

SMALL GROUPS

LIVING HD



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Contents

(Part 1–3)

Small Group material lovingly adapted by former Bishop Rev. Themba Mntambo.

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YOUR FAITH WAS MADE FOR THIS

Opening Discussion

Jesus, responding to the request from his disciples to teach them how to pray, gave them what today we call “The Lord’s Prayer”. Part of the prayer has these words, “And lead us not into temptation...”¹ At first reading of these words, we may want to believe that this is a plea for God not to visit temptation on us.

What do you think? Is this God, whom we worship, and we believe loves us, capable of visiting us with temptation to the point that we pray, “No Lord, please do not take us there”?

Prayer (Read the prayer together if you are in a group, if alone, read the prayer out loud if you can)

Gracious God, you Son Jesus Christ our Lord encountered trials and temptations throughout his life on earth, not because you brought this to him, but because of sinful humanity, refusing to recognize you in our presence, to hear you speak through him, and to find restoration in him. We marvel at how, when confronted with trials and tribulations, he turned to you in prayer. Help us in our trials and tribulations, to turn to you with reverent and submissive hearts, and give us the assurance that in all our troubles, you remain beside us, carrying us in your wings of love and grace. Lord hear our prayer, and let our cry come unto you. Amen.

Scripture Reading

James 1:1 – 18

Unpacking the Passage

Verse 1

The book of James was most likely written by James, the brother of Jesus around 50 AD. Each epistle usually begins with a greeting or salutation similar to the one stated here. James identifies himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Moreover, the author is writing to Jewish believers in the Messiah who are scattered among the nations or “dispersed” throughout Israel.

¹ Luke 11:4b and Matthew 6:13

Verses 2 – 4

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

A comment by someone reading these verses is that this is pie in the sky religion and asks the question how we can have joy in times of trial and tribulation. Indeed, it is not possible to have joy when we are in pain, or troubled, or fearful. Paul writes in Romans 5:3 – 5 *“...Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”* Other translations render the word “glory” as “rejoice”. There is the mistaken belief that the Christian must always face suffering, trials, and temptations, and that because of that suffering they should then rejoice. But we note here that Paul does not mean that we rejoice **because** of our sufferings, but that we rejoice **in** our suffering. Suffering does not make us better Christians. What makes us better Christians is that in the midst of our suffering, we focus, not on the current state in which we find ourselves, but beyond that to what our suffering will produce, and that is, perseverance, character, and hope. For gold to be produced the rock in which it is stuck must be crushed, put through intense heat to burn away all impurities and the end result is pure and beautiful gold. When we are put under pressure of any kind, we rejoice because out of all this, we will emerge stronger, purer, and more beautiful. So we are encouraged to hang in there, to “vasbyt” because the result of our suffering has greater value.

The most important reason for rejoicing in our suffering is because we know that our Lord Jesus Christ endured suffering, pain, and death – and glorious resurrection! We are therefore encouraged to also endure. Secondly, we know that in our own suffering, the Lord is with us and will never leave us nor forsake us, we can call on him for strength in our times of trial. Here the words of the hymn:

Have we trials and temptations,

Is there trouble anywhere?

We should never be discouraged:

Take it to the Lord in prayer.²

Thirdly, our focus is not on the trouble we go through, we look beyond all of that to the glory that is surely to come,³ thus we are strengthened to hold on.

Question 2 – What are some of the past or present sufferings that possible have or are hindering your site of the glory to come?

² Hymn 559 (Hymns and Psalms), Hymn 539 (Methodist Hymn Book)

³ Read Romans 8:18

Verses 5 – 8

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

Wisdom is defined as having experience, knowledge, and good judgment. This is a needed virtue today in our broken world, where proper judgment is lacking. For instance, we are in the middle of a pandemic, the Corona Virus, but some people are still rather lax in observing and taking safety measures which have been proved to limit the spread of the disease. Conspiracy theories abound where people refuse to take the opportunity to be vaccinated against the disease, even when presented by scientific proof that the vaccine will help in preventing infection. There are sincerely religious people who will say that God will protect them. But is it not God who has provided us with scientists, natural or manufactured resources to produce the vaccine and protect us? Yes, God does protect God's people, but God has also given us the gift of common sense to see how that protection is provided, through scientific knowledge and products.

It is true that wisdom is more than just scientific knowledge or intellectual reasoning by our own will; wisdom comes from God, and we must ask God to give us wisdom just like Solomon did. In our prayer for wisdom, we do so in faith that God will grant us our prayer. So it seems that faith and wisdom are interrelated.⁴ The person who doubts *"...is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do."* Such a person is bound to make poor choices relying on their own understanding (Prov. 3:5) rather than God's.

