



FAITH WORKS
James 2:14-26

The late Dr. Charles Allen, when he was pastor of United Methodism's largest church in Houston, Texas, shared, tongue-in-cheek, a survey he once made in his church:

- 10% of the members cannot be found
- 20% - never attend
- 25% - never pray
- 35% - never read the Bible
- 40% - never give financially to the church
- 70% - never attend Sunday evening service
- 75% - never assume any church task
- 85% - never invite anyone to church
- 95% - never win a soul to Jesus
- 100% - expect to go to heaven!**

It reminds me of the old black spiritual that goes, "Everybody talkin' about Heaven ain't necessarily going'."

Now, you can see why James included these twelve verses in his instruction manual on the relationship between faith and works. James writes to share that an authentic faith confession results in readily observable commitments.

Dr. William Barclay believes that the primary aim of James' writings in this epistle was not to write new truths, but to awaken Christians to the truths they already knew – but had forgotten - or chosen NOT to follow.

The followers of Jesus had allowed their faith expression to become idle. They were no longer an inspiration, providing illumination for others to see the Christ live in them. They had heard the great teachers and prophets of the Old Testament explain the relationship between doctrine and its application to everyday life and behavior, but they'd gotten lazy.

James knew what truth faith was, but his emphasis was on what true faith does. Even Martin Luther, who struggled with the Book of James for a long time because he thought it supported a work righteousness salvation, wrote, "Good works do not make a good man – but a good man does good works." James states the same thing in **verse 26** – "Faith without works is dead."

Before I go much further in this sermon, there is one major side road I must go down. There is no major difference here between Paul's teaching found in his various writings and the teaching of James found in our lesson today. We are not talking about a faith vs. works controversy. As the writers of the Bible study, **MASTERING THE BASICS**, state in their study of James: "The key issue for Paul is how one gains right standing before God – while for James, the issue is how one demonstrates to others the claim to have such right standing. Paul's focus is **inward**. It centers on a person's relationship with God. In contrast – James' focus is **outward**. It centers on relationships with other people. Paul writes about how **one begins** the Christian life – while James writes about how **one lives** the Christian life. The issue for James is sanctification."¹ You see, James is not talking about works as a **means to salvation**, but as a proof of faith. Paul's perspective is the **root** of our salvation, while James' perspective is the **fruit** of our salvation. With that out of the way – let's dig in.

FIRST, JAMES IS TEACHING US THAT REAL FAITH IS INVOLVED IN THE REAL WORLD – IT IS NOT INVISIBLE.

He gives us an example of the wrong attitude in **verses 15-16** when he writes, "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? In the same way, faith by itself – if not accompanied by action – is dead or idle."

James would agree with this statement written in the late 1970's by an anonymous Christian:

**I was hungry
and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger.
Thank you.
I was imprisoned
and you crept off quietly to your chapel in the cellar
and prayed for my release.
I was naked
and in your mind, you debated
the morality of my appearance.
I was sick
and you knelt and thanked God for your health.
I was homeless
and you left me alone to pray.
You seem so holy,
so close to God.
But I'm still hungry and lonely and cold.**

Yes, James urges Christians to pray, but Christians pray in order to immerse themselves in the presence of God – so they then can **engage themselves** in the purposes of God. Remember, in **Chapter 1:26-27**, James has already hinted as to

what real religion is made of. Now he reminds us what it is to live it out. You know electricity when you touch it. It has power and a charge. That is what James says is to be said of a follower of Christ. You know the source of their power.

SECOND, OUR FAITH NEVER EXISTS IN ISOLATION – IT IS INCARNATIONAL.

Our faith commitment to Jesus Christ, while deeply personal, is never private. G. K. Chesterton was absolutely correct when he said, “A man can no more possess a private religion - than he can possess a private sun, moon or stars.”

Every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we declare – give us this day **OUR** daily bread – not give me this day MY daily bread. We are reminded that our “bread” must never come at the expense of any other human being on the face of the earth. We are reminded that we are part of a larger community of faith and humanity.

Here at EUMC, we do our best **never to allow** anyone in our church fellowship to go hungry! Last week at our Administrative Board meeting I shared how important our Pastor’s Discretionary Fund has been to our church family.

Genuine faith is never indifferent, but always looking for a place to be involved. We put our love into action! As Dwight Moody once said, “We put the gospel message into shoe leather or boots!” This is why we take the “One Great Hour of Sharing” offering – which is in your church envelope box for today.

THIRD, BELIEF IS CONFIRMED BY BEHAVIOR.

