

Season 2, Episode 5: James: Grace that shapes our actions (2:14-26)

With Sam Allberry

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Welcome to Two Sisters and a cup of tea. I'm Felicity and I live in America and this is Sarah, she lives in the UK, everyone. And this week we're really excited to welcome a special guest, Sam Allberry. Welcome, Sam. So, actually, with two sisters, Sam and a cup of Tea, and maybe a biscuit as well. Sam, great to have you here. You're a Brit living in the US and you're a Bible teacher. Much appreciated your teaching over the years and you've written a book, and particularly you've written a book about James, which we'll talk a bit more about later, but maybe you could tell us a bit more about what you're doing, why you're here, who you are, those kind of things.

Sam: Thanks for having me on. Hi, guys. I'm slightly nervous. There's one cup of tea between three of us.

Felicity: I'm hoping everyone's got their own has.

Sam: The biscuit as well. I'm Sam. I've been in different forms of Christian ministry for the last, I guess, 20 years now, pretty much as a pastor, as an apologist, in the process of moving to Nashville, Tennessee, to work for Emmanuel Church here. And I'm a Brit abroad, as you are, Felicity, as well. Biscuits mean something inferior here to what we normally mean by them in the UK, he's gone big inferior.

Sarah: So do you have any kind of biscuits, then? Would you choose to eat a national biscuit?

Sam: Well, what they call biscuits, we call scones, and then what we call biscuits, they call cookies, but they don't have the same kinds of things that we do. So you don't get your little jam sandwich cream type biscuits.

Sarah: Thank you. I just want to clarify, last week I came on with a Jammy Dodger, convinced that it should have cream in the middle, but it didn't have cream in the middle.

Sam: They should have cream in the middle. And I think my favorite biscuit in the UK is Custard creams. I found one store, you can get them out here, but it's like sort of \$5 a packet or something because they have to be imported, so I miss British biscuits.

Felicity: Castle Cream is a good shout. They're a solid staple biscuit. Everyone should have in their biscuits in.

Sam: I would say, yeah, it's dependable. It's a royal family of English biscuit. It's always there, always constant.

Felicity: I've actually gone for a malted milk today. Do you remember those that have a picture of the cow on solid?

Sam: Are those the ones you only eat when you've had a variety packet and you've eaten all the other ones?

Sarah: No, I think they're on Costa cream kind of level.

Felicity: I'm not sure they are good, but yeah, casta cream are higher up in the hierarchy of biscuits, which I feel like this podcast is establishing.

Sarah: For those listening today. This episode is going to be slightly longer than usual just because there's three of us talking and we want to get the most out of time with Sam today.

Felicity: Yeah. So Sam, one of the things that we are seeking to do with this podcast is to help people get into the Bible for themselves and see that it's possible to just chat about things of the Lord over a cup of tea with the word open. Have you got any top tips for reading and understanding the Bible for yourself? Like for people who are thinking it's just a bit of a big deal to open the Bible if you got any couple of tips for us?

Sam: Yeah, I mean, nothing sort of groundbreaking. It's both a divine book, which is why we're intimidated by it, but it's also a human book, which means we can read it. So that means I can read it, but I need to pray when I do, so I shouldn't read it thinking everything is going to make sense immediately or I've done it wrong. Sometimes you have to look at certain things and think, I've got a no idea what that means, but I can see what the next bit means and that's enough for today to go on with. So I think reading the Bible helps you read the Bible, if that's not too tautologist, but it really does. The more you do it, it's like flexing a muscle. The more you use it, the more you are able to use it and the more it can do. So the more we read the Bible will help us and we do have to work at it. It's not always going to be if I just glance briefly in the direction of a passage, it'll suddenly yield all of its riches to me. I have to sort of think about it and meditate on it and ponder it. So I've started doing something in the last couple of years I never wanted to do and felt a bit naughty doing over the last couple of decades or served being a Christian and that's I now write in my Bible. I have a Bible with big margins so that as I'm reading through, I can just write down little things that occur to me or even questions. I love those journaling, scripture journal things as well for the same reason. So that helps if I can underline circle things, if I see something that's repeated that looks interesting, I can highlight that in some way. And then the other thing I was doing this just yesterday was sitting down with a good buddy of mine here and doing what you guys do. Which is we just opened a passage together and we both got so much more out of it doing it together because we each had half observations that the other could complete and you end up with combined thoughts that neither one of you would have had in isolation. You kind of bounced things off each other. And so we found all kinds of things in the passage we just never noticed before and we hadn't sort of studied the Greek or cracked open big commentaries. We were just chatting over it ourselves and it was wonderful. It was just wonderful.

