

Big Shoes to Fill
Acts 15:1-35 (esp 13-21)
Series: The Walk – The Life of James Week 3 Learner and Leader
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It was 5th grade at Quarry Hill Elementary School. When the class assignments came out, I realized for the second year in a row, I was placed in the class with the teacher I wanted the least. But I figured 4th grade ended up being pretty good so maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

I can't remember all the details. But my grades were never good enough. I didn't try as hard as Mrs. Gordon thought I should, and she actually told me one day I had an overinflated opinion about myself. Then, there was the food fight. I like to think it resembled the famous "Animal House" food fight, but it was probably just a few of us got into an altercation throwing noodles at each other. Naturally, I was the only one that was caught in the act. When I was questioned and told to reveal the names of the others who were involved, I refused. Her next comment explained to me why 5th grade wasn't going the way I thought it would. She said, "I expected better of Nancy Burgess's brother." Nancy was a better student, applied herself more, and I don't remember her ever getting in trouble at school.

Trying to follow in somebody's footsteps is never an easy trail to take. It makes me wonder how difficult it must have been for James to follow Jesus. **Those** are big shoes to fill.

Today we are wrapping up the "The Walk", a three-week series on James' Journey of Faith. Week one was about James the Skeptic – Critic and Curious. Last week, Doug described the transition to Faithful and Follower – James the disciple. But James doesn't stop there. He follows Peter as the head of the church in Jerusalem. Today, we'll be looking at James the Leader.

Some of you might be thinking this is the week that doesn't apply to you. Maybe you were once a critic, or were at least curious about the faith. Our church is in the process of changing the way we define our congregation – from a member to a disciple. Most of us can identify with that. We are following Jesus and trying to be faithful. But a leader? No, no, no. Doug is the leader. I'm just trying to do my part. Well, I hate to be the one to have to tell you this, but you are a leader. And so are you, and you, and yes, you. We all have unique callings and lead in some way. The problem is we often identify a leader as someone in position of power – the CEO, President, Director, Pastor. These are titles. A leader is someone who leads. If you can teach somebody to do something, show the way forward, be an inspiration – you are a leader. It could be at church or in government. Maybe at work or school. Home, or on the street. If you don't think you're a leader, think a little harder. James was a leader just like you and me.

It is in the Galatians letter where Paul's writing identifies the status accorded to James. His first trip to the leaders in Jerusalem is described in chapter 1, verses 18-20.

¹⁸ Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas^[a] and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰ I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. Galatians 1:18-20.

At this point in time the three men noted here are already deep in their roles. Cephas, or Peter, is primarily responsible for bringing the gospel to the Jewish believers. Paul has been chosen to share the good news with Gentiles. And James is rising in status in the leadership of the Church in Jerusalem. Fourteen years after his first trip to Jerusalem, Paul returns;

⁶ As for those who were held in high esteem—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not show favoritism—they added nothing to my message. ⁷ On the contrary, they recognized that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised, ^[b] just as Peter had been to the circumcised. ^[c] ⁸ For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles. ⁹ James, Cephas ^[d] and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰ All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along. Galatians 2:6-10

Here we see one of the important characteristics of a good leader. Delegating responsibility. I've heard it said in the business world that a good boss always tries to hire somebody smarter than they are. Or can do the job better. James, Peter, and John recognized Paul and Barnabas were better equipped to bring the gospel to the Gentiles and gave them the authority to do so.

However, leadership is not always the same thing as righteousness. In the years since the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, James has indeed grown into his leadership role. But here we see one of the big differences between these brothers, and why the elder's shoes are so hard to fill. Jesus had no sin. And he didn't make mistakes. There were many times when his follower's thought Jesus was wrong, and in every instance, we look back and see it was never Jesus who is wrong. It is often Peter and sometimes Thomas. It is certainly Judas. And yes, it is even James.

Paul Opposes Cephas

¹¹ When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. ¹³ The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. Galatians 2:11-13

The reason Paul is so angry at Peter's actions is because they are in direct opposition to the gospel Paul is sharing. The good news says Jesus's death and resurrection has given us all grace. The grace isn't any different between Jew and Gentile. But it appears James sent men with a message to Peter for him to eat only with Jewish Christians, and not the Gentiles. That creates the possibility for the first division in the new Faith.

