



Catalog No. 1545

James 2:14-26

Fifth Message

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September 3rd, 2006

FAITH AND DEEDS WORKING TOGETHER

SERIES: FAITH THAT WORKS

It's been my privilege these past few weeks to bring to you the word of God as expressed through the book of James. I appreciate the direct way in which Pastor James writes and the practical nature of what he has to say.

In just the first chapter and a half we have seen that genuine faith endures trials, asks for wisdom, resists temptation, controls one's tongue, looks after orphans and widows in their distress, keeps oneself unpolluted by the world, avoids favoritism, and loves one's neighbor as oneself. This fruitfulness is evidence that we have heard and accepted the implanted word and continue to do what it says.

James has also made clear the danger of self-deception regarding faith. It's easy to believe our faith is something that it is not. James minces no words about the dangers of bogus faith and the true nature of authentic faith. Our passage today will be no different. In an effort to help his readers recognize the difference between authentic and bogus faith, James gives four illustrations. The first two demonstrate what authentic faith is not; the second two demonstrate what authentic faith truly is.

We begin by looking at verses 14 through 17 of chapter 2.

The "faith" of just words 2:14-17

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? (James 2:14-16 NIV)

James begins his discussion on faith by asking two pointed questions: "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" He answers his own questions by asking us to consider a certain scenario. Imagine a brother or sister in rags and starving comes to a man asking for help, and that man who claims to have faith offers nothing more than words. What good is his faith? Can that possibly be the kind of faith that saves a man?

The words sound good: "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed." They almost sound religious, like a prayer offered to God that he would somehow find a way to supply the need. The words seem to reflect personal concern,

but the response is completely lacking of anything the poor brother or sister really needs.

Sure, he claims to have faith, but his behavior is without Christian mercy or grace. If a person professes to have faith in God but does not love like God, then his proclamation is meaningless and does not reflect a heart that has been saved and transformed by God.

Genuine faith does not respond to a genuine need with mere words. True faith is alive and active. Like we see in the parable of the Good Samaritan, an active and loving faith involves, inconveniences and sacrifices itself for the benefit of another.

We must stop and ask why we fail to involve ourselves in the genuine needs of others. Is it because we feel we don't have the time, money and disposition to help? Is it because we don't want to have our busy schedule interrupted or our bank account shrunk? Is it because we don't consider ourselves well suited for acts of mercy or generosity? Surely someone else with the gift of mercy will come along soon and help. Helping someone in need is often messy and involved and personal. It requires us to step out in faith and depend on the Lord to supply what we lack.

James consistently speaks of deeds as moral actions that are taken because of one's faith, and therefore demonstrate and authenticate that faith. He is not insisting that works must be added to faith, but that saving faith includes works. It's the very nature of genuine faith to express itself in loving action. We are not saved by our works, but we are created to do good works.

The apostle Paul agrees: "For 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" (Eph 2:8-10).

What a blessing that many of the opportunities we have to care for others were designed specifically by our Heavenly Father to bring him glory. The good deeds we do have no value in bringing us into a saving relationship with God, but once that relationship is established and his Spirit lives within us, then obedience is a natural and essential expression of our faith.

This kind of faith in action is what we find in the description of the early church, found in the book of Acts: “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need” (2:44-45). “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had” (4:32-35). The early Christians simply had an intolerant attitude towards want. None of their possessions were held back if that might meet the need of a brother or sister.

Words, whether in sermons, prayers, confessions of faith, wise advice or encouragement are important elements of our Christian faith, but they are shown to have real meaning when actions correspond to our words.

The apostle John also encourages us to demonstrate this kind of faith and love: “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world’s goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?” Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:16-18).

James gives his verdict on a faith that is just words in verse 17.

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (2:17)

Faith without deeds is not weak or immature, it is dead. If a brother or sister comes to us cold and hungry and leaves the same way, what good is our faith? It is no good, says James. Can it save? Absolutely not. That kind of faith is lifeless, unresponsive and impotent.

