Sunday, February 4, 2018

Lesson: James 2:14-26; Time of Action: about 45 A.D.; Place of Action: James writes from Jerusalem

Golden Text: “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (James 2:26).

I. INTRODUCTION. There are things in life that we automatically associate as a pair: peanut butter and jelly, horse and buggy, hand and glove. James was trying to make the point that faith and works are an automatic pair. Our lesson this week reveals the visible sign that proves faith is real. It is works of love. Deeds of love fulfill the claim that we have faith.

II. THE LESSON BACKGROUND. The writer of the book of James was Jesus’ half brother (see Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3; Galatians 1:19). Mary’s younger children didn’t believe in Jesus during His earthly life (see John 7:5), but they joined
Jesus’ followers after His resurrection (see Acts 1:14). It’s very possible that James was converted by the risen Lord (see I Corinthians 15:7). He also became the leader of the Jerusalem church (see Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 1:19; 2:9, 12). James wrote to the “twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (see James 1:1). This refers to Christians Jews. After the death of Stephen (see Acts 7:58-8:1-3), the persecution of believers increased and believers in Jerusalem were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Since these early believers in Jesus Christ didn’t have the support of established churches, James wrote to them as a concerned leader, to encourage them in their faith during those difficult times. James began his letter by outlining some general characteristics of the Christian life (see James 1:1-27). Next, he exhorts the Christians to act justly in society (see James 2:1-13). He follows this practical advice with a theological discourse on the relationship between faith and actions, or works. This is where our lesson begins.

III. A QUESTION ABOUT FAITH (James 2:14-16)

A. A false claim (James 2:14). In our first verse James asked a two-part question: “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?” The answer is that there is no profit or nothing to be gained. His question in this verse was essentially “What good is it my brothers if a man claims to
have faith but no deeds? Can this kind of faith save him?” The real question therefore, would be “is there such a thing as faith that is separated from “works,” or good deeds?” The “works” James was talking about are expressions of love for God and neighbor that come from true faith. **Note:** When someone claims to have faith, what he or she may have is an intellectual agreement with a set of Christian teachings, which would really be incomplete faith. True faith transforms our conduct as well as our thoughts. If our lives remain unchanged, we don’t truly believe the truths we claim to believe.

**B. An example (James 2:15-16).**

1. (vs. 15). James continued to write in this verse, “If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food.” He presents an illustration to prove his point that faith, or what we believe must be accompanied by good deeds. James starts his illustration with a supposition: suppose a brother or sister was “destitute” meaning that they lacked clothing and food to eat.

2. (vs. 16). James continued his illustration in this verse saying “And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?” Remember, James is writing to Jewish Christians therefore, in the phrase “And one of you say unto them” James is referring to Christians who see this
poor and destitute brother or sister in need and instead of helping, they simply respond saying “Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled.” All this believer is doing is offering religious sentiments by wishing the destitute person to go “in peace” and get warm and eat. This is an illogical response because if the poor person could get warm or eat, he or she wouldn’t be in need of those things. This is the same thing as seeing a person in need who we can help and all we do is say “I’ll pray for you.” James then condemns the believer’s response by saying “notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body.” Instead of the Christian giving the needy person the things he needed for warmth and food, he sends him on his way having done nothing to prove his faith in Christ. So James poses the question again, “what doth it profit?” In other words, what benefit is there for either the believer or the poor person if no help is given? Those who claim to love God, to know the Messiah, and yet who are not driven to show grace to others prove their lack of faith.

IV. COMPARISONS WITH FAITH (James 2:17-20)

A. Faith and works (James 2:17-18).

1. (vs. 17). In this verse, based on what he says in the previous verse, James concludes “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.” James was saying
that anyone who claims to have “faith” in Christ and does not show mercy or love as he described in verse 16, that person’s “faith” is “dead” or non-existent. That person is separating “faith” from “works” or good deeds. Likewise, Christians today can find themselves separating “faith,” or what we believe, from “works” or acts of love. This kind of faith is “dead” because it is also “alone.” Just as there can be no real compassion without action (see verse 16), there can be no real “faith” that denies service to God and the needs of others. **Note:** Now, none of what James is saying means that we can earn our salvation by simply serving and obeying God. Salvation is, and always has been a gift from God by grace (see Ephesians 2:8-9). But such actions as serving and obeying God demonstrate that our commitment to Him and others is real. Actions of loving service are not a substitute for our “faith” in Christ; it is verification of our “faith” in Christ.