Felicity: Thank you.

Sam: Studying with others. Not all of our Bible study needs to be solitary. There's a place for just being with the Word on our own, but there's also such a great thing to do with others.

Felicity: Thank you. Yeah, I so agree with that and obviously we agree with that as we sit here together, but such a good reminder to hear it. But that is so rewarding to do.

Sarah: That and that together time to take over time with other people fuels my own time with the Lord in between that as well. You come back to the conversations and you come back to the reflections that you've had and you see it with different eyes. Coming back to it when you're on.

Sam: Your own again and it deepens friendship, doesn't it? Because you're not talking about trivial things and you're talking about the deep things of life and having people just to process that with and think out loud with yeah. That doesn't wander through our friendships.

Felicity: Yeah wholeheartedly agree absolutely the best thing to be doing. Should we get into James? Sarah, do you want to kick us off with some James kind of thoughts?

Sarah: Yes, I guess just as we think about James generally. Sam, we're just wondering what's been the big punch for you? What's been the big thing that you can't come back to time and again as you've read through the letter? If you've studied it, if you mold over it over the years, what do you keep coming back to as the big things in the letter?

Sam: Yeah, well, the things I keep coming back to aren't necessarily the big things, they're just certain things that poke me in the eye every time I open the book. So James saying being doers of the Word are not heroes only that always gets me because it's easy to turn the battle of the Christian life into merely I've got to be someone who hears the word of God and then once I've heard that, I've done my job. But James is saying, actually it's great to be reading the Bible, but on its own it's not sufficient. You can be reading the Bible but not actually allowing God's Word to do the work in you for which you purposed it. And it

can be just a checklist thing. I've advanced my Bible ribbon another two pages today. Therefore, I've done my god thing. And God is just bigger than that, and he has a higher purpose for us than that. And he dignifies us by wanting us to reach for Him in every area of life and to allow His Word to transform every area of life. It's a compliment he's paying us here because we can do God's Word. We're expected to as his people. Not in a flawless, perfect kind of way, but we're meant to be energized by it and driven by it. So if we simply stare at it for the sake of staring at it and then think we can move on, we've kind of missed the point of it. So that always comes back to me, I think. James as a whole, I've always loved this letter because he's declaring war on half heartedness. And it's so easy to be lackluster in our affection for the Lord and to sort of compartmentalize Him and try and blend our love for him with love of too many other things that we put on the same level as him. And James is always just bringing us back to being wholehearted, not double minded, as he often calls it.

Felicity: Yeah. I loved in your book, you were talking about the kind of the idea that you're hedging your bets. I think that's a really good way of thinking about the double mindedness, that you're sort of trying to have a foot in both camps and just making sure you're covering all bases and just the whole heartedness. That's been so challenging to me as I've been digging into James and just how often the double mindedness is exposed. Areas where you're not even thinking about double mindedness. No, it's true of that area as much as it is of other areas. Yes, I think that's you're right. The poking in the eye, Sarah and I have both felt that James is a poking kind of book. Like, it doesn't let you sit comfortably, does he? He's like every line is like an elbow in the ribs saying, what about this thing and that thing?

Sam: Yeah. He won't let us coast along. He won't let us be satisfied with our own kind of hypocrisy. He's such a good friend from that point of view, because he wants the best for us. It's actually loving for him to do that. So it's hard to read James without sort of feeling slightly roughed over by him, but in a kind way, yeah.

