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James 2:14-26

Sixth Message

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A FAITH THAT WORKS

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

There is a story told about a blind rabbit and a blind snake who met in a forest. Both are extremely curious as to what they look like and what they are. Due to their blindness, however, they cannot describe each other's appearance. The snake has an idea. He says to the rabbit, "If we feel each other, we can describe what it is we feel, and that may give us some indication as to what we are." The blind rabbit agrees, and asks the snake to go first. As the snake feels the rabbit, he says: "You are very furry, and you have rather large ears. Your back feet are very large, while your front feet are much smaller, and you have a small tuft of a tail." Even before the snake can finish his description, the rabbit exclaims: "I must be a rabbit!" He is quite excited at this new-found knowledge. Then the rabbit begins to feel the snake. He describes what he feels: "You are very long and slender, with hardly a hair on you. In fact, you are very scaly. And you have a very interesting tongue. Why, it's forked." "Oh, no," says the blind snake, as he realizes what this description means. "I'm a minister!"

No matter who we think we are, some would describe us much differently than we describe ourselves. Oftentimes our perception of ourselves is warped, especially when it comes to the Christian life. For example, if you were asked to describe your Christian faith, would what you say be consistent with the way you act?

In our studies in the letter of James we come now to one of the most difficult texts in the New Testament, both to understand and apply. This is the text that caused Martin Luther to throw out the book of James from the New Testament, because he had a difficult time finding this letter to be consistent with the book of Romans.

The theme of this book of James deals with how Christians should respond to the pressure of injustice and the heartache of suffering. Trials test our faith. They can evoke within us emotions to revenge, lust, greed, doubt and anger. But James calls Christians to purity instead of sin, joy instead of despair, prayer instead of confusion, quietness instead of anger. He exhorts us to actions that are consistent with our speech, to be "doers of the word."

Our text today summarizes what James has been talking about since the second half of chapter one. Chapter 2, verses 14-26:

What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may well say, "You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;

and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works, when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (James 2:14-26 NASB)

The issue raised by this text concerns the matter of hypocrisy in terms of faith and works. Our speech makes a statement about our faith, but our actions speak louder—and sometimes our speech and actions don't say the same thing.

Let us begin by asking the question, what is faith? The word comes from the noun form of the verb "to believe." Everyone has a faith, a system of belief which influences the way they live. Christians, for example, believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for their sin. If we accept the benefits of that death for ourselves, we are saved unto eternal life. We believe that God has done everything for us. There is nothing we can add to Christ's sacrifice on our behalf to earn salvation for us.

But faith goes beyond even this. If we are in Christ, we believe that we are sons and daughters of God, with free access to the Father. We believe that we are part of one family whom God has chosen and has been calling out from the beginning of time. In Christ, we believe that we will be glorified with him and that we will share the nature of the Father. We believe that though we might have to suffer, that all of life is a gift from the Father who will ultimately fulfill his promise in us.

And what are "works?" In the context of this letter, the word is not referring to obeying certain laws or rules so that one can earn salvation. "Works" here are deeds of love and compassion that spring forth and flow out of a genuine faith in God. The examples that James has already given include care for orphans and widows, equal treatment for both poor and rich, and giving food to the hungry and clothes to the naked. "Works" also includes acts of obedience to God's will, e.g., "keeping oneself unstained by the world." These actions do not produce salvation, they are the results of salvation. They are not what grant us entry into the family of God, they are the results of being in the family of God. Works are a natural by-product of our identity in Christ. They are like the fruit of the Spirit: they give evidence of genuine faith. As the apostle Paul writes in Eph 2:10: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

A problem arises, however, when the faith we profess and the deeds we perform are not consistent with one another. It is religious hypocrisy for one person to say, "I have faith, but no works," while another person claims, "I will show you my faith by my works." In the context of this letter, we have seen that when we come under pressure, we sometimes resort to living as if we had no relationship

with God. We forget our identity in Christ. We know the truth intellectually, but we panic when we come under pressure and start running our own lives again, apart from God. If this is true of us, we may say we have faith, but our actions do not demonstrate the evidence that validates our words.