Verse 9 – 11

Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild-flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

As believers, we ought to humble ourselves before God and God's people. For God has given us all things, including our jobs and places of high position. The platform we have as Christians should not be taken for granted. If you have a position of authority, use it wisely and for the advancement of God's kingdom. The rich, however, should take pride in their humiliation since they will pass away like a wildflower.

Does God disapprove of wealth and riches? Certainly not, but God does disapprove when people, in their wealth, neglect God. Is it not true that when we have abundance, we may be tempted to be full of pride and boastful in our own achievements? The writer of this Epistle warns us that our pride will be

⁴ Read Proverbs 3:5

turned into humiliation. There are a few parables in the Bible teaching us to be humble in our elevated positions.⁵

Verse 12

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Athletes suffer much physical and mental strain by training every day, building up to a goal, perhaps of receiving a medal, or achieving their personal best. They look forward to something good that will come out of their efforts, call it suffering if you like. They know that their pain is short-lived, but that the rewards will be long lasting. This striving for human achievement pales in comparison to being obedient to the Lord because the crown of life that the Lord promises to those who love him is everlasting. Paul states that in Romans 8:18.

Verse 13 – 15

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone;¹⁴ but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

These verses are clear. God is not the tempter! It is our evil desires and actions that lead us into sin. God who created us and loves us cannot lead us to sin or have temptation visited upon us. God has given us the free will to choose, and we often make bad decisions that could ultimately lead us to death.

- Here then is the Good News; *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*⁶
- Again, here is the Good News; *"No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."*⁷
- Here is the way-out God provides for us; *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*⁸

Verses 16 – 18

Do not be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.

⁵ Luke 16:19 – 31, Luke 12:13 - 21

⁶ Romans 5:8

⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:13

⁸ 1 John 1:9

God who gives us every good and perfect gift, does not change. Matthew 7:9 - 11 tells us this: *“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!* As God’s children, we can be confident that God will do as God has promised and will continue to seek every good thing for us. All we need do is to be receptive to this offer of every good and perfect gift.

The Challenge

Here is a personal story. My spiritual director, who is also a psychologist tells me that I am mild OCD. In my cupboard at home, every cup must be aligned to all the others; handles facing the same way, all cups facing down. Every glass must be alongside face down, aligned with all other similar glasses, and all facing down. To put them facing down is so that if there is dust in the cupboard, it should not get into the glasses or cups. The thing is, if I want to have a drink of water, I have to take the glass out, and let it face up in order to be filled – you cannot fill your cup if it is facing down – you must place it in a position where it will receive the water. Is it not time for you perhaps to turn your life, let it face up, and open, in order to receive every good and perfect gift from God?

Question 3 – Reflection

How can I practice this challenge this coming week?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for your word that helps us to see you clearly, but more especially to allow those among whom we live and work to see you much more clearly. Help us to be a beacon of light to those who walk in darkness and despair. May those who live in this dark and broken world find hope when they see us overcome every trial and temptation, not in our wisdom and according to our understanding, but because you are present in our lives to guide us and bless us. Remind us, not to look at the present times of suffering, but to look forward to the day when you will redeem, sanctify and deliver us from pain and suffering. Thank you for sending us our Saviour, Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, for his endurance and victory over sin and death. May we follow his example, that we too may find glorious victory and eternal life. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

LIVING THE LAW OF LOVE

Opening Discussion

The world in which we live is one in which people's lives and integrity are constantly devalued. Our Lord Jesus Christ continually stood up for and protected those who found themselves on the receiving end of discrimination. In what ways can we be the voice of Jesus, speaking on behalf of the marginalized, the powerless and those who are discriminated against?

Do you know of anyone in your community, at work who suffer discrimination? How can we support them? Do you know someone who practices discrimination against others? How can we challenge them or help them to act in ways that affirm others rather than devalue them?

Prayer

Lord God, your word teaches us that "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you (we) are all one in Christ Jesus."⁹ Yet in our world, your world, we find ourselves separated from one another. This separation is based on the outward appearance of people, the languages we speak, the culture to which we belong. Help us not to look at these outward appearances, but to consider what is inside of each one of us. Help us to recognize that we are all created in your image, and that should bring us together, hold us together, and that Jesus Christ our Lord bind us together with cords that cannot be broken. Amen.

