

May 6, 2018
James: Walking the Talk
James 2:14-26

1. Faith OR works?

Martin Luther, who championed the truth of salvation by faith and faith alone, never liked the letter of James. When Luther produced a German translation of the New Testament in 1522, he went so far as to put James in the appendix, calling it an "epistle of straw." Luther lived in a time when everyone believed that doing the right things was enough ... You believed all the right things (this was the time following the Spanish Inquisition and other attempts to keep the church pure – heretics were tortured, burned at the stake, or drowned), went to mass, and paid your indulgences for your sins.

Paul (Luther's preferred writer) lived in a similar culture. The Pharisees taught what you did saved you. You believed the right things, brought the right sacrifices, and followed all the right rituals. Paul and Luther emphasize you are saved by grace, NOT works/what you do (although Paul is more nuanced). It was a good corrective for their times.

The big divide between world religions (including offshoots from Christianity) is between those that teach we must **do things** to please God, and those that teach we cannot please God; **it is only by God's good pleasure – or His grace – that we're saved.**

The first group of religions teach that **we have to do** things to please God. We have to earn our salvation. We must be good enough for God. Something in the human psyche resonates with that. If we work hard enough and become good enough, we earn favour with God. That's only fair. It's right. It appeals to our egos. This includes Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, Sikhism, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses ...

The other way is to teach we can do nothing to please God. We cannot earn our salvation. We can never be good enough. We cannot save ourselves; **only God's gracious love saves us.** This isn't nearly as attractive to our egos. It doesn't seem fair. What religions belong to this group? Only one: Christianity.

Christianity – and only Christianity – emphasizes that we can never do enough to please God. We are saved by faith and faith alone. That's humbling. It's hard on our egos. It's the uniquely good news of the Christian faith. This is one of the main reasons I believe in Jesus. His message is unique. It's humbling. It's unhuman-nature-ish. What person would have ever invented that? It's also so honest. At the end of the day, none of us can be perfect. None of us is ever good enough. None of us has a hope, apart from God's grace.

2. Faith WITH Works

James agrees 110%: good works don't save us. However, he argues that, if our faith is genuine, good works inevitably follow. Faith and works go hand in hand: "*What good is it,*

dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?"(2:14).

- Faith brings us to salvation.
- Living out that faith leads us to faithfulness in our actions.

Faith is the cause, a way of living ("good works") is the effect. (Paul agrees, *"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"*(Ephesians 2:8-10)).

James is writing to people who do believe in Jesus by faith. But they are responding to that new life in Jesus in different ways:

- Some have completely withdrawn from the world. These people claim that because they believed the right things, they could withdraw into themselves, and live lives of private righteousness, completely separate from the world.
- Some Christians say they believe, but don't want to change how they live. They believe in salvation by faith, but see no practical application of Jesus' love, mercy, and grace. They live lives of wild living or snobby judgement ... but they're "saved."

You can know all the right things about God and Christianity. You can believe salvation by faith. You can believe there is only one God and that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. But James says there's a problem if nothing in your life gives evidence of the faith you claim to have. It is good to know all about Jesus, but that has to change how we live. *"It is a good thing,"* C.L. Mitton writes, *"to possess an accurate theology, but it is unsatisfactory unless that good theology also possess you."*

The Bible consistently teaches if you truly love God, it will make a difference in your life.

3. Faith at Work THROUGH us

James writes, *"Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, 'Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well'—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless"*(2:15-17). Suppose, James says, you see a need and respond: *"Shalom"* (or *"God bless you!"* or *"Good luck!"*). The next phrase could be translated: *"Go find some clothes and some food."* If this were possible, wouldn't they have done it already? Or it could be translated: *"I hope you find some warm clothes and some food!"* In a sense, the person says, *"I'll pray for you – that you get what you need (but it won't be me who helps you)."* (Have you ever said, *"I'll pray for you ..."* in that kind of a way?)

