

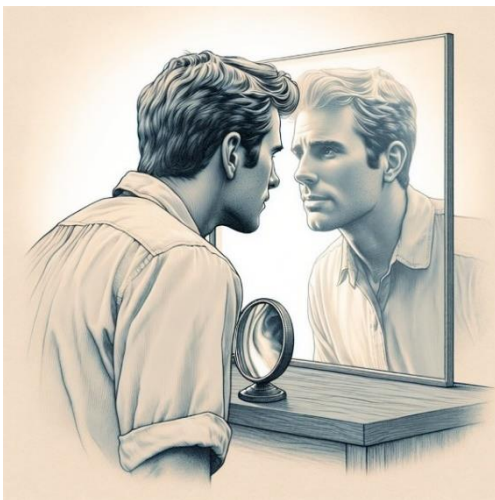
High St Uniting Church Frankston Be Doers of the Word James 1:17 - 27

A bit of introduction to James for those who haven't read the letter in his name very much. Of the three or four people called James in the Gospels and Acts, the best opinion is that this is James, the brother of Jesus. Although there is an opinion in the scholarship that the quality of Greek writing and the some of the expressions and thoughts point to someone writing in the name of James, because he was a respected figure in the first generation of the church, to distribute his teaching after he was killed, or after the church fled Jerusalem.

Despite the negative picture that is painted in the Gospels – the family trying to persuade Jesus to come home because he's a bit of an embarrassment – other books in scripture tell us that James received a resurrection appearance, was present at Pentecost, and came to be the leader of the church at Jerusalem. Someone so well-known in the early church that he could simply open the letter by saying 'James, a servant of God'.

The letter we have seems to be a collection of the teachings of James – which more closely reflect the teachings of Jesus than any other book – that was circulated to what was called the Dispersion. The churches that formed out of the Jewish Dispersion in the cities around the Mediterranean. More than a personal letter, this is like an official dispatch from the mother church of Jerusalem.

Over the history of the church, some have sneered at this letter as being too Jewish, a bit legal, lacking in theology, or not poetic or uplifting. Luther famously called it "a right strawy epistle", implying that it wasn't fit to build a faith on. But what James is giving us is God's word about living, not James' words about theology.



There is a plaque on the wall of Wesley Uniting Church in Geelong in honour of the minister Francis Tuckfield, who, in the 1860s opened the manse to victims of a plague on board a newly arrived ship in the port of Geelong. He had rowed out to the ship and brought the sick back to the manse to be cared for. The monument was donated by the families of those who survived.

There is no plaque for Wesley and his heart being 'strangely warmed', nor a monument to the doctrine of salvation by grace. What is being remembered is someone who acted on his faith and showed that the church was not just a place of worship and thoughts. Tuckfield was also showing the world a positive

example of being a 'do-gooder.'

And Jesus said to the people, "In everything you do, have a positive attitude and think the best of people, so that they will think the best of you".

How much have Jesus words of action – DO – been watered down by modern individualistic philosophy? In a society and culture that wants to tame religion, limit it to personal belief, and lock it away in our homes and our minds, James writes to the church and says, "This is true religion; to care for the needy and to keep yourself untempted by the world of money and possessions." Studies in comparative religion tell us that most of the world's religions contain

a version of what we call the Golden Rule – Do unto others as you would have them do unto you - but only Jesus words are positive; do. The Buddhist version – Do not do to others what you would not want done to you – sounds similar, but it's a passive version. By saying do, Jesus is reinforcing the truth that love is a verb, an action word. Do, act, help, support.

In the collection of books and writings that the early church considered important enough, sacred enough, to preserve, we have a balance of perspectives. More than theology and worship inspiration, the collection calls us to the complexity of living our faith. Who is Jesus and why is it important to reconcile yourself to God are great themes but what happens after you answer those questions? What does the answer mean for your life? You have heard the words of life, now what are you going to do about it? James is a very practical little book, written to the new churches popping up around the known world at that time and offering answers to how to live as followers of Jesus Christ in a world that doesn't respect you for that faith and is a hostile place to try to live as servants of Jesus. Sounds a bit like the world now, doesn't it?

The section we heard today begins with reminding the reader about God's generosity – all that God has done for us - and ends with the call to be generous to those in need around us – be doers in response to the Words of life. True religion is not worship in the temple, or defining the nature of salvation in Jesus Christ, it is active care for those most in need and not getting tempted by the attractions and distractions of the world. The collected nature of this epistle is clear in this section as it sounds and reads a bit interwoven and disjointed. In the middle of a teaching about generosity we get a word about being slow to anger and putting away wickedness and controlling your tongue. But the teachings are connected by the basic truth of James that we are born anew, the first fruits of creation. As we are born anew, our whole lives should change, we should give up our old ways of thinking about ourselves only, and getting angry at everyone else, and give up old ways of bad behaviour. Just as we should be doers of the word, not just hearers, so we should be listeners to each other and not bosses. And bridle your tongues, a theme he comes back to much more strongly in chapter 2. In a modern image, James is like all those renovation shows on TV. Giving your life to God in Jesus Christ and the Spirit is not just a coat of paint on an old building. Walls get torn out, rooms repurposed, friendly living spaces added and the whole house works in a different way. The other books of scripture call us to change, here is James telling us the extent of that change. It's a new life to be lived in a new way. No more lip service to religion, or worship for self-improvement, here is faith in lives lived for God; put all that you have learnt about God into action in your community and in the world.

Maybe because he was not saddled with the grand title of apostle, James reads very differently to either Paul or Peter. Here is a church leader who cares about his people living in difficult times. Life is hard and full of temptation, but God gives generously, and you can join in that giving as your response to the new life you have in Jesus Christ. Life is hard, but it is hard for everyone, so listen to each other and consider what is best before you speak and before your anger causes a problem in the community. Life is hard but welcome the word of forgiveness and allow it to change your life for the better. And it's no good thinking, "I'm OK, I'm religious, I have accepted Jesus as my Lord." James wants changed lives, not piety. The way of Jesus Christ is about faithfully living for God and showing that in compassion, in action and in living a new, clean life – religiously follow Jesus all the week, not just the times of religious observance. Be doers of the word – put your faith into action - not just hearers or readers or studiers.