

FAITH THAT WORKS

James 2:14-22, 26

Don and Mary Jane met at the university at an Inter Varsity Club meeting. Each had been baptized as an infant but never confirmed. Each will tell you they became Christians at the same Inter Varsity retreat, when the speaker challenged them to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Now as middle-aged adults and married parents of two teenage boys, Don teaches history at a small private college and Mary Jane is a pediatrician. They are active in a nearby Methodist Church and they are eager students of the faith. They have read the works of John Wesley, plus C.S. Lewis, St. Augustine, and even the Cappodocian Fathers. Every Sunday morning they team teach a Bible study for college students which students overflow because of Don's and MJ's able and winsome articulation of the faith. They believe it is essential for Christians to know the what and why of our faith.

Kate and George grew up in an Episcopal church in which they were baptized, confirmed, and elected to the Vestry as teenagers. They attended the same high school but did not date. After attending different colleges, each returned to their hometown, a Midwestern city, and became reacquainted while serving at a soup kitchen in their spare time. They dated and married. They have no children of their own but provide foster care for special-needs kids. They attend a Lutheran Church but have not joined. They like the music and the worship service and serve on the congregation's mission committee. They have expanded the churches outreach by tweaking the

congregation's social conscience. Under their influence, the church offers shower facilities and a clothing closet for homeless people. They have not joined the church because of doctrinal issues. Kate says they are probably more Unitarian than Lutheran, but adds that they strive to live in a manner that honors Jesus' call to care for "*the least of these.*"

Which couple is more faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ? Which couple is justified in the eyes of God? Some will insist it is the former couple, Don and MJ, who have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and who believe it is essential for Christians to know the what and why of our faith. Those who pick this couple might cite Romans 3:23, "*We hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works.*"

Others may reply that Kate and George are striving to embody Jesus' words to love neighbors as ourselves. Their lives demonstrate a commitment to Jesus that exceeds even that of Don and MJ. Those who pick this couple may cite James 2:24, "*A person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*"

Over the years I have learned that many folks want clarification on the relationship between faith and works. James raises the question of the connection of faith and works in Christianity. It appears that Paul and James contradict each other on this issue. So, let's ask what each means by faith. (1)

For Paul faith is the specific belief that Jesus Christ is Lord and God raised him from the dead. Paul told the Romans: "*If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord*

and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (10.9) And, says Paul, faith is our response of grateful love for God’s love of us. He told the Galatians, “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (2.20)

For James faith is trust in God. According to this one and only letter of James, faith is trust by which we endure trials, pray, resist temptation, control our tongue, care for orphans and widows, avoid favoritism, love neighbors, and help the poor. James calls us to *“welcome with meekness the implanted Word that has the power to save your souls.”* (1.21) Therefore, he does embrace belief as faith, but then also he quickly adds the need not only to welcome the Word but to *“be doers of the Word”* as well.

Biblical faith encompasses three components:

1. **Belief** – acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ as true.
2. **Trust** – certitude that Christ’s gospel is efficacious.
3. **Obedience** – conforming one’s actions to the gospel’s demands.

Paul’s and James’ understanding faith complement and complete one another and that of other New Testament teachers. Paul tells the Galatians, *“The only thing that counts is faith working through love.”* (5.6) That sounds a lot like James. And James writes, *“Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”* (2.23) That sounds a lot like Paul.

One biblical scholar concludes:

Both Paul and James see confidence in God’s saving act along with the effects of that act in the lives of the

followers of Jesus Christ. Neither Paul nor James sees faith as mere assertion of doctrine. (2)

John the Baptist argued that true faith is accompanied by deeds. Moreover, Jesus claimed that deeds must accompany true faith. He said, *“A good tree cannot bear bad fruit and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.”* Then he warned that many who called him *“Lord”* will not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 7:15-23)

When James says “faith without works is dead” he means it fails to accomplish its mission. The contrast is not faith vs. works; it’s dead vs. living faith. Works are a constituent part of faith. (3) As one man said to me, “My interpretation is that if you are not doing something to help others, you’re not upholding a basic pillar of faith.” Paul, John the Baptist, James, and Jesus would agree.

In our text James calls us to integrity. He asks us to integrate faith and works into one faith expression. He makes this call upon us for these reasons:

1. **It completes or fills out our faith.** It’s similar to the distinction drawn by Dietrich Bonhoeffer between “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” (4) “Cheap Grace” does not lead to action, because it does not demand a changed heart. “Cheap Grace” he says means:
“...grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian concept of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held in and of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins...Cheap grace is the forgiveness of sins with requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline...Cheap grace is grace

without discipleship, grace without the cross,
without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

“Costly grace” Bonhoeffer says, is bowing to the kingly rule of Christ. It is surrendering one’s life in Christ’s service. It is “costly” because it calls us to follow, but “grace” because it calls to follow Jesus Christ. It is marked by obedience to Jesus expressed in deeds performed by us in his name. These deeds require sacrifice of energy, money, and time; hence they are “costly.” They are faith in action. They constitute what James calls evidence of living, not dead faith.

2. James asks us to integrate faith and works because it extends Jesus mission. When I was Associate Pastor at Central Presbyterian Church in Omaha, the congregation gave food baskets to needy folks, referred to the church by a city agency. Every basket was topped with a hand-written note to the recipient. It read:

We are sometimes asked why we prepare and give food baskets such as this one. It is because Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior and it pleases him when we do this. Jesus cares about you and your family, and he has given us the privilege of getting to meet you and share food with you. Please receive it as coming not from us but from Jesus to you.

3. Integrating faith and works attracts others to our faith. David Nystrom tells of an experience of a minister friend of his, when he was out of town at a conference. He went to the hotel pool to relax. Soon he was joined by three other men. The three began to drink Jack Daniels whiskey and, to his shock, snort

cocaine. A conversation ensued, and it moved, as it inevitably does with men, to a discussion of their vocations. Not sure what kind of a reaction to expect, the minister told what he did. One of the men responded, "I have a question for you. Can you tell me what "born Again" means? I really do not know. Until recently I laughed at people who said they were "born again," but some people I've known for years talk that way now. And the thing is, I have watched them and I know their lives are transformed. They live differently...more interest in others. So, what is "born again"? I really want to know.

Unchurched and nonbelieving people watch how we live. They look for hypocrisies. But they are attracted, when they see integrity – when they see declarations of faith accompanied by works of love and service. Christians' good works prove the sincerity and truth of our faith, just as James insisted.

Integrating faith and works completes our faith, extends Jesus' mission and attracts others to our faith.

So, once again, I ask: Which couple is more faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the former couple, Don and MJ, or the latter, Kate and George? I think they represent two components of faith that need to be joined: faith and works. Remember: It is not faith vs. works; it is faith that works.

SOURCES:

1. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, Romans: Part Two, WJK, p.149.

2. David P. Nystrom, *The NIV Application Commentary*, James, Zondervan, p.148.
3. Ibid, p.147-148
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.
5. Nystrom, p.162-163.