Sing Together (if possible and if you know the song)

Bind us together, Lord
Bind us together
With cords that cannot be broken
Bind us together, Lord
Bind us together
Bind us together in Love

There is only one God,
There is only one King
There is only one Body,
That is why we sing. || Bind us ||

⁹ Galatians 3:28

Fit for the glory of God,
Purchased by His precious Son
Born with the right to be free
For Jesus the victory has won. ||Bind us||

We are the family of God
We are the promise divine
We are God's chosen desire
We are the glorious new wine. ||Bind us||

Introduction and Background

In chapter one, James dealt with the issue of temptation, saying that *"because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance."* (1:3) and that the person who endures temptation *"will receive the crown of life"* (1:12). He disputed that temptation ever comes from God (1:13) and affirmed that *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights,"* (1:17). James also counselled that we must be *"quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,"* (1:19); counsel that, if universally adopted, would solve many of the world's problems. He introduced the subject of doing versus merely hearing the word (1:22), and also introduced the subject of bridling the tongue (1:26), a subject on which he elaborates in chapter 3.

Unpacking The Passage

DON'T SHOW PARTIALITY: JAMES 2:1-7.

Verse 1: *"My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism." Another way to translate this verse is to say; "My brothers and sisters, do not show favoritism as you hold the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ."*

When James says, "believers in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ," he is speaking of the faith that believers have in Jesus.

Verses 2 – 3:

"Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³ If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet,"

We are tempted to show partiality to wealthy or powerful people, sometimes out of respect, sometimes out of fear, and sometimes in the hope that the wealthy or powerful person might give us something out of their wealth or help us in some other way. From the standpoint of the Christian faith, this attitude of favouritism is wrong because it responds to the wealth or power of the person rather than to the person him or herself.

We would do well to remember that God shows no partiality, but *“Since you call on a Father who judges each person’s work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.”*¹⁰

- The Torah (Exodus 23:3; Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 10:17; 16:19),
- The Psalms (82:2),
- and the prophets (Isaiah 3:9; Malachi 2:9) also forbid showing partiality.
- Jesus rebuked powerful scribes and Pharisees, not because they were powerful, but because they used their power for self-serving purposes.

Verse 4:

“have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”

As noted above on verse 3, the Torah, the Psalms, and the prophets forbid showing partiality. The person who divides people into classes and tailors his or her response to those persons according to their class is guilty of violating Jewish law forbidding judges to show partiality.¹¹

What does James mean by “evil thoughts”? Here are two possibilities:

- A person who shows partiality to the rich might be guilty of coveting the rich person’s money.
- Or the person might be guilty of hating the rich person and condemning him or her without cause.

POOR IN THIS WORLD—RICH IN FAITH: JAMES 2:5-7.

“Verse 5: Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?”

Here we should not make the mistake to believe that God blesses the poor with faith to the exclusion of the rich. We do, in fact know wealthy people who are devout and humble servants of the Lord. James here might be implying that faith does seem to be more prevalent among the poor than among the rich, perhaps that was the context of his time that once people become rich, they were more inclined to think of themselves too highly, and God not at all.

Question 2 – Digging Deeper

Do you think this is true for today?

Verses 6a:

“But you have dishonored the poor.”

If God has honored the poor person, can we feel justified in treating the poor man badly?

Verse 6b:

“Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?”

¹⁰ 1 Peter 1:17. See also Job 34:19, Acts 10:34, Romans 2:11, Galatians 2:6.

¹¹ Leviticus 19:15

Is it not ironic that we show deference to people who use their power to mistreat us? In the culture of the time, the rich were the ones who often dragged the poor to court, even for a small debt. The poor were certainly at a disadvantage in the courts precisely because they were poor and that their word and social status carried no weight.

The laws of our country once practiced this kind of discrimination, where certain races had more credibility than others. Perhaps today it is not about race, but social status, political power or proximity to power and authority that gives some people advantage over others. The powerful are able to swing things to their advantage and for their personal gain. Is this why we have commissions of inquiry such as the Esidimeni and Zondo Commissions for example.

Verse 7:

“Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?”

Blasphemy is not only about verbal abuse directed at God, but it also applies to abuse, verbal or otherwise at God’s people. Slander is another word we could apply here because slander conveys the elements of evil intent and untrue charges. In the Methodist Church of Southern Africa there used to be deep disapproval of people who brought what was then referred to as “frivolous and vexatious charges” against another person, especially to the church. Such charges brought were meant not to resolve problems but to intentionally bring harm to the person’s reputation.

FULFILL THE LAW—LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR: JAMES 2:8-13.

