

15. The Close Relationship Between Faith and Deeds

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? 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 it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

(James 2:14-17)

A Return to the Theme of Faith and Works

As we continue with the letter of James, we recall that its theme is the maturity of faith. Our faith has to grow so that it becomes mature, that is, functions as it should, giving praise to God and being of benefit to our neighbors. We know there is a danger that our faith stops growing and maturing, and therefore the Lord works with us and in us by his Spirit and Word.

In the first chapter of the letter, James emphasizes that trials are sent to us to make our faith strong. We are warned that God does not tempt anyone, and that sin is entirely our own doing from beginning to end. We must therefore be very serious about being hearers and doers of the word. Then in the first part of the second chapter, James warns us against the sin of favoritism and stresses that we will all be judged by God. Whoever has not shown mercy to his neighbor will not receive mercy from God, either. We are to grow in faith, through trials, and learn to keep the royal law in love and with mercy.

James now returns somewhat to the theme of faith and works. The connection with the previous portion of the missive is clear. Whoever shows no mercy to his neighbor and yet claims to be a believer, a true Christian, obviously does not have a living and functioning faith, but has a dead faith. In 2:14-17, James asks three questions, gives an illustration, and then comes to a rather strong conclusion. The questions are rhetorical, and we can sense how they should be answered. The illustration is from every day life, and is quite powerful and to

the point. The conclusion is inescapable. This method of asking penetrating questions, using clear illustrations, and leading the congregation to a proper conclusion is a legitimate and effective way of preaching the Gospel. Preachers should follow this form as well, for it is the very heart of apostolic preaching, as we see here.

The bottom line in 2:14-17 is this: do we have a living and functioning faith or do we have a dead and ineffective faith? James twice uses the expression, “What good is it?” The KJV and the NKJV read, “What does it profit?” Faith without deeds is ineffective and therefore useless. God is not glorified by it, nor is the neighbor served by it. And we are not comforted by it. Faith without works is of no use to anybody. In our text, then, the Lord Jesus teaches us about the close relationship between faith and deeds. We will consider the question, the illustration, and the conclusion put forward by James.

The Rhetorical Question

The question that James asks is rhetorical, which means it is asked in such a way that it already contains the answer. But we must still carefully consider it. It is a sharp question, yet not meant to be harsh for James writes, as he does so often, “my brothers.” He does not stand far away from them or far above them, but he acknowledges them fully as brothers. There is also an appeal in that name: if they are brothers, they must grow in the faith. As brothers and sisters, we grow together towards maturity.

The expression “my brothers” also functions to dissolve possible anger that might come from the asking of the question. People react in different ways. Some may get upset at the strong line of questioning. Who does James think he is? But James, who is the brother of the Lord, does not take upon himself any position above the members of the churches. By using the expression “my brothers”, James is essentially saying to his readers, “You know right from wrong, you have been taught in the riches of the faith, so judge for yourselves.” James does not talk down to his readers, but brings them to the proper level of participation,

What are we to judge? “What good is it if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” James does not say that the man really has faith, but that he claims he does. He lays claim —publicly, I presume— to the fact that he is a believer, a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is not afraid to go around telling others that he is a Christian. He may even be a prominent person in the church, for the word “claims” suggests a certain boldness. The

man dares to speak up and speak out, therefore we may assume he is someone to be reckoned with.

We may look at such a member and think, “What a blessing to have him as a member of the church. We really need such strongly outspoken people who can defend the faith and who are not afraid to show forth that they are disciples of the Lord Jesus.” Yet James calls us to look a little closer. We must not just listen to what people say, for some are good talkers, but observe what they are actually doing. Are the words accompanied by Christian deeds that prove or show the claim to faith is real and true?

Faith Without Works?

Some people talk a lot, but do nothing. They will state their opinion without being asked, yet will not lift a hand to help even after repeated requests. To what kind of deeds is James then referring? The illustration given later also gives us direction here. James is thinking about works in the congregation, in the communion of saints. I will come back to that later. The point now is that the man talks much and talks loudly, but does not do anything in and for the church. He is all mouth and no heart.

What good is it? Does this type of behavior really benefit anyone in the church, let alone the entire church? James goes even one step farther. Can such faith save him? Can faith without works, which is not even true faith at all, save anyone? The answer must be: not at all. This is a false faith, a matter of self-deception. Such a person may think that he is on the right track, but in fact does not have true faith for then we would *see* it. That kind of faith —words without deeds— does not save.

