

2/6/13

GSM

James 2:14-26

Ephesians 2:8-10

[*read*]

A while back a friend of mine at work sent me the top 4 stories from the African press from 2010. Here's my favourite, from a newspaper in Zimbabwe:-

*While transporting mental patients from Harare to Bulawayo , the bus Driver stopped at a roadside shebeen (beerhall) for a few beers. When he got back to his vehicle, he found it empty, with the 20 patients nowhere to be seen. Realizing the trouble he was in if the truth were uncovered, he halted his bus at the next bus stop and offered lifts to those in the queue. Letting 20 people board, he then shut the doors and drove straight to the Bulawayo mental hospital, where he hastily handed over his 'charges', warning the nurses that they were particularly excitable. Staff removed the furious passengers; it was three days later that suspicions were roused by the consistency of stories from the 20. As for the real patients: nothing more has been heard of them and they have apparently blended comfortably back into Zimbabwean society. .*

The story says that the only reason that the 20 people who should never have been locked up in the relevant institution were let out was the consistency of their stories. I guess that's because on their own it must have been quite hard for the people who had accepted what they thought was a free lift to prove by their actions or words that they were in good mental health. And that got me thinking – how would we show that we were in good spiritual health, that we were authentically Christian? If people saw our lives how would they know that we were proper followers of Jesus and not just pretending?



When I was growing up in Bedford I was sure who the proper Christians were in the Schools Christian Association of which I was a part. They looked like their lives were sorted, like they had absolute certainty over their faith, and their prayers seemed much more intense, like they had their own hotline to God. My faith was more questioning, my prayers were faltering and tongue-tied. Since then I've been a member of a few churches and have found the same sort of thing – you can spot who's on the inside, who's closer to God by how they appear, by their words and the sorted-out-ness of their lives. So when the Bible talks about authenticity in the Christian life, it must mean those sorts of people, right?

Let's take a look. James 2, from verse 14: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." So, you can picture the scene – it becomes known at a church meeting that one of the church is in dire need of food and clothing. What does the church do? Well, they show real concern. They feel the pain of the person in need. They really hope that things improve. And then they go home and get on with their lives. The Bible calls that faith "dead". The Bible says that that faith cannot save them. The Bible calls that faith useless.

So let's have a look at the theology of these people who seem so sincere in their faith. They know everything about everything in the faith. They can explain any passage in the Scriptures. They can answer all the difficult questions. They're not thrown by anything in the Bible. Surely the Bible has something to say about people who know all the important stuff? Verse 19: "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." So, if they're relying on their Bible knowledge alone to save them, then they're in no better position than the demons, under everlasting judgement for their rebellion. After all, who has better theology than Satan and his followers?

Man, this is hard stuff. This should shake us up. But really, it's nothing we haven't heard recently. At the end of our series on the sermon on the mount we had two sermons on the same theme. One described a passage where people were calling Jesus Lord, performing miracles, prophesying and casting out demons in his name, and Jesus says to them "I never knew you, depart from me". One described a passage where people heard Jesus's words and did not put them in practice and were described as being like people that built their house on sand and were swept away by a flood. So we shouldn't be surprised, but we should be shaken up. It's very easy to get a feeling when you're in a church service, here or anywhere else, that our activities on a Sunday morning are enough. We sing praise to God and encouragement to each other, we pray, we listen carefully when God's word is explained. All these are important. None of these are enough.

But hold on, you say, how about the Ephesians passage? "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast." This *explicitly says* that you are saved by faith, and not by anything you do. You're not saved by helping someone in need in the church. How can James say "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead"? But look at how the Ephesians passage carries on "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Why are we saved by faith? In order to do good works. In order to act out our faith. So what can we expect to see from someone who has decided to follow Jesus, to be his disciple? We can expect to see those good works – that

person living out their faith. There will be changes happening in the life of that person and that person will also be changing the lives around him or her. If we don't see that in our lives? Then we should question the nature of the commitment we have made. What actually have we decided to do when we follow Jesus?

You see, we can deceive ourselves on a Sunday morning. We learned that earlier in James, from verse 22 of chapter 1. "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." We may listen to God's word being explained and get inspired, or get cross. We may sing and pray. But unless we put God's word into practice then we are deceiving ourselves into thinking that it does us any good. We may look like dutiful Christians doing God's will. According to this passage in his Word, God sees us differently.