James is asking whether this kind of faith is valid. Is it professed faith or demonstrated faith that is important? For example, say someone claims to be a football player but in actuality he is not. Does merely claiming to be a football player make him one? Or if someone claims to be a movie star, does the fact that he claims that make him a movie star? Say you plant what you think is an orange tree, but after a couple of years the tree produces lemons. What kind of tree is it, an orange tree or a lemon tree? What if someone says he has faith in Jesus and believes in God, but there is no evidence of that faith? Is it what he says or what he does that validates his Christianity?

This newspaper clipping about a recent religious survey is revealing:

A flurry of recent survey research has found that, contrary to the secularism of popular culture, Americans believe in God and identify themselves as strongly religious. But analysts who have studied the data say the spirituality of many Americans may be only skin-deep. One church historian comments: "Our biggest problem is not secular humanism, but interest in religion that doesn't turn into commitment in everyday life...only about half of that 86 per cent majority identifying with Christian denominations in the survey has any sort of ongoing participation in a body of believers. For the others, religion seems to be an ungraspable, utterly private and practically invisible thing in their lives...the faith of many Americans is a vague, oblong blur...no more than a warm tingle in the bathtub." Another historian comments: "This outward expression of belief is not to be mistaken for religious devotion. Americans by historical habit wear religion on their sleeve, almost as part of national patriotic ideal, to a greater extent than almost any other society."

The message of James certainly applies to American Christianity.

This brings us to James' question, in verse 14, "What good is this type of faith, a faith that lacks works?" To help us, he gives four characteristics of this kind of empty faith.

First, he says, it is no benefit (14). This kind of faith cannot save you. It cannot redeem your life; it cannot grant eternal life. This faith is simply intellectual lip-service. But God knows the heart. Not only does this type of faith bring no security for your eternal destiny, it is of no benefit to save you from the pressures of this life. It is powerless to change you or sustain you. It does not help you to be "quick to hear and slow to anger," to consider trials as "all joy," to love your neighbor as yourself.

Second, this kind of faith is no benefit to others (15-16). What use is it if a brother or sister comes to you and says they are without clothing or food, and you say, "Be warmed and be filled"? Furthermore, the one in need in the illustration is not just anyone, but a brother or sister in the family of God. What value is a faith that sees a simple need but does not meet it?

Third, this kind of faith cannot be demonstrated (18). Someone may say "I have faith," but he cannot say, "I will show you my faith by my works." A faith that does not work does not give evidence of something which is alive beneath the surface. A fruit tree produces

fruit, giving evidence that there is life in the invisible root structure underneath the ground. In the same way, good works demonstrate that there is genuine faith, that the life of God lives inside the heart of the one doing them.

Fourth, this kind of faith is no different from the faith of demons (19). The demons also believe that God is one. They know the truth about God. They even profess correct theological dogma. They recognize God as the sovereign Lord of the universe. They recognized Jesus when they encountered him on earth. They even shuddered before him. And yet they are not saved or transformed. They do not have an active, viable faith, the kind of faith that James is talking about.

Jesus had a few things to say about religious hypocrisy, as the following texts affirm: Matt 23:1:

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them. And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger." (Matt 23:1-4)

Matt 23:13:

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. ["Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, even while for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you shall receive greater condemnation.]" (23:13-14)

Matt 23:23:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others." (23:23)

I read where Brennan Manning and his wife were walking down Bourbon Street in New Orleans one day, when a 21-year-old girl approached them and pinned a flower on their jackets. She asked if they would like to make a donation to support her mission. When Brennan inquired what her mission was, she replied, "The Unification Church." He said, "Your founder is Doctor Sun Myung Moon, so I guess that means you're a Moonie?" "Yes," she said. She had two strikes against her. First, she was a pagan who did not acknowledge Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior; and second, she was a mindless, witless, naive, vulnerable kid who had been brainwashed by a guru and mesmerized by a cult.