James gives a second example of bogus faith in verses 18 and 19.

The “faith” of demons 2:18-19

“But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (2:18-19).

James addresses here an imaginary critic who proposes that faith and deeds are actually separate entities. He suggests that you can have faith without deeds: “You have faith, I have deeds”. But James challenges the authenticity of that kind of faith: “Show me what faith looks like apart from deeds. Give it a try.”

James knows it is impossible to show genuine faith without the authenticating evidence of genuine obedience. So what does faith without deeds look like? Like the belief of demons, says James. Their brand of faith is nothing more

than an intellectual belief in God’s existence. Demons believe there is one God, but they do not submit to him. Their belief does not affect their will or transform their character. They do not love and do not obey God. They are simply afraid of God.

Genuine Christian faith is not just a belief that God exists; it is giving ourselves over to him in heart, soul, strength, and mind. Faith without submission to Christ’s lordship is not saving faith at all. If we think that simply believing God exists is the same as authentic Christian faith, then we are in very dangerous company. That kind of faith is no better than demon faith.

James gives two illustrations why authentic faith and deeds cannot be separated. A faith that is merely verbal is useless and dead, and a merely intellectual faith is no better than the faith of demons.

Genuine faith is evidence of a transformed heart, demonstrated in humble obedience to God. It is this kind of faith in action that James turns to next.

The faith of Abraham 2:20-24

You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor 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 justified by what he does and not by faith alone. (2:20-24)

The first example of genuine faith is found in the life of Abraham. Genesis 22 describes how God tested the patriarch’s faith by asking him to take his beloved and only son Isaac and sacrifice him as a burnt offering.

The promises of God, that Abraham would have an abundance of descendants and be a blessing to the whole world, depended on this one boy, and yet Abraham bound Isaac and laid him on the altar. When Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son, the angel of the Lord called out to him, “Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son” (Gen 22: 11-12).

The book of Hebrews reveals the mind of Abraham at that moment: “He reasoned that God could raise the dead” (Heb 11:19). Abraham trusted the Lord. He had faith in God and so he acted in obedience to him. Abraham showed his faith by his deeds. It was his faith in God that resulted in his righteous behavior.

James stresses the close relationship between Abraham's faith and his actions: his "faith and actions were working together." Not only did his faith have an effect on his actions, his actions had an effect on his faith. His faith "was made complete by what he did." His faith was deepened and strengthened by his active obedience to the will of God.

Our faith grows and matures as we actively obey the Lord and experience his faithfulness first-hand. Not only are our deeds a product of our faith, our faith is made complete by our deeds.

The apostle John wrote something similar: "if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (1 John 4:12). God's love finds full expression when we respond to his love with love toward others. So also, James suggests, Abraham's faith found full expression when he obeyed God in spite of the difficult circumstances.

An indication of the intimacy that Abraham enjoyed with his Heavenly Father is reflected in that he was justified before God and called his "friend" on account of his deep faith and practical obedience.

There is the perception of many that James and Paul are in disagreement when it comes faith and deeds. Some think that James contradicts Paul's emphasis that we are saved not by deeds but by faith and faith alone (Rom 3:28). James does not argue for action instead of faith, or even action above faith, but for faith and action working together to express the love and will of God.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians is in agreement with James that genuine faith expresses itself in loving deeds: "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Gal 5:4-6).

Abraham's faith and actions "worked together" and demonstrated the integrity and authenticity of his faith.

The second example of genuine faith is found in verse 25.

The faith of Rahab 2:25

"In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction. (2:25)

The story of Rahab is told in the second chapter of the book of Joshua. There we read that she was a Canaanite woman with a checkered past. Rahab was a prostitute living in Jericho who had heard of God's mighty acts on behalf

of Israel and became convinced that the Lord God was the one true God, the "God in heaven above and on the earth below" (Joshua 2:11). So when spies from Israel came into Jericho and knocked on her door asking for refuge, Rahab in that very dangerous moment acted out her faith in God and sheltered them in her home.