James asks, *"What good is that kind of faith?"* How is that response Christian? How does it fit with the command, *"Love your neighbour as yourself?"* *"Now someone may argue, 'Some people have faith; others have good deeds.' But I say, 'How can you show me your*

faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds.' You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless?" (2:18-20). James holds nothing back. He says that if we believe all the right things but don't act on them, we are no better than a demon. My computer knows every Bible verse (in umpteen translations) but it is not Christian. The demons – Satan himself – know everything about God. Satan can quote chapter/verse better than the best of us. He knows the truth about salvation by faith, who Jesus is, and what the Holy Spirit can do in a person's life. But he's not a Christian. His actions prove quite the opposite.

He goes on to give two practical examples of people, whose actions breathed life into their faith ... *"Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was shown to be right with God by his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete. And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith." He was even called the friend of God. So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone"* (2:21-24).

James talks about another hero of the faith: Noah? Moses? David? No ... *"Rahab the prostitute is another example. She was shown to be right with God by her actions when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road. Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works"* (2:25-26).

"Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works," James emphasizes. "Faith" without practical expression, is like a lifeless corpse. The corollary is that faith with works is like a body, alive and energized. Paul loves to draw similar contrasts: life before faith and life after are different. Writing to the Christians in Galatia, he says, *"You don't have to do good works in order to be saved ... If you are trying to make yourselves right with God by doing all the right things, it isn't going to work! We are not saved by what we do! But what is important is faith expressing itself in love ... For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself. So I advise you to live according to your new life in the Holy Spirit ...*

"When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, your lives will produce evil results: sexual immorality, impure thoughts, eagerness for lustful pleasure, idolatry, participation in demonic activities, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, the feeling that everyone is wrong except those in your own little group, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other kinds of sin ...

"But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:1-23). Our faith changes who we are and thus how we live.

4. Seeing opportunities for Faith at Work

On a down home, practical note, here are some ideas ...

- a. **Go on a "Vision Quest."** Search for ways you can live your faith. Yes, part of this personal: look at your own life and ask God what needs to be dealt with, honestly, repent, and ask for His forgiveness. Then ask God to show you opportunities to share that same love, grace and mercy you have received with others. Sponsor a child to go to camp. Drop off some soup or a casserole to the person who is sick or just had a baby. Take time to listen – *really* listen – to a friend going through a difficult time. Ask God for eyes to see and ears to hear what HE is doing in your world, and jump in.
- b. **Get involved in the news.** None of us, single-handedly, can save the world. But we can make a difference in our little corner of the world. If there is an issue that you feel strongly about – camp, needy children, pregnancy counselling, affordable housing, refugees, environmental issues, recycling – whatever ... there are opportunities for you to get involved. The agencies that work with these needs are always looking for volunteers. Even if you can't physically get involved, pray for these organizations, make a donation, or offer practical help.
- c. **Families/friends that serve together ...** In the late 1980s a huge survey of Christian education was undertaken in the U.S. One of the surprising results was the impact on children of participating with their parents/friends in helping someone in need. Adults who could remember as a child (ages five to twelve) doing something for others with their parents/friends that made a difference were far more likely to stay involved in church and grow in their maturity as Christians than those who couldn't remember helping others.

*"The value of serving activities is clear. Not only does it benefit recipients, but it positively impacts the giver. Faith is enhanced, values shaped, and behaviours altered. The fact becomes obvious when Search Institute (the group who did the study), using a sample of thirty-three thousand ninth to twelfth graders, compared youth who serve to non-servers. The comparisons showed that serving youth are less likely to be involved in at-risk behaviours, more confident of their worth, stronger in their leadership skills, and better equipped for social situations. Significantly, serving youth are more likely to hold caring values and be open to receiving care from others" (M.P. Strommen in *Rethinking Christian Education*, 70).*

What can your family/friends do together?

When people who love Jesus begin to reflect that love through their lives, that love changes the world. In small ways - and surprisingly big ways - our service changes the world around us. We make the world a better place. People know we are Christians - by our love for one another, and by our love for our broken world. By our love for our neighbours. By our love for them. And the world is changed.