any scripture, but instead, we must interpret scripture based off the context in which it was written, interpret it to understand various socio-economic standpoints, interpret based off of our own experiences, rely on the Holy Spirit to help us wrestle with certain texts, and look to Bible scholars theologians who spend their lives study God's word to help us understand a full picture. We each may obviously fall into one category in which we are more familiar with interpreting, but each methodology, just like each part of the Body of Christ, is vital to understanding the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Bible has a troubled past with some interpretations people have come to in the past. The most notable in our country is the way the Bible was used by slaveowners to justify their atrocious actions of creating and maintaining an institution of slavery that would reach all throughout the Americas, the Caribbean, and into Europe. However, the Bible has been used to inspire countless people as well. Think of the Catholic Workers Party and Dorothy Day who fought for women's rights during the Suffrage Movement and helped alongside community organizers to give us the 8-hour work days we know take for granted. Think of the various religious movements like the Evangelical movement of Billy Graham and the Great Awakenings long before his time. At the end of the day there are certainly correct and incorrect interpretations. I think more often than not the wrongs are pretty easy to point out as Jesus and many of the prophets make it clear you must work together to build the kingdom of God and that God is present in all of God's creation. We must do our best to limit the capital T truths of the Bible as many different denominations see things in nuanced ways, and I would argue this is a good thing!

I am not a Bible literalist, meaning, I do not think the exact words written on the pages we read is exactly how we should live our lives or understand God's word. I will cut you a little slack if you can read all the multiple forms of Greek, Aramaic, ancient Hebrew, Latin, and German, but even then, our translations are limited due to different contextual meanings of words and different customs, traditions, relationships, and rituals people of the day understood to be true. Since I have spent the last 14 years of my life studying the Bible from an academic perspective, I tend to have a fairly academic understanding of the Bible, and at minimum, I use these tools and resources I have learned throughout the years. However, I grew up in the evangelical tradition and was raised to understand scripture is interpreted through deep prayer, meditation, and reflections, and even today, I tend to always try my best to interpret from a socio-economic lens. I say all of this to help us all understand there is no singular way to interpret a text which has been translated into over a thousand languages without having different understandings, meanings, and perspectives.

It doesn't mean you can interpret anything from it either though.

I would never tell Joan how to administer stitches after her years of a nurse.

I would never tell Dave how to organize the town of Wibaux since I've never been mayor of Wibaux

I would never tell Bonnie the ins and outs of grammar and syntax rules as she was the English teacher for years of public service.

I would never tell Andrine how to catalogue a library considering she was a librarian for years.

There are bad and incorrect interpretations. So, I hope none of you are going to be disappointed by this, but I don't think the Bible is a way to prove the existence of aliens. If you do think that, then please stop watching Ancient Aliens on the History Channel. The Bible is composed of authors from Greece, Egypt, the Italian Peninsula, the Middle East, and the list of countries gets even more complicated when you look at books of the Bible, which are not in our 66 book canon. So let's do some interpretation by looking at the Book of James.

"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. ¹¹ For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Faith without Works Is Dead

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" (NRSV).

James starts with his interpretation of how to live out our faith in the opening line of this chapter. He gives an example of how we should not show favoritism in those who are a part of our community. In the days of the early church in which James is writing, the church would gather weekly for reading the scriptures out loud to one another, sharing in ministries and updates to the poor, orphans, and widows, have a meal together, which eventually became communion, and fellowship with one another to see how their friends had been. Because of these interconnected relationships, James notes of the importance of not just showing favoritism to others, but we are also not meant to be flashy in showing our wealth or elevating ourselves above one another because of our wealth or status.

To appreciate the entirety of what James is trying to say, we must look back to Paul's teachings, which James is expounding upon. James isn't entirely please with Paul's interpretations of the law and scripture. James is referring to Paul's arguments about the law and works of faith in the Letter to the Romans and Galatians. Let's briefly summarize the arguments in each of these books.

