

'The shift: Introducing to the epistle of James'

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

*The Lord will be your guide continually and will satisfy your needs in the bare
desert. – Is.58,11*

Collect:

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ fed the hungry with the bread of his life and the word of his kingdom. Renew your people with your heavenly grace, and in all our weakness sustain us by the true and living bread, Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

With undivided heart and ceaseless songs
give thanks to God.

To Him all majesty and praise belongs:
give thanks to God.

His love and truth proclaim,
His mercy still the same;
and for His holy name
give thanks to God.

Exalt His name and His eternal word,
He is our God.
Before His throne our every prayer is heard,
He is our God.

Let kings declare His praise,
sing of His words and ways,
for through eternal days
He is our God.

He reigns in glory from His throne above,
He is the Lord:
and in our weakness meets us with His love:
He is our Lord.
His purpose cannot fail,

though fears and foes assail,
His love shall still prevail,
He is the Lord.

From Ps.138 (Timothy Dudley-Smith)

James 1, 1-12 (Introduction to series)

Dear friends

James' letter is a great gift and blessing to the church. It speaks about faith and to the faithful in ways which call the church to task – to the task of proving the genuineness of faith in the appropriate way, which is faithful living. Faith, we all need reminding, is nothing if not an active thing. It is not something to which something needs to be added that is not faith. It therefore has the means to be proved, and to be tested.

Is our faith truly alive to the possibilities the coming of Jesus Christ has opened up – the possibilities of discipleship, of life in obedience to God's will? Does our faith affect in a manner consistent with Christ's word the way we live our lives? The way we behave and respond? The way we suffer and hope? The way we live and die? Do we let its light shine into every aspect of our lives so that it may guide us to greater conformity with the way of Christ? Is our faith a *happening* whereby Christ is formed within us?

Underlying the message of James' epistle to the church, and its point of departure, is this matter of genuine faith, of the need for faith to be genuine. It is, however, important that we understand that James is not here turning faith into a system of dos and don'ts – it's not morality that is here presented – as though he was saying, "Look, salvation by faith alone is well and good, but it only goes so far; to grace needs to be added your right behaviour, that's what salvation ultimately comes down to."

No, James' letter is more properly understood as a comment on, and a filling out of, a point that Jesus made repeatedly, saying for instance, '*Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock*' (Mt.7,24); or, '*You are my friends if you do what I command. .. This is my command: love each other*' (Jn.15,14.17). James, to use an illustration of Jesus, does not tell us in his letter how to make the tree good (what faith is and how it comes about), that is true, but his aim is to show us the fruit by which alone the good tree is known so that by pondering these things faith may be alive and awake.

At one point in his epistle James uses a strong image in order to convey the sense in which a faith that is unconcerned about this vital correspondence between faith and life - about the impact of faith on life -, a faith that hears the word but doesn't do what it says, is guilty of inattention, he speaks of self-deception. He likens such faith to "*someone who looks at his face in the mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like*" (1,23.24) He immediately forgets who he has seen himself to be and how he appears to others. It's an image for a faith that does not want to know, in the sense that it won't do what it hears, a faith which puts faith's own vision out of sight for the purpose of keeping in step with that of the world.

James saw a need in the church, in the faithful, for these words to be written and this message to be given and proclaimed. And the church, seeing the usefulness and rightness of it, included this letter in the canon, because it saw the ways of the heart, the propensity there to separate faith from faithful, obedient living and so get trapped in a form of self-deception, which by its very nature remains unrecognised until it's made visible and is brought to light.

Can we doubt that the inclusion of James' letter in the Bible / God's Word is providential and reflects the working and wisdom of the Holy Spirit? Can we doubt that God intends to use these words through our use of them and as we apply them to ourselves, to uncover the self-deceptions and blind spots that our faith may labour under – as well as at the same time to strengthen and confirm what is right and good – so that faith may flourish in truth? As we read through James let us be aware, then, that *'all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. So that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work'* (3,16.17).

Surely, James' letter has a vital role to play in God's task of creating a faithful people that is *to be thoroughly equipped for every good work*. The reason for James' letter to the church is that he realises what this means: that faith implies and is about a real shift!

It is helpful perhaps to know a little bit about James. He was a son of Joseph and Mary, that is, he was a brother of Jesus. But he didn't believe in Jesus nor did he join the disciples. With other members of his family he thought that Jesus was really a bit mad. And he would have thought that because he did not want to shift his position to that which appeared in the word and actions of Jesus. But when he did come to believe that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, that he had risen from the dead, he was involved in that real shift (of position and principle) which earlier he had sought to avoid.

This awareness of faith being and bringing about a shift from a self-ful (= idolatrous) to a faith-ful (=godly) way of living, loving and hoping underlies the whole motive, direction and theme of this letter to the church. It is the awareness he seeks to impart to the church. And it is a necessary and loving and true thing to do. Because a faith that does not effect a real shift is disingenuous, it is not genuine Christianity nor is it the fruit of salvation (it's the fruit of something else!).

Dear friends, people say of many events that happen to them, "this changed my life!" There are events that are claimed to have "changed the course of history". Coming to faith is also often spoken of in such terms. Question is whether such change equates to a person and people undergoing that real shift that the word "change" in the notion "life changing" implies!

Take for example that talk of change implied in the words of Neil Armstrong as he set foot on the surface of the moon, "that's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." But what was the giant leap forward for mankind that was supposedly inaugurated on July 20th 1969 some 238,000 miles from here? Technological advance has made some things more bearable, has increased levels of efficiency, has achieved greater reach in many ways, but it has not meant progress, it has not advanced mankind one iota in terms of any real shift – from self-ful to faith-ful living.

So many life-changing events and celebrated giant leaps in history have had zero effect when it comes to man shifting from his position to the only one that can be called a real advance – the one which appeared in Christ.

And dear friends, it is our faith in Jesus Christ alone that can effect this shift. Because the power to reconcile the sinner to God and change the heart through grace lies in the power of the cross and

resurrection of Christ Jesus.

Let us rejoice in the goodness of God to us through the gift of faith and let His word through James help us understand how it is by faith that God equips us thoroughly *for every good work*.

AMEN

- time of prayer / intercession – [we give thanks for God’s mercy and faithfulness, for the compassion and steadfast love he has for all that he has made, that all his judgments are just and righteous, that he is our refuge and the helper of all who call on him; we praise God for His work through the grace of Christ of equipping us for every good work and we pray for Him to break down further by the power of the Holy Spirt the power of sin over us in that we do as we hear; we pray for those who have become ill, are fighting illness or are recovering from it, for those who care for the needs of others; for those in positions of leadership and authority: that they may rule wisely and seek peace, that they may guard the values by which a society can flourish, that they may lead with courage and wisdom, for a turning to the light that is God’s Word; for those who have lost loved ones, need comfort into their grieving and the loving presence of friends; we give thanks for all the help we have received and still experience, for grace and answered prayers; we pray for the despondent and the hopeless, for those who seek light, for the wisdom to comfort the suffering; we pray for our sister church in Northern India and for the body of Christ worldwide and here, for our church, the church’s leadership; we think of the situation in India, Nepal and other places, the suffering of the people there and elsewhere, the attempt of the authorities to regain control; we give thanks for the help that is being delivered; we pray for the situation in Israel, the rift between the Palestinians and the Jews; for perseverance in the determination to share our means with those who lack them; we pray for God’s blessing on the preaching and teaching of His word, for people to respond in repentance and faith, for freedom and liberty and courage to stand for what is good and true and honours His name;]

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

Now may the peace of God which passes all our understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you. AMEN
