

Rev. Janet R. Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
16th Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 8, 2024
Scripture: James 2:14-26
Sermon: Faith Is Shown by Actions

I'm sure that you're familiar with the common expression, "Your actions speak louder than your words." That's really the theme of the whole book of James, especially our text today. The topic of today's text is the central theme of the book of James, which is faith that works or faith that brings fruit into our lives. As it is in our day, so it was in the day of James: some claimed to have faith in Jesus, yet their life showed no evidence of that faith.

We've all known people who say, "Well, I'm a Christian, I believe in God, I go to church, I've been baptized, I've been confirmed, I've gone through Sunday School," but when you look at their life, the way they are living is inconsistent with what they are professing. So their practice doesn't match their profession. It's one thing to say, "I'm a Christian": it's another thing to be a Christian. Anyone can profess to believe in God, but do they possess true, authentic, genuine salvation? So James is saying in our text, "Examine yourself to see if you are really a believer, if your faith is real."

John Bunyan wrote the famous allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*. Next to the Bible, everyone should read *Pilgrim's Progress*. John Bunyan was in prison when he wrote this allegory many years ago. It is about a man named Christian, who is fleeing the city of destruction, and is on his way to the Celestial City. On his journey, he meets many other people and has encounters with them. One of them in this allegory is a man named Talkative. Christian meets Talkative, and he says about Talkative, "All his religion was only in his tongue." He wasn't a true believer. He just had the talk, but he did not have the walk. So that kind of faith does not save.

There is a song written by Rich Mullins called ***Screen Door*** and it is based on our scripture lesson from James this morning. Here are the words:

"It's about as useless as A screen door on a submarine
Faith without works baby It just ain't happenin'
One is your left hand One is your right It'll take two strong arms
To hold on tight Some folks cut off their nose
Just to spite their face I think you need some works to show
For your alleged faith Well there's a difference you know
Between having faith And playing make believe
One will make you grow The other one just make you sleep
Talk about it (yeah) And I really think you oughta
Take a leap off of the ship Before you claim to walk on water
Faith without works Is like a song you can't sing (sing)
It's about as useless as A screen door on a submarine
Faith comes from God and Every word that He breathes
He lets you take it to your heart So you can give it hands and feet
It's gotta be active if it's gonna be alive You gotta put it into practice
Otherwise It's about as useless as a Screen door on a submarine
Faith without works baby It just ain't happenin'
One is your right hand one is your left It's your light your guide
Your life and your breath Faith without works is
Like a song you can't sing It's about as useless as
A screen door on a submarine Faith without works
Like a song you can't sing It's about as useless
As a screen door on a submarine

I had never heard that song before this week and thought it was an interesting song as we think about the relationship between faith and works. Rich Mullins wrote that song with this morning's scripture in mind, because James makes the same point: faith without works is dead, calling us to realize that works in our Christian walk is living out our faith and showing Jesus' love to others we meet. There are those who read this scripture and say, "What about the Apostle Paul's belief that we're saved by faith through grace?" We can't work our way into heaven; it's only through faith. In

support of this, Martin Luther said, “The most damnable heresy that has ever plagued the mind of man was the idea that somehow he could make himself good enough to deserve to live with an all-holy God.”

So, which is it: faith or works? Paul or James? First we have to understand the context within which each of these men wrote. Paul, at times, was writing to non-Christians who believed they could work their way into heaven. If they maintained the proper ordinances, followed the script, and did the “right” thing, they were guaranteed a place with God. Paul was attempting to undo this belief by offering God’s grace, the idea that we can do nothing to earn God’s favor. He loves us, and when we come to faith in his son Jesus Christ, God’s grace showers down upon us. Many faiths in our world today believe that it is only works that get you to heaven.

James, on the other hand, was writing to Christians, those who had already come to faith in Jesus Christ. The tone of his letter is one of irritation. In speaking to fellow-believers, James was pointing out that faith and works do not stand in opposition to one another. It is only through works that faith can prove and demonstrate itself; and it is only through faith that works will be attempted and accomplished. Faith is bound to overflow into action and action begins only when someone has faith in some great cause or principle, which God has presented him or her with. James has made a strong statement, challenging the people to live out what they profess. That’s our challenge.

There is a saying: “If you don’t live it, you don’t truly believe it.” If you don’t live it, you don’t believe it.

