

JAMES: FAITH THAT WORKS

Talk Is Cheap

James 2:14-26

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This morning it's our privilege to have Isa Martinez read for us. I've asked Isa to read verses 14-17 of James chapter 2 from The MESSAGE Paraphrase.

Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?

I've titled today's sermon, "Talk Is Cheap," and in the verses Isa read, James points to the absurdity of a religion that expresses itself in words that don't match our actions. I hope you were here last week or if you weren't physically present that you took the opportunity to watch or listen to Pastor John King and his wife, Cindy's, sermon. They did a fantastic job!

John was actually scheduled to preach this morning on the passage I'm preaching from and I was going to visit another church as part of my ministry with our conference. After I preached the first sermon in this series 2 weeks ago, John came up to me after the service and offered to write some thoughts regarding caring for orphans and widows, based on the ministry he and Cindy have embraced for over 30 years. I told him I'd appreciate he and Cindy's insights and then I asked, "Would you be able to preach next Sunday on the 23rd, rather than on the 30th. John did some shuffling of his plans and I arranged to switch my church visit, so John could preach last week, and I'm glad I did. John and Cindy preached with authority, because their walk matches their talk. They challenged us to notice and care for the powerless, and they were able to do that effectively because their walk matches their talk.

Look again at James chapter 2 verse 17: *"Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead."* James 2:17 James doesn't hold back at all with that statement. It's very straight forward and difficult to explain away...and yet, James felt the need to challenge his readers with that truth and you and I and Jesus' Church at large, also needs that challenge today...But it hasn't always been that way.

As Cindy pointed out last week, the Old Testament is filled with reminders by the prophets and priests of Israel to care for the poor, foreigners, orphans and widows, and those who have been marginalized. God's people often didn't get it right, but they couldn't escape the challenge. Throughout much of history, followers of Jesus have been known as those who cared for the poor and hurting of society. We have accounts in the first centuries after Jesus' death of Christians' commitment to caring for the poor and sick and hurting, while the rest of society ignored these marginalized people. Through the centuries, followers of Jesus established hospitals and orphanages and established ministries that cared for the sick, orphans, prisoners and others who were oppressed and on the fringes of society. Again, Christians didn't always get it right, but there are many examples of when they fulfilled the call of God, his prophets, Jesus and the New Testament writers.

But in the late 1800s and early 1900s a split occurred in the Church. One part of the Church became convinced that the preaching of the Gospel, missions work and evangelism were being relegated to lesser status, behind meeting basic human needs like food, shelter, clothes and jobs. Another part of the Church reacted against the focus on evangelism and preaching the Gospel that didn't give sufficient attention to meeting basic human needs. These tensions had probably always existed—in fact, we see it in James' words about faith and works—but the split became more obvious in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One camp in the Church became known as the liberal or progressives and the other as the conservative or fundamentalists. Throughout much of the 20th Century this divide in the Church became increasingly pronounced, but my sense is that in the 1970s and 80s the more conservative side of the Church—where the Brethren in Christ and McBIC have landed historically—began to embrace what I would call a more holistic Gospel that coupled evangelism with meeting basic human needs. In conjunction with this shift, ministries that focused on justice and mercy were started throughout the conservative wing of the church. We see this at McBIC in ministries like Peace Promise, At The Cross Recovery, Our Father's Hope, Eternal Hope and more recently, 180 Ministries that have begun here over the past 10-15 years. Church historians might quibble over the dates I've assigned, but I feel pretty confident my analysis is accurate in broad brush strokes.

2 weeks ago I mentioned that the letter of James hasn't always been readily accepted as Scripture because James' view of faith has been seen by some as contradicting the Apostle Paul's writing in New Testament letters like Romans and Galatians. The well-known reformer

Martin Luther struggled to accept James' emphasis on human works. Luther, a Medieval priest, was tormented by his inability to achieve salvation through his works, or to see his life transformed by working harder at it. As a devout priest, Luther had tried everything—fasting, good works, physically harming himself to subdue the flesh—and nothing worked. When he encountered the truth of Romans 1:17, *"The righteous will live by faith,"* Romans 1:17 Luther came to understand that it was God's grace and the faith we place in Him that transforms us. With all due respect to Luther, the Father of the Protestant Reformation, Luther missed the fact that the "faith" James refers to wasn't opposed to works or action. The "faith" James writes about is a hollow shell—a faith that isn't substantial because it isn't real. I think this distinction will be evident to you as I read today's passage, James chapter 2 verses 14-26...

James 2:14-26

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

²⁰ You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ 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. ²⁴ You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

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? ²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

James isn't setting up a dichotomy between our belief in God and how we live our lives. He doesn't see faith and works as mutually exclusive. He's challenging followers of Jesus with the understanding that our walk should match our talk, and that talk by itself, apart from action is cheap.

In support of his argument, James uses 3 examples. First. In verse 19 he points out that even Demons believe in God, but their belief doesn't compel them to follow and submit to Him,

their belief makes them quake in fear. James 2:17 Knowledge or belief or faith that's not followed through on doesn't amount to anything worthwhile.