2. (vs. 18). In this verse, James says “Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.” James presents a hypothetical case to prove that it is impossible to demonstrate “faith” without “works” of love. Someone might say that you have “faith” and I have good deeds. But the one who really has faith will answer saying “show me your “faith” without good deeds and I will show you my “faith” by what I do.” What James is saying here is that a person who simply claims to have “faith” cannot show something that is only internal. However, a person can demonstrate his acts of love by
“faith.” True “faith” is shown by what a person does. It’s similar to whether love that is only spoken and has no outward evidence is really love. The proof of “faith” and love is seen by its actions. What a person believes can change and even be a figment of their imagination. But good deeds or good works require effort, and over time will show real character and “faith.” A “faith” shown by works of love cannot be faked, at least not for long.

B. Belief and works (James 2:19-20).

1. (vs. 19). Now James attempts to show the uselessness or futility of having a correct belief that is separated from correct actions. He wrote in this verse, “Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.” James makes the point that one can have a correct belief in something, but without the proper actions their belief is futile. In essence, James was saying “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shake in fear.” The term “devils” refers to demons. These unseen forces of evil know that there is only “one God” (see Mark 1:24; 3:11; Acts 16:17), yet no one would consider demons to be saved because of their actions. By interjecting the subject of demons into his argument, James seems to be saying that those with dead faith are more ignorant of reality than the demons. The demons believe there is a God, but are smart enough to tremble at what lies ahead for them, because their faith is not saving faith—it bears no good fruit. Note: The
sons of the priest Sceva, started using Jesus’ name to cast out demons, but the demons overcame them recognizing that Jesus and Paul were genuine, but the sons of Sceva were not real servants of God (see Acts 19:15). If demons have a correct belief of what the message of salvation is and still are workers of evil, no one would conclude that they are saved. Therefore, James proved that correct belief without correct actions or good works is useless.

2. (vs. 20). James continued to say in this verse “But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?” In other words, James was saying to his readers, “You foolish (vain) man, do you need evidence that faith without works is useless (dead)?” The only kind of person who would consider that one can have “faith|without works” is “vain” or foolish, and is devoted to selfish living. The word “vain” here should be seen in the sense of vanity as used in Ecclesiastes 1:2, “all is vanity.” In this sense vanity means something that appears to be real but isn’t. So the “vain” man is empty. Therefore, the person who thinks he is righteous before God while being wicked and unloving is empty, senseless, and lacks both knowledge and righteousness.

V. ILLUSTRATIONS OF FAITH (James 2:21-26)
A. Abraham’s works (James 2:21-22).

1. (vs. 21). To further make his point that faith without works is dead, James gave some concrete examples his readers would be familiar with. The first example is given in this verse. James said “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?” James’ claim that “Abraham” was “justified (considered righteous) by works” might seem to be contradictory to what Paul taught about faith and works as well as Genesis 15:6 where it is said about Abraham: “And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness.” However, there is no contradiction here with Paul or Genesis 15:6. The “works” James is talking about refers to deeds of love, not what Paul referred to in Romans 4:1-5 and Galatians 3:6. In those verses Paul was proving that Abraham was not saved by becoming an Israelite (by being circumcised). He was declared right with God before he was circumcised (see Genesis 15:6; 17:9-14). James was proving something entirely different, that Abraham’s faith was a working faith. He was willing to show his faith by offering his son “Isaac.” Abraham’s righteousness with God came through faith and was fulfilled or completed by his work of love for God. **Note:** At first glance, this verse seems to contradict Romans 3:28, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” If we look deeper we will find that James and Paul are not at odds. While it is true that our good deeds can never earn salvation, true faith always results in a changed life and good deeds. Paul speaks against those who try to be saved by their works
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instead of true faith in Christ. James, on the other hand speaks against those who confuse simple agreement with true faith. After all, even demons know who Jesus is, but they don’t obey Him. True faith involves the commitment of a person’s whole self to God.

2. (vs. 22). Still discussing Abraham, in this verse, James asked “Seest thou how faith wrought with his (Abraham) works, and by works was faith made perfect?” The word “wrought” means “to go together” or “to work together.” In the phrase “Seest thou how faith wrought with his works” James was saying to his readers, “can’t you see that Abraham’s faith and his actions were working together?” In other words, Abraham’s “works” and “faith” worked together, and “by works was faith made perfect?” The word “perfect” means complete. “Works” or deeds of love complete our “faith.”

