

Feb. 4, 2018

Lesson 4: Faith Without Works is Dead

Scripture: James 2: 14-26

Context:

The next unit for our series on faith dives into the Book of James. The book of James is a New Testament book with the opening referring to “James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (vs.1). There are no other references to the author of the book. However, church tradition places the author as James, the brother of Jesus as the author due to his leadership in the Jerusalem church.¹ James is given credence as a Christians leader as he determined the conditions by which Gentiles can enter the Christian church as found in Acts 15: 31-29. James was known for giving council to churches in Syria about setting the conditions for admitting Gentiles to the community.² This letter is addressed to “the twelve tribes in the Diaspora” and could be applied metaphorically to the Gentile Christians.³

The letter never gives a specific occasion or reason for why the letter is written. An important theme in the letter though is a focus on the works that accompany faith and come with being a part of the Christian community. For an early religious community with people from different backgrounds including Jewish and Gentile influences, there was a need to explain the practical component of being in that community. Throughout the letter, the author constantly appeals to practical components of how faith comes alive on a daily basis. Faith is more than a theoretical thought as it is also an agent of change both individually and communally.

In this second chapter of James, we have the author exhorting the community to look at how they use and understand the faith. For someone who is naked and hungry, you don’t tell them to go to those things when they don’t possess it. In the same way, faith should transform who you are a believer of Jesus Christ.

To drive the point home, the author alludes to the patriarch Abraham. Abraham not only believed in God, he also listened to God and did the things God asked him to do. He even obeyed God up to the point of offering up his son Isaac at the altar. His faith made him righteous and it wasn’t just because Abraham paid lip service. The author carries the point even further by alluding to Rahab and her actions to help the Israelite spies. Her faith in God moved her to help the men and protect them from those who sought to kill them. The author drives the point home by pointing out that just as a lifeless body is dead, so faith without actions is dead.

As one reads, there is the impression that the author wants Christians to be active in their faith. The other writings of the New Testament, particularly those attributed to Paul, focus on the faith of the patriarchs and faith in Christ. However, that leads to other questions about what that means for daily living. Thus, the author wants the early church

¹ PHEME PERKINS, “First and Second Peter, James, and Jude,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1995), 83.

² *Ibid.*, 85.

³ *Ibid.*, 85.

to live that out their faith by how they treat one another and others outside the door. Faith and actions are to go hand in hand with one another.

Application:

James' letter still speaks to us today as we think about how faith plays out on a daily basis. It brings up to the forefront to what we think about faith and our own definitions. Often I've hear of faith being summed up as: "Well because I believe that Jesus is Lord and Savior and I gave my life to him when I was fill-in-the-blank years old, I'm saved and will go to heaven when I die." When I hear that, I become a little sad because I wonder why that event was a one time thing that leads to a point of forgetting that God is at work in the here and the now. And better yet that God is calling us to live out our faith as servants in the Kingdom.

The words of the author remind us that faith in Christ is to be embodied by the way we live every day and how we are involved in our churches, our communities, and our world. John Wesley, who we attribute as the founder of Methodism, believed that our faith in Christ leads us to do deeds of mercy and kindness. As we do those deeds, we aren't earring jewels for our crowns when we die or achieving our salvation, we are actively doing the work that God has called us to do. In the process we are transformed as God uses us to be vessels of love and grace.

My experience has been that people of deep faith are those who reach out to others. They understand that going to church on Sunday is but part of the process. It is about doing ministry alongside those in prisons, in poorer school districts, and in situations that might be riddled in conflict.

I've recently watched a colleague handle a situation where their faith translated in their actions. This person truly loves God and serves Jesus with their whole heart. Yet others have attempted to sabotage them and their ministry with slander and manipulative behavior. The colleague continues to preach about grace and love day in and day out. Recently, something went wrong with the family of those who have attempted to sabotage them. That colleague was one of the first to show up at their front door with their arms open wide and offering love and support.

This person believes in Jesus and his healing grace. They also believes in Jesus' words: "Love and pray for those who persecute you." When the time came to do to put faith to work, that person did so with grace and dignity.

I hope that we too can embody our faith with our actions. You never know who you will touch and who you will inspire when do so. And better yet you honor God, the one who gives life and is always faithful.

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