

June 26<sup>th</sup> 2011 Practical Christianity #4 "The Love Challenge" :James 2:1-26

As we already know the author of the book of James was the head of the first Christian community gathered in the city of Jerusalem, and from what we read in the book of Acts the early church did a lot more together than just meeting for worship services. They met in the temple courtyard and they met in homes; they prayed together, studied together, often ate together and met each other's needs.

This was a new experience for all of them, made more so by the fact that they were such a mixed group. The gospel had broken down the social barriers of class, position, wealth, and occupation. Suddenly the rich and the poor were in closer company than they had ever been, and into the mix was thrown reformed criminals and prostitutes, converted priests and Pharisees, slaves and masters, tax collectors and maybe even some Roman soldiers.

All this made James job of keeping everyone united and working together for the kingdom an extremely hard one. And from his letter he obviously had difficulties simply because he was dealing with Christians who were all fallible human beings like you and me.

We read about some of those problems in our reading today from James chapter 2

There was the problem of favouring the rich and discriminating against the poor.

'You have this rich guy come into your meeting' says James, 'with his gold rings and fancy clothing and immediately you are all over him like a rash. You bob and bow to him, offer him the best seat in the house, and before you know anything about him you start treating him as though he were the answer to every poor man's dream".

But then in comes a poor guy wearing clothes that even the Salvos would reject and you hardly speak to him. He doesn't even get a chair to sit on but you make him stand or sit at your feet. It's wrong, says James. So wrong.

Then there was the problem of being all mouth but no heart. Of talking a lot but not walking the talk. Of appearing to be such a great Christian—full of compassion and kind words; always noticing the needy brother or sister and rushing over to let them know how much you care for them. But in reality

never showing love in a practical and meaningful way. The Message paraphrase of James 2:15-16 puts the problem so well:-

***Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?***

Now we can imagine these small communities of Christians—we would call them house churches today—scattered around Jerusalem and throughout the country, sitting down to hear what James had to say in his letter to them. They would have sat through what we call chapter 1 with a fair amount of composure. What James said was reasonably direct stuff, but on the whole it was simply a list of do's and don'ts that applied to everyone.

But when they began to hear the words from chapter two we can imagine that it was not so easy to take. Suddenly James becomes quite personal, and there would have been a growing sense of unease amongst the whole group. For in this so practical area of showing love to all most knew that they had fallen short, and his remarks about favouritism and faith without actions, were failings that they themselves had.

But James had no intention of just making them feel guilty about their failings without the Challenge to do better, so we find in verse 8 what I have called, "The Love Challenge".

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

Here is the challenge that applies just as much today for you and me as it did for those Christians then. It is called the Royal law because it is one of the two most important commands that the Bible contains. The first command is found in Deuteronomy 6:5 and that is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. This second one comes from Leviticus 19:18 and it is to Love your Neighbour as yourself. The two commandments are two sides of the same coin. You cannot do one and neglect the other.

It is called the Royal command because it comes direct from God, Almighty King, to the heart of each one of His people. And everyone here who owns

the name of Christ will be responsible one day before God for the way we have sought to keep it.

The problem that they had in James day, and in the time of Jesus, and we still have today is this human tendency to compromise our love. To think that we can make it less than what God wants from us and get away with it.

So these people to whom James was writing were showing love in their welcoming, but only to certain people. To the rich and not the poor. They were showing love in their concern for the needy but that love didn't extend into action. Consequently the love was compromised. It was less than what God commanded and therefore it was not the love He wanted.

Back in Jesus' day there was this guy who was an expert in the Jewish law. He decided to test Jesus by asking Him what Jesus thought that he, as a very religious man and an expert in knowing and keeping the law, should do to inherit eternal life.

Jesus said, "Well what does the law say?". The expert responded with these two commandments. Love God etc etc, and your neighbor as yourself.

That's it, said Jesus, Do this and you will live.

But the man had a problem. Not with the loving God part. He felt ok with that. But with loving his neighbor as himself because he obviously felt that neighbor only meant those that he wanted to love. So He asked "Who is my neighbor"? There must be a compromise here Jesus, because no one could be expected to love all types of people in such a self-less way.

And in reply Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. Turn with me to Luke 10:25-36. I'm sure we all know that story well. We know that there were two very religious types who felt quite justified in walking past on the other side of the road. They compromised their love without feeling any guilt about that. And because no one in that crowd interrupted and said that such would never happen, we can assume that they wouldn't have expected anything more from them either.

Then Jesus told about the enemy in their midst. The Samaritan, who not only helped the injured man but took him to the inn where he personally cared for him, paid for the man's accommodation, and promised to return to pay any extra that was required and to see how the guy was. No compromising of love here. In fact the Samaritan went way beyond what Society expected of him and treated that man as a close friend rather than as a stranger.

Then when Jesus asked the expert in the law who he felt was a neighbor to that poor beaten man, there was no way he could honestly say that the religious Jews were. It had to be the Samaritan.

But the interesting point is that whereas the man asked, 'Who is my neighbour ?', Jesus responded by telling him that God's law demanded that he be a neighbor to everyone—friend, enemy, stranger. And as a neighbor go beyond the limit in showing that love.

I reckon that James may have been thinking of the parable of the Good Samaritan when he gave his love challenge. And in fact the challenge of James is for Christians not just to love, but to Un-compromise their love.

To see if we have knowingly or unknowingly restricted our love to certain people and would never think of extending it to certain others. There may be a social or ethnic group that we have placed outside any expression of love. It is more likely that there a particular person or persons that you would normally never think about helping or reaching out to.

The practical challenge for you today is to go home and read again from Luke 10 the story of the Good Samaritan. Then ask God to reveal to you someone who you have never thought of being a neighbor like that to. Then make a plan. Relying on God seek to follow it with much prayer. And watch and see what God does as you seek to really keep the royal command to love in an unrestricted, uncompromised way.