In Romans, Paul is arguing for the law of faith which is a way to see the law as both actions and how we understand our communal identity of the Body

of Christ. In many ways, he comes to similar conclusions as James, and the reason Paul is making this argument is because people in his community of early Christians are arguing the only true believers are the ones who are circumcised. Paul tells the Romans to basically get over it and that the Gentiles are just as much a part of the Body of Christ as the Jewish people are and quotes Deuteronomic Laws. He also points to the oral traditions his audience would have been well acquainted with by speaking about Abraham being the ancestor of all humans who were created by God. We all have a story to tell and our stories are directly influencing other stories and being simultaneously influenced by other people's stories as we journey through life. So why do we view the scripture differently? This is the basis of Paul's argument which James is building on.

In the Galatians verse James is referencing, Paul is mad at Peter for only preaching to the Jewish people. Peter is beginning to influence other people's actions as well, as Paul notes Barnabas is following Peter's example. We are all sinners justified by faith as our sins are forgiven. The works and the fruits of the gospel in which do this work is God's work, not ours, as Paul continues to chastise the church of Galatia who have become a little too prideful of what they are doing instead of focusing on the work itself. Paul calls us to follow Christ's teachings and example, not just one or the other.

In the section of James that we read today, James is building off both of these arguments. James is calling out Paul's rigid legalism that compartmentalizes his faith into nice and neat areas, where James argues for a more practical faith. In theology, James would be considered a Practical Theologian, which is a theology that many people aspire to focus on as a way to live and be inspired by God's word in our daily lives. James also points out that our faith is not a competition to see who is the most Godly this week. James sees this as sinful as it disconnects us from God by making ourselves the center of God's work instead of allowing God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit to be the core of the work of the Gospel. Anything which disconnects our work of the Gospel is a sin in James' eyes.

In our context of today, James would despise politicians of today who say one thing on the campaign trail and do something sometimes entirely different when they take office. James would be disgusted at the vast amount of people living in the streets as billionaires compete to see who can be in space the longest as rent moratoriums end and people go hungry. James would be disgusted by the refugees the Western world refuses to accept as its people who are running away from climate displacement, the endless wars we fight abroad, and the poverty and better opportunities these refugees are only looking for as our ancestors once did and as Jesus Christ himself did in the story of the Gospel. James would be disgusted by the way we treat our neighbors out in the public square, in school board meetings, and at town halls as our civic leaders only try to do their best to protect the public and serve one another in this time

of Covid. I believe James would proclaim the faith of American Christianity dead because it has lost its foundation of the gospel by serving our neighbors, caring for the poor and less fortunate, lack resources in providing for orphans, widows, and those who have lost dear loved ones, and James would be disgusted by our apathy of calling out the powers that be to bring forth a better world and do God's work by building the Kingdom of God here on earth now and today. Is our faith dead?

I think we can see in our own community that the answer is no, our faith is not dead by the ministries we serve here in our community. We are not perfect, but we are doing our part whether that be the conference ministries we support with our funds, the district events we attend and organize, and the local ministries that provide help to our communities. Our faith is not dead, but the work of the Gospel is also far from being over.

We will continue to wrestle with the questions of how to live out our faith and how our faith is hopefully not considered dead throughout the remaining weeks of looking at the Letter from James. My challenge for you is this. Spread a little extra goodness in the world this week. If you have a few extra dollars, then donate to a local or regional charity. If you have been meaning to make that phone call, text, or skype visit with a friend or family member who know is having a difficult time, then call them. If you see someone this week in need of food or shelter, then instead of judging them, and we all have, buy them a meal or put them up at El Centro for one night. The work of the Gospel is not our way of making us feel better about ourselves or the things we do to make the world a better place, but we can still do those things and build the Kingdom of God at the same time. Let's get to work friends and may the Divine bless you and keep you as you live your faith and understand your faith built on the principles and values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.