This is a picture of a Skoda Fabia:-

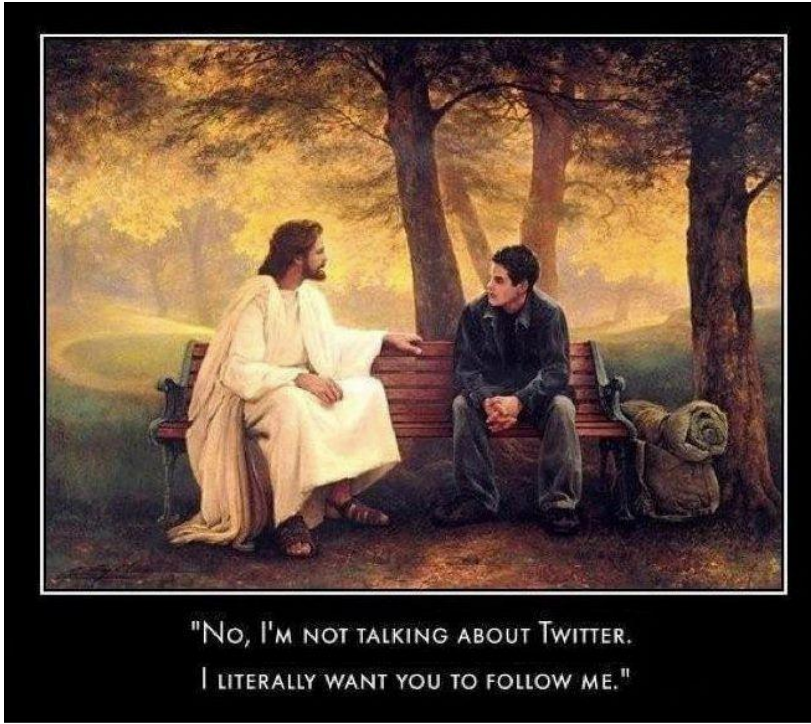


This is also a picture of a Skoda Fabia:-



Except the reality is different. They might look similar from a distance, but close up a different reality emerges. The first is a functional piece of kit, which you can go on journeys in. The second is a cake. It is made so that it looks like a car, but the reality is different. They are fundamentally two different things. One is made of metal, rubber, fabric, glass and other substances. The other is made of butter, sugar, eggs and flour. One will perform its function in taking you from A to B. The other will not.

What James is saying here is that there needs to be a reality behind our profession of faith. It needs to be true. It needs to mean something. It needs to be something more than an intellectual understanding of Christian truth to make us better than the demons. It needs to reflect the new life into which the Bible says we have been born again. If it doesn't, then the Bible says that we need to decide to follow Jesus in truth, not just conceptually. I laughed when I first saw this picture. The more I think about it, the less I laugh. We follow football teams, we follow people on Twitter, we follow trends. Following Jesus means something different.



Now, this letter is written to Christians, and is meant to provoke them, I believe, into examining their own lives and making sure that their Christian discipleship is genuine and not just a self-deception. And James gives us two striking examples of the sort of reality that God looks for in his people. Two very different examples. Let's look at them together.

So, first, Abraham.



Let's read verses 21 to 24: "Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone." Two different bits of Abraham's life are quoted here, and it's instructive to see how they work together. First, that bit where it says "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness". Now that's taken from Genesis 15, and verses 4 to 6 say this: "Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir."<sup>5</sup> He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness". Do you see, Abram is doing nothing here, but trusting in God's promises. And he is called righteous because of his faith. Abram doesn't do anything, and is called righteous because of his faith. If we decide to trust in God's promises, in what Jesus did for us on the cross, then we are called righteous because of our faith. Not because of what we have done. But then James refers to the episode where God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. As Abraham prepares himself to do so, God stops him and says this in Genesis 22: "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore." So you see, in Genesis 15, a promise made to grant Abraham offspring as numerous as stars in the sky because of his faith. In Genesis 22, a promise made to grant Abraham offspring as numerous as stars in the sky because of his actions. So which is it? Which was the clincher – the faith or the actions? James says this in verse 22: "You see that his faith and his actions were *working together*, and his faith was made complete by what he did." Do you see – the faith and the actions were indivisible – they were working together – the actions were a natural outworking of the faith Abraham had. They showed the genuineness of the faith Abraham already had, and which had already formed the basis of his righteousness, of his being *made right*.

Secondly Rahab and the story of the escape of Joshua's spies from the city of Jericho.



Verse 25: “Was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?” Who was Rahab – a great leader of God’s people? No - a world away from nice respectable Christians. A woman from *outside* God’s people, a prostitute in Jericho, home of Israel’s enemies. About as unrespectable as you can get.