If you say you’re a Christian, but you’re a gossip, are you living it? If you profess to be a Christian, but you have racist beliefs, are you living it? If you say you believe, but don’t love your neighbor, are you living it?

That’s our challenge. So how do we live it? How do we make James’ challenge a reality? I’d like to suggest two things. First, you’ve got to enter into a relationship with God whereby you can expand and deepen your relationship through worship, Bible study and prayer.

Think of the scriptures as an accurate map. A map tells you how to get to a certain place. But just looking at a map won’t automatically take you there. Getting to your destination means you have to make the effort, pay the cost, make the time to travel and keep going until you arrive. In a

word, persevere. That is what it means to be a disciple- to keep going, keep learning and keep working on your relationship with God.

So it is in the Christian life of deepening your faith, which leads to works. God's map is reliable and available. It is also clear and direct for us to follow and stay on the narrow path. Wide is the path that leads to destruction and narrow is the path that leads to life.

The second way to prepare yourself to live out James' challenge is to discover your gifts, get involved and use them. Scripture tells us that we have each been blessed with gifts from the Holy Spirit. Some people say, "Oh, I can't teach," or "I can't lead that." That's okay. We're not gifted in the same way, which is a good thing, because we need multiple talents and abilities in the church. Yes, we need teachers, and yes, we need leaders, but we also need people to do other things: hand out bulletins, visit shut-ins, offer hospitality to those in need and help out with other ministries in the life of the church. The body of Christ has many parts, and I encourage you to discover your gift from God and use them.

As James points out, believing in the body and showing up is not enough. What are you doing as an active, living part of the body?

Faith and works don't stand in opposition to each other. Faith and works represent two sides of your experience with God. No one will ever be moved to action without faith, and no one's faith is genuine unless it moves you to action.

Billy Graham once said this about faith and works and their relationship to each other: "There really is no conflict between faith and works. In the Christian life they go together like inhaling and exhaling. Faith is taking the Gospel in; works is taking the Gospel out."

GENUINE FAITH REVEALS ITSELF IN DEEDS OF LOVE

What is the use of declaring your faith to the world if your actions don't correspond? Is that the kind of faith that saves?

James contends that true Christianity is seen in the person that is willing to be involved in the things of Christ

For a genuine faith, the first three principles are involvement, involvement, and involvement - involvement with Christ daily, involvement with Christ daily, involvement with His world, and sharing His love with others.

We are to be Christlike. Jesus spent His life serving, giving and telling. On a desert hillside Jesus fed thousands with 5 loaves and two fish. It was a miracle, but it was faith in action. Jesus wanted the disciples to “DO” something to help the people.

Jesus also wrapped a towel around his waist and washed 12 sets of filthy feet. It was an act of faith in the principles of servanthood. It was an action.

On a hill outside Jerusalem He died an agonizing death. It was more than just being an example. He became the gospel, living it out in faith, defining the meaning of love. It was the ultimate expression of receiving the Father’s word and submitting to His will indeed.

Genuine faith reveals itself in deeds of love— IN ACTION. What could it possibly mean to ACCEPT Christ, if not to accept His lordship over your life. Genuine faith reveals itself in deeds of love.

Verse 26 is the key to this principle. James uses the negative to illustrate the positive. He tells us a very simple but accurate fact. The body without spirit is dead...So is our faith without works.

That fact teaches the opposite also: When the body has a spirit it is alive. When the faith is in action it has loving deeds sprouting out of that faith, the faith is alive and pulsating. It is like the budding limbs on a young tree. The sprouts on the limbs don’t cause the tree to be alive; they simply announce the reality that there is life.

There are many people today who are content never to be involved in putting their faith to the test (See v.18). Simply saying you are a Christian, and associating yourself with a church does not mean there is genuine faith.

Jesus told a parable about seed that was scattered. True, some of the seed grew and took hold in good soil. But there were some that only sent down a shallow root, and when the shoot came up it quickly withered and died.

You see that played out many times over in churches across the nation today. A person makes a "profession of faith," but it doesn’t always take root and grow. They never bother to send down deep roots, joining in the activities and Bible studies of the church or worshipping often. They

starve that little seed to death over time. They don't water and feed themselves in their faith to grow beyond a seed.