We know that faith itself does not save us. Only Christ saves us by his one sacrifice on the cross, but the means by which we are bound to Christ and his sacrifice is true faith. I do not often use the term saving faith, lest the emphasis comes to fall unwittingly on the effort of mankind for salvation, but there is nothing wrong with the expression itself, if properly understood. Jesus saves us, and he does so by causing us in faith to share in his one sacrifice on the cross. True faith is saving faith.

The question that James asks clarifies that there must be works giving evidence of the existence of true faith. The works flow forth out of faith, and there is an unbreakable bond between the two. We cannot say that we are saved by faith alone and it does not matter whether we do works.

We must say instead that we are saved by faith and this faith is evident in works. Faith is first, but works always follow; the two can be distinguished, but not separated.

The Illustration

The question of James now comes to us, not that we should use it to hit others over the head, but to examine ourselves. Do we ourselves have an effective faith? Is our faith visible and evident in deeds? James even gives us a clear illustration of what kinds of deeds he means.

He writes in 2:15, “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.” James uses an example, a hypothetical case. There is someone who has no clothes or food, who is essentially a poor person. This person is a member of the church, a brother or sister in the Lord. We know the apostolic rule: do good unto all, and especially to the household of faith. This brother or sister needs immediate attention and help.

We can hardly imagine the predicament. We do not really know what it is like to have no clothes or food, just rags and an empty stomach. Yet this is the example that James uses. I therefore conclude that this kind of situation actually occurred in the churches of James’ time, perhaps all too often. In the early church, there was a definite gap between rich and poor (and James focuses on this gap in his entire letter, as we already have noted).

The poor person goes to a well-off member of the church, explains his situation, and asks for financial help. His audience is sympathetic and feels sorry for him. We know this because the man who is asked for help replies, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed.” That is like saying, “I really hope that your situation will change some day. Meanwhile, don’t give up, keep trying, and you will find clothes, food, and shelter somewhere.” The response is encouraging, but not really helpful.

James then writes, “...but does nothing about his physical needs.” This is a significant formulation. The man who is asked for assistance may have come with some encouraging spiritual words, such as, “Brother, trust in the Lord, he will provide. Go in the full assurance that God is with you. Don’t worry, things will change.” He dispenses spiritual advice, but does nothing for the poor man’s physical needs.

Excuses, Excuses

This is a very telling illustration and so it can happen in the church, even though it should not. We offer spiritual encouragement, direct people to the Lord above, but do little or nothing to help them in their physical needs. We might ask, “What about the deacons? Should the poor man not have been advised to go to the deacons?” Perhaps, but that is not the point of the illustration. The churches may not have had deacons in place everywhere yet. More importantly, we should not assign to the deacons that which we can do ourselves. We may give our alms for the poor to the deaconry, but that does not exempt us from helping when we are approached directly.

“Go in peace. Trust in the Lord. I wish you well, and may your circumstances improve. Keep warm and well fed.” This is also a kind of dismissal. James asks, “What good is it?” Of what benefit is that kind of attitude to our neighbor? He does indeed need spiritual encouragement, but physical needs must also be met. That is why we are within the communion of saints.

There are all kinds of excuses to get out of helping others. One is: “I have helped so many already, I’m getting tired of it and I’m going to stop. There’s no end to the requests for help. Feed one beggar, and twenty stand around the corner, ready to ask as well.” Another excuse is: “If this poor person would have worked harder and saved more, he wouldn’t be in this predicament, so it is his own fault.” And so we think we can wash our hands and say, “Go in peace.”

We Must Be Like God

Now let us look at I John 3:11-24. Here we find the prime example of how we should really act. James writes about the working of faith; John writes about the power of love. It is from the same root and source. John writes in verse 14, “Anyone who does not love, remains in death.”

Then, in the verses 16-18, we read the same words as those of James, except these have greater depth and power: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”

The LORD God has deep compassion and endless pity for his children. We sing from Psalm 103 of the *Book of Praise* that “a father with his children sympathizes, likewise for us God’s pity swiftly rises.” The word “swiftly” is not in the original Psalm, but the thought is valid, for we read in the original

that “the LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love” (Ps 103:8). God’s eyes are always upon us, and his pity swiftly rises when he sees us in need. If we cannot believe this about God on the basis of his self-revelation, what *can* we believe about him? Our faith is not based on our own ever-changing perspective of things, but on his never-changing revelation about himself.

