

21st Century Christianity, is having an identity crisis – “What does it mean to be a Christian?” – you’d reckon we’d have **that** one sorted out by now, wouldn’t you?

- If we were to ask Joe Blo or Jill Blo off the street, “What does it mean to be a Christian”, their answer would most likely be 1 of 2 things: “You go to church to be a Christian”; or “To become a Christian, you live a good life; do good; don’t do bad; maybe pray occasionally; and be a nice person.”
- If we were to ask some Roman Catholics, they might say, “As long as you were baptised into the Roman Catholic Church, that’s enough”.
- If we were to ask a more reformed church, like Lutheran or Presbyterian, or maybe some Uniting Churches, and many others, they might say something along the lines of, “Repent and believe in Jesus for your salvation. And be baptised.”
- Some churches might say “Just believe in Jesus – that’s all you’ve got to do – just believe that Jesus died to save you from your sin.
- A more liberal church, might say something along the lines of “Well, you should take Jesus as an example of love and live in love as Jesus did.
- Someone who would align themselves with what they call “Progressive Christianity”, might say, “It doesn’t matter which God you follow – whether it be the god of the Muslims; or of the Hindus; or the god of the Christians – that’s not what matters – what matters is the

moral and ethical teaching we can **glean** from all of these religions, and the service we can provide our community because of them.

- A more Evangelical church (such as we are here, at Bush Disciples), might focus on the **evangelical** message: If our community believe (as I suspect about 90% of them do) – if our community believe that becoming a Christian means living a good life, doing good, not doing bad, maybe praying occasionally, and being a nice person.... The evangelical message must counter that, with a clear message that we can never **be** good enough. It's beyond our capacity, and it's only because of God's Grace and mercy that any of us can be saved – salvation is an undeserved gift that the Lord offers to us...

God's standard, is not a 50% pass mark. It's not a set of scales, where all my good deeds are on this side, and all my bad deeds are on this side, and as long as the good deeds outweigh the bad deeds, then it's all good. That's simply not the way it works.

If I have **ever** sinned at all, I am not fit for God's Kingdom – it's as simple as that. And no amount of good that I do, can ever make up for the evil that I've already done.. . And so we preach:

- Repent from sin
- Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ
- Be baptised into Jesus, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; and
- Receive the Holy Spirit.

That's the evangelical message, that we preach. That is how you become a Christian.

But the identity crisis of the Christian church, stretches even further than that. “Once I am saved, how should I live.”... Once I **become** a Christian, how should I live, **as a** Christian???

And a very nice, religious answer for that question (and it’s Biblical as well), is “We live by the Spirit”. ... And that might sound very nice, and very religious, but what does that mean?

And different churches, and different Christians, have such wide views of what it means to live by the Spirit, that our teaching can be like chalk and cheese.

- And so we end up with some churches teaching us how to get rich, and basically teaching “Greed”, while some others, would promote taking a vow of poverty.
- Some ministers, have removed the word “sin” from their vocabulary, because they feel it is an out-dated concept that’s not relevant to us any more, while some other ministers feel they need to make their congregation squirm (every Sunday), as they condemn them for their sinfulness.
- There are churches who only ever preach the cross, and being saved by grace, and condemn anyone who will preach a need for personal holiness and righteousness, and say “That’s just all law” – we preach grace – that’s law. While in other churches, grace is not preached at all – to them, ‘living by the Spirit’ boils down to a set of rules and regulations that one must live by.

- Some churches celebrate homosexuality as a gift from God; While some other churches would want to enact the Leviticus death penalty upon them.
- Some churches say that abortion is a good thing – it’s about a woman’s right to choose; While some other churches, say “No, it’s murder”. And in the name of Christ, some individuals have bombed abortion clinics, and assassinated their staff.
- Some churches would say “Never, ever get involved in politics”, where as in other churches, that’s their main game – for them, righteousness is **them** telling the government how the government should behave....

So, there is such a wide view, of what it means to ‘live in the Spirit’..

But today, I want to focus on the identity crisis **within** the broader evangelical church. Do you know what I mean by “the evangelical church”? The evangelical church (as I said before), preaches the evangelical message, but we are also characterised as having a high value, of the Scriptures – the written word of God. Some more liberal veins of the church, would say “**Some** of the bible is useful, but a lot of it’s out-dated”...

But as an evangelical church, we believe that **all** Scripture is God-breathed, and its usefulness is timeless. We believe that God speaks to us, through the Scriptures today. And in the Scriptures, we’re not only taught how to be saved, but we’re also taught how the church should function, and how we as Christians, should behave.