It takes a mature tree to bring worthwhile fruit. You cannot expect a seedling to bear fruit.

James is telling us that unless we are willing to grow in Christ, allowing the faith to become works our faith is empty without hope!

There is a balance between "faith and works" that will make a true believer want to be close to their Lord in worship. It is the deeds of love, born of an alive faith that identifies you with Jesus and the Father. It tells the others if His Holy Spirit is within you.

Jesus' words in Matthew 7:21 tell us, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (NKJV). It is not enough to simply know what it takes to be a Christian, real faith is shown by the way we live and the things we do on an everyday basis.

It is not enough to just believe the right things. We must have a transforming faith that produces righteous acts in our lives. Do you remember 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore if anyone be in Christ, he or she is a new creature: old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." That kind of faith is not dead at all.

Two heroes of faith round out the discussion of faith that works with solid examples of what a living faith looks like. The first is Abraham, father of the Jewish people. The second is Rahab, Gentile prostitute from Jericho and ancestor of Jesus Christ by her marriage to Salmon, a descendant of Judah. Through these two examples, James covers every possible excuse and solidifies the necessity of a works-producing-faith.

The illustration from Abraham's life deals with the challenge from God to go to Mt. Moriah and sacrifice Isaac. It is good for us to remember that Isaac was born when Abraham was 99 and Sarah was 90.

Was it important that Abraham obey God's request for the life of Isaac? Friends, Abraham's salvation was at stake. It was that important. James says that he was justified by his works (v.21). He also goes on to say that faith was made "perfect" through works; this word, "perfect" implies completion and maturity. Abraham's obedience to God was vital to his justification before God.

Verse twenty-three brings us to another important point in James' argument. He quotes a reference from Genesis 15:6 that says, "And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness." Abraham's belief was not merely a confession or an agreement with God: it was a lifestyle that affected the way he did almost everything. It was a living relationship that was forever different.

The result of this lifestyle is found in the final clause of verse twenty-three: ". . . and he was called the Friend of God." That is a pretty meaningful title

As we come to Rahab in verse twenty-five, it is interesting that James quickly points out her career, her relationship to the Jews, and her ministry. He tells us first that she was a harlot, a paid prostitute. While this may have been acceptable in many cultures of the day, it was not the kind of thing that God wanted his people to be involved in. The fact that Rahab was a prostitute amplifies the remarkable nature of her faith.

The second thing that is implied about Rahab was that she was not a Jew. She welcomed the spies ("messengers") into her home. We all remember the story of the scarlet thread hanging out her window that spared her and her family from the conquest of Jericho after the walls fell. Rahab found a kinship with the Jewish people that eventually led to her marriage to Salmon, a descendant of Judah. Through this marriage they had a son named Boaz. Boaz married Ruth, a Moabite woman, and had a son named Obed. Obed had a son named Jesse, and Jesse had a son named David, the second king of Israel. You see, in welcoming the Jewish spies into her home, Rahab unwittingly became the great-great grandmother of one of the greatest rulers in Israel's history.

As far as Rahab's ministry is concerned, we can all imagine the risks she took in not only sheltering the spies but helping them escape the city. Yet she did it willingly and graciously, helping them and advising them in their preparations to conquer what at that time was one of the great cities of the ancient world. Rahab became a part of God's plan as she aided the spies in their mission. It was her actions that justified her and her faith before God.

Take away the works and the faith is dead. Take away the spirit and the body is dead. A person can give the appearance of life by many signs,

but life itself is made visible in the works that go along with living. They are inseparable.

Are you producing the works that indicate your faith in God? What evidence is there in your life that you are what you claim to be? Matthew 7:20 says, "Wherefore by their fruits you shall know them." Even if you have all the right words and believe the right things, James says that faith without works is dead.

Are you caring for brothers and sisters in need? Are you obeying the Scriptures? Are you cultivating a growing relationship with Jesus Christ on a daily basis?

Remember faith without deeds is like a body without the spirit - a corpse. For if the life-giving Spirit is in us we will act according to the Spirit.

What kind of faith do you have? Intellectual, emotional? Or faith that leads you to obey God and to trust Him fully? To care for others and to do what His word says? A faith that acts? A walk that measures up to our talk?

With works that measure up to our words?

Paul, the apostle wrote, "Be very careful, then, how you live - not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity." (Eph. 5:15)