"You know something, Susan?" Brennan said. "I deeply admire your integrity and your fidelity to your conscience. You're out here tramping the streets, doing what you really believe in. You are a challenge to anyone who claims the name 'Christian.'" "Are you a Christian?" she asked. "Yes," he replied. She lowered her head, and her tears began falling on the sidewalk. A minute later, she said, "I've been on my mission here in the Quarter for eight days now. You're the first Christians who have been nice to me. The others have either looked at me with contempt or screamed and told me that I was possessed by a demon. One woman hit me with her Bible."

What would we have done? As Christians, we may know a lot of truth, but faith is useless if it does not result in good works.

Faith should make itself visible in the lives of those who profess to believe. Faith should benefit ourselves and others. To help us, James gives two examples from the Old Testament of people who demonstrated visible faith, a faith that worked.

The first example is Abraham, the man of faith. God promised Abraham that through him would come a seed (Christ) who would bless all the nations of the earth. And God promised Abraham that he would be a father of many nations, and that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars of the heavens. Genesis 15 gives Abraham's response to the promises of God: "Abraham believed God, and this was reckoned to him as righteousness."

Abraham did not always act in faith, but he grew in faith. But James says that Abraham's faith was genuine, for when he was asked by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, he obeyed. In Genesis 22 we see that Abraham's faith was demonstrated and perfected. This was the conclusion of his journey of faith. His works did not add to or merit his salvation, they were the result of it. This is the text that caused such problems for Martin Luther. But James' words here do not contradict Paul's words in Romans. Paul points to the faith of Abraham when he deals with justification and the problem of legalism; James points to the faith of Abraham when he deals with sanctification and the problem of cheap grace. James says that Abraham was justified by a faith that worked.

Rahab, James' second example of faith, had a completely different story. She was a harlot, living in Jericho before the city fell to the nation of Israel. Two Israelite spies who were sent into the city arrived at her house. She wondered why it had taken so long for Israel to come. The Canaanites knew that the God of Israel was powerful, and they were fearful of Israel. Rahab had more faith than the nation! Lack of faith was the reason Israel wandered forty years in the wilderness. Rahab believed that the God of Israel was the true God, and that he was with Israel, and she acted on her faith by hiding the spies and protecting them from the Canaanites. She obeyed God in the face of danger. Rahab had a faith that worked, and that is why she is listed in the "hall of fame" of faith in Hebrews 11.

I recently received a letter from a young woman who was part of our singles group. She now lives now in Caracas, Venezuela, where she teaches school. The living conditions are dangerous, food is very expensive, and corruption is widespread, but she believes that God has called her there and also that he wants her to teach a Bible study. She writes about this study:

I feel really privileged that the Lord has trusted me with this. Last week I was having a lot of doubts whether I wanted to continue with this, because it's somewhat far from my house, in a dangerous area. I don't have dependable transportation, it's on a Monday (reality day), and there were only three people who showed up last week. Then after prayer one day I felt like the Lord told me, "If I could die for you, you could inconvenience yourself a little for my sheep. I love them like I love you." I realized that even if it were only one person that came, it would be worth it to the Lord; so I committed myself to Him in respect to it. The next day there were twelve people there! That was my confirmation.

Here is a young woman who has a faith that works.

James' conclusion is quite clear. He repeats it four times, in verses 17, 20, 24, 26, using two words to describe it. First, faith without

works is useless, empty and unproductive. It has no purpose or goal. Second, faith without works is dead. It is not alive and growing. James likens this kind of faith to a body without a spirit. It is like a corpse, an empty shell, with no life. A living person is made up of a spirit combined with a body. In the same way, genuine spiritual life is a combination of faith and works. Both elements are necessary for life. You can't separate the two. It is not faith and works, nor is it faith or works, but a faith that works.

This is a difficult issue to grapple with. Our last three studies have given me pause as I thought about caring for orphans and widows, loving the poor, and having the kind of faith that makes a difference. As we come now to the application of this text for our lives, I think it would be better to simply reflect on what it means for us, both individually and as a body, to listen to the Spirit of God and what he has to say to us, rather than being heavy-handed.

As I meditated on this passage, the following things came to mind.