We find the story of Rahab in the book of Joshua chapter 2, where we read that the Israelites sent spies into Jericho, who stayed at Rahab’s house.

The king of Jericho sends for the spies but Rahab says they have already left and sends the king’s men in the wrong direction. In fact, she had hidden the spies under flax laid out in the roof. This is what Joshua 2 says from verse 8:

“<sup>8</sup> Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof <sup>9</sup> and said to them, “I know that the LORD has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. <sup>10</sup> We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of



the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. <sup>11</sup> When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

<sup>12</sup>“Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you.”

Notice how incomplete her faith is and how rooted in her own self-preservation. The outworking of it was to lie to the ruler of her own people. Yet it was enough to call her righteous before God. Her actions in putting her own life at risk and concealing God's people showed that she was genuine in her belief that God was God in heaven above and earth below and that she looked to him and his people for her rescue.

How do we apply this? Well, first, by looking at ourselves. This passage is not licence for us to examine how others are living their lives and run to judgment. This passage, I believe, is designed to get those who say they are followers of Jesus to take a look at themselves and their lives and examine how true that is in practice. We should look at ourselves.

Secondly, examine what we have agreed to do when we decided to follow Jesus. Leave aside complex theology for a second here. What actually have you agreed to? The Bible calls us to do a few things. Firstly, repent. Repentance is a Christian jargon word but it essentially means turning around and resolve to follow Jesus. You were facing one direction, towards your own selfish desires, but now you resolve to face towards God and obey him. You still mess up, but ultimately you're facing in a new direction. Note that Rahab was a citizen of Jericho but in effect she had changed sides – she had decided to ally herself with the people of God. That's the picture here – we need to resolve to follow God. Secondly, self-denial. If any man would be my disciple, says Jesus, he must deny himself. No longer putting ourselves first, but putting God first. Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son, even though Isaac was the most precious thing in the world, because God told him to do so. Abraham put God ahead of his own wishes. Thirdly, Jesus bids us pick up our cross and follow him. The path that Jesus took, and which he invites us to follow him on, involves

picking up a cross, an instrument of suffering and disgrace. Are we prepared for suffering and disgrace. Forget for a moment all your theology – does our desire to follow God include a willingness to experience suffering and disgrace? Think a little before answering that – it’s an easy question to answer in this place. It’s a harder question to answer on a Monday morning, which is when we’re called to worship with our lives outside a supportive place like this.

Could I suggest two litmus tests for us to apply to ourselves to examine ourselves against this passage? These work for me – but you may find others useful. Let’s start with one taken from the passage.



We sing at this church a song called “I will offer up my life”. How about “I will offer up my bank account”? You see, until recently, I would have said that I would give a certain percentage of my income to the church, and the rest of my money was mine, although of course at any stage God could tell me to use my money for his kingdom. To my shame, only recently have I realised that God tells me to do exactly that – throughout God’s word there are instructions to use our wealth and possessions for his kingdom. So if we become aware of someone in this church or a church overseas who is in dire need of food and clothing, do we earnestly hope that things improve, or do we improve things? Verse 16: “If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?”. Our faith if genuine should prompt us to meet their needs, if we are able to. I will offer up my bank account.

The second litmus test will show where our heart is at and whether we have taken the step of denying ourselves.



When we meet together in small groups or prayer triplets and share prayer needs, what is the first thing we pray for? Jesus said seek first God's kingdom and the things we need will be added to us as well. The Lord's prayer begins "your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". Is that what is foremost on our heart – to see God's will done and his kingdom come, in the lives of our friends and family? To see injustice opposed, to see the hungry fed and the naked clothed? Or do we ask for prayer for ourselves first? Now I'm not talking here about moments of crisis in our lives where there is good Biblical precedent for crying out to God for help. I'm talking about us putting our everyday concerns before the concerns of God's kingdom. Are we denying ourselves? Are we following Jesus? Have we repented of our own selfishness?

The Bible teaches that we are justified by faith alone, but that faith has to include a commitment to follow Jesus and put him first in our lives. We have to repent of our old ways and turn ourselves around to God's ways, the way of the cross that involves suffering and disgrace. That will show itself in action. We will still fail God, but we resolve to carry on following him. If you are concerned that you may not have taken this step, then understand

that Jesus has paid the price for your rebellion against God by dying on the cross and calls you to follow him. Repent of your old way of life, trusting in your own goodness and trappings of Christianity, and decide to follow him.