Verse 8:

“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.”

The phrase, “the royal law,” might also be translated, “the king’s law.” In this case, the king is God.

Jesus taught that the whole of the law and prophets could be summarized in two commandments: Love God and love neighbor.¹² James narrows the list to one: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He says that the person who loves his or her neighbor does well. That is true in three ways:

- First, the person keeps the law.
- Second, the person makes life better for his or her neighbor.
- Third, the person makes life better for him or herself.

Read the parable of the Good Samaritan¹³ and determine for yourself who is your neighbour.

Verse 9a: *“But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers”*

¹² Matthew 22:37 - 40

¹³ Luke 10:25 - 37

The connection between this and the last verse is this: The person who loves his or her neighbor will treat the neighbor well regardless of wealth or social position, even race, language, culture, and any other ways in which we perceive differences among us. Showing partiality means treating the rich or powerful well and the poor less well, which violates the “love your neighbor” rule. Since “love your neighbor” occupies such a high position in the hierarchy of spiritual rules, the person who shows partiality is guilty of violating one of the most important rules. He or she commits a sin.

Verses 10 – 11:

“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.”¹ If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.”

James continues to explore the idea of guilt and innocence. He says whether we are guilty of murder, adultery, showing partiality, or any other sin, we “have become a law breaker”. Who then is innocent? No one. Who is guilty? All of us. Paul says, “all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). How then can we have any hope? Paul says that the remedy for our sin is “being justified by (God’s) grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24).

Verse 12:

“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

James here emphasizes the actions of speaking and doing. We will explore this emphasis in verses 14 – 18. Suffice to say that while Christ freed us from Jewish law, he has not freed us from judgment. In Matthew 25:31-46, he created a picture of Judgment Day that says that our inheritance of the heavenly kingdom will depend on whether we fed the hungry, gave a drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and those in prison. Note that this is not to frighten us into doing good, but to encourage us to care and to have compassion on one another.

Verse 13:

“because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

This accords with Jesus’ comment, *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy”* (Matthew 5:7). Jesus also taught us to pray, *“Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors”*, and then went on to warn, *“For if you forgive people their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive people their trespasses, neither will your father forgive your trespasses”* (Matthew 6:12, 14-15).

The Exercise

Have you been on the receiving end of discrimination in your life? How did you cope with it?

Have you discriminated against others in your life? How do you feel about that now?

How can we bring healing to ourselves and others who have been caught in this terrible web of discrimination?

Question 3 – Reflection

What does God require us to do in order to bring healing to one another?

A Prayer (to be read in silence)

Loving God, we thank you that your Son Jesus Christ welcomed sinners, entered their homes, and ate with them. He touched the leper, bringing healing and wholeness to them. He affirmed those in the fringes of society, “the least of these” and called us to care for them – feed, clothe and visit them. He brought women from the outer circle to the inner circle of communities, protected them when they were adjudged to be deserving of death. He condemned those who neglected to show compassion, care, and love. Help us to be like him; to live our lives worthy of his calling. Let us not be ashamed of touching the outcast, befriend the sinner, for it is in doing this that the world in which we live will be truly a world under your rule. Help us to forgive those who have discriminated against us; fill us with your love, for it is in loving that we will have the strength to forgive. Forgive us when we have treated others as less than what you would have us treat them and give us courage to humbly seek their forgiveness when we have hurt them. Amen.

The Prayer of Saint Francis (to be read out loud together)

Lord make Me an instrument of Your peace.

Where there is hatred let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness joy.

O Divine master grant that I may

Not so much seek to be consoled as to console

To be understood, as to understand.

To be loved. as to love

For it is in giving that we receive

And it is in pardoning that we are pardoned

And it is in dying that we are born...

To eternal life.

Amen...

FAITH & FRUIT

FAITH AND WORKS

In this next study, James is concerned with what we might call lip-service faith; faith that finds expression in words but not in deeds.

Opening Discussion

Jesus in telling the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 25 – 37 seeks to help us understand the importance of caring for those in need.

Have you ever been a recipient of such care from a stranger?

Considering that the first two people, the priest and the Levite did not stop to assist a person clearly in distress, and only a Samaritan stopped to assist, do you believe that faith, or religion can disable us from acting in compassion towards others in distress?

Opening Prayer

Compassionate God, in the outstretched arms of your Son our Lord, you have embraced the world in which no one is a stranger to suffering. By your grace, let our pain be the medium of our solidarity who stumble beneath the weight of adversity. Let our pain not hold us back but spur us on to reach out to others. For it is in helping others carry their burdens that we will find strength to carry our own burdens.
Amen

Scripture Reading

James 2:14 – 18

“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?”

