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James

I want to read you a letter.

Dear Mom, I finally got rid of him. It took longer than I expected. He kept coming back, and every time I thought it was over, there he was again. Yesterday I decided I'd had enough. I waited until everyone was asleep, went downstairs, and dealt with it myself. It was disgusting. I nearly threw up when it happened. But I got him. I cleaned everything afterward, opened the windows, and made sure there was nothing left behind. You don't have to worry anymore. He won't be coming back. Love, Mary.

If I went around and asked people in this congregation, I bet I would get some very different answers as to what Mary is talking about. Maybe Mary finally dealt with a very dangerous animal, perhaps a burglar or intruder. Maybe it's about a relationship. You see, when we don't know the context, we don't just stop interpreting. No, our brains create our own context, it's built into us.

Nothing in the letter, I just read, explicitly tells us which interpretation is correct. When we hear, "I finally got rid of him," this could mean something very different

depending on if we know who the “him” is. When Mary says, “I waited until everyone was asleep,” this sounds suspicious if we don’t know what’s going on, and we create our own context.

This is what can happen with Scripture. We can read a biblical verse, or a whole letter, technically quote it correctly, while not understanding exactly what it is saying, if we remove it from its context. A couple of weeks ago we looked at the end of James chapter 1, and talked about hearing and doing. That faith has action to it. I didn’t want to repeat much of that message today, and so while I’ll speak to some of that, as today is a continuation of what James was speaking to then, I was also led to bring up context.

You see in the letter at the beginning that Mary wrote, she was dealing with a mouse. So, now, let me read the letter again and see if your understanding changes.

Dear Mom, I finally got rid of him. It took longer than I expected. He kept coming back, and every time I thought it was over, there he was again. Yesterday I decided I’d had enough. I waited until everyone was asleep, went downstairs, and dealt with it myself. It was disgusting. I nearly threw up when it happened. But I got him. I cleaned everything afterward, opened the windows, and made sure there was nothing left behind. You don’t have to worry anymore. He won’t be coming back. Love, Mary.

Did the words change or did the context change?
The words didn't change, but their understanding did because we now understood the context. And so, we need to try our best with Scripture to understand the context.

New Testament authors assumed contextual knowledge often on the part of their readers. Though sometimes they didn't. For instance, in John 4:9 it is written "The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)" Or Acts 17:18 "Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babblers want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.)" So sometimes contextual information is offered, but James often assumed contextual knowledge.

And this context matters. Christianity is rooted in a historical person who lived at a particular time and did real things in time and history. This sets Christianity apart from many religions. The Christian faith is not simply rooted in truth claims. We don't simply choose one set of teachings over another. As Christians, we pledge allegiance to a person, a real historical person in Jesus Christ, who is God. If Christianity is a historical faith then context does matter.

This passage from James is known to be a troubling passage for interpreters. One commentary says it is, "one of the most difficult texts in James." Another says, "it is the most theologically significant, as well as the most controversial, in the Letter of James." For hundreds of years, Christians have been disagreeing on its meaning. We need to think about the context that James was writing, because if not, as we know, our minds will make up their own context. And this can become very difficult and/or dangerous, as words can mean something very different in our time, to that years ago. You see, when people read this passage from James, they often start to pin James and Paul against one another, as many have done throughout history.

Paul writes in Romans 3:28 "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law," or Paul's writing to the Galatians in 2:16 and 3:6-7 (Galatians 2:16 "yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law." Galatians 3:6-7 "Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham.")

Hear parts again from James in comparison. James

2:20–21 “Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?” James 2:23–24 “Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”.

James was well known to Paul. Paul met James, whom he identifies as “the Lord’s brother,” during his early visits to Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18–19), and later describes James, along with Peter and John, as a pillar of the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:9). Paul also mentions James as one of those to whom the risen Christ appeared (1 Cor. 15:7). More importantly, James and Paul share significant common ground. Both emphasize that faith must be lived out rather than merely professed. James calls believers to be “doers of the word” (Jas. 1:22, 25), while Paul similarly emphasizes that it is those who do what is right who demonstrate their standing before God (Rom. 2:13). Both also teach that love for one’s neighbour fulfills the law (Jas. 2:8–11; Rom. 13:8–10), and both appeal to Abraham as an example of faith.

This is especially significant because James describes loving and caring for others as part of the “royal law” (Jas. 2:8), echoing Paul’s teaching that the law is fulfilled in loving one’s neighbour (Gal. 5:14). James had

already connected this kind of active obedience with the “law of liberty” (Jas. 1:25). Rather than presenting James and Paul as theological opponents, these similarities suggest that both saw genuine faith as something that expresses itself in how believers live and treat others.

So as much as what we read today can sometimes appear to be contrary to what Paul writes about faith and works, as one individual wrote, “the greatest difference between James and Paul is not directly theological but pertains to the time and context of composition.” James may not be engaging in the debate of Paul’s day, but may instead be speaking to issues that are relevant to his own time.

James writes to scattered Jewish-Christian communities facing trials, poverty, and conflict. James defines works as doing Christian charity because there were poor people in the Christian community. This is why James dealt with the issue of neglecting the poor. James is not contrasting faith and works but contrasting living faith with dead faith.