And I'm so thankful to the Lord, that He teaches us these things in the Bible. If I didn't have the Bible to preach from, what would I teach? If I didn't have confidence, in the word of God, written in the Scriptures, what value would there be, in listening to any message that I brought?

A more liberal church, would base their message on science, or philosophy, or humanistic, social content... But we don't do that here. What power can come from those? Every time we open our Bibles, there's power in the words: Power to challenge; Power to comfort; Power to transform; Power to convict; Power to save; and power to give life.

The Holy Spirit, speaks to us, through God's written word.

So,,,,, if the evangelical church in general, places a high value on Scripture, why do we see the values of the world, becoming common-place **within** the church? And nothing is done to weed it out:

- Sex-before-marriage
- Couples living together, rather than getting married
- Divorce
- Abortions
- Drunkenness
- Drug use
- Foul language
- Dishonest financial dealings
- Theft
- Filthy joking
- Lying
- Christians dabbling in the occult; or

- Eastern religious practices, like Yoga and whatnot...
- Gossip
- Greed
- Christians dating non-Christians
- Adultery
- Storing up wealth, for a wealthy retirement
- Self-aggrandisement

Why do we see the values of the world, becoming commonplace within the church? (and even in the lives of some who claim to be bible-believing-Christians, for that matter)

And I'll name it:

To some extent, it is because of the belief of some, that living by the Spirit, means we make no effort (on our part) to do good – Some believe, that if **we** make the effort – that's 'legalism' – that's not living in 'grace'... And it's only as the Holy Spirit sanctifies us, that we begin to naturally (supernaturally) do good, instead of bad. And so in effect (with this view), our behaviour is in God's domain – not ours.

And they believe that when we do the **wrong** thing, we shouldn't feel guilty about it, because Jesus has dealt with our sin on the cross, and so we now have complete freedom and complete forgiveness, and even when (as a Christian) I do wrong, there is no guilt – there is no need for repentance, because I've already been forgiven.

Some have disparagingly labelled this as "easy-believism" – believe in Jesus and His work on the cross, and there's no demands on you – He'll do the work – you do nothing.

And this, has been a very long introduction, to set the scene, for what James is talking about in this morning's reading. Because this, is the same old misunderstanding of the Gospel, that has been in the church from its beginning. e.g. In Corinth, a man was 'shacked-up' with his step-mother, and that church was proud – they thought they were living by the Spirit – he had freedom to do that – until Paul said "No, you don't"...

I believe, there is a confusion between the evangelical question (what must I do to be saved), and the Discipleship question (How now, should I live)... Two different Questions, which some confuse with the one answer.

As you know, being saved by grace, means **none** of us can earn our way to heaven by being good. And even once we are saved, none of us will be perfect – It's only because Jesus died for our sins, and because He is quick to forgive us, that we can be saved.

But once we **are** saved, **how does Jesus expect us to live?** How do we honour God, with our lives? And the answer to that question, is **the major focus**, of James' letter.

be doers of the word, and not hearers only

Christianity is not only about what we hear – It's not only about what we believe. Our faith, is displayed by our actions. ... This is a commandment – **be a doer** of the word. And it's not something James made up. It comes from the mouth of Jesus.

At the end of Jesus' sermon on the mount, He said:

Matthew 7:24 "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

And every time we hear the word of God, and don't put it into action, it's utter foolishness. James says, if we just hear it, and don't do it, we're deceiving ourselves.....

In Ephesians chapter 4, Paul is comparing the way disciples of Jesus should live, with the way people of the world live...

And he says, **that is not the way you learned Christ.**

And while Paul explains it in mostly spiritual terms, James is teaching us, what it means, in practical terms, and the two are not at odds with one-another – the two go together. What the Holy Spirit is doing inside of us, **must** be accompanied by our deeds. And the fact that we are **commanded** to do these deeds, leaves no doubt at all, that we have a part to play here – we must put the **effort** into obedient Christian living.

James uses a bit of a strange illustration to make his point. He says “Christians who are not doers of the word, are like a man who looks in the mirror, and then goes away and forgets what he looks like.” What’s he getting at? Well, I reckon he’s taking us back, and getting us to remember, our salvation experience.

- Who cries out for a saviour, if they don’t know they need saving??? Nobody.
- What did Jesus come to save us from? ... Our sin.
- So, what do I need to be aware of, before I cry out for Jesus to save me? ... Sin. **My sin!!**
- How do I become aware of that sin? Well, God’s law reveals to us what sin is. And the Holy Spirit convicts the world of guilt in regard to sin...

