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The Book of

Session Seven:
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James 2:21-26—Profiles in Faith

❖ The Text (NRSV)

²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ²³Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? ²⁶For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead.

❖ What’s going on here?

-v.21—We pick up here in the thick of James’ discussion of faith and works. The same specific definitions apply to this passage as did in 2:14-20. For James, the “faith” he is describing is an intellectual assent (alone)—a belief *about* God that doesn’t grab hold of the believer (again, this is a different usage of “faith” than in 1:3 or 2:5, where faith seems to be positive and sufficient—it is a re-orienting, radical trust in God). “Works,” here, too, seem to be understood as ways that our trust in God is lived out—they are not so much attempts to prove our worth as natural expressions of our trust in God which bubble up to the surface and spring from faith’s confident trust.

A new key word is introduced here: *justification*. Here, justification is understood as *demonstrating* that one is righteous, or in a right relationship (see **Themes**, p. 2). James alludes to the story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22 as he continues to define what kind of faith is authentic and truly comes from God. His point is not that Abraham had to earn an award from God by doing something, but rather that his act of

trusting obedience by being willing to offer his son demonstrates the kind of faith Abraham had. For that matter, the point is not that Abraham has to prove his faith to *God*, but rather that the story demonstrates to *us*—to those who know the story—that Abraham had more than lip service faith.

The point of the Abraham example is to show yet again that authentic faith is in many ways like being in a love relationship: apart from any concerns of making your beloved love you in return or being kind in order to *earn* affection, you express your love simply *because* you love the other person. Abraham’s action was an *expression* of a radical trust in God, not something separable from trust.

-v.22—James has returned to his talk of *completion* (see especially 1:4), and again, this makes it clear that James is not talking about how we “get into” a right relationship with God (remember, that is Paul’s fight). He is talking about how we continue and live *in* the relationship we already have. He is addressing *how we become what we are*. By acting on his trust in God, Abraham’s faith was made all the more real. Again, James doesn’t suggest that Abraham’s faith was “false” or “insufficient” *before* he offered up Isaac, but only that this action demonstrates to *us* what authentic faith looks like as it is lived out.

-v.23—For James, this quotation of Genesis 15:6 confirms his point about the authenticity of Abraham’s faith and therefore, that all authentic faith will also come to expression in actions. Honestly, this is rather funny, since Paul uses the *exact same* verse in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6 to demonstrate how Abraham was justified by his faith *prior* to doing any work. Chronologically in Genesis, Paul is more on target—in Genesis 15, God makes a promise to Abraham, who believes the promise, and the text says then that God “reckoned it to him as righteousness [being justified].” Only later in Genesis 22 (seven chapters later!) does Abraham offer his son Isaac in

response to God's directive.

So did James forget or not the order in Genesis? Was he intentionally twisting the Old Testament story to fit his argument? Is it merely a bit of artistic license? Most likely for James the chronology is far less important than the argument at hand that belief and action-on-belief are inseparable. Questions of which came first are like so much talk of chickens and eggs, and for James, are far less important than the practical question of how we *live* as people of faith (although it is worth noting again that James writes with the implicit assumption that faith comes first and works are then the natural but necessary embodiment of faith).

-v.24—Here is another verse that even Lutherans know—and shudder at. Why does James seem to contradict quite plainly what for Paul is at the heart of the good news: that we are put right with God *only* by faith and *not* by our earning it? So far, we've seen that in many ways, James and Paul are not directly contradicting each other so much as making very different points while using overlapping terms in distinct ways. That begs another question—if James has some familiarity with Paul (and presumably he does), why does he use the same words that Paul does if he doesn't mean them in the same senses Paul did? Most likely, scholars suggest, James is dealing with disciples of Paul who have taken his mottos and key ideas (like faith alone) and changed their meaning. "Faith," intended by Paul to mean a life-changing, radical trust in God, had come to refer to a mere statement of belief or having correct factual information about God. James responds here almost as if to say, "All right, if you want to call lip service 'faith,' (although I don't know why you would), you can—but *that* kind of 'faith' isn't what Abraham had, and it's not the kind that God deals in."

-v.25—The story of Rahab is perhaps a little less well known, but it is still a part of the larger and more

central story of the conquest of the promised land by the wandering children of Israel (see Joshua 2:1-21). When Hebrew spies investigate the city of Jericho and try to hide from the authorities, the prostitute Rahab hides them and in turn asks for her household to be spared when the Israelites conquer the city. After she has first hidden the spies, Rahab gives a lengthy speech declaring her belief that the God of the Israelites will give the spies victory. This profession of belief by itself is only a statement of correct factual information about God (who does in fact give victory to the invading Israelites). And for James, this is the connection to the story of Abraham and to our stories: Rahab does have right belief "about" God, but more than that, she trusts and acts on that trust in who this God is. In the moment when action is called for, Rahab's faith comes to expression in her daring willingness to help the spies.

Taken together, the examples of Abraham and Rahab make it clear that James' main focus is on describing what authentic faith looks like rather than insisting that only a certain number of "good works" earn divine favor. And really, this is because neither Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son nor Rahab's action (which is essentially a betrayal of her fellow citizens) are really "good" works. That is, we often think of good works as deeds that show compassion, love, justice, or courage—but the actions in these stories aren't great examples of moral virtue so much as they are example of a faith and trust in God so real that it led people to act in powerful, radical ways. Again, we get the sense that James is not telling us to live rightly *in order that* God will love us, but rather simply wants us to let our trust in God sink in so completely as to shape all of how we act and live.

