

3/29/09

Faith In Action

James 2:14-26

Introduction

I would like to begin this morning with a story that is perhaps somewhat familiar to you. It is often used in evangelism, but I think that it has appropriate application for what we are studying today. There was a tightrope walker who did incredible aerial feats. All over Paris he would do tightrope acts at tremendously scary heights. He then would perform succeeding acts: performing the acts blindfolded and then traversing the tightrope blindfolded while pushing a wheelbarrow. An American promoter read about this performer in the papers and wrote a letter to the tightrope walker saying, "Tightrope, I don't believe you can do it, but I'm willing to make you an offer. For a very substantial sum of money, besides all your transportation fees, I would like to challenge you to do your act over Niagara Falls." The tightrope walker wrote back, "Sir, although I've never been to America and seen the Falls, I'd love to come." After a lot of promotion and setting the whole thing up, many people came to see the event. Tightrope was to start on the Canadian side and come to the American side. Drums rolled and he came across the rope, which was suspended over the most treacherous part of the Falls, while blindfolded. He made the journey easily. The crowd went wild. He approached the promoter and said, "Well, Mr. Promoter, now do you believe I can do it?" "Well, of course I do. I mean, I just saw you do it," he replied. "No," said Tightrope, "do you really believe I can do it?" "Well, of course I do. You just did it!" "No, no, no," said Tightrope, "do you BELIEVE I can do it?" Now, somewhat frustrated, Mr. Promoter said emphatically, "Yes! I believe you can do it!" "Good," said Tightrope, "then you get in the wheelbarrow!" Very often, people will say they believe something or have faith in something, but they don't reflect that belief or faith in their actions; they refuse to get into the wheelbarrow and show their faith. The word "believe" in Greek means "to live by". Do we, as the Church, live by what we say we believe? As Christians, do we really live Christ-like lives? I recently read a statistic from 1980 that said that only 2 percent of evangelical Christians said that they had introduced someone to Christ. If that was true in 1980, and since most of us believe that things in the US have gotten worse, it is probably safe to assume that this statistic is at least the same, if not a little lower, today. It makes me wonder what all the churches around the country are really teaching. I have heard it said that the United States is the most "churched" country in the world, and although I don't have any research to back it up, I tend to believe it is true based upon what I read from American missionaries scattered around the globe. So, if there is so much exposure to church and supposed biblical teaching, why are there so few willing to talk about their faith or who live it out? Think about it. When is that last time that you, personally, shared your faith with someone? I have thought about this thoroughly and I am embarrassed by what I found. To be honest, the last time I had a meaningful conversation about Christ with someone that I think is a non-believer was at work about 3 days before Christmas. And, worse than that, it is not nearly often enough that I have meaningful conversations about Christ in my own home with my family! I am extremely humbled when I read about those in the Bible that were DAILY out talking to others about Christ and very often being persecuted for doing so. Something else that I have thought a lot about is whether or not I really live my life differently than those of the world. Are my priorities, what I devote my time to, different than everyone else? When some difficult situation comes into my life, does my faith in Christ shine through or do I whine and complain through it? Is there a real change in my life that is obvious to those I come in contact with? Over the past couple of months, we have been talking a lot about living the Christian life here in this class and also in church by studying James, talking about hospitality, and looking forward to our home Bible studies on Good Friday, but is it having an impact on us in this local body? Do we need to and are we making practical changes to the way in which we live our lives on a daily basis to better reflect our faith in Christ? Personally, I have discovered that I have much room for improvement and the changes I need to make are very difficult and seemingly slow to come, but I am working on it. Only by the power of the Holy Spirit will I attain any amount of change, but there are

perhaps millions in this country sitting in churches as we are this morning on whom the Word of God will have absolutely no impact. There are many in this country who say they believe in God - to the tune of about 75 percent or so. But how real is this belief? James 2:19 tells us that even the demons believe in God and tremble! Matthew 8:29 and Mark 1:24 tell the accounts of demons recognizing Jesus as the Son of God and asking Him not to torment them before their time. Yes, they believe in God and it appears that they know what is in store for them when Christ returns to take His rightful place as King! But, evidently they are not going to heaven, so we can surmise that just knowing who God is and who Jesus is does not qualify one to go to heaven. It is not enough to know about Jesus and call oneself a "Christian". That brings us to James 2:14-26 - a passage that very clearly speaks to the issue of true faith. This passage pulls no punches in the discussion of what true faith will and must produce in the life of the believer. Let's read the scripture together.