The good news is that James is not just a Leader. He remains a Learner as well, and we see this unfold during the Council of Jerusalem, probably in the year 50 AD. Paul and Barnabas lead a group to speak with the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem. The question is whether a person must be circumcised to be saved. Paul and Barnabas argue against that requirement. A group of

Pharisees, who are believers, insist the Law of Moses and the law of circumcision must be followed. Peter then speaks up and points out three very important points.

1. God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles just as he gave to the Christian Jews
2. The Jewish people were never able to follow the law in a way that gave them salvation.
3. It is by the grace of Jesus we have all been saved.

Barnabas and Paul then shared the miraculous signs and wonders they had seen being performed among the Gentiles. But it is James, Leader, and Learner, not Peter, who responds.

¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon ^[a] has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ “After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, ¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’¹⁸ things known from long ago.

This comes out of the book of Amos ¹⁹ “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For the Law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.” - Acts 15:13-21

Here we see James displaying another characteristic of a good leader - Humility. He has learned from earlier mistakes and doesn’t continue insisting on circumcision for the Gentiles. Think about what that means. If James hadn’t made that change it is very possible, we wouldn’t be following Jesus today. The Christian might just be a subset of the Jewish community.

James’ leadership didn’t end there. He became a person everybody looked up to. The name given to him, James the Just, was a result of the reputation he earned from all in Jerusalem. We know this because of a writing outside of the bible. Around 93 or 94 AD Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote “The Antiquities.” In this writing he says a new High Priest, Ananus, was appointed around 62 AD. Regarding Ananus, he writes, “was also of the sect of the Sadducees, (23) who are very rigid in judging offenders, above all the rest of the Jews.” Josephus then writes, “so he assembled the Sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.” But Josephus also writes there are many upstanding citizens of Jerusalem who didn’t agree with Ananus’ decision to execute James. They lead the way to convincing King Agrippa to remove Ananus as High Priest.

In many ways, our faith responsibilities don’t change during our journey. We should still be:

- Reaching Up and Loving God – This can’t stop. Our relationship with God is built through our communication with him. Speaking, listening, and learning from him. It is as important for a leader as it is for the newly saved. It is probably more important as we

have responsibilities to others. Maybe that is a reason so many famous church leaders end up failing at some point. They get so busy with their responsibilities they don't have time for God. Think about your relationships with your friends, your family, your spouse. If you stop communicating, your relationship drifts. It's no different with God. Talk to him – Listen to him.

- Reaching In or Grow in Grace – Don't ever stop learning. The Bible is our manual, and it is a living, breathing guide book. I was reading John 21 a few weeks ago for my Friday morning group. It's the story of the 2nd miraculous fish catch and his asking Peter three times if Peter loves him. I don't remember ever reading verse 25 - Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. It doesn't matter how many times you read the bible. There is always something waiting for you.
- Reaching Out, and Share With Others – Starting next week we are going to begin the series called, "Faith *that* Works" on the Book of James – one of my favorite books. At some point I hope verse 22 in Chapter 1 will come up - ²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. The bible says, ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, - Matthew 28:19 Share your story with others. Let them see how Jesus has changed you.

If you've gotten nothing else out of The Walk, I hope you have seen the reason our faith is often described as a journey. We begin as novices, turn to believers, and hopefully become leaders.

Nicky Gumbel is a British priest/pastor. One of his most notable acts was creating the Alpha course, a 10-week study that is kind of an introduction to Christianity. During one of the sessions he uses an illustration to explain the journey. I'm borrowing it here but paraphrasing a bit. Let's imagine there is a chart next to me, showing where people in history are in their journey to Jesus. I'm guessing Hitler and maybe Stalin are somewhere down here. Maybe Billy Graham is around here. And Mother Theresa is probably here. We are all somewhere in here – hopefully closer to Mr. Graham and Mother Theresa. Now, let's expand that chart, and take it to the ceiling, and up to the tower. And let's just keep going, up and up. It is going to take a long time to reach the place where we can find Jesus. Our goal as disciples of Jesus is to strive to be like him. Now do you see how much more you need to do?