

What Do You Believe?

A Sermon Expositing James 2:1-17

By Brent Bowden

First Baptist Church of Rochester

What do you believe? I mean about God, what do you believe?

That's not hypothetical, I'm curious what you believe about God? For instance, I believe that God is both in, with, and throughout the entire cosmos *and* right here, present to us here and now. That is to say, I believe God is transcendent, but also imminent.

What do you believe?

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See video here for in-service conversation on what the congregation believes about God.

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What do you believe about God? It is all at once such a simple question and such a challenging question. One can answer it so fully with one little sentence, "God is love." But at the same time a truly full answer could take a lifetime. Volumes could be, and have been, penned with inexhaustive answers, but children sometimes sum the whole thing up with just a word or two. What do you believe about God?

It is right and good that we be able to *say* something about what we believe in. Both scripture and Christian tradition have impressed upon us the need to search our souls and the world around us for what we believe to be true of the universe, true of God and to congeal those beliefs into things we can say. "You will be saved," says the apostle Paul, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord.'" The Psalmist begs of us on more than one occasion to *declare the glory of God*. At Isaiah's call to prophecy his mouth is touched with a burning coal; what he proclaims about God is of utmost importance. Jesus in the gospel of Matthew tells his disciples that when the time has come they should shout what he has taught them from the rooftops. For generations some Christian traditions have asked those ascribing to the faith publicly for the first time to respond verbally, affirmatively to a series of questions about what they believe about God – a catechism. Even we Christian traditions who hold our doctrine a bit more loosely are in the habit of using the term, "profession of faith," to describe a person's taking up Christianity. Arriving at a set of beliefs coherent enough for articulation is and has been an important part of faith for centuries, but would believe if I said we can take *profession* too far.

Some have suggested, and I tend to agree, that sometimes American Christianity has done just that. As Americans we tend to be fairly transactional. That is we like arrangements with clear cause and effect. If you do this, I'll do that. If you give me this, I'll give you that. When you overdo that kind of thing in the realm of faith you end up with what has been called *propositional* Christianity. All of the focus of the life of faith becomes what one believes and therefore professes to be true – and that's about it. If I believe rightly, I will be in the grace of God. If I profess Jesus, I'll go to heaven. I have to admit, it's a simple and clean way to sum up faith,

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

but in my experience it falls short in areas where truth is unknowable or highly complicated and especially in areas for which absolute truth aren't really helping anyone. But it is true, a predominant theme in Christianity in the US today places virtually all importance on believing the right sentences to be valid and true.

The writer of the book of James, let's call him – James, has penned the letter we've read from this morning to a community who apparently has a similar problem. Clearly they know what they believe. They've formed a community and begun the habit of meeting together in proclamation, celebration of the faith they hold in common. Even with the depth of commitment it takes to form a community around shared beliefs, something is amiss and we recognize it right away in James's writing, "Do you really...believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?," he asks. Do you really!? James comes out punching. He's gone straight to questioning the core of the community's reason for being, straight to the core of their faith, and questioned whether it is even valid. Christian tradition has passed this text to us through the centuries as if it has something to say to us, which is to say that James is asking us today too, "Do you really – believe all that stuff you said just a few minutes ago?"

His cause for doubt back then in that first century community had to do with observations – his or someone who had reported to him - about how things work there. He didn't pull this whole thing about favoritism out of thin air. Evidently, there were occasions when important, wealthy people would gather with the community and they knew exactly how they were supposed to treat them. Maybe they were government officials who they didn't want to cross. Or maybe they thought with a bit of schmoozing their visitors might pad the endowment, or donate new choir robes, or better yet – become a regular tither. Who knows, maybe it was just engrained as part of the fabric of society that some people are worthy of more attention and care than others. Whatever the reason, people who looked like they were in high position were given the best seats, were looked after the most, were made comfortable in the assembly of Jesus followers to whom James wrote. While that was happening the folks who couldn't afford Sunday best had to park in the back of the parking lot, got the coffee that had gone cold, and had to sit in the back under that broken vent that blows ice cold air and the speakers don't work. Some were made to feel comfortable and welcome while others were pushed aside and unseen.

Now, as a church that professes to be welcoming to all people we could hunker down here on this bit about favoritism for a while if we wanted to, but for today it's the wider picture I want us to see. Yes, the community was inequitably hospitable, but it was that observation that caused James to ask, "Do you even believe in Christ?" Whoa, whoa, whoa! That's taking it a bit far, don't you think? We aren't perfect in the way we welcome people? We like being around the well-dressed folks more than we like sitting near you-know-who who clearly hasn't *showered in a while*. We're not perfect, we get it. We're human. Is that a reason to call the entirety of our faith into question!? Yes, of course we believe in Christ! We believe...[name some things mentioned earlier].

You see though, the problem with the community's favoritism wasn't just inequitable treatment on the face of it, but the fact that that behavior was vastly disresonant with what they *professed* to believe. They formed a community around the worship of one who *preferred* to be with the vulnerable, who showed favoritism to the poor, whose dear mother sang before he was born, "you have brought down the powerful, and lifted up the lowly." While worshiping him they were doing the opposite! They were giving preference to the rich and ignoring the poor. No wonder James asked, "Do you even believe!?"

You see, the crazy idea James was peddling was the thought that an earnest, deeply held belief would actually impact the way one lives in the world. He thought that an earnestly believed proposition would necessarily turn into action. Real beliefs will manifest themselves in physical space and time. A community who expresses faith in the one who raised up the lowly would probably find a way to ensure equality in their gatherings. A person who professes that God is about reconciliation would work hard not to hold grudges. A church that believes people are made in the image of God would almost certainly stop trying to force God into the image of humanity. A person who believes God loves peace might try to learn a thing or two about nonviolence. James thought, as do I, that while professing what one believes about God is important at times, one can also tell a lot about what a person or a community believes by the way they live their lives.

So in a few moments when our time of worship is through for now and we turn toward those doors that carry us back to our individual lives, back out into the world the question will still be before us, “What do you believe about God?”