(pray)

I. The first thing we find out from James is that faith without works is dead (v. 14-17, 26). If we say we believe in God but don't do anything with it, it is not worth the oxygen we used to speak the words. It is similar to me telling my wife that I love her but never doing anything to show her that it is true. It would be about the same as wearing glasses without corrective lenses in them. I've seen glasses in Wal-mart that are intended for fashion purposes only - they have lenses in them but they have no correctional value at all. I guess some people think they look better or more intelligent wearing glasses, even though they have perfectly good eyesight. This is what a lot of people do with their faith - they put it on to make them look a little more moral, but it does nothing to actually change them. The lives that they lead are really no different than the lives led by most people in the world. They think that they are pretty good people, but need that little extra measure to improve on the "pretty good". It's almost like a status symbol to say that they believe in God and go to a certain church. James again uses an example of someone in need coming to ask for help to explain what he means by faith without works. I'm actually starting to sense a theme here. Anyway, he tells us that if we simply wish them well and send them on their way, it is meaningless. Have you ever gone to someone with a problem and gotten the pat Christian response of "I'll be praying for you"? Now, I want to make it perfectly clear that I am not trying to down-play the power of or need for prayer. But, if what you are asking is for help in satisfying some physical need, the simple act of someone praying for you is not necessarily satisfying that need. As we talked about at the end of chapter 1, we have to be ready to satisfy the physical needs of people; we have to care for them in a tangible way for our faith to be authentic to them. This is what James is talking about here - the real evidence that our faith is actual saving faith and we believe what we say we believe. He is talking to the issue of if we are living by our faith. I recently experienced the acting out of the faith of believers in this church when Andrea had her gall bladder surgery, and I didn't even ask for help! Several women in the church got together and provided very good meals for my family for a few days so that I wouldn't have to concern myself with it while having to deal with everything else it takes to keep a household running. These acts of kindness were hard evidence to me that the faith of these women is real. James is not saying here that it is the works themselves that save us, although there are many who argue that perhaps James is contradicting the teachings of Paul on justification by faith. But, rather, he is saying that if our faith is true saving faith, then it will be revealed in our actions. Once we have come to saving faith, we will begin doing what are called "good works" out of love for and gratitude to our Savior. God makes the change in us that is able to produce the works of which James and the other writers talk about in the Word. Jesus tells us in Matthew 7:19 that "every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." It seems that those that say they have faith but do not follow it up with action are in for a surprise. These are ones that have not experienced the regeneration the Holy Spirit gives through faith in Christ. Because they don't have authentic faith, they are not producing any fruit to show evidence that they have been changed. Revelation 3:15-16 is a stern warning to the church of Laodicea regarding their claim of faith but lack of action. They were apparently concerned more with their image and ignored the call of Christ for His Church to be diligently working for Him. They were lukewarm in that they claimed to be in Christ, but were not doing anything to prove it. There was no evidence that their faith was real and that they really believed what they said they believed. Hebrews 10:26-27 tells us that there should be a definitive change in the life of the believer and that we should turn from sin. Remember that sin is not only doing those things that God tells us not to do (sins of commission), but sin is also not doing those things that God has told us to do (sins of omission). The true believer will be striving to obey God - both in not doing those prohibited acts and in doing those commanded acts. Let's turn to I John 2:3-6 (read). Clearly, John reinforces James in saying that if we have come to faith in Christ, we will act out that faith in obedience to the commands of God. Without

the appropriate actions, the world will have no evidence that our faith is the real thing.

II. Secondly, although James doesn't directly address it but the subject is implied, works without faith are dead. A person can say all the right things, do a lot of "good" things, treat others with respect, and even go to church, but if they do not have faith, all of their working has been in vain. A key scripture for this truth is Ephesians 2:8-9. Although I think pretty much all of us can quote it, I would like us to turn there and examine it together (read). Martin Luther sums it up very nicely in the following statement: "The apostle [Paul] distinguishes between the law and faith, the letter and grace. The 'works of the law' are works done without faith and grace, by the law, which forces them to be done through fear or the enticing promise of temporal advantages. But 'works of faith' are those done in the spirit of liberty, purely out of love to God. And they can be done only by those who are justified by faith. An ape can cleverly imitate the actions of humans. But he is not therefore a human. If he became a human, it would undoubtedly be not by virtue of the works by which he imitated man but by virtue of something else; namely, by an act of God. Then, having been made a human, he would perform the works of humans in proper fashion. Paul does not say that faith is without its characteristic works, but that it justifies without the works of the law. Therefore justification does not require the works of the law; but it does require a living faith, which performs its works." Whether or not people want to admit it, it is only by the grace of God that any of us ever get an opportunity to serve Him and eventually be in His presence for eternity. As we saw last week, it only takes one sin to fall short of God's perfect standard and disqualify us from heaven. After that, all of our working and striving to please God will not make up for that offence because God's holiness does not allow anything less than perfection to be in His presence. That's part of why James told us that if we are guilty of one sin, it is as though we are guilty of breaking the whole law. By God's grace, we are given the gift of faith. Without this faith, it is impossible to please God, according to the book of Hebrews. So, logically, any works that we do outside this gift of faith accomplish nothing in regard to saving us from the penalty of our sins or gaining favor with God. We cannot earn our way to eternal life. As we know, our salvation comes by God's grace through the gift of faith in the work accomplished by Christ. Everyone wants to have significance in this life, but the only significance is found by what we do as followers of Christ. As was pointed out in our discussion last week, everything in creation was made to glorify God and this cannot be done outside of faith in Him. Let's review a couple of other scriptures. First, let's turn to Matthew 7:21-23 (read). In this passage, Jesus gives a picture of what judgment day will be like for those who perform works without faith. Clearly, the ones spoken of here thought they were doing their deeds in the name of Christ, but they obviously had not been given a true saving faith in Him. Their motivation seems to be something other than love for the Savior. They taught the scriptures, drove out demons, and performed miracles, but for what purpose? It did them no good because they were not given the gift of faith. In the end, those that do seemingly "good" deeds but do not personally know the Savior will be cast into the lake of fire. Second, let's turn to Revelation 3:1-2 (read). This passage is addressing one of the seven churches, specifically the church in Sardis. Apparently, this church did a lot of good things. Perhaps they had many good programs, good worship music, helped the needy, grew large in number, and had the appearance of being alive and vibrant, but all these things were not considered complete by God. I submit to you that this was because there was a lack of genuine faith in this church. Does this sound like so many churches in the US today? Once again, I don't want to sound judgmental, but maybe this helps explain why only 2 percent of those involved in American churches have shared their faith in Christ with someone else. It seems to me that people in this country are no longer interested in sound doctrine but have become an entertainment hungry lot. They long for someone to share with them about the love and grace of God, but they don't want to hear about His judgment of sin and the righteous discipline of His children. They want someone to tell them that they are doing okay and the life that they live is acceptable. They fail to recognize that studying the scriptures for the Truth and finding out how badly we fall short many times is a very painful activity, but according to those same scriptures, this process is necessary to obtain optimum spiritual growth. How I pray that there will be an awakening among the American church to see that without true faith in Christ, all the religious activity in the world is worthless!