She hid the spies from the searching eyes of the king, and eventually helped them escape by lowering them on a rope through a window in her home. She trusted in the Lord and his people, that they would spare her and her family when the men of Israel returned to overtake the city.

Like Abraham, Rahab demonstrated her faith to be genuine and righteous because that faith was joined with action. Her faith is in direct contrast to the "dead" faith of the individual in verses 15-16 who refused to give aid to those in need. Unlike that man, Rahab did not tell the ones in need, "Please go away." "I hope you get what you need and don't get caught. I'll say a prayer for you." Instead, Rahab put her life in God's hands. She trusted the Lord with everything she had: her house, her resources and her personal safety. This is living faith.

Rahab was different from Abraham in almost every way but one. They were both declared righteous because their faith was made evident in their actions. The contrast is deliberate and provocative. Anyone is capable of acting on his or her faith in God – whether a patriarch or a prostitute.

The deeds of Abraham and Rahab were not done apart from faith, but done in faith. Their faith and deeds were working together for the glory of God and his kingdom.

In verse 26, James concludes his exhortation by reiterating his central point.

Faith without deeds is dead 2:26

"As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (2:26)

Faith without deeds is a meaningless, useless, powerless, lifeless impostor. As unity of body and spirit is required for life, so too is the unity of faith and deeds necessary to express the life and love of God.

For many of us, our initial response to a passage like this is to feel either proud of our record of good deeds or guilty about what we have not done. We must remember that if we are "in Christ" we are called not to boast in our good works, but only in the good work of Christ on our behalf. It is because of his merciful work on the cross that we are saved and transformed by grace and able to do good works.

And because we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ we are not to wallow in despair over our sin and failures, but to go to our Heavenly Father and confess our inadequacy and depravity. By his rich mercy and great love

we are forgiven and set free to love others as he has loved us.

The obedience we render to God is not meritorious obedience, but responsive obedience. We obey, not as those who are trying to merit salvation, but as those who have already received salvation and respond by giving our whole lives up to the Lord as an act of worship.

So instead of feeling the need to rush out in a frenzy of activity searching for good deeds to do, let us take an honest look at our heart. If our heart is truly transformed and enlivened by the Spirit of God, then his life and love will flow from us. Being precedes doing. We will love others if his love fills us.

We don't have to look far to find opportunities for our faith and actions to work together for God's glory. Abraham's opportunity involved a close family member. Rahab's opportunity came when she opened the door of her home.

Consider putting your faith in action where it may be the most difficult – in your immediate circle: your spouse, children, parents, friend, neighbor, boss, co-worker. Begin with your eyes open and a heart sensitive to the needs and hurts of those whom God places in your life. Slow down enough to ask probing questions and then be ready with an attentive hear to all that is being said, and all that is not being said. Don't be afraid to offer your help and to get involved. Step out in faith in the Lord and rely on his resources. Be patient, compassionate and steadfast, even if it gets messy and involves sacrifice.

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). The good news that is the gospel is that Jesus not only spoke those words, he lived them.

Hearing these words from James about authentic faith, perhaps you have come to realize that your faith is not genuine, that you are not a Christian, that your faith is not what you thought it was. Maybe your faith has been just words, or merely an intellectual agreement to the truth about God, but you have not given your heart and your life completely over to him. Know that he sees you just as you are and he loves you.

It doesn't matter whether our pedigree is closer to Abraham or Rahab. Our past does not define us, nor must it condemn us. Salvation is available to all. All of us are invited to participate in the life, love and forgiveness offered by our Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ his son. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16-17).

Our Heavenly Father yearns for intimacy with each and every one of us. Let us spend time in prayer before the Lord, confessing our sin and thanking him for the gift of salvation and forgiveness offered to us through his son Jesus Christ. Let us offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

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