

Safeguarding Sunday

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James 2:14-26

Morning, everybody. Over the past few weeks, we've heard some excellent teaching on salvation through faith from Andrew Kitcatt, Bishop Michael Beasley, and even the eminent Tom Perrier. We've been reminded that salvation isn't something we earn, but a gift freely given by God to all who trust in Jesus.

Today's passage from James takes us a step further - not away from grace, but into what grace looks like when it comes alive in our lives. If Paul shows us the *root* of salvation, James talks about the *fruit* of salvation.

You know, I've always found James quite challenging. He's practical, and not one for vague theology or empty talk. My Occupational Therapy colleagues would often be putting things into practice, whereas I, as a psychologist, would be getting the theory right first and then the plan. Actually, I think Kurt Lewin, a German-American psychologist, often considered the founder of modern social psychology, said, "There's nothing so practical as a good theory." Lewin used it to express the idea that a sound theory leads to effective action—that well-thought-out principles are more useful in practice than quick fixes or unexamined routines.

The book of James was written by James, the half-brother of Jesus, not one of the original twelve apostles like James the son of Zebedee. Although initially a sceptic, James became a prominent leader in the early Jerusalem Church after witnessing the resurrected Christ, and is traditionally believed to be the author of the letter of James.

He's the one who won't let you say you've done the washing-up if the plates are still dripping on the draining board. James says, "Faith without works is dead." Or, in musical terms, faith without works is like having a piano in your music room and not practising. It looks impressive—quite cool, very smart, a beautiful piece of furniture—but it's not *for* being a piece of furniture.

We've been in that position for some years now, since our daughter Miranda left home. She has no space in her small house for a piano, so we've had this beautiful Yamaha upright sitting in our house. It's been wonderful to invite

Stefan Everton to play Chopin or Rachmaninov on it. But it feels a bit hollow looking at it and not playing it.

But I digress.

James' letter is all about showing that real faith *does* something. It feeds the hungry, notices the lonely, speaks up for the vulnerable. It's faith that has rolled up its sleeves.

James challenges us with words that are almost uncomfortably direct:

"Suppose a brother or 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 that? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

It's a question that lands close to home. How often do I walk past someone in need, muttering a silent "God bless you", but doing nothing? It's not that we can solve every problem, but the point is that faith that never moves from the lips to the hands isn't really faith at all.

One of my favourite moments from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*—if you go back that far - is when Captain Jean-Luc Picard powers up the warp engines for the next adventure and simply says, "Engage."

James gives two examples of living faith. The first is Abraham, the great patriarch of faith, yet a man pushed to the edge of trust. He writes:

"Do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 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."

God asks Abraham to offer his son Isaac - an unthinkable test. Abraham obeys, trusting that somehow God will be good. And at the crucial moment, God stops him. No harm is done. Instead, a ram appears for sacrifice.

When I first read this in the context of Safeguarding Sunday, I thought, "Hang on a minute - it's Safeguarding Sunday and we have a reading where God asks Abraham to abuse his son?" It sounds like the opposite of safeguarding.

However, the lesson isn't about cruelty; it's about trust. Abraham's faith was not a quiet feeling, but a costly act of obedience. He believed that God would provide.

That's a word for safeguarding, too. Perhaps the story makes us face something real: faith always carries a kind of risk. When we open our doors as a church and say "All are welcome", that includes the whole complicated range of humanity - the broken, the repentant, the unpredictable, and also the vulnerable: children, young people, older people, those who are struggling or cognitively impaired, those who have been hurt before.

To be that kind of church, where the vulnerable can truly belong, is a kind of faith test. It's not a sacrifice of others but a sacrifice of our comfort. It means holding risk wisely - structures, people, and habits in place that make this a place where people *feel* and *are* safe. Where grace isn't naïve, and safety isn't cold bureaucracy, but both are expressions of love.

Because that's what God actually calls Abraham to see - not the destruction of his child, but the discovery that God provides what is needed to make faith possible *without harm*. And that's what safeguarding is: trusting that God provides what we need to make love safe for everyone who walks through our doors.

Then James reaches for a very different example: Rahab the prostitute from Jericho.

"In the same way, 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? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."

Rahab appears in Joshua 2. She's a Canaanite woman living in Jericho, and—as the text says quite bluntly - she's a prostitute. When two Israelite spies come to scout the city, she hides them on her roof and lies to the authorities to protect them. Then she helps them escape safely, asking only that her family be spared when the Israelites return.

Her faith was messy, risky, and completely real. She didn't just say she believed; she staked her life on it. And because of her action, her whole family was saved. She even became part of the family line of Jesus. In Matthew 1:5-6 we see Rahab, the Canaanite woman from Jericho, becoming the great-great-grandmother of King David and thus part of the ancestral line of Jesus.

James uses Rahab's story to remind us that faith in action isn't limited to the respectable or the powerful. God delights to work through ordinary, imperfect people who are willing to do the right thing at personal cost. That's the heart of a safeguarding culture: recognising courage in action - the small, unseen decisions to speak up, to listen carefully, to look out for somebody who might be at risk.

And maybe, as we hear James' words today, some of us sense something deeper stirring: that faith isn't just about good works or safe spaces, but about knowing the God who makes them possible. If you've never really made that step of trusting Jesus for yourself - or if you've drifted and want to come home again - you can do that right now. Simply ask him into your heart. Tell him you believe he is who he says he is: your Saviour who forgives and restores.

You'll find, as so many of us have, that when you take a step of faith, he meets you with grace and begins the quiet work of changing your life from the inside out.

So, James isn't setting up a debate about whether we're saved by faith or by works. He's showing that real faith is alive. It has fruit, evidence, movement. To go back to my analogy: the piano is being used for its proper purpose - being played for the enjoyment and edification of us all.

We might quote Paul from Romans 3:28: *"For we maintain that a man" - or a woman, or a child - "is justified by faith apart from observing the law."* It's only through faith, and not actions, that we're saved. But no - James is speaking of a different sort of works here: works that flow from the gospel, works that *prove* the gospel is working in that person.

As we've said, Paul talks about the root of salvation and James talks about the fruit. The two actually belong together. And that's why safeguarding belongs in the life of the Church. It's not an extra rota job or a bureaucratic burden. It's faith made visible. It's the everyday practice of love and wisdom—boundaries that protect, compassion that listens, courage that acts.

When James says "faith without works is dead", he's not condemning; he's inviting. He's saying: let your faith breathe. Let it move your hands. Let it open your eyes. Because a living faith builds a living, safe community—one where grace and truth walk hand in hand.

Amen.