

1. Introduction – a story

- a. When I was at Huntington Bank (HNB), I remember being called to a meeting with many prominent members of the bank to discuss what would be the bank's DEI-kind of initiative. These were the top leaders of the west Michigan region. It was 2017ish, so it wasn't called DEI yet, but that is essentially what it was shaping up to be. Everyone in the room was allowed to speak for 3 minutes and say whatever they wanted about the new initiative, which was going to be applied across the bank. For those 3 minutes, no one was allowed to interrupt the speaker, nor offer a rebuttal when everything was finished. We would simply move on to the next speaker in a room of about 20 or so, really important bankers in the HNB workplace. As people began to speak you could feel the tension. No one wanted to offend anyone, and everyone was looking for the right thing to say. It was a like a competition about who could say the most Human Resource-safe thing to say. You could feel landmines everywhere. After about 6 or 7 speakers, I remember hearing someone speak up and say that if HNB wanted to value people, they should really seek to ground their values in something. That person went on to say that the book of Genesis already gives immense value to humans because they were made in the image of God, and that Genesis, the Bible and God would be a great place to say that HNB values people. He went on to say that if they don't ground valuing people in what God has said, then the values of people, or how we value people would be constantly shifting to the next latest fad. It was a very out of norm thing to say in a corporate setting but as a Christian, it became a rallying call. After this man was done speaking, all of a sudden other people were Christians in the room. Up until that point everyone was on pins and needles about what would be an acceptable thing to say. After this was said another Christian woman quickly spoke up and started saying what she needed to say with "because of my faith in God". I didn't know if there were any Christians in that room besides me, but after that individual grounded his statements in Genesis 1, I knew who else was a Christian. After that meeting was over, I could hear other people say to that individual "thanks for saying that, I'm glad there were Christians here".
- b. Today's text takes us somewhere similar. It takes us to a place where Christians are the minority and feeling out of place, but in the midst of that place, a confession of faith, and a steadfastness, encourages other believers.

2. Let us take a look at what God is saying to us through this text today:

- a. **James 2:14** *14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God.

24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

3. Context 1- Audience

- a. Here James writes for us a brief bit of wisdom for those in the church, about those who are inside the church. This is a very careful distinction that I want to make right away. James is not writing to non-believers. He is not writing to believers about non-believers. He's writing to believers about believers. He's writing to the church about the church.
 - b. Who is the church that he's writing to? He's writing to the "*twelve tribes scattered among the nations*" (**James 1:1**), we know that right from the beginning. Why is this important?
 - i. This really matters when we try to understand this text. So let's go through the story of the NT so far to try and understand the audience of this letter.
 - ii. Jesus has this amazing ministry on earth, and after His death, burial and resurrection, He commissions His disciples to go all over the world to make more disciples. He then ascends into heaven and is seated at the right hand of The Father before their very eyes. This is important to remember because this means that Jesus has an amazing amount of power and authority now. Like, all the power and all the authority. He gives the disciples power, and He gives them authority to go out and fix the broken world by being witnesses of His. But, what happens? As soon as the disciples begin to do the work that Jesus told them to do, they are met with intense persecution. So much so that James himself, who wrote this letter was killed by Herod (some think it's the other James, Jesus's brother that wrote this epistle, to me it makes more sense to say that this was an urgent kind of letter to a desperately necessary time in church history).
 - iii. We read about this persecution in **Acts 8:1** "*And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.*" It is these Jewish Christians, as well as any gentiles that might have believed, who are receiving this letter from James.
 - c. What this means is this: James is writing to a religious community without a home. A community without a centralized temple of worship. A community that follows the same religious life, but who have no outside markers making it obvious that they are actually united.
 - i. They couldn't go and see Bob at the temple and be like "yep, he's one of us". They couldn't go to the temple courtyard and say "yeah, Megan is safely one of us". They couldn't look at the tassels that were being worn by the priests and think "ah, he's the one preserving our culture and helping us keep our land". There were simply no external markers for a Christian anymore. Christians left all the religious spaces and left the synagogues around Jerusalem and now they were meeting in people's homes.
 - ii. We experience the same kinds of things today. We go to work or to school, and, in general there are no external markers of which co-worker is a Christian or not. In general, there aren't external markers telling you which fellow student or teacher is a Christian. And if you stop and think about it long enough, theologically speaking, there aren't ever any external markers of who is a Christian or not apart from their external convictions and external actions.
 - d. It also means that James isn't writing to a bunch of people who are trying to keep the law and earn their salvation, like the problem that Paul was facing. No, James's audience couldn't keep the law anyway, they were banned from entering the temple, and following all the Jewish ceremonies.
4. Implication: Therefore, as we read this text, we aren't reading about how God might distinguish a Christian from a non-Christian, although certainly God is involved and judging all things at all times, rather this is a communication to exiles for them to know who is a Christian with real faith and who has dead faith.
 - a. One key grammatical point that clears this up is found in **v14** "*Can ***that*** faith save him*"? There's a definite article in Greek in front of the word "faith" to indicate that we're not talking about faith in general. We're talking about "the faith". What faith? "The Faith" that was just described, the kind that "*says he has faith but does not have works*".
 - b. This faith being described here in verse 14 is a certain kind of faith. It's the kind of faith that doesn't do anything and that kind of faith is dead. Dead faith doesn't save anyone.