III. The third point that James makes is that faith in action is alive (v. 18). The evidence that we have received the true saving faith in Christ from God is that we are living out His Word. We are helping those less fortunate in a God-honoring way. We are studying His Word for the Truth and not seeking to justify ourselves before Him through what we do. We are sharing our faith in Christ with others on a regular basis. We are doing everything He asks us to do without questioning it. James gives us a couple of Old Testament examples in Abraham and Rahab. Abraham put his faith in action by being willing to sacrifice the very promised son that God gave to him late in his life. James tells us that his faith and his actions were working hand-in-hand to please God; that his faith was proven complete by his actions. And then this faith was counted to him as righteousness. Rahab put her faith in action by hiding the Jewish spies and sending them on their way in a direction away from their pursuers so that they would not be caught, even though her life would be in danger if she were found out.

God does not want us to come to saving faith in Christ and be done with it; that is not His design. This gift of faith is proven complete by what we do in His name and for His glory. Faith and good works cannot be separated. Let me demonstrate this with a parable. An old boatman painted the word "faith" on one oar of his boat and "works" on the other. He was asked his reason for this. In answering, he slipped the oar with "faith" into the water and rowed. The boat, of course, made a very tight circle. Returning to the dock, the boatman then said, "Now, let's try 'works' without 'faith' and see what happens." The oar marked "works" was put in place and the boatman began rowing with just the "works" oar. Again the boat went into a tight circle, but in the opposite direction. When the boatman again returned to the wharf, he interpreted his experiment in these strong and convincing words. "You see, to make a passage across the lake, one needs both oars working simultaneously in order to keep the boat in a straight and narrow way. If one does not have the use of both oars, he makes no progress either across the lake or as a Christian." Faith and works complete each other. We come to Christ through faith and then He gives us the ability and desire to do His work through the Holy Spirit. There are several passages of scripture that speak to this. Ephesians 2:10, which follows the scripture showing us the fact that salvation is by grace through faith, tells us, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Once we have come to faith in Christ, we are told that our whole purpose becomes to do good works in the Name of Christ, which God has already prepared for us to do. If we are not doing them, something is terribly wrong. Either we are living in staunch disobedience to God or we have not come to saving faith - those are the only 2 things that can be true. The Bible clearly says that Christians are to be actively performing good works. This is backed up in several other places (Titus 3:8, I Thessalonians 1:3, II Peter 1:5-11, I John 2:3-6 (already read previously)). The Bible makes no bones about the Christian life being lived out in actions and that we are to imitate the life of Christ. But, how can we accomplish this? Let's turn to John 15:1-6. This is a very familiar passage for those of us that have been in the church for awhile (read). If we are in Christ, we will bear fruit - we will do good works. And Christ seems to be saying that we have to make a conscious effort to remain connected to Him in order to continue bearing that fruit. Without Him, we can do nothing. As we grow, Christ "prunes" away the things in our lives that hinder our growth so that we will produce even more fruit. If we are not connected to Him through faith, we cannot and will not produce any fruit. Faith and works go together to produce a life that is pleasing to God - you cannot have one without the other. True faith produces the works and the works are the evidence of true faith. They are interdependent in the life of the believer.

Conclusion

In closing, let's turn to I Samuel 2:3b (read). God knows every person's heart, He knows every action, and He knows every motive behind every action. He weighs our deeds and knows if they are derived from faith in Him or not. James has challenged us to live out our faith because faith without action is dead. Faith in action is alive. What are some practical things that we can do, even this week, to show that our faith is alive in us?

(pray)