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James 2:14-26
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Faith vs Works: A Showdown

For nearly 2,000 years, there has been an ongoing debate among theologians about whether or not we, as Christians, are saved by faith or saved by works.

Actually, we're saved by Jesus ... so maybe it's a moot point.

The fancy theological term for being saved by faith alone is "justification" – which basically means being made right with God.

And the question at hand is this: Is it enough that we profess a faith in the Risen Christ – or do we have to act on that faith, in order to truly be saved?

Or is just being part of the human race enough?

I have no idea.

It is a slippery slope. You can believe in God and do a lot of really bad things in your life.

You can also do a lot of really wonderful things and think that the whole faith thing is completely bogus. Which is the better scenario?

Like I said – I have no idea. Okay, I have a little bit of an idea.

So, let me ask you, which is it, faith or works? Just look at our two texts for this morning and you can get even more confused.

Paul says that you are made right before God, NOT by works, but through faith and faith alone.

And he states it very clearly, not just to the Ephesians, but also to the Romans, the Galatians, and in a letter to his friend Titus.

Over and over he says – it is faith, not works, that save us.

Enter James. James makes it equally clear that without works, our faith is essentially non-existent.

It is not our faith that makes us right with God unless we show our faith through our works. Our works are essential.

To be honest, I probably align more with the James' camp than with Paul's. I mean, if all that is important is how deep and abiding is our faith, then what do we do with Matthew 25.

You remember. That's where Jesus separates the sheep from the goats.

The sheep are the ones who fed, gave drink, clothed, visited, Jesus. And the goats were the one who ignored him.

Both were surprised, because neither recognized Jesus in their actions or inactions.

Jesus told them, "In as much as you did it (or didn't do it) to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me."

And if you read the entire passage, you will notice that it says nothing about belief, nothing about right doctrine, nothing about proper church attendance. Actually, nothing even about faith.

Point for James!

Okay, but then what do we do with the Mark passage where he tells the story about this crippled man who has four very good friends.

These friends were so good, that they packed him up on his mat and dragged him down the street to try to see Jesus.

When they got to the house, the house was packed, so they climbed up on the flat roof and started tearing away the roof tiles and the plaster, the beams and the ceiling.

And the turning point in the story comes, the Gospel writer says, "When Jesus saw their faith..." Not when Jesus saw their works.

Point for Paul!

But look again, although the story does say, "When Jesus saw their faith," what he saw were four friends who cared enough to drag their friend across town; cared enough to climb up on the roof; cared enough to tear the place apart to get their friend to Jesus.

When he saw their faith, what he saw was their works.

Okay, maybe ½ point for Paul and a ½ point for James!

So where does that leave us? Faith or works? Maybe it isn't such a hard question to answer.

Could it be that it is our faith that is important, but it is a certain kind of faith that Jesus is interested in.

To some faith is the blind hope that God will come through for them, but they're never really sure.

To others, faith is a memorized verse, but not something lived out in their life.

To others, faith is a "church word" we hear repeated from adolescence to adulthood in Bible classes and sermons but are never told what it really means.

The truth is, what we believe determines how we act. It's not what we say we believe, but what we actually believe, that governs our behavior.

For instance, I may say I believe that exercise is good for me. And I actually do believe that.

But since I'm obviously not doing a very good job at following through on what I say I believe, I must be acting on another, stronger belief - one that I may not want to acknowledge.

There is only one reason that belief isn't followed by action.

And that is that another, stronger belief is getting in the way.

The story that is always told to illustrate this principle that true faith results in action, is the one about the great tightrope walker, Charles Blondin.

At one time during his long and illustrious career, he crossed Niagara Falls on a tightrope.

He did this several times before the awestruck audience, and then he turned to them and asked, "How many believe I can walk across the falls pushing a wheelbarrow carrying 200 pounds of potatoes?"

People cheered loudly — they were sure the great Blondin could do it.

And he did.

Then he asked, "How many believe I can push a wheelbarrow across the tightrope with one of you sitting in it?"

Again, the cheers almost drowned out the sound of the falls.

Blondin then pointed to one of the most enthusiastic men in the audience, and said, "Okay, you get into the wheelbarrow."

The man quickly disappeared into the crowd.

You see, even though he knew that Blondin could carry something in his wheelbarrow over the falls, now, he had to entrust himself to him, having faith that he could carry him over the falls. A literal life or death faith.

It's not until you entrust yourself to that man and you actually get in that wheelbarrow and rely upon him completely to take you across, that you have genuine faith in that person.

And until you do that, you will never get to the other side. No matter how much you say you believe in him. You see, mere knowledge and assent is just not enough to get you there.

It is like the letter a man wrote his beloved.