Sarah: We've really noticed that going through it so far. Just like the emphasis on dear brothers and sisters, my brothers and sisters. He's very passionate, isn't he, in the way that he obviously loves them and he cares for them. Well, should we get stuck into this week's passage? So we're reading from the NRD version and we're reading chapter two, verse 14 to 26 today. So let me read it for us. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds, can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, go in peace, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, you have faith, I have deeds. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith. By my deeds. You believe that there is one God good. Even the demons believe that and shudder. You foolish person. Do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our Father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the Scripture was fulfilled that says Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not even Rey? Have the prostitutes considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. It's a big one, isn't it? It's a powerful passage, as ever. Some people are often familiar with this passage, but I wonder whether they're familiar with it for the wrong reasons, because it just brings so much challenge and it kind of seems to grate against what we read in Paul's letters and maybe in habitat that we were reading last time. I wonder whether you can just start off by just helping us to talk through why people get stuck here.

Sam: Yeah, well, as you say, it looks like, particularly in verse 24, it looks as though James is intentionally disagreeing with Paul. One of Paul's cherished slogans was that we're justified by faith alone. You think of Romans three, or Ephesians two, or all of Galatians, and again drawing a lot from habitkuk as well. And James seems to be picking a fight here because he says, you see, that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. So it's

one of those verses skeptics love to leap on and say, see, the Bible does contradict itself. It's not coherent. And it's a verse that people with doubts and uncertainties feel troubled by because we sort of think, I want to believe the Bible, but there's stuff like this. Does it hang together? Can I trust it? So there's legitimate reason to pause and to do some head scratching. Luther famously had an allergic reaction to this part of James letter as well. So we're kind of in good company if we do find a little bit perplexing, which is some comfort at least, but it's worth not just being perplexed by or troubled by, but actually sticking with and really looking to see what James is and isn't saying here, that's really helpful.

Felicity: As I've been doing the head scratching and trying to work this out, I found that being in the kind of flow of James kind of way of thinking and logic really helps with this, because I think if we come at it from a different part of the Bible, then it does kind of cause a bit of an obstruction, as you say. It seems to be picking a fight and all that kind of thing. So when James says, So we've got in that first bit. It's such a big punch at the start, isn't it? What good is it, my brother? Someone claims to have faith but has no deeds. Can you just help us to kind of see how that does fit with what James has been running with so far?

Sam: Yeah. So James is on scripted, this is what his letter has been about the whole way through. It's not just professing to be a Christian believer, just saying you're a Christian is not good enough. It needs to be seen in the way that you live. Hence that driving force of don't just be hearers, but doers of the word. Don't deceive yourself. And he's saying, hey, what good is it? What does it actually do for you to claim to be a Christian if you're not actually if that's not seen in any way in the way that you live? It's just hot air. So it's not faith. It's interesting. James is beginning to use faith and claiming to have faith sort of interchangeably here. So the kind of faith he's particularly dealing with is claimed faith. Yeah, supposed faith. And there's plenty of it around and we drift into it ourselves if we're not very careful. As long as I'm saying I'm a Christian and I've always said I'm a Christian, that's all that matters. And James is saying, well, actually, let's look a bit more closely at this. Is your Christianity in any way having a positive impact on your life? Or are you just full of luster and claims and it's not going to do you any good? It's certainly not going to do other people any good.

Sarah: So powerful that, isn't it? Even the demons acknowledge that the Lord is one like that.

Sam: There's good doctrine in hell, it turns out.

Sarah: Yeah.

Sam: So don't hide behind that and think, well, I've got my doctrine, I've got all sorted out and orthodox and he's going, Good. Well, yeah, so far you're on par with the devil and his demon. What difference is it making? At least with the demons? They shudder.

Sarah: Yeah.

Sam: So at least you can see something of what they understand taking effect in their life. But if your Christianity is just there acting as a kind of chaplain, to your status quo and whatever you were wanting to do with your life anyway, then that's not real Christianity.

Felicity: Yeah, I love his practicalities in that first 1516. Just the reality that if you are going to say, go and peace, keep warm, but does nothing about their physical needs, that just exemplifies it exactly, doesn't it? You're going to say stuff, but you're not going to do anything about it. And the emptiness of that is so striking in that I just find it.

