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As we move deeper into the letter of James, we begin to appreciate the effort he has put in, to communicate with a people who are settled outside Jerusalem and Israel, among people who do not share their social and religious heritage and customs. Imagine the difficulty of connecting with people whom they have only ever known back in their own land as **foreigners**, but among whom they live presently!

This Jewish Christian diaspora faced a serious problem: before they accepted Jesus as God's promised Messiah, their lives were governed by The Law. The 10 Commandments, and the subsequent expansion of the law into 613 commandments covered three areas of life:

1. **their personal relationship with God:** The 10 Commandments begins with, know there is a God, do not even think that there are other gods besides Him, know that God is One, love Him and hold Him in awe and reverence.
2. their **relationship with people** around them including family, friends, neighbours, priests and government officials (*those in authority*), kings and rulers (*those in power*)
3. their **relationship with nature** (God's created order): e.g. not to plant different seeds together, and not to crossbreed animals; not to plant grains or greens in a vineyard and not to work different animals together.

Whilst **ALL** of the law governed **ALL** of life, their practice of "The Law", fell into three categories: **first**, the *self-evident commands* such as not to murder and not to steal which did not need policing, but judgement when such laws were broken. **Second** were commandments to *commemorate important events in Jewish history*, which needed to be observed. It was not

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difficult to comply with such commandments, because everyone around you was doing the same. e.g., the Shabbat which testifies to the story that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day and declared it Holy; the **third** are commandments with no known rationale, and are perceived as pure manifestations of the Divine will (*this is what God would want you to do, to be Holy*).

Throughout their history, the Jews were regularly reminded they were a special people to God. (*read Deuteronomy 7:1-11*)

I hope you get a snapshot of the predicament in the minds of these Jewish Christian immigrants in various countries. It got even more complicated: e.g. there are several "laws" which address purity, not to mix the purity of God with the impurity of that which is not of God. e.g., Not to turn a city to idolatry, to burn a city that has turned to idol worship, and not to rebuild it as a city.

Now that they are living among people for whom idolatry is a way of life, do they **adapt** to local customs **and ignore** what they believe to be God's commandments, should they live together and **practice** the customs of the "old country", perhaps to be made fun of by the locals, or find some kind of **compromise** solution, the way we are trying desperately to find a compromise solution in Brexit, by which everyone will have a part of their individual concerns addressed? This question resonates throughout history: *Do you want to buy into their practice of religion, or will you be true to the religion God has called you to practice? And how will people know if you claim yourselves to be different?*

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James' response is this: remember, character is shaped by God, and Godly character is evidenced in three ways: evidenced in our **conversation**, evidenced in our **concerns** and evidenced in our **conduct**.¹

Now James comes to some sticky issues which deal with attitude, opinions and convictions.

It seems both strange and yet natural that James would start by addressing attitudes of ***prejudice and partiality***.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, major changes swept across our world. We learned we could not keep people locked up forever, when the doors were opened for Jews in the former Soviet Union to immigrate to Israel.

We learned, a people could not be separated indefinitely when the Berlin Wall crumbled. And we learned from South Africa, that colour of skin cannot separate people forever.

Despite these and many other landmark developments around the world, we still have a very long, long, long way to go.

James' question to Christian Jews, is also one for the Church: *How can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, if you favour some people over others?* In Jewish society, everyone cared for everyone; now in these foreign lands, social hierarchy was practiced; people looked up to the rich because they had something to give, and looked down on the poor because they were a blight on society: they were poor because they didn't do what was necessary not to be poor!

¹ James 1:26 & 27

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James warns his readers, that discrimination is stands on two feeble wooden pegs, both of which should be broken and demolished: the first is **prejudice** (1-7) which draws on preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience, and the second is **presumption** (8-13) which is taking something to be true, when it is not certain, if it is indeed true. This becomes extremely dangerous when adopting an attitude toward someone, without knowing, without conducting due diligence, if it is indeed true!

James is building on his advice at the end of chapter 1, not to practice an empty religion by **servicing a cause**; instead practice a genuine religion by **servicing people**, because God's only concern is people, not causes. When God brought a nation out of Egypt, He was not concerned with *liberation*; His concern was for people who were enslaved. When God interrupted Saul's journey to Damascus, God was not concerned with the consequence of *conversion*; He was concerned with Saul, who became the Apostle Paul.

This true religion focused on the needs of people, is based on faith in God, which is knowing the character of God and trusting Him to do the best for us. But faith alone is not enough. If faith is not demonstrated through fruit, James warns us of three dangers:

The first danger is a **False Faith** (14-17). *What good is it to you or anyone, if you say you have faith in God, but don't show it in your actions? ... because faith by itself is not enough. Unless our faith in God finds its way into trusting God when He prompts us to do some-thing, faith is dead and useless.*

The second danger is **Futile Faith** (18-19). We can **try** to build a relationship with God by faith alone, but what use is it in the Kingdom of

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God if we will not follow through with deeds. To have faith in God is to trust Him and His judgement; so when in that relationship of absolute trust, He says, *I want you to reach out to this person... or to do something which will help this other person*, what good is it if we say, *It's OK. I have faith and that is enough for me; someone is more interested helping others, let them do it!*

The third danger is **Fatal Faith** (20-26), faith which drives us to to be reckless in a sense, the way Abraham was when he took his son Isaac up the mountain to sacrifice him as God had asked, and Isaac asked, *Father, where is the lamb for the sacrifice?*, to which Abraham replied, *God will provide, my son; God will provide*, and God **DOES!**

I love the sentence towards the end of Abraham's narrative, when James says, ***So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith ALONE!***²

James is reciting Jesus' teaching, *You can identify false prophets by their fruit, that is, the way they act. ... a good tree produces good fruit; a bad tree cannot produce good fruit... and the tree which does not produce good fruit, is chopped down and and thrown into the fire. **Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their deeds and actions.***³

Jews who accepted Jesus as the Christ, needed to hear this encouragement, and so do we.

² James 2:24

³ Matthew 7:16-20

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Don't be afraid to stand out among God's treasured people; Don't be afraid to stand out and be known as God's special person, wherever you are, wherever you live, whatever you do.

We are special in God's sight, not because think we are special, but because God, who has given us life, considers each of us, very special.

Why else would He send His Son to buy us back through His sacrifice on the cross?

AMEN.