- c. James then goes on to describe what kind of faith is the kind of faith that saves. It looks like what Abraham and Rahab did. So Christians can distinguish who is who, we see examples of faith working itself out.
- 5. Why do they need to know who has dead faith and who doesn't?
 - a. We as Christians need to know that Jesus is alive and active and working in the world. We need the encouragement that comes by knowing that Jesus is at work. James is writing to a persecuted group.
 - i. You and I live in times not welcoming faith in Jesus. Sometimes we need to hear and see Jesus at work.
- 6. There's a story in the Gospel that displays this very well. We see this same thing playing out in the life of John the Baptist (JTB) **Matt 11:2** " *Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"*
 - ⁴ And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."*
 - a. JTB was suffering and in prison for being The forerunner to the Messiah. Not just another prophet, but to the Messiah. He needed to know that as a follower of Jesus, is it worth it? Am I suffering for something? Is it worth it that I'm going through this? Messiah, are you really here?
 - b. Jesus' response is the same response that James gives in chapter 2. What do you see and what do you hear? Jesus does not answer with a "I'm doing these things to earn my Messiah status, once I finish a few more healings I'll have earned this title". No, He's already the Messiah. He's showing His identity through His works.
 - c. It's the life of Jesus, that will comfort JTB and help him persevere all the way to his death. We might hold to a confession of faith, but it always strengthens our faith to see God at work. That's why churches always baptize in public. Because it's a display of God working in the world through the transformed lives.

7. Observations:

- Therefore, James telling his audience to **hear** and what is he telling his audience to **see** some specific things as these Christians go out into world as Christians. Seeing and hearing things will help that scattered and persecuted church. It is what help us today. There are things we need to **see** and **hear**.
- a. What should we **hear**? The first thing is that Christians should hold to a confession. This letter starts out with **1:1** "*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*". That's a huge confession. God and Jesus Christ are working together. To serve God is to serve that Human Jesus of Nazareth.
 - b. Then James says in the beginning of chapter 2: "**2:1** *My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*" Not only is Jesus of Nazareth connected to God, He is God! Not only is He Lord, He is the Lord of Glory! That is the Christian confession.
 - c. Remembering that this confession is all sorts of dangerous, Christians should first hold fast to proper beliefs. We don't need to know everything and we don't need to know that deeply, because we're all in separate walks, but we do need to start off like the thief on the cross. We're about to die and we confess that Jesus is Lord. If God grants us life and days beyond that point, then we start walking with Him.
 - d. That's why this chapter isn't talking about how you are made right with God. This whole book is already written to people who would only care to read it if they already followed God anyway.
 - i. Perhaps you are here today and can easily ascend intellectually to all sorts of doctrinal positions like these scattered Christians. Great! Now what?
 - e. Next comes what we should **see**? James tells his dispersed audience that as they confess the proper beliefs, they should also be acting them out. And as others confess their beliefs, we can test their trust in those beliefs with our very eyes. How does this work?