In **verses 18-20**, James says, “Yes, you believe – but even the demons believe.” What are the results of your beliefs? There is a BIG difference in believing there is a God – **and placing faith and trust IN God**. You see demons can recite scriptures and be awestruck, but demons are not saved. There is no partnership or relationship between their godly beliefs and their behavior. They know ABOUT being transformed, but they are not transformed.

As the evangelist, Luis Palau, writes, “Just reading the Bible doesn’t mean you are a Christian. When Karl Marx was seventeen years old, he wrote a fantastic explanation of part of John’s gospel. Great theologians agree with much of what he said, but Karl Marx eventually rejected the Bible’s authority and during his adult life, called himself an atheist, a communist – anything but a Christian.

“And Nikita Khrushchev, the former premier of the USSR, read the Bible when he was a boy. Yet later, he made it his ambition to bury the church in the Soviet Union by 1965. Instead, he is buried and the Russian Church continues to grow!

“Read the bible all you can . . . Since it is God’s word, we can trust it completely. But remember, just reading the Bible won’t make you a Christian.”²

It is when we put our faith into practice that we show exactly what kind of faith it is. Is it **saving faith** or a self-centered faith? Since we believe in God, we must watch our tongues and help the poor.

FOURTH, WORKS ARE AN EXPRESSION OF FAITH.

Can you imagine Moses saying, “Lord, I believe what you say about the Egyptian treatment of the Jews, but surely you don’t expect me to go, do you?” God is more than a mental image and asset. He empowers us to act in human history. There is a correlation between our confession and our conviction.

Anthony DeMello, whose inspirational stories have been read by millions, has written this incisive first-person story:

On the street, I saw a small girl, cold and shivering in a thin dress, with little hope for a decent meal. I became ANGRY and said to God, “Why did you PERMIT this?” For a while, God said nothing. That night, He replied quite suddenly, “I certainly DID something about it. I made YOU!”

This is exactly what James is sharing in this lesson.

In **verses 20-26**, James demonstrates how ridiculous it would have been for Abraham and Rahab to have faith – but never to act upon that faith.

A Salvation Army preacher was greeting parishioners at the door of his meeting house on Easter Sunday. He said to one man, “I want you in the army of the Lord!”

“I am in the army of the Lord,” came the reply.

“Then why do I only see you at Christmas and Easter?”

With a twinkle in his eye, the man said, “**Because I am in the secret service!**”

James knew the Christian faith was not a call to be in the secret service but to be in the everyday world of God’s service. He had heard his half-brother, Jesus, challenging the people of faith to be **salt, light and leaven**. The world needs salty Christians – we already have enough faulty ones!

The Roman Emperor, Hadrian, was concerned about the growing Christian movement so he asked a secular journalist to write about what he observed. He wrote:

They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother. They don’t consider themselves brothers in the usual sense,

but brothers instead, through the Spirit, in God.

Thank God their faith was alive and kicking. Thank God they were not part of the secret service.

FINALLY, FAITH AND WORKS ARE INTERWOVEN TOGETHER, LIKE TWO SIDES OF A COIN.

The famous Methodist missionary, E. Stanley Jones, once wrote, “An individual gospel without a social gospel is a soul without a body, and a social gospel without an individual gospel is a body without a soul. One is a ghost and the other is a corpse.”

I hold in my hand a quarter. Imagine if it were imprinted only on one side. It would be worthless – a counterfeit. James is saying the same thing about a faith that produces no works.

I close today by sharing the example of one man whose faith worked to save a nation. The 18th century was one of the worst chapters in the life of the great city of London, England. There were 30,000 homeless children on the streets of London. Alcoholism destroyed many a family unit. Animals were tortured for sport by the rich. Factory workers were chronically misused – and the prison system was a disgrace to such a civilized society.

A secular historian wrote a book entitled: **ENGLAND BEFORE AND AFTER THE MINISTRY OF JOHN WESLEY**. He concluded that it was the ministry of John Wesley that literally saved Great Britain from the bloody revolution that took place in France. This secular historian who had no connection to the Christian faith said, “John Wesley restored to England its soul.” John Wesley not only preached the gospel – he lived it. Faith does work when it is deeply rooted in the power and purposes of God. Fruit just comes when it is the result of a life lived for God.

May God give us grace so to be and so to do.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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ENDNOTES

¹ Lyman Coleman and Richard Peace, **MASTERING THE BASICS**, Serendipity House, The Book of James, 1986, page 34.

² From **“Preaching,”** January – February, 1993 edition, page 77.