Sarah: Interesting that even just going back to the demons comment, they acknowledge the first half of that famous bitrinity, don't they? The Lord is one, and yet the second half is love the Lord with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength, with everything. And that works out itself out in action, doesn't it? And so they stop there, and the Lord calls us to not stop there and to live out and love our neighbor and love the Lord. Why does he go to Abraham and Rehab to help us through this?

Sam: Yeah, those are both two really good examples from the Old Testament of how someone's genuine faith in God unmistakably shapes the way that they live. And they make a good pairing. Abraham is the father of the faith. You can't get more Jewish than Abraham. Rahab was a gentile prostitute. Abraham is a man. Rehab was a woman. So you kind of covered the spectrum here. So if it's true of both of these types of people, it really has to be true of everyone. If you just done Abraham, you might think we had, but that was Abraham.

But it does abraham and Reyhan, you think, well, okay, the spectrum that those two encapsulate, I'm on that spectrum somewhere. I can't put myself outside of that. But in both cases, we see they're justifying faith confirmed by their actions. James talks about the faith was completed. In a sense, it reaches its fullest embodiment in the way that they live. I was just thinking actually of the healing of the paralytic and Mark, too, when the guys lower down their friend through the roof, the first thing it says is when Jesus saw their faith. So faith is not primarily meant to be or not simply just something that you hear someone professing to have, but something you see them living out. And you see that with both Abraham and Rehab. And then James wants to kind of swing the camera around to us and go, is that the case with us? Can people see our faith? They may not understand every facet of it, but can people see that what we believe really does shape us in some way?

Felicity: I love that the justifying faith, which has been confirmed in our actions, because that's one of the key things, isn't it? It's not that the actions are the justifying thing. Faith is the justifying thing, as Paul says. As Habitat says, all throughout the bible. That is the story. But the actions confirm that faith. Yeah, that full embodiment of our faith. That is so challenging, because then actually, that means that our faith is not complete unless it is active. You can't have a kind of sitting duck faith that just does nothing, but.

Sam: There isn't actually you can't be theoretically in the Christian understanding of these things. Faith is not simply who I'm going to vote for for eternity. It's putting all of the chips of my life onto the square of Jesus. And we even find out in the Bible that as we have faith in Jesus, we become united to Him. There's a spiritual union exists between us. This is not just slightly more intensified admiration from afar. There's a spiritual reality that cannot but be confirmed in a way that we actually then live. It changes us.

Sarah: And I guess that's his concern, isn't it, for the people who are writing to you? He doesn't want them to be wandering away from the truth. He's definitely concerned with me, that they would be wholehearted and I guess to see the danger of inaction, would you say? That is right? See the danger of just sitting and professing without actually acting on it?

Sam: Yeah, and I think what he's warning us against is having faith in our professed, faith in Christ. Right now I'm in Tennessee, and everyone in this part of the world says that they're a Christian. I remember talking to one guy recently, and I said, you're a believer as well? And he said, Baptized when I was eight, or that kind of thing, and I'm glad you're baptized when you're eight. That's wonderful. But that's not what you're trusting in. And it's very easy to sort of think, well, I prayed that prayer 15 years ago, or I came forward at that meeting, or whatever it was, and to think, that's what means I'm okay because I did that. And that's trusting in our professional faith and not trusting in the one who's meant to be the object of our faith.

Felicity: Yeah, that's a really helpful distinction. And as we kind of just begin to drive it to the heart a bit more. I've been so challenged by this passage. I mean. Obviously the whole of James. But this passage. I think in our world of the kind of fairly conservative angelica church where we're really big on doctrine and teaching the Bible well. And we like to get our words right. And we exert lots of energy and arguing for various doctrinal things. I think this is a challenge to me as we do this podcast and talk about the Bible, but also as I teach the Bible, or if we're in any way eager for that kind of stuff, that we would then have the actions that embody what we're actually teaching. And I think my heart is like, I'm just checking myself on every oh, okay. So that's the challenge, isn't it? And we've been talking about that. But what do you do with that? Because James clearly speaking to Christians grace underpins the whole letter, but he only mentions Jesus a couple of times by name. What do we do with the fact that I read this and I'm like this is convicting every step of the way? How do we kind of keep trying to do it? Or what's the process, the thought process, if you see what I mean? The grace fuelled action in all of this.