- f. James gives us all sorts of ways to live out our faith. We could just see if the church is doing what Jesus was doing when He answered JTB. Or we could just read this whole letter. In this letter James instructs us to have lives that “count as joy”. That’s very visible. As Jim mentioned last, have you seen someone suffering, yet with Joy in this church? I already have, and I’ve only been here 3 weeks. The book of James gives lots of other examples of Christian living. Chapter 2 starts off with telling people to not show partiality. Don’t treat people differently because of who they are socially. Tangible stuff.
 - g. But specifically, in this text James gives us examples that don’t spiritualize what we should see. These are tangible actions. Clothe the poor, and feed the hungry. This passage gives two clear examples.
8. Interpretation: These kinds of commands are given to a dispersed and persecuted church, why? Because it is in this kind of living that we display the truth of our conviction, namely that The Lord Jesus Christ is Lord of Glory. For Jesus to be the Lord of Glory, He has to be Good, Just, and very Real.
- a. James is saying, “do you believe in God like Rahab did” then, do what is right even when it’s illegal dispersed Christian. “Do you believe God as Abraham did?” Then believe that if God were to take everything away, He’d still give you new life and keep His promises.
 - b. If you have these kinds of beliefs, then of course you would show them in the way that you care for the poor and the hungry. We would look at humans who are suffering and say “I will disadvantage myself because I know God will give me good things”.
 - i. God will give us money even if we give money we don’t think we have
 - ii. God will clothe us even if we give stuff we think we need, away
 - iii. God will give us life, even if preaching Christ is illegal and we get arrested
 - iv. God will save us even if we meet for church when it’s illegal
 - v. God will feed our stomachs even if we give our food away to the hungry
 - c. JTB asks this same kind question. He wants to know that what he’s done will be seen by God and Jesus says, look at what I’m doing and be comforted in your suffering- persevere until the end because I am here, I’m the Lord of Glory, I’m the King of the universe, not Herod.
9. Application: First let us look at this text not as an understanding of how God is going to save us. This is not the context of this passage at all. This passage contrasts real faith with dead faith.
- a. Firstly, real faith can arise from anyone. James uses both Abraham and Rahab as examples. Makes sense of course because these now Jewish-Christians are walking among the nations, where Judaism isn’t practiced. Abraham and Rahab create kind of huge book ends of the kinds of people that can be saved, that can be included in our churches. Abraham is a powerful man. Rich, important, militarily strong, and called to leave his land. Rahab is a woman, poor, not socially significant, and called to accept that her land is about to be destroyed while a new nation is built around it. Abraham is Jewish, Rahab is a gentile. This is a wide spectrum of the kind of persons who could be called Christian. Therefore we shouldn’t show any partiality, because God Himself accepts anyone who does right by having a “living faith”. That’s the very first point in this chapter. We who have real faith will welcome anyone who confesses Jesus as Lord of Glory and lives a faithful life to God. Christians have special commitments to Christians, or unique obligations to Christians. We are to “*do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*” **Gal 6:10**. We help “brother or sister” v15.
 - i. You and I need to look no further than someone’s true faith before we enter life together. The world would have us create subcategories of humans so that we can be judges of who should get help first and who gets help second. The world creates a competition of oppressed classes. The Bible doesn’t do this at all. It just says help that person in front of you. Whether rich or poor, white or black, oppressed by the system, or not oppressed by the system. The net is as wide as Abraham is to Rahab and it benefits everyone in between. God doesn’t show partiality, so neither should we. “*do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*” **Gal 6:10**
 - b. Second, there’s not only one kind of work that shows true faith. Look closely at this text. Preaching the Gospel isn’t listed here. Does that mean that true Christians don’t share their faith

with anyone? This passage isn't talking about the only ways in which we can show faith. It's simply giving us broad categories. Consider that the faith that Abraham shows was not one that clothed the poor. In fact, him and Sarah kicked out the poor from their house, and Hagar almost died in the wilderness with her son if it weren't for God showing up. Consider that Rahab did not feed the hungry or preach the gospel. In her story she simply protected God's people because she had heard years earlier that God had saved the Israelites from the Egyptians. Meaning, this text isn't saying "faith without works that feed the poor are dead". It's saying, "faith without works", and works can be all sorts of ways in which we relate to God. Especially clothing the poor and feeding the hungry, but not only that.

- i. Is God calling you to quit your job Abraham? Show your faith
 - ii. Is God asking you to do something that will get you in trouble like Rahab? Show your faith
 - iii. Is God asking you to move, like He did Abraham? Show your faith
 - iv. Is God asking you to stay and ride out the incoming chaos like Rahab? Show your faith
 - v. Is God asking you to give so that others are fed and clothed? Show your faith
- c. Lastly, be comforted that God is at work. I've only been here 3 weeks and I've seen God at work in all sorts of ways. Ways that confirm that there is a living faith here. When the world gets to be too much, too stressful, too hateful, too divisive, too chaotic. Come to church. Look with your own eyes and see God working. Look at His hand moving. Conversely, when God does something in your life, please share it with us! It will help us persevere until the end.