First, we should not respond to this text by trying to stockpile good works so as to avoid feelings of guilt. God does not want us to define who we are by religious performance, to fake a good appearance so that it will seem as if we have genuine faith. This kind of response leads to legalism and self-righteousness, and if we fall for that approach, we will act out of our own resources. Good works should be a natural outgrowth of our faith—the fruits of our life. They are the very works of God himself, and they should flow out of the relationship that we have with him as his beloved children.

Second, it should not surprise us to see people who appear strong in their profession of faith drift away from the church. The text assumes that there will be spiritually dead people within the community of believers. We should not be alarmed by this. The sower sows the seed of the word, yes, but some seeds do not take root and grow.

Third, we must accept that faith takes time to grow and mature. There are many stories in the Bible about faith finally being perfected in some very weak, selfish and timid people. This is the story of Abraham, Jacob, David, Peter, and Paul. These are the stories of people who gave up control of their lives to believe something which is invisible and intangible. These are stories of people who come to believe in the ways of God, who valued friendship with God as being more important than success or popularity.

But that does not happen overnight. We fail many times. We try to do things in our own strength and we make fools of ourselves. And so we don't have to check on whether our own faith or someone else's faith is growing. We should encourage and love and cultivate the life of God within ourselves and others. Let us not forget that even our faith is a gift of God, and that he is at work within us. Remember that before the apostle Peter became a pillar of the church, he sank while trying to walk on water.

Fourth, the things that will complete and perfect our faith are the things that we will hate the most. The seed of faith which God plants within our hearts is often entombed in a hard, crusty, stubborn shell of humanity. It takes crisis, tragedy and pain to crack open that shell so that the life of faith might grow and blossom. We suffer and hurt, but in the process we find a life that is not of ourselves. As the apostle said, "we carry around in our body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus might be manifest in our mortal flesh."

We must have faith or we will perish. Situations will arise that are too difficult for us to understand or handle, and we seek to avoid them at all costs, but these are the things that perfect and complete what God has begun in us. Let us remember James' opening words: "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various kinds of trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its perfect work that you might be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Abraham's faith was perfected, and he was called the friend of God.

Fifth, having said all of this, we need to be challenged by verse 20 to recognize that there is a purpose and goal to our faith. Faith without works could be likened to a symphony orchestra that is forever rehearsing and tuning up, but never performing. We can come to church week in and week out, preparing ourselves to do something, claiming that once we get it all squared away we will start doing, but never putting into practice what we have been preparing. There is nothing wrong with getting squared away inside, but there is a time to act. I am the first to admit that I don't have all this worked out in my own life yet. At times I have feelings of loneliness, doubts and fear. I work with a group of pastors and elders who would say the same thing of themselves. We fail, we make mistakes, but that should not stop us from doing. Faith demands we act in obedience to the voice of God, despite our feelings.

Brennan Manning has a good word for us here:

In the past twenty years both psychology and religion have laid a strong emphasis on the primacy of being over doing. We are often reminded by pastor, therapist, and next-door neighbor, "It is not what you do that matters, it is who you are."...But what we do may be far more decisive and far more expressive of the ultimate truth of who we are in Christ than anything else...The one who talks, especially if he talks to God, can affect a great deal, but the one who acts really means business and has more claims on our attention. If you want to know what a person really believes, don't just listen to what he says, watch what he does...When being is divorced from doing, pious thoughts become an adequate substitute for washing dirty feet.

Jesus always backed up his words with actions. He must be our model here. He broke all the rules of tradition and reached out to love prostitutes and publicans, the headstrong Peters, the doubting Thomases. Jesus took on the role of a slave: He washed feet, he carried his cross to die. At times we will not feel like doing. We will not feel like loving an enemy. We will not feel like staying in a difficult marriage. We will not feel like forgiving someone who has ripped open our heart. We will not feel like helping a stranger who is filthy. But faith demands that we will respond, because that is what Jesus did for us. He has called us to a life of compassion and purpose. If he has not called us for this, then, James is asking, what use is the faith that he has given to us?

These are tough words. May God give us the grace to respond out of love for him, because he first loved us. And we cannot know the breadth of that love until we walk by faith.

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