B. Abraham’s justification (James 2:23-24).

1. (vs. 23). James concluded his example of Abraham by saying in this verse, “And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.” The “Scripture” that James says was “fulfilled” is Genesis 15:6 combined with II Chronicles 20:7 and Isaiah 41:8. The word “imputed” means “to recon” or “to count.” The Scriptures said that “Abraham believed
God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness.” Abraham had faith in God and that faith or belief was “imputed” or counted for righteousness. The proof that “Abraham believed God” is seen in that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac, believing that God would raise him from the dead (see Hebrews 11:19). So, we see that “Abraham” was declared right or justified with God in Genesis 15:6, but his faith was completed by his work of love shown for God as he was willing to sacrifice his only son Isaac. Since Abraham’s faith and deeds worked together, James said that he was “called the Friend of God.” Abraham was justified by what he did and became God’s friend by his obedience. **Note:** Just as Abraham believed God and was justified, those of us who believe in Jesus are also justified (see Romans 3:24; I Corinthians 6:11; Galatians 2:16). However, this is a promise that still awaits completion. Once our lives are filled with works of love because of our faith, our justification will be complete, and we will have been saved by our works that verified our faith. That does not mean that our works earned us salvation. It means that God saves us by making us good or righteous and delivering us from death. The process is all in God’s hand and is totally by grace (see Ephesians 2:8-10).

2. (vs. 24). Having provided undeniable evidence, in this verse James says “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.” The only conclusion James’ readers could come to was that a man is considered “justified” or righteous by both “works” or good deeds and “faith” or belief in Christ. “Faith” and “works”
are inseparable. The person who truly believes does good “works,” and the person who truly does good “works” believes. Saving “faith” in Jesus Christ changes a person’s character causing him or her to do good deeds of mercy and love. False professions of “faith” can include the right beliefs, but not the trusting “faith” of the heart which changes character and results in deeds of mercy and love.

Note: We must remember that as Christians, even though we have been justified (found not guilty and made righteous) by Christ, we will still face the judgment seat of Christ (see Romans 14:10). This will not be a judgment for our sins because they are forgiven. At the judgment seat of Christ, we will either be rewarded, or lose rewards based on the “works” or good deeds we have done (see Romans 2:6, 10; II Corinthians 5:10). Our place at that judgment will confirm what James was teaching, that “faith” and “works” go together. You can’t have one without the other.

C. Rahab’s works (James 2:25-26).

1. (vs. 25). In this verse, James gives another example of how faith and works go together. He said “Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?” “Rahab” was not a Jew, but a Canaanite who lived in Jericho during the time of Joshua. She was also a prostitute. Her story was a perfect example
for James to use to prove the unity of faith and works. As an unbelieving Canaanite, she was doomed to death. Just as all sinners are under a death penalty, so was “Rahab” and all the Canaanites who were idol worshipers. By using the term “Likewise” James was saying that “Rahab’s” justification was just like Abraham’s. “Rahab,” the “harlot” or prostitute was “justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?” This prostitute of Jericho was “justified” or made righteous by her “works” or deeds. Those works or deeds were performed “when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?” What confirmed her salvation were her actions when she hid the Israelite spies and then helped them to escape from Jericho (see Joshua 2:1, 4-5, 15-16, 21). If she had simply said to the Israelite spies that she believed in God and did nothing else, she would not have been delivered (see Joshua 2:7-11). But her deed of loving-kindness resulted in the Israelites also showing her a deed of loving-kindness (see Joshua 2:12-14; 3:24-25). “Rahab” demonstrated her faith with the right actions, and the Israelites recognized her genuine faith. She demonstrated faith in God’s purpose for Israel, and that faith accompanied by her good deeds done to the spies, resulted in her and her family being saved from destruction (see Joshua 2:15-21; 6:21-25). It should be noted here that “Rahab” is listed among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11:31, and also was an ancestor of Jesus, for she is found in the genealogy of Jesus (see Matthew 1:5).

2. (vs. 26). In our final verse, James says “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without
works is dead also.” Here James uses the human “body” as a final illustration of how “faith” and “works” go together. The phrase “as the body without the spirit is dead” compares a faithless “faith” with a body after the spirit has left it. It is no longer alive. A person’s spirit is life. The deeds of mercy that people of “faith” do are the very life of the gospel message. A believer without “works” of love and mercy is like a “dead body.” He or she has not truly been begotten by the word of truth (see James 1:18). Therefore, he or she has not received eternal life. That person must repent and live out their “faith” by their deeds (see Isaiah 1:16-17), then their justification will be complete when he or she stands before the judgment seat of Christ.

VI. Conclusion. We must be careful when judging faith in others for a couple of reasons. First, it takes time for real faith to show itself. As a tree needs time to produce fruit, so it may be the same with a professing believer. Second, not all works or good deeds are done in public and therefore may not be visible to others. Christians are not supposed to blow their own horn, thereby bringing attention to their good deeds. Then again, many deeds by their very nature are done in the open for all to see. The important thing is to be sure that we trust Jesus Christ for salvation and are doing good deeds because of it. Our lesson has taught us that faith and works go hand in hand. They are an inseparable team. Unproductive faith is useless and does not save. May faith
and works be evident in our lives to bring about a change in others.

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