And so, to be saved, means I have to come to a loathing, self-awareness of personal sin... I must recognise sin within me, and hate that sin – “I want to be free of it – I want it gone....” It’s awful. Get rid of this sin that’s in me...”

And if you cannot think of a point in your life, when **you’ve** felt like that – when you felt so wretched – when you were so convicted of sin and you wanted to be free of that sin, then you’re probably not saved, and you have probably never encountered the living God...

Have you ever tried to take a photograph of something, and the bright light behind it, means what you’re trying to photograph, appears to be darkness??? Like the picture on

the left... But the picture on the right – that’s what you’re wanting to see...

When one encounters the living God, in all of His holiness, it brings about a self-awareness, and self-loathing of sin.

And this self-awareness of sin – it’s like looking in a mirror – and seeing all of the wrong and sin and evil and vile – all of the hatred and bitterness, and pride and lust and the envy, and the vulgarity... I can see everything that has separated me from God – everything that I have done, that earns me death.... I see all of this sin, living within me... I hate it, and I want it gone... I **don’t** just want to be a better person – I want to be righteous before God..

And then we hear the word of grace – Jesus says – “I died for **you**”. I take your sin. You have just repented. Now, believe in me. Trust in me. Follow me...

And I fall down on my knees in repentance... Baptised, and sin is washed away. Saved. By the grace of God, **in Christ**, I am saved....

What now? I’m free. Total freedom.... What now????

Well, Jesus has given me a new life – not just a modified life – a **new** life.

What do you do with life??? **Live it!!!** What do you do with a **new** life??? **You live a new life!!!**

And every day, we're going to be presented with 2 options – live the new life that Jesus has given us, or live the old life that He's taken away. And if we don't live the new life, what have we forgotten???

Have we forgotten when the Holy Spirit made us look in the mirror, and we saw ourselves as we truly were, and we knew that we needed a Saviour, and we cried out to God for His mercy... Have we forgotten that???

What James is saying, is don't forget where you come from. And so he contrasts the man who looks in the mirror and then forgets what he was like, with what we **should** do... Once we are saved, we are then part of what he calls "The perfect law – the law of liberty".

In Christ, we are free to obey His commandments... To obey God's law isn't a drudgery – When Jesus is in your heart – when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, it's a privilege – it's wonderful – it's delightful – it's **good times**, to be **doers** of the word.

And we will be **blessed** in the doing... It's not like: "Oh, it's so horrible... I've got to live like Jesus lived... Jesus is telling me to forgive these people – oh, it's going to be so horrible... The bible tells me I'm not allowed to get drunk – what a drag... - I was so hoping to get drunk, lay in the gutter and vomit... The Bible tells me not to swear, but I love swearing – I feel so much better when I'm swearing... What a drag...

It's not like that – it's a law of liberty... We are free to live this new, **better** life that God has given us – it's a **blessing**.

If we just **hear** the Word, or **read** God's word, and aren't **changed** by it, and don't **do** it,,,, - if we just come along to church and sing a few songs, and listen to the long-winded preacher, and go home again, unchanged – that's self-deception.

We might **feel** that we're all very religious, and that we've fulfilled all righteousness , but what good does it do us? – It's worthless.

And James gives a couple of very practical examples, that cut deep....:

If you think you're going good with God, but don't control your tongue, your religion is worthless....

And he says, ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows

Alright? Pure religion – undefiled religion, has legs on it – it goes to visit those who can't care for themselves...

We are commanded – you get that “**commanded**”, to be doers of the word...

And he's pointed out 2 aspects – he's given an example of personal holiness – alright, God's word – His commandments,

the words of the prophets, the teachings of Jesus, the exhortation of the apostles – are all in agreement – our Lord demands, the personal holiness of His children.

As a child of Jesus, the Lord demands, your personal holiness.

And He **also** demands, the righteous **acts** of his children...

Now, of course we're not always going to personally achieve this. You **will** fail, as **I** fail. And the Lord is gracious and forgiving, when we repent anew, of our sin and wrong-doing, and ask for His forgiveness.

The New Testament knows nothing of a once-only repentance. Time and time again, Christians are told to repent of their sin, and when we do, the Lord forgives us.

Don't be just a hearer. Don't be just a believer. Be a doer... Be a doer **because** of what you've heard. Be a doer **because** of what you believe. Be a **doer** of the word.

Amen.