Sam: Yeah, we need to keep I mean, he's giving us a drip feed throughout the letter of what we can do about this. Everything from how we hear the word to coming to God for wisdom, all those sorts of things. These are the ways we work out our faith that we bring our faith to bear on the way that we live, our attitude to money or partiality, all these sorts of things. So I think if we find ourselves really convicted by this part of James too and think is my faith purely hot air? Am I a real Christian? Has this made any difference? The very first thing we need to do is just to come back to the Lord and say, I want to be a real follower of Jesus

here. He talks about our glorious Lord Jesus Christ in the beginning of chapter two. So to think, Lord, please give me a fresh taste of the glory of Jesus Christ. He talks about the royal law that brings life. I think he talks about so I think one of the things that can lead us into drifting into this kind of non transforming, mere ascent is that we lose sight of the goodness of God and especially the goodness and beauty of Jesus. The demons had factual accuracy, but they didn't have hearts that were captivated by Jesus Christ. So if we're feeling as though James is exposing something that is lacking in our lives, I think the very first place we need to go is I need to see afresh the goodness of Jesus, I need to be captivated by it and to ask for God to help us to do that. Maybe go back and reread one of the gospels. James is sort of assuming that we know we've sort of already familiar with the life and teaching of Jesus, which is why he makes so many allusions to it. So maybe we can just go back there again and yes, pray forgot to help us with that.

Sarah: I think that's really helpful, Sam. I think we have been discussing in last couple of conversations of like do we go to Jesus? James doesn't take us to a kind of explicit look at Jesus at this moment when you're feeling like this. But I think it's really helpful to just kind of remind ourselves that he would have had all the teachings of Jesus in his mind. He grew up listening, don't he? And our natural inclination is to want to go to Jesus and plead for mercy, as we were seeing last time, and to kind of lean back on the mercy of Christ. I'm just helpful to see that. That is the gospel, isn't it? Lived out to the action starts with going to Jesus and going to the work of Christ that he's done for us. I'm really aware that time is running very short and already we've just found your book so helpful. We just want to thank you for surrounding it and helping us.

Felicity: We haven't actually said the name of it, have we, as a Christmas, the one we're talking about, it's called James For You. And really helpful commentary, but I would say, Sam, it's a devotional commentary, isn't it?

Sam: I'm not an academic, so I couldn't have written an academic book. But it's really designed to help us as we read through James, to hopefully understand what he's saying and how it applies to us.

Felicity: Yes, really helpful questions as well, to.

Sarah: Keep it on the phone.

Felicity: So highly recommend for anyone who just wants to dig in a bit deeper and keep thinking about James.

Sarah: So we'll put a link to that in the show notes, and there's also a link there for discount to get that off. Some of those is in there, 15 on that. But, Sam, would you pray for us? And Pray for US news as we wrap up?

Sam: I'd love to. Thank you. Yeah, let's pray. Father, we thank you for this part of your Scripture. We thank you for blessing us with this letter and the freedom to read it, to reflect on it, to be challenged and encouraged by it further. Help us to not be deceived, not to think we can just simply claim faith and then just press on with our own agenda. Help us to be really transformed by your words. Thank you. That is what your Word does in our lives. So help us to be attentive to James, Lord, and all that he has to teach us that our lives might be an unmistakable confirmation of true faith, and we pray in Jesus name, amen.

Felicity: Amen. Sam, thank you so much for being with us. It's just been a delight to hear you speaking wisdom on these things, responding to the Word. I'm sure it's been a light for our listeners to hear a different voice to ours.

Sam: Thank you very much for having me. Thank you for doing this podcast. It's wonderful.

Felicity: No, it's a joy. My cup of tea is finished. Is your tea gone, Sarah?

Sarah: Yeah, my Yorkshire tea is done. Finished? Yeah.

Felicity: Time to go there.

Sarah: All right.

Felicity: Thank you so much, Sam. See you, Sarah.

Sarah: Bye bye.

Sam: Bye.

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