Next James points to the Jewish hero, Abraham. James explains that Abraham's faith was demonstrated in what he did. James 2:21-23 Specifically, Abraham demonstrated his faith in God by being willing to sacrifice Isaac—the child through whom God had promised to make Abraham and Sarah the father and mother of nations. Several years ago I read a Biblical scholar—I don't remember who so I can't give the person credit—who pointed out that prior to the New Testament, the Jewish people considered Moses their father, because it was through Moses that God gave his people the Law and the priests and the sacrificial system. However, after Jesus came as the fulfillment of the Law, the Apostle Paul and other New Testament writers—like James—pointed to Abraham as the Father of the Jewish faith, because it was through Abraham's faith in God that God's covenant with the Jewish people and all who placed their faith in Him was established. Moses was the father of the law and the sacrificial system, but Abraham was the father of faith for all who believe and place their faith in God's Son, Jesus.

The 3rd example of faith James points to is an unlikely candidate, the prostitute, Rahab. Rahab is considered righteous before God, because her faith in God led her to protect the Jewish spies sent by Joshua to scope out the Promised Land prior to the Israelites' conquest. James 2:25 As a result of Rahab's faith in God, her life and the lives of her family members were spared when Joshua led the Israelites to conquer Jericho. And in Jesus' genealogy Rahab is listed as the great grandmother of King David. James relentlessly makes his case that it is faith demonstrated through action that identifies the followers of Jesus. Rahab was a woman, a foreigner and a prostitute yet she is mentioned by the author of Hebrews in the Heroes of the Faith Hall of Fame in Hebrews chapter 11; she's highlighted by James as righteous before God based on her belief and actions; and, she is listed in Jesus' genealogy.

I used the word *absurdity* to try and describe how ludicrous (another strong word) James thinks it is to separate faith from works or belief from action, but James makes his case so forcefully that this passage really speaks for itself. I'd like you to listen closely as I read this passage—James 2 verses 14-26—from The MESSAGE Paraphrase. I'll begin with the passage I read as we began.

Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come

upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, “Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!” and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?

I can already hear one of you agreeing by saying, “Sounds good. You take care of the faith department, I’ll handle the works department.”

Not so fast. You can no more show me your works apart from your faith than I can show you my faith apart from my works. Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove.

Do I hear you professing to believe in the one and only God, but then observe you complacently sitting back as if you had done something wonderful? That’s just great. Demons do that, but what good does it do them? Use your heads! Do you suppose for a minute that you can cut faith and works in two and not end up with a corpse on your hands?

Wasn’t our ancestor Abraham “made right with God by works” when he placed his son Isaac on the sacrificial altar? Isn’t it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in works? That the works are “works of faith”? The full meaning of “believe” in the Scripture sentence, “Abraham believed God and was set right with God,” includes his action. It’s that weave of believing and acting that got Abraham named “God’s friend.” Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by faith fruitful in works?

The same with Rahab, the Jericho harlot. Wasn’t her action in hiding God’s spies and helping them escape—that seamless unity of *believing* and *doing*—what counted with God? The very moment you separate body and spirit, you end up with a corpse. Separate faith and works and you get the same thing: a corpse. James 2:14-26 The MESSAGE

I began the sermon today by reinforcing what Pastor John and Cindy pointed out in last week’s sermon, that God’s heart has always been for the marginalized, the powerless—orphans, widows, the poor, foreigners, the sick and prisoners. I went on to give a quick overview of the history of Christianity as it pertains to how followers of Jesus cared for and nurtured the hurting. I then made the case that in the late 1800s and early 1900s a division occurred between followers of Jesus who focused on evangelism and preaching the Gospel and Jesus followers who were committed to caring for the physical needs of people. (Please understand as I draw these lines, that there have been exceptions on both sides—more theologically conservative followers of Jesus who have cared for the physical needs of people and more theologically liberal followers of Jesus who also are committed to sharing the Gospel.) I’ve been encouraged that over the last 40-50 years, in seeing the conservative wing of the Church—where the Brethren in Christ and McBIC have historically placed themselves—renewing their focus on caring for the marginalized with the result that many powerful ministries have been started that seek to meet both the physical and spiritual needs of people.

Here’s a concern that deeply troubles me. I fear that the events over the past two years in this country have once again widened the gap in Jesus’ Church between theological liberals

and theological conservatives, between those who focus primarily on caring for the material needs of people and those who focus primarily on evangelizing. Specifically, as it pertains to McBIC, I'm concerned that our fears surrounding extremes we see in our culture and in the Church related to what is labelled *social justice*, lead us to pull back from or possibly even abandon our Biblical calling to pursue mercy and justice for all people, especially the powerless and the vulnerable.

Brothers and sisters, I don't want to see us politicize mercy and justice. I want to see us grow in pursuing what God calls us to in the Old and New Testaments—from the beginning of the Bible through the end. In the Old Testament, in Micah 6:8 we read, "*What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*" And in the New Testament, in one of his most poignant parables—the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats—Jesus said this,

Matthew 25:34-40

'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Our love for Jesus and our faith in Him is clearly demonstrated by what we do, by how we live our lives, by how we care for the vulnerable and the powerless. Faith and works aren't separate. They're two sides of the same coin. I loved a statement Cindy made last week, and I think it's a fitting place for us to close. "*Someone always finds the most vulnerable. The most vulnerable among us will either be found by those with evil intent or by those of us with the love of God. Oh, let it be us!*"