

James 5 : Live a Life of Faith

Introduction

Earlier this year a social media straw poll was done by over 400 people, asking them, "Do you agree that when Christians use the word 'faith' they mean 'believing something even though it is not supported by evidence?'" 74% of non-Christians agreed that's what Christians mean. But of the Christians who did the poll, 91% disagreed, saying that this is not what faith means.

Today, when we look at the "life of faith" James talks about, I want to be clear - we're not talking about believing in something without evidence. We're talking about a life of confidence or trust in God. So when I say 'faith' today, that's what I mean.

The last chapter of James confronts us with the central message he has been pushing all along. In James chapter 2 are those powerful words, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." We must not only have faith, we must actively live a life of faith. We must do actions that make our faith in God alive.

Previously in James he has focused on the actions, the deeds of the life of faith. In chapter five, the big focus is on the faith that makes it a life of faith. Today we see how James wants us to realise this active life of faith in three important ways: 1) Don't hoard and die, but instead persevere and live; 2) don't promise and lie, but instead ask and receive; and 3) don't fail alone, but serve together.

1. Don't Hoard and Die

Here's how the chapter starts. 'Look out, rich people, he says, your days are numbered! Your wealth is evidence against you! Living your life of luxury and self-indulgence - you're being fattened up like pigs for the slaughter!' And we all look at each other and sweat a little, we laugh nervously and we say, "Oh, well, I'm not rich. I'm middle class. I'm on a fixed income. I'm comfortable. I'm average. Other people are richer than me."

There's an easy test to see if this judgment applies to you. Verse 3: "You have hoarded your wealth in the last days." It's not just 'you have money in your bank account'. Hoarding isn't saving. It's stockpiling, it's depriving others of some so you can have all. It's collecting up more than you need. Put simply, it's greed. It's when your refusal to share hurts someone else. If you put your luggage on a train seat so you don't need to sit next to other passengers, you are hoarding seats! If you have a large country that is rich and comfortable to live in, and you turn away boats full of needy people, that's hoarding wealth.

Hoarding is always bad. What's worse is hoarding in the last days. Jesus is coming back, and all you care about is making sure you're comfortable. People suffer so you can live that life of luxury. We should look at our iPads made in Chinese sweatshops, our jeans made in Bangladesh factories, our coffee and our chocolate picked by child slave labourers in Ivory Coast and Colombia, and we should feel uncomfortable. James says their blood is on our hands! We'll be judged for that! In view of the fact that Jesus is coming back any time now, we can't afford to be focused on making ourselves comfortable, and especially not at the expense of others - that is not the life of faith!

1. Instead, Persevere and Live

What is the life of faith? It's persevering, relying on God to meet your needs, not relying on yourself to gratify your desires. God calls us on a difficult path - a path of trusting him to give us what we need, trusting he will take care of us, especially when we are suffering. That might sound

lazy to some, who think that relying on God means you don't do anything. That couldn't be more wrong! The important verse here is verse 7, "See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop."

Everyone knows farmers are not lazy. But they have absolutely no control over whether their seeds will grow up and their plants will flower and their flowers will fruit. That is what persevering in faith is like. Relying on God means choosing to rely on God, actively realising that what happens to us in our lives is out of our hands, and trusting, verse 11, "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy." It doesn't come naturally to trust God's compassion and mercy. You have to choose to do that.

But hoarding - hoarding is easy! You listen to rich people, and they make it sound like it's so hard. But deciding to hoard what you have is the easiest thing in the world, because you don't even have to try. You will hoard stuff naturally - it's human nature. Putting your faith in God to look after you, trusting that he will turn what you are suffering into something that bears good fruit - that is hard.

2. Don't Promise and Lie

Next we move on to verse 12, "Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else." "Above all," James says - this is clearly highly important. It's almost a repeat of the language used by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount, where he said, "All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one." 'Anything beyond this comes from the evil one' - this is important stuff!

Why is so important? When we read these passages about oaths, we tend to think we're talking just about making promises with each other. So it's about keeping your word, and being so trustworthy that you don't need to swear on anything that you'll do something. And that's important - we Christians should be trustworthy in our dealings. But the reason this is 'above all', the reason that such oaths 'come from the evil one' is that these passages include making oaths to God! You know what I mean, "Oh God, I really want this job, and if you give it to me, I swear that I'll donate 10% of my income to the church." Or, "Oh Lord, my friend is really sick, but if you make him well, I swear I'll be a better person and pray every day."

This is just plain wrong. We shouldn't talk like that at all, but we certainly can't talk like that to God. We can't say to God, "If you do something for me, I'll do something for you." Why not? Because that isn't the life of faith! First of all, God owns everything anyway, and that includes all of our love, devotion and actions. We should be doing everything for him because we love him and he deserves it.