My dearest Sally,

I love you more than anything else in the whole world. I would climb the highest mountain just to be with you. I would walk across the hottest desert just to be with you. I would swim the deepest ocean just to be with you. Nothing can separate us and our love. Your beloved Michael.

P.S. See you Saturday night if it does not rain.

Do you ever feel that your Christian faith is a bit like Michael's love for Sally? You can talk a good talk but does your walk match up?

In Texas they say you are "all hat and no cattle."

You think big things, but fail to do the small things that would really help people around you.

You sing the greatest songs to God, but somehow fail to connect with the truths they proclaim.

There's more to having faith than just saying you've got faith.

For instance, what if I go round telling everyone that I'm a giraffe? If I did something crazy like that, you'd be looking for something we call evidence.

You'd say, "But a giraffe has four legs, a long neck, is incredibly tall. That doesn't sound like you at all."

It's exactly the same with a person who claims to be a Christian.

It's not enough just to claim it. There has to be evidence, proof of the faith that a person claims to have. Otherwise it's just dead faith.

I think faith is something that needs to be used in order for it to be healthy.

In the same way that doctors make their patients get up and moving after surgery, so their muscles don't atrophy sitting in bed, we need to use our faith so that it continues to grow and be healthy.

The more we use our muscles, the stronger they get. And the more we use our faith, the stronger it gets; it is as simple as that.

We have to find ways in our lives to actively express the things that we believe so that our faith can be nurtured, strengthened and protected.

We have to send cards to people when they are going through something difficult in their life, give them a call or drop off a meal.

We have to come to worship so we can strengthen those "faith muscles" with other people (it is always more fun to workout with other people, right?).

We have to challenge ourselves and our faith by reading the bible and engaging in discussions on faith.

We have to serve the church in some form or another. We have to look for ways to give back to the community. We have to pray – for ourselves and for others.

Faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

The great Warren Wiersbe said, "People with dead faith substitute words for deeds.

"They know the correct vocabulary for prayer and testimony, and can even quote the right verses from the Bible; but their walk does not measure up to their talk.

"They think that their words are as good as works, and they are wrong."

Jesus told a story in Matthew 21:28-31 that illustrates this.

A father had two sons, and he said to the first one, "Son, go and work in my vineyard."

But his son had better things to do than work for his father. He said, "Not a chance. I've got things to do, people to see, places to go."

But later on, he had a change of heart, and went to work.

In the meantime, the father went to the second son and told him to go and work in the vineyard too.

"Sure," said his second son. "Not a problem." But he didn't go.

"Which one," asked the Lord, "did the will of his father?"

Which one?

Not the one who said he was going but didn't go.

The one that did the will of his father was the one that did more than just talk, went out into the vineyard, and actually did some work.

Talk is not enough. Intentions are not enough. Real faith translates into real action.

One last story from scripture. One day Jesus was talking one day to a one of the Jewish legal experts, a man steeped in the Law of Moses, a devoutly religious man, no doubt a good church member.

And he asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus replied, "Well, you know God's law, what do you think it says?"

And the man responded, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, mind, and strength ... and ... you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

And Jesus said, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." [Lk 10:28]

But somehow the scribe knew this wasn't enough. He has faith, he believes, but he also knows he's still missing something. So, he asks Jesus, "who is my neighbor?"

And Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan.

You remember, a priest and a Levite, both religious leaders, pass by an injured man.

The only one who actually does anything when he sees the man in need is Samaritan, someone that the young lawyer Jesus is speaking with wouldn't have given the time of day.

The first two claim to be men of faith, but the Samaritan is the one who showed that he had faith.

The first two undoubtedly had faith. But it was faith in the wrong thing. They believed that doing all the right religious things was what God wanted.

And, they believed that God's purity would be polluted if they touched a corpse, which the injured man might very well become.

But the Samaritan believed - or at least we can assume that he did - that giving life was more important than staying clean.

On the other hand, the priest and the Levite both should have known better. Hadn't God told them often enough that religious observance wasn't the most important thing?

“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. . . . learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” [Is 1:11,17]

What then does the Lord require of you?

Let me close by asking: Are Paul and James really at odds with each other?

Not at all: The key to the whole mystery is found in verse 26 in our passage from James: “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

James uses an analogy to show the relationship of faith to works.

It is like the body that contains the human spirit.

A live body has the human spirit within it; if not, then the body is dead. You know what I mean if you’ve ever seen a dead body!

In the same way, a living faith has the works already within it waiting to be done; if not, then that faith is dead.

It is faith alone that saves us; but if that faith does not produce good works, then it’s not real faith.

Real faith is a one that is evidenced by what we do, not just what we say, and not just what we believe.

Real faith – reaches out, not in.

And that is who we are called to be – doers of the word, not hearers only.

So ... just do it!

Amen