What do faith and work mean?

Faith is one of those words that can have different meanings to different people. Some people say, “have faith in yourself,” and while this may be a popular saying, it is not the biblical faith. We hear in Hebrews

11:1 what biblical faith is. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." When going to Greek, faith and believe have virtually the same meaning. Christian faith is aligned with the ideals and example of Jesus Christ. As Christians, as we continue to see the mystery of God, with His grace, we seek to know Him more, becoming more obedient. Faith is not static, in that it stays still, but should get us to learn more of God and continue to grow in Him. It's not being obedient to a set of rules, but faith changes us as we seek a greater understanding of God. Biblical faith is more than intellectual agreement. It is trust in God that reshapes how we live. James makes this clear by pointing out that even demons believe certain truths about God. The problem isn't that their belief is factually incorrect; the problem is that their belief produces no loving obedience.

And what about works? Works also has a range of meanings. James and Paul sometimes use the language of works in different contexts, addressing different problems. James uses the word positively, often to do with loving mercy, kindness, and obedience to God. Paul however, speaks to a different meaning. He often uses the term with "works of law," antithetical to grace, a way to boast before God, or place God under obligation, to earn justification. It often has to do with circumcision, ritualistically keeping certain days, abstaining from certain food and drink. Paul is not

saying that faith shouldn't be accompanied by loving acts of kindness and mercy, but that performing ritual acts to have a standing before God are not necessary. They deny grace through faith, instead trusting in works for justification. While both using the same word of works, they can mean two different things, just as how they use of the word faith could. For Paul, faith is a relationship of grace and love towards God, this results in a transformed life. James exposes a counterfeit form of faith—one that consists merely of believing certain truths about God without trusting God in a way that produces obedience and love. As he says, even the demons believe. But this belief doesn't bring about salvation.

James brings up two individuals from the Old Testament, Abraham and Rahab. Completely different from each other. Abraham, the father of the Jewish faith, the first patriarch, a wealthy, influential, esteemed and powerful person. Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute, who was poor, ill-esteemed, and a powerless woman. Yet, as James says, deeds show if our faith is genuine.

Paul makes it clear that salvation is not because of what we do. Paul appeals to Genesis 15, reminding us that Abraham was justified by God as a gift, not by anything that Abraham did. James also quotes this part of Abraham's story in Genesis 15, but then points to Genesis 22, an event that happened thirty years

later — the sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham believed in God in Genesis 15, it shows Abraham's faith, but in Genesis 22 it demonstrates that his faith was genuine and active. James is showing how Abraham's later obedience demonstrated the reality of the faith he already possessed.

Paul is confronting reliance on works of the law as a basis for justification. James, meanwhile, appears to be confronting people who claim to have faith while their lives show no corresponding obedience or mercy. James argues that genuine faith produces action. Faith that never expresses itself in works is, in his words, dead. James was questioning faith of those who fail to act or provide for those around them. We hear from Jesus in Matthew 25:42–43 "for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

Paul confronts the temptation to trust in our works instead of God's grace. James confronts the temptation to call something "faith" when it produces no works.

In other words, Paul: "You cannot earn salvation by your works. You need faith."

James: "Don't claim to have faith while your life has no works. Genuine faith produces works."

As we heard from James a few weeks ago, which is reiterated even more today in James 2:22 "You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works." He challenges us to examine whether our faith is truly alive. James isn't asking his readers to choose between faith and works. He is asking whether their faith is the kind of faith that actually lives and acts. James wants to make sure your faith is real. James doesn't want his readers merely to profess faith with their mouths; he wants that faith to become visible in how they live. Or as we might say it today, he doesn't want his readers just to have head knowledge about God, but heart knowledge. Faith does something. Faith is not static. For something to be alive, it must show vitality by the things it does.

Works are not the root of our salvation; they are the fruit of a living faith. They are not the cause of our justification, but the evidence of a faith that is alive.

I want to reiterate what I said a couple of weeks ago from the passage at the end of the first chapter of James.

The question isn't simply, "Have I heard God's Word?" The question is, "What am I doing with what God has shown me?" Am I quicker to listen? Slower to speak? Slower to anger? More compassionate toward those who are vulnerable? More generous? More forgiving? More like Jesus?

This isn't a message telling us, 'Try harder to be a better Christian.' The gospel is not that we save ourselves by becoming better people. The gospel is that Jesus saves us by grace, and the Holy Spirit begins the work of making us like Christ. Our response is not to earn God's love, but to surrender ourselves to the God who has already loved us.

Because when the world looks at the church, they should see more than people who know the right things to say. They should see people who have been changed by the One they proclaim.

Can you imagine a world where millions of Christians claim faith in God, but yet do nothing to bring the Kingdom of God to the here and now? They do nothing to love, serve, and act in obedience. That is the kind of faith James warns us against—a faith that can speak the right words but never acts, because even the demons believe. May our faith be more than something we profess. May it be a living faith that loves, serves, obeys, and acts.