Secondly, we just aren't trustworthy! God can keep his promises, but us, we can't! Jesus says "Don't swear by your head, for you can't make even one hair white or black." We are making promises to God, and then breaking them. Essentially, we are lying to God when we make these deals to him.

Thirdly, saying this stuff makes out like God needs us to do things for him. This is God we're talking about. He doesn't need your giving or your prayer. Those are already for our benefit, not his. It's like saying, "If you buy me dinner, then later I'll let you buy me dessert as well."

Such bargaining with God is exactly the opposite of the life of faith - it shows that we don't really think God is already doing everything that is best for us. We think we need to make deals with him to get what we think is best! That's not what the life of faith looks like.

2. Instead, Ask and Receive

What does the life of faith look like? It is absolutely encapsulated by a life of prayer. Prayer is the very essence of the life of faith that James is so keen for us to live. He says, Are you happy? Praise God for it! Are you in trouble? Pray for help. Are you sick? Pray for healing. Are you sinful? Pray for forgiveness. A life of prayer reflects a life of trusting God.

You can't read this passage without remembering what James said in chapter 1 verses 6 and 7, "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." Or chapter 4 verses 2 and 3, "You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

Actively living this life of faith in prayer is hard! It is hard to get out there and pray, and trust God to look after us. Recently a doctor who was dying of Ebola in Africa was cured. He is a missionary doctor, and perhaps unsurprisingly he thanked God for being cured of a deadly disease, and thanked the thousands or millions who were praying for him. But the Australian media called this "bizarre". They asked, "Did God just ignore the prayers of those thousands of people who died of Ebola?" They criticised him for giving the glory to God, when to their eyes the reason for his cure was an experimental drug (even when another doctor was given the drug, and still died). It's easy to believe that God doesn't answer prayers. It's hard to believe that he does.

We also have to understand that not every answer will be the one we hope for. When we pray for sick people, some will get better. Some won't. But in both ways, God will be glorified. In Acts chapter 12, when Peter was in prison, sentenced to death, the church was praying for him, and he was released by an angel. Miraculous, glory to God, right! But then what happened: did Peter live to a ripe old age free from suffering after that? No. He was arrested, sentenced to death, and then executed - crucified upside down, history tells us. So what happened, did the church stop praying? Not at all. I'll bet they were praying just as hard. But God's plan is to be glorified, and this time he was glorified by Peter's death and martyrdom. And so the church's prayers were answered - because the prayer always is "Your will be done." It is easier to believe that God doesn't answer prayer, than to accept that God's answer to prayer might be that someone gets crucified.

3. Don't Fail Alone

James finishes off his letter with an exhortation for us to remember: "Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins." The truth is, we are all imperfect people. Even though we know the truth, sometimes we stray from it. Whether it's because of sadness in our life that we blame on God, or misunderstanding the truth, or sinful desire that we pursue knowing God doesn't want it for us... it's all too easy for us to find ourselves suddenly adrift from God.

And if it were just up to us, we might stay adrift forever - because of guilt or shame or anger or even just not realising. When we treat faith like a personal and private matter, that's the danger - we can slip away from God and not even realise until we are well and truly far from him. There is quite possibly nothing more difficult than living the Christian life alone.

Which is why God tells us not to. Look at what James has said earlier: in verse 14, don't just pray to get well from sickness, go to your church leaders and ask them to pray. Verse 16, Confess your

sins to each other, and pray for each other, it says. Don't grumble against each other, verse 9 says, but persevere together. The life of faith is not meant to be lived alone.

The Christian life is like cleaning out roof gutters. Yes, you can do it alone, but not only is it harder, it's also more dangerous. Not only is no-one there to stop your ladder from wobbling, but if it really does fall away, you're left clinging to the gutter with no support, and no-one is around to grab the ladder and put it back up under you. You're in some serious trouble.

3. Instead, Serve Together

That's why it's so important to come to church, to join Bible studies, to be involved in ministry, to marry a Christian believer, to be accountable to a prayer partner - these aren't just good things for spiritual growth, they are vital to the Christian life of faith! It's dangerous to your life of faith to live it alone! Yes, we're all sinful, none of us are perfect. We acknowledge that when we confess our sins together. That's us admitting to God, but also to each other, "We're not perfect." But as Ecclesiastes says, "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." We can be there for each other - God will help us through the prayers of others, even when we're not prepared to pray for ourselves. With God, we can accomplish things for God that don't even seem possible.

Conclusion

The life of faith is not easy. Hoarding is easy. Making promises you can't keep is easy. The life of faith means persevering through the hard times, trusting God is full of compassion and mercy, and has everything under control. The life of faith means praying to God, and having confidence that he hears your prayers, and answers them with the absolutely best possible answer and timing. And the life of faith means not going it alone - it means helping each other get close to God, to understand God, and to serve God better, as part of his church. God's message in James is not just that we need to be active - it's that we need to live an active life of *faith*.