

“Mission Possible: Faith that Works”

September 12, 2021

Faith without works

Is like a song you can't sing

It's about as useless as

A screen door on a submarine

Not the words of author James to the early church, but song lyrics written in the late 1980's by contemporary musician Rich Mullins. Mullins offers a clear image of James' words about the connection between faith and works written in the first century. Over the years, there's been struggle with this short New Testament letter because of its emphasis on practical faith - how we live the faith we claim. Some have felt the tension between James and the apostle Paul, who talked about faith alone for salvation. But they're not in competition.

James calls us to integrity - being aware and making sure that our beliefs, our words, our actions line up, especially when we claim to believe in Jesus, when we say we love and trust Jesus, and then how we show it. And James does it all very directly: *Faith without works is dead*. In Eugene Peterson's paraphrase: *God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense*.

Reading all of this letter is important so that we understand why James is so concerned. Remember that the letter is written to Jewish Christians outside of Jerusalem who really had no place to land. The letter addresses Christian identity, but the ideas in this letter weren't always received well. Being called out about shaking integrity isn't what anyone really wants. We don't want the criticism or challenge, but none of us gets away without some discomfort when we read James.

My discomfort came with this week's reading and James calling out the community about playing favorites and making distinctions. God's grace is the great equalizer for all of us, but James addresses how we treat each other - and how we welcome one another - not based upon status or outward appearance, but upon our identity as beloved of God. The distinction evident in the church for James was between the rich and the poor, and it was hurting the church. We still struggle to treat the "haves" and "have-nots" equally. But maybe there are other distinctions, too - educated and uneducated, old and young, where we come from. There are lines of respectability that we draw - both consciously and unconsciously.

At the end of the first chapter, James references "being unstained by the world" and caring for the widow and the orphan as an example of living out faith. Christians live

in loving and caring community - and faith in Jesus and playing favorites don't mix. Faith acts because of the grace we experience in Jesus Christ. Faith interacts with others because that's what Jesus did. And James' message is a challenge to us as we consider hospitality - both in the church and in our daily lives. How do we make space and really welcome each other? Ours is a practical – or practiced – faith. Faith is more than what we say we believe; faith is also about how we live what we believe.

So, when someone walks through this door, we have to live that out in how we treat one another. Everyone is a child of God and must be treated as a child of God. If we claim to believe in God who has offered us grace, then there is no excuse for us treating someone else as unworthy of grace. But it happens...

Most of us would say that we're friendly when people come through these doors. None of us would be unfriendly to someone who walked in – at least not intentionally, right? But Jesus' way with people tells me that we have to show radical hospitality – going beyond being nice enough and move to truly welcoming people as children of God who need to be in community and experience God's presence. The church should be a unique place when it comes to hospitality.

James' example (one man dressed in fine clothes and another in dirty clothes) hits us hard when we consider our biases. We hope we're overcoming those tendencies. We want to do better and be better, but we struggle with resisting the temptation to value people on outward appearances alone and not even get the chance to get to know someone.

There are many stories that show our tendencies. A famous preacher was supposed to preach at a certain church. Many people from town came to church because this preacher was coming. The ushers became nervous because the preacher still wasn't there when worship was to start.

And people coming into church were complaining because there was a man barefoot and in shabby clothes waiting to be seated. Some people thought he should be asked to leave, but he was seated in a back corner. Others close to him shifted away when he sat down.

When there was a pause in the music, this man walked up to the pulpit and read from the book of James. He was the famous preacher they were waiting for and illustrated the Word of God in a way the people never forgot.

There are lots of social experiments of how people are treated depending on how they're dressed. I watched one where a man named Sandy who lived on the street asked for help - money for coffee or food - without a lot of response. When he was clean-shaven and dressed in a suit, almost everyone he asked for a dollar responded. I watched and found myself convicted by what I saw and then by James' words - *do you*

with your acts of favoritism really believe in Jesus?

James challenges us to see our need for integrity and witness - not simply for the sake of the mission to make disciples, but hospitality because it's at the core of our faith. Performative activism isn't the same as genuine action and addressing deeper issues and problems. Our words are empty and meaningless without action.

James reminds us that my life and your life bears witness to what I believe. And believing in James' terms is more than accepting facts or truth. Believing isn't simply an intellectual exercise; it's about my life reflecting a core belief. *What am I willing to stake my life on? Do I show integrity? Do my beliefs, my words, and my actions line up to show that Jesus is Lord of my life?* That's James' pointed question for us.

How do I view and treat others? It means I have to do some digging - some heart excavation - and really ask myself if I believe that God's grace puts on equal ground - or if there are some who are more worthy or deserving. James calls us to the hard work self-examination and reflection to see where it is that we're making distinctions and then stop doing it - for the sake of our faith and for the sake of others who need to know God's grace is for them because that's really what's at stake. If we follow Jesus, then we have the responsibility to offer grace and compassion just as we've received it. It's a simple message, but not easy.

We hear and feel the challenge viscerally when we're willing to engage it. And James moves us beyond "thoughts and prayers" to an adequate response to human need. Certainly, we need to be in prayer for those who are hurting and suffering, but prayer should move us to action. Christ-followers are people who live transformed lives because of the experience of a risen Savior who calls us into the world. Faith that doesn't act isn't faith. It's not just in our heads, but also moves through our hearts to our hands and even to our feet. Faith acts. Faith works for the sake of the Kingdom.

It's Good News, even though it's a hard message. James asks the questions that can move us to deeper faith. What good is it...to say we believe, but then don't act? What good is it...to know the needs, but refuse to help?

What will we do? How will God inspire us to act in a new way - to be sent forth to serve - and be changed - transformed - by faith that works? Faith that works in every interaction - in every moment that we live.

Thanks be to God! Amen.