

Faith Works – Introduction

May 22, 2016 - Pastor Randy Eliason

During the next several weeks we will be exploring the relationship between faith and works, belief and behavior, in a series of messages from the NT Letter of James.

Everything we teach and do as a church is tied to our mission: to learn, live and share the good news of Jesus. A few weeks ago I unpacked our mission statement in a three-week series and emphasized that all of our learning has a two-fold purpose:

- A. We learn in order to live what we learn.
- B. We learn in order to share what we learn.

In my message on learning to live, I spoke about the gap that exists in our lives; the gap between knowing what to do and doing what we know. We learned that discipleship is about closing this gap.

I should add that followers need to continue to learn so they can grow in their knowing....and then close the gap between their knowing and doing.

The letter of James was written primarily to Jews who had become believers in Christ. Their problem was that they were not doing a very good job of closing the gap between the truth they now believed and how they lived. There are two reasons why this might have been the case in their lives and why it might be the case in our lives.

1. Sometimes we let our passions rule over our convictions. We can let our personal desires and appetites determine our decisions rather than submitting to the Word of God and following the leading of the Spirit.
2. Sometimes it is due to a deficiency in our learning. Our faith is not limited to the plan of salvation. Christians are called to believe in all that God has revealed about Himself and His will. Christianity is a belief system that encompasses all of life. To learn to follow Christ is to learn to see all of life through a different set of lenses. The Christian faith changes my understanding of God, my understanding of myself, my understanding of others, my view of work, the way I view my resources, the way I view my trials, my purpose, my past, my present, and my future. In 2 Corinthians 5:17,

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Paul wrote, "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" Now look at the immediate context. In verse 16 Paul wrote, "So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now!"

This new life means we DO things differently because we now VIEW things differently.

James' letter is full of practical instruction. It has been often been accused of being void of theological content but, as we will see, all of James practical instruction is undergirded by his theological outlook. It is not always clearly noticeable because he doesn't elaborate on it.

The overall premise of James letter is Faith Works. A genuine, robust faith in Christ and the gospel story will evidence itself in a lifestyle that is consistent with what God has revealed in His word. Today we begin by looking at one of the most well known passages in James which happens to form his main thesis.

James 2:14-26

"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? 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. 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?

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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.

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."

Throughout the history of the Christian church people have stumbled over James words, wrongly assuming he is teaching salvation by faith plus works in contradiction to the repeatedly clear teaching of Paul in Romans and Galatians, as well as Jesus clear teaching that forgiveness and eternal life are the result of belief in Him.

1. James is not teaching that we need to add works to our faith. He is arguing that you cannot divorce the two; they are inseparable.

It is clear that James is not teaching that faith is insufficient to save, but that he is arguing against a definition of faith that is other than what the scripture means when it calls us to believe.

- A. Paul asks in verse 14, "can *that kind of faith* save him"?
- B. James twice uses the phrase "Faith without works is dead". The second time he compares it to a corpse. It is non-existent.
- C. James speaks of the "faith" that demons possess. He does this to demonstrate that to know truth is not the same as possessing faith in the biblical sense. Demons are examples of the possibility of believing in God while remaining as his enemy.

When Jesus called people to believe in Him, He was calling people to trust in Him. To trust in someone implies a commitment or allegiance to the person.

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“Saving faith is embracing Jesus with such radical dependence on his work for us that we stake our lives on the truth of his claims.” – Craig Keener

James uses two OT people to support his argument that genuine belief will be evidenced by behavior: Abraham and Rahab. Both did something that was difficult and daring because they believed in God. Abraham was willing to sacrifice His own son because he believed so strongly in God’s faithfulness to His promise that he knew God would bring him back to life. Rahab risked her life by giving refuge to foreign Israelite spies because she believed in the God of the Israelites. Faith is evidenced by action. Faith follows. Belief obeys.

2. Paul never taught that works don’t matter. He did teach that they are not the grounds/basis of our justification. Nobody will be justified by their works. If you could the cross would be unnecessary. However, Paul’s teaching clearly affirms what James says here; faith without works is dead. In Romans 3-5 Paul goes to great lengths to establish the fact that we are made right with God due to his grace in response to our faith.

Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on faith. 28 So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law. (Rom. 3:27,28)

But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners. (Rom. 4:5)

Therefore, since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith... (Rom. 5:1)

In chapter 6, Paul anticipated a question in response to his insistence that we are justified or saved by a gift of God’s grace in response to faith alone, prior to any works on our part. The question some might ask is, “Should we continue in sin to get more grace? God forbid! How can we who are dead to sin still live in it? Paul is saying that a question like that is ridiculous and betrays a complete misunderstanding of grace and justification. Why would anyone want to do the things that they have just asked to be saved from? Now if you only want forgiveness from sin but not to be saved from your sin you might think that way.

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I know teachers like to tell us that there are “no stupid questions” but that is unfortunately not true. Here is some proof:

The following are questions asked by actual lawyers of witnesses and reported in the Massachusetts Bar Association Lawyers Journal,

"Now doctor, isn't it true that when a person dies in his sleep, he doesn't know about it until the next morning?"

"The youngest son, the twenty-year old, how old is he?"

"Were you present when your picture was taken?"

"Were you alone or by yourself?"

"How far apart were the vehicles at the time of the collision?"

3. This does not mean that we will never act inconsistently with our faith. Our fleshly appetites are powerful. I can believe that to live is Christ and to die is gain, but if I see a truck bearing down on me I am going to run. People of faith sometimes give in to their fear, lust, greed, pride. No Christian obeys perfectly, but when there is faith there will be a new direction in life that is towards God, His people, and His purposes.

Illustration: Imagine an engineer came into the service and presented persuasive evidence to us that this building was about to collapse any minute. After his presentation I returned to the mic and asked for a show of hands as to how many people believe. Now imagine that if after having received a show of hands I asked Pastor Alex to return to the platform and lead us in a song of praise to God for this wonderful revelation and I announced that after the song we had refreshments. What would you do if you believed the engineer?

So how do we build our faith so that it produces the kind of behavior that it ought to? James gives some insight in chapter 1:22-25

"But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it."

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The Purpose of a mirror is to enable us to detect if our appearance is not presentable so that we can...fix it! Notice James says the blessing does not result from the “hearing” unless it is accompanied by “doing”.

I had an amazing experience a few years ago. After having lost my hair to make pattern baldness in my mid twenties, a few years ago I began to grow new hair on my head!! But it wasn't the blessing that you think.

Notice the contrast here:

One glances at it and walks away “immediately” forgetting what he saw. As a result, he is unchanged.

The other looks carefully (literally: “bent over” to look) into the mirror and walks away set free, not forgetting, and blessed because he acts on it.

It is not in trying harder, but believing better. Make a list of your behaviors that you know should change. Ask God to show you how they result from a deficient or distorted faith. Then begin to build your faith by sustained careful attention to God's word until it gets implanted into your mind. The more you fill your ears with God's word, the more your mind will think about think the way God thinks and the more you will see things the way God sees them and the more your heart will care about things that God cares about and your mouth will begin to speak the things that God speaks and your hands will begin to do the things that God wants done and your feet will begin to take you in the direction that God is leading you.

Don't work to earn God's acceptance.

Don't work to earn heaven.

Do work for the glory God

Do work for the good of others