

February 7, 2010

“Actions Speak Louder Than Words”

James 2:14-17

For those of you who were not here 2 weeks ago, I chose to address the recent devastation in Haiti for my message. I wanted to bring a Biblical perspective to these events and affirm God’s promised presence in the midst of trouble. And, I noted the generous response of our congregation in providing offerings to help the people of Haiti, and the work of so many of you in producing the much needed health kits.

At the beginning of the service, we also celebrated the ministries of our Prayer Shawl and Congregational Care teams, and those members who choose to serve in this way. Remarkably, there are over 30 people who serve in these two areas. I took a moment to applaud these members saying “they do more than profess their faith...they are actively living out their faith”.

So today, I want to continue in this teaching using the book of James, the brother of Jesus. James is writing to address right Christian behavior... or you might say he is writing to address those right actions that are reflected in the life of a follower of Jesus.

Charles Allen is a retired UM pastor from Houston, Texas. He claims to have taken the following, tongue in cheek, survey with one of his congregations.

According to his survey:

10% of the members cannot be found

20% -- never attend

25% -- never pray

35% -- never read the Bible

40% -- never give financially to the church

75% -- never assume any church task

85% -- never invite anyone to church

95% -- never led a person to Jesus

100% -- expect to go to Heaven!

Rev. Allen used this survey to point out that talking about being transformed by Christ, and looking like a transformed person (i.e. how we act and live) are two different realities.

So James included these twelve verses in his instruction manual on the relationship between faith and works. James makes the point that an authentic faith confession results in clearly observable commitments and actions.

Commentator, William Barclay, writes that the primary purpose of this letter was not to teach new truths... but to awaken Christians to the truths they already knew...or had forgotten... or chose not to follow.

It seems these followers of Jesus were allowing their lives of faith to become idle. They were no longer an inspiration for others to see Christ living in them. They had heard the great teachers and prophets of the Old Testament explain their faiths application to everyday life and behavior... but... they'd gotten lazy.

James knew what true faith was, but his emphasis was on what true faith does. Martin Luther, struggled with the Book of James for a long time because he thought it supported a “works righteousness” Salvation. The earn your way to heaven approach! He wrote, "Good works do not make a good man--but a good man does good works." James states the same thing in verse 26--"Faith without works is dead."

Before I go any further, however, I need to clarify that we are not talking about a faith vs. works understanding of Salvation. It was Paul who focused on how one is redeemed, made right with God...but for James, the issue is how one demonstrates to others the CLAIM to be one of the redeemed.

You see, Paul's writings focus inward. It centers on a person's relationship with God. In contrast, James' focus is outward. It centers on relationships with other people. Paul writes about how one begins the Christian life--while James writes about how one lives the Christian life. James is not talking about works as a means to salvation, but as a proof of faith. Paul's perspective is how one is saved, while James' perspective is the fruit of our salvation. Okay, with that out of the way...let's continue.

First, James is teaching that real faith is involved in the real world--it is not invisible. We are not called to the Secret Service of Jesus. He gives us an example of the wrong attitude in verses 15-16 when he writes, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs--what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself--if not accompanied by action--is dead or idle."

James would agree with this statement by an anonymous Christian: I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger. Thank you. I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel in the cellar and prayed for my release. I was naked and in your mind, you debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health. I was homeless and you left me alone to pray. You seem so holy, so close to God. But I'm still hungry and lonely and cold.

James urges Christians to pray, but as Christians we pray in order to immerse ourselves in the presence of God...so then we can engage ourselves in the vision and mission of God's larger and continuing story.

Second, our faith never exists in isolation--it is lived out in the world. Our faith commitment to Jesus Christ, while deeply personal, is never private. G.K. Chesterton was one of the most influential English writers of the 20th century and he was absolutely right when he said, "A man can no more possess a private religion than he can possess a private sun, moon or stars."

You may recall in a series I did on the Lord's Prayer, I noted that we pray, "give US this day OUR daily bread-- not give Me this day MY daily bread. We are reminded that we are part of a larger community of faith and humanity. I found a little poem that sums it up nicely.

You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer
In first person "I"
You cannot say the Lord's Prayer
And even once say "MY"
Nor can you pray the Lord's Prayer

And not pray for another.
For as you ask for "daily bread"
You must include your brother.
Yes, others are included
In each and every plea; but
From the beginning to the end of it,
It doesn't once say, "ME."

Here at Powhatan UMC, we recognize that our faith in Christ is not just about us and our personal relationship with God. It is seen in our actions, and the ministries in which we actively participate. Your response to the crisis in Haiti is a good example. Later this year, we will gather again to help provide for the hungry in third world countries thru the feeding mission of Stop Hunger Now. Last year we provided over 10,000 meals through the commitment of time and funding of over 100 members and friends of our church. Genuine faith is never isolated, but is always looking for a place to be involved.

Third, belief is confirmed by our behavior. In the verses immediately following today's lesson (18-20) James says, "Yes, you believe--but even the Demons believe." It begs the question, "What are the results of your beliefs?". There is a BIG difference in believing there IS a God--and placing faith and trust IN God. You see Demons can recite scriptures, but there is no partnership or relationship between their godly beliefs and their behavior. They know ABOUT being transformed, but they are not transformed.

It is when we put our faith into practice that we show exactly what kind of faith it is...is it a saving faith that leads to following Christ's example of servanthood... or a self-centered faith seeking only the promises of God?

Inspirational writer Anthony DeMello, wrote this short, yet insightful, story: On the street, I saw a small girl, cold and shivering in a thin dress, with little hope for a decent meal. I became ANGRY and said to God, "Why did you PERMIT this?" For a while, God said nothing. That night, He replied quite suddenly, "I certainly DID do something about it. I made YOU!"

James knew the Christian faith was a call to be sent into the everyday world in God's service. He knew Jesus had challenged his followers to be salt, light and leaven.

An ancient writer sent a letter to the Roman Emperor, Hadrian, about Christians and the church: "They love one another", he writes. "They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother. They don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead, through the Spirit, in God." What a testimony of Christian living. They lived out their faith and, like this ancient writer, others could see Christ in them.

Finally, faith and works are interwoven, like two sides of a coin. The famous Methodist Missionary, E. Stanley Jones, once wrote, "An individual gospel without a social gospel is a soul without a body, and a social gospel without an individual gospel is a body without a soul. One is a ghost and the other is a corpse."

This is an old truth--we just need to hear it many times! We can talk the talk but we also need to walk the walk.

This is one of the primary purposes of our initiative, *In Mission Toward God's Promised Land...* to learn about the Vision and Mission that Jesus has for His church... and to help you discern where and how you can actively participate in His mission.

But as we begin this process, let me dispel a long held misunderstanding of the church. For a long time many mainline churches have believed they were in the business of maintaining the church. They are not. The business they, and we, are in is God's Mission in the world. It is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world... it is the *God of Mission* that has a church in the world. (Rev. Ted Smith Vanderbilt Divinity)

As the people of God in this time and place, we are simply asked to join in God's mission... to actively participate in God's larger and continuing story of redeeming the world. You see the church, the Body of Christ here and around the world today, is the instrument and servant of God's mission who was at work long before the church arrived.

Over the next 6 weeks of Lent, you are invited to learn about God's Vision and Mission for the Church of Jesus Christ, and to decide if you will seek your place in God's larger and continuing story. The small group studies begin February 14th. Join this Lenten journey. You, too, can be God's instrument and servant for changing the world. We are given such a possibility... and together, we could change the world. Amen.

Hymn - Change My Heart of God TFWS #2152