

Faith, in public and in private (James 1:17-27)

James is looking at the big picture.

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The Epistle of James is like my in-laws: quite helpful when something specific is needed, but generally not the first place I look for wisdom. Now, I love my in-laws, and I have known them practically all my adult life. But they are very different from me, and so we may not always be on the same page. I feel the same about James and his desire to see the results of faith.

“Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” Well, James, what if I want to have a lazy faith? What if I want to sit around learning my right beliefs but never do a single thing with them? There are plenty of things in life I have learned but have yet to use: my stand mixer, advanced calculus, a manual transmission. Is it really so important that we use what we have learned?

James is looking at the big picture. What does a faithful person look like, act like, be like? What does the world see in followers of Jesus that it does not see in other faiths? The truth is that you can be a faithful shut-in. You can read and study; you can be a Christian from your own bed, chair, house, or car. James is not questioning the integrity of anyone's faith.

He just pushes it a step further. Can you call yourself a Christian and not speak of Christ? Can you be a person of faith without ever sharing, asking, proclaiming, mentioning Jesus Christ?

There are many faithful followers who, for various reasons, will not share their faith publicly. Even in the Mark text, Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for being so focused on public faith that they neglect their own integrity. So which is it: show or hide, proclaim or keep internal, speak or listen? As my husband would say, the answer is yes.

James is sharing the importance of public faith, of being an example for others by caring for the orphans and widows and proclaiming the gospel. For him, this is a life that exemplifies faith even when no one is looking. Maybe the question isn't so much "can I?" but "should I?" For James, faith is life, and so a faithful life is one lived out, not hidden.

This is not in conflict with the gospel reading, in which Jesus criticizes a group of Pharisees—not for following the law, but for prioritizing public displays when their personal faith is lacking. Jesus expresses his faith publicly, too. But like James he stresses the importance of a well-rounded faith that is present in all of life, private and public. James reminds us that our faith life, although sacred, is not to be forgotten or left behind after Sunday worship. It follows us throughout the week, influencing even our mundane decisions.

When you walk away from a mirror, you can still catch glimpses of yourself in windows and other reflective surfaces. So don't forget who you are. You are a faithful follower of Jesus, whether you're stranded on a desert island or you're in the middle of Manhattan. Faith is about what God sees and what the world sees; they are not separate. Hear the word, do the word, follow the word, alone in your car or on a crowded bus. The journey is yours, but others may notice.