This question has provoked a good deal of discussion among Biblical scholars and theologians. For example, Martin Luther was uncomfortable with the book of James, suggesting that it seemed to be at odds with Paul’s theology of salvation by faith rather than works. Paul emphasizes that we have been saved by faith. The best-known Bible passage on salvation by faith is Ephesians 2:8 – 9, *“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.” Other passages such as this one are Romans 3:27-28; 4:1-5; 11:6; Galatians 2:16; 3:2, 10.

James on the other hand, if we read the second part of James 2:14 asks the question: *“Can such faith save them?”* That is faith without deeds. If we read only verse 14 in isolation from the full text, we may believe that indeed James advocates that faith is not sufficient for salvation. But does James really say that? A reading of the full text reveals to us that James really says that genuine faith will result in works, and any faith that produces no good works is not true faith (James 2:14-18). Throughout this Epistle, we continue to discover that James often seeks to encourage us to put our faith into practice, that out of our inward faith, there should proceed outward acts – good deeds.

Question 2 – Digging Deeper

When was the last time you experienced a loving kindness or love in action from somebody – how did you respond or feel?

Paul and James really are not at odds here for while Paul says that we cannot win salvation by our good works,¹⁴ he also acknowledges that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God.¹⁵ He encourages us to live, not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit, and says that the fruits of the Spirit are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control”¹⁶

Verse 15 – 16:

“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?”

An encouraging word, a warm hug or a kind pat on the shoulder are important expressions of support to anyone in need, but they are not of great value to a person who is cold, naked, and hungry. The kindest and most helpful act or deed would be to provide food, clothing, or shelter.

Here is a story.

One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean.

Approaching the boy, he asked, “What are you doing?”

The youth replied, “Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I do not throw them back, they’ll die.”

“Son,” the man said, “don’t you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can’t make a difference!”

After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the surf.

Then, smiling at the man, he said, “I made a difference for that one.”

¹⁴ Ephesians 2:8 - 9

¹⁵ See 1 Corinthians 6:9 - 10

¹⁶ Galatians 5:116 - 26

The problems of the world are so many; they are overwhelming, and even when we try to bring relief, we are simply overwhelmed by the levels of suffering and pain. We see them on the faces of men and women sitting by the side of the road, hoping that someone will pitch up and give them some work. We see the gaunt looks and pleading eyes of men, women, and children at the traffic lights, begging for some food. We walk into old age homes and find people there who are lonely and sometimes abandoned by their families. We see men in the doorways and alleys of the city, sleeping on cardboard, with tattered blankets covering their bodies – there is poverty, disease, unemployment, homelessness, and all manner of problems people are facing. We might also be overwhelmed and discouraged because the little we do does not seem to make a difference, but it does to the one person we can help. Bend down then, pick up the one starfish at your feet and make a difference for that one!

Verses 17 – 18:

“In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.”

James is not trying to downplay the role of faith. His point is that true faith will manifest itself in actions that will make a difference in the world in which we live, reaching out to others in practical, genuine, and visible ways. Faith that fails to do that “is dead”, lifeless, useless. Faith that does not give life is indeed dead. Can the dead ever give life? True faith will always give rise to good works, and works will confirm the validity of a person’s faith.

The Challenge

In one of the churches I served some years ago we embarked on the Manna and Mercy study programme. As part of the programme, we required all participants to find practical ways in which they can reach out to others. One woman shared with the group that she often entertains her husband’s work associates in their homes for lunches and dinners. She told us that more often than not there were a lot of leftovers from those meals, and these ended up in the rubbish bins. She realized that she was throwing away food that someone else desperately needed. So she went out to buy packets into which she put the food, nicely packed to be given to someone. As soon as the food was packed, she put it in her car, drove out of her home to give it to someone who needed it. She told the group that she never had to drive too far away from her home and all the food she had was given away. Is this not practical, helpful, real actions coming out of her faith?

Question 3 – Digging Deeper

What can you do to make a difference in someone’s life? Go and do likewise.

Praying Together

Lord Jesus Christ, you were prompted by compassion to act on behalf of those who were suffering loss, disease, and hunger. So it is our call, those who follow you, Lord, to show compassion in all of our actions, just as you did. We cannot call ourselves your followers if we ignore the needy of this world, and neither can we look away from the needs of the world. Help us to model our lives and actions after you, help us to look with compassion upon all who cross our paths. Amen