-v.26—As if his point were not clear already, James says it again: faith (understood as pious words or beliefs *about* something by themselves) without expression in the ways we act and live (what James calls works) is futile. In fact, for James, true faith—

the kind God gave to Abraham and counted as righteousness, the kind that led Rahab to act—is inseparable from our way of life. And to underscore this point one last time, James compares these realities to the *body* without *breath*. The Greek word translated as “spirit” by the NRSV is the same word for “wind” or “breath.” For that matter, the Jewish mind did not think of humans in terms of having material bodies which housed souls our spirits until they escaped their physical prisons at death. The human being is a unified whole, and the Greek idea of a disembodied soul floating off somewhere (an idea that has crept into our contemporary culture) was not what James has in mind. So rather than conjuring up images of ghosts or spirits that can exist apart from the body, James is emphasizing that what he calls “faith” and what he calls “works” are inseparable parts of the same thing: what it is to be alive in God. The comparison to the body and breath is especially powerful in this light. Yes, we would say that it is *necessary* to breathe in order to stay alive, but it is also perfectly *natural* to breathe—in fact, if you’re alive, you can’t help it.

Connections: Learning to Breathe

- Think of a time in your life when you feel you really had to act on faith. What did it look like? What did it feel like? What led you to act the way you did? How does action affect the ways and the things we believe?
- Who has been someone in your life who has exhibited great faith in your eyes? What left an impression on you? How have you seen their faith?
- The ways we act often reveal much about what we believe—not only to others, but also to ourselves. Have you ever acted in a certain way and been surprised about what it taught you about yourself or what you believe?
- Think back to your earliest memories—what did faith look like then? Where does faith come from? What enables you to grow once you have it?

❖ Themes

-justification—As we’ve seen again and again so far, James is often focused not on how we enter into the life of faith but how we live as a result. He is writing to people who already see themselves in a right relationship with God, so he doesn’t have to address the questions Paul does about how we “get in” to that kind of relationship. Once again, that theme is clear in the way James thinks of justification. Paul uses talk of being justified as a “transfer” term—that is, to note a *change* of status from being unrighteous to being reckoned as righteous. This fits his work and context as he addresses the question of how Gentiles can be grafted into relationship with God. But for James, and more broadly for the Jewish mindset as a whole, justification language (especially the Hebrew words that get translated as “justification” language) is not about a *change* of status but about *maintenance* of status. It is about how to remain in a relationship one *already* has. “Justification”/ “righteousness” has a connection to covenant language in the Old Testament, too—to be righteous was to be faithful in living out one’s relationship with another. And similarly, to be declared justified was to have demonstrated that one was living up to one’s part of life in covenant. This is not to say that James thinks that God starts us off right and then it’s up to us to be worthy enough to stay on God’s good side. But rather than focusing on how to get *into* a relationship, justification for James refers to the quality of upholding and being faithful to an *existent* relationship—a relationship that God has brought about by “giving us birth.”

James 3:1-8—Taming the Tongue

❖ The Text (NRSV)

^{3:1}Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the

whole body in check with a bridle. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

❖ What's going on here?

-v.1—James abruptly changes topics to the power—for good or for ill—of human speech. In some ways, this new chapter is a new beginning and stands on its own apart from the argument in chapter two on faith and works. But at the same time, 3:1-8, and then 3:9-12 after it, all focus on one aspect of the life of completion and integrity that James invites us to share. Earlier in 2:14-16 especially, James exposed the disconnect between people whose speech is pious and seems compassionate but is unrelated to how they act toward others. And back in 1:26, James warned us about those who do not “bridle their tongues” and instead deceive themselves. James doesn’t seem to think that the tongue (representing the power of human speech) is by nature evil—but rather that like atomic energy, it is incredibly potent, either for constructive or destructive purposes. Sadly, we get the strong impression that James has seen human speech used to destroy others and harm the community far too often, and so he directs his focus to these situations.

It is the concern for the life of the community that begins chapter 3. James warns that not many should be teachers, and he is concerned about the power of teachers’ and leaders’ words. James is well aware that the way we are taught affects the ways we believe and

act. James’ words about greater strictness echo the idea in Jesus’ teaching about not causing one of the “little ones” to stumble (Matt. 18:6ff) or the importance in the letters to Timothy on faithful teaching. All three writers know that those who teach have great power, and their actions not only affect themselves, but ripple out with consequences for a whole community.

-v.2—The opening phrase of 3:2 comes in some ways as a much needed relief in this book—so far, James has stressed right action and faithful living (often couched in terms of *perfection* or *completion*) so much that it has often sounded as though he expects us to be perfect here and now. And while James wants us always to strive to live in *complete* faithfulness to God, here he admits that everyone, including *himself*, goes astray at times. But because he knows that our mistakes and goings astray affect the lives and faiths of others, he wants us to be especially discerning in who leads us and how they practice leadership and teaching.

-v.3-6—Continuing the “bridle” imagery of 3:2, James uses three examples from the everyday world of small things with great power. Like Jesus’ parable about the potency of the mustard seed, the first two illustrations—a small bit in a horse’s mouth and the rudder of a ship—demonstrate how something small can wield great power. Still thinking of the church’s teachers, James is stressing the power for direction that human speech has, and thus far, this seems to be a power that can be used for good or for evil. The fire imagery of 3:5-6 continues this line of thought with a strong emphasis on how destructive speech can be.

-v.7-8—Another metaphor for human speech is invoked—the tongue as a wild animal. The description is much darker, doubting whether it can be even restrained, much less used for good. We get the impression that James has seen the human tongue at its worst and is writing—pleading—and pulling out all the stops rhetorically to prevent further destruction in other communities of faith.