We must become like God. How can we see a brother or sister in need, and not be moved by compassion and pity? What motivated our Lord Jesus Christ? He was rich, yet he emptied himself, became a slave, and even let himself be nailed to a cross for our benefit. Our Lord Jesus did not say, “Well, I can see you’re in dire straits. I really feel sorry for you, but keep your chin up, go in peace, and times will change.” How would that have benefited us? We do not need sympathy, but restoration and renewal.

It can happen so easily that someone with real needs comes to us, and all we do is have a good talk. We say later, “I think I really encouraged him.” Yet the situation of that person has not changed. This is the benchmark for Christian love and faith: what do we do to change the situation of others for the better? Our Lord Jesus Christ changes lives both spiritually and physically. He gives us hope by his satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness. And he places us in a communion where faith is the source and love is the way of helping one another.

Faith Accompanied By Action

There can only be one conclusion. James writes in 2:17, “In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” We may say we believe, but the evidence of it is lacking and faith is dead if we do not help those in need. “Dead” is a very strong word here. Whatever is dead does not have life, does not function, is not of any benefit, and will disappear.

Faith must be accompanied by action. Faith and works go together because they belong together. We cannot have orthodoxy without *orthopraxis*. Orthodoxy means to have the right doctrine. Orthopraxis (which I do not think is a recognized word in the English language) means to have the right practice, conduct, deed, or action. Doctrine and life go together, and we may even say that doctrine shapes life. We love one another, because Christ first loved us. John writes with the same tender care as James, “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (I John 3:18). Love leads

to action, just as faith is accompanied by action. Believing is not just thinking the right thoughts, it is also doing the right things.

We do not have to discuss here if James teaches that we are justified by works, for we know that we are not. Note carefully how he writes that faith “by itself” is dead. Faith must be accompanied—not preceded but accompanied—by action. Faith cannot walk alone, but must walk together with works. Love cannot exist alone, but goes together with action and truth.

This is not new knowledge for us. Article 24 of the Belgic Confession states, “We believe that this true faith, worked in man by the hearing of God’s Word and by the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man. It makes him live a new life and flee from the slavery of sin. It is...impossible for this holy faith to be inactive in man, for we do not speak of an empty faith, but of what Scripture calls faith working through love (Gal 5:6).”

Faith Working Through Love

“Faith working through love.” Now it all comes together. A brother or sister knocks on our door, wearing tattered, filthy clothes and worn out by hunger. We do not generally have such people in our congregations, but if we did and if they were to knock at our doors, we would say, “Come in, let’s get you some good clothes and a warm meal, and let’s arrange for shelter.” Then that brother or sister has a lot to do, perhaps even repent from a lifestyle that leads to poverty, but we have done what Christ has asked: we have given to others from what he has given to us.

Then we have a living, productive, and active faith. As stated, we do not generally have such people in our congregations. But we do have many different needs, perhaps needs that are not so immediately evident. Are we helping one another? Do we even think of those who *might* need help? Do we benefit our neighbor? What good is it if nobody benefits from our faith?

This is true also for the society in which the Lord placed us. We have to do works of faith and show the power of love in a responsible and concerted manner, so that it becomes evident that our faith is true and our love is genuine. Everyone must see that we are mature Christians who strive to meet Christ’s standards and reach his goals. We must shine like stars in the universe and be without fault in a crooked and perverse generation.

I know that we are limited in this respect. There is no end to the need and the poverty in this world. Yet in order to help many, we must start with one. To touch many, we must first reach out to one. We must show forth the power

of faith, the effectiveness of love. We must not think that we can leave it up to others or to the office bearers, for we all stand in the office of believers, to be prophets, priests, and kings in the anointing and service of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then we may fulfill our calling, as described in I Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” We are to be proclaiming prophets in the office of all believers. That is what the Bible says.

There is but one conclusion to make: faith not accompanied by action is dead. It may be vocal and loud, but it is in fact dead. Good works are mostly done quietly and often go unnoticed. What about our faith? Does it speak through our actions? Which actions do we undertake to glorify Christ and benefit our neighbor? Take stock, for a living faith always works through love. James anticipates an objection to all this, and we will deal with that in the next chapter. There are always objections and objectors, but we must not worry about that. Instead, we must let our faith do the work it should as a *living* faith.