

JAMES 3: “FAITH WORKS!”

(07/11/10)

Scripture Lesson: James 3:1-18

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? . . . Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (James 2:14&17)

For our Sunday morning reflections this summer we are exploring the Book of James. We are reading one chapter of this pastoral letter every week. After I provide some general information about the letter, we focus on two or three passages or themes in the chapter that teach us something about what James believes it means to be a Christian.

What do we know so far about this letter? Despite its epistolary greeting, it lacks the formal structure and characteristics of a letter. The central section addresses three themes: chapter 2:1-13 tells us not to show partiality to the rich; chapter 2:14-16 speaks to the relationship of faith and works; and chapter 3:1-12 comments on sins of the tongue. This central section calls the church to ground itself in Jesus’ commandment to “Love one another as I have loved you.”

As we discovered, however, Jesus is mentioned only twice in the letter and then in the most perfunctory way. Last week we explored what I believe to be an exceptionally brilliant and creative explanation for this rather glaring omission, the assumption of a sibling rivalry between the author of the letter and Jesus, the author’s biological brother.

With regard to the three themes of the central section, we should note that they have little relation to each other. The letter’s form and tone of general moral instruction is called a paraenesis. A paraenesis is written in the 2nd person singular or plural and is addressed to an individual or a group. This letter is also in the form of a diatribe, a speaker engaged in a lively oral debate with an opponent to prove a point.

Some biblical scholars believe that because the letter is in the form of a paraenesis with frequent use of diatribe, the author’s literary associations would be with the Greek rather than the Hebrew world. This style, which is common in Greek, is quite uncommon in Hebrew writings of that period. Other scholars have pointed out that there *are* biblical parallels to this style of writing not only in the writings of the prophets and the Book of Proverbs but also in the collections of Jesus’ sayings in the synoptic gospels.

I know that this may be what our young people refer to as TMI – too much information, a little more than you actually want or need to know about the form or style of this letter. The significance of this information, however, is the light it casts on the identity of the author. It implies that the author could write easily and fluidly in Greek, and that the letter is probably not a translation of a Hebrew or Aramaic original. This would tend to exclude the disciple James, who was a fisherman, and the other disciple named James as authors, since neither of them, presumably, would have been fluent in Greek. It may or may not eliminate the James who was Jesus' biological brother.

In the second chapter James speaks of a tension that had apparently arisen in the early church or the early churches, the tension between Christians of different socioeconomic strata. James speaks out against the secular custom of favoring the wealthy and pushing the poor aside. He tells us that, as Christians, we should rise above the discriminatory labeling of people and the prejudices that arise from dichotomization.

I suspect this was, indeed, a problem in the early church. There were both Jews and Gentiles in the early churches. There were men and women, slave and free. James tells his readers that Christians should be committed to dissolving these social and class distinctions, first within their church, and then, hopefully, in the wider society.

The matter of prejudice is also a problem in our day and in our church. We may not differentiate between rich and poor, though I suspect we do this more often than we think. When a church is calling a pastor, they have to be careful not to make judgments based on a candidate's racial or ethnic background, on whether the candidate is male or female. We also have to confront our prejudices concerning homosexuality as they find expression within our church and the wider society.

The bottom line is that it was of no consequence to Jesus whether a person was rich or poor, Jew or Gentile, man or woman, saint or sinner. He ate with tax collectors and prostitutes as well as with Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin. This should be our guideline for the way we relate to others within our church.

James tells us that it is wrong to dichotomize, to pass judgment on a group of people and on individuals who are members of that group. It is wrong for us as a society. It is especially wrong for us as a Christian church. James tells us not to think of people in

this superficial way. We should regard each and every person as a child of God, as a unique incarnation of God, and as our brother or sister in Christ.

James then goes into considerable depth regarding the relationship between faith and works. At the time of the writing, James may have had access to some or all of Paul's letters. Paul, as you know, preached that we are saved by our faith, not by our works. In this letter, James takes Paul to task on this theological point or emphasis.

Before we begin to unfold what James is saying, I would like to make what I believe to be an important distinction: the distinction between belief or beliefs and faith. John Wesley, the Methodist reformer, once said that "faith is not the same as a belief or any system of beliefs, no matter how true those beliefs might be."

I think of *beliefs* as cognitions, as deeply held assumptions about reality. I may believe that Jesus was the Son of God, that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he said what is recorded in the gospels, that he died and rose from the dead. I may believe *in* Jesus, that he died for us, that his death atoned for our sins, and that if we believe in him we are saved. I may believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God. These are all beliefs.

I think of *faith* as the quality of our relationship with God. As Christians, our faith is the quality of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Our faith is obviously deeply shaped by our beliefs, but our faith is not the same as our beliefs. We can hold an entire system of orthodox beliefs and not have a personal relationship with God or with Jesus. I believe it is the relationship, not the beliefs, that saves us, that brings health and healing to our souls, that enlightens us, that helps us enter into the kingdom of God.

I know it's not in good taste to criticize James, but I am going to do it anyway. Actually, it's not really a criticism; I just would have said it differently. James maintains that faith without works is dead. I would say that faith without works is impossible, at least when we define faith as the quality of our relationship with God or Jesus.

St. Augustine once said, "Be a Christian and do whatever you like." I don't see how we could have a better guideline for the Christian life, for the relationship of faith and works than this. If we are Christian, if we are *really* Christian, if our relationship with God is grounded in our relationship with Jesus, if we have really taken on the heart and mind of Jesus in all we think, feel, say and do, if we let Jesus guide us in our

relationships with others, how could we do or say something mean, cruel, selfish, or hurtful? We couldn't. It would be impossible.

I agree with James when he says that we can have works without faith, but once again I would have said it differently. When he uses the term "works," James means good deeds. It is obvious that not only Christians do good deeds; Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, humanists, agnostics, and even atheists do good deeds. In fact, I am not sure that those who say they are Christians do more good deeds *per capita* than members of these other religious groups. I think they *should*, but I am not sure that the research bears this out.

I believe that when people in these other religious or even non-religious or anti-religious groups do good deeds, they are doing it, whether they know it or not, in the spirit of God. Remember how, in chapter 1 of this letter, James said that every generous act of giving is from God. I think this is a very important point. The Spirit of that God who created and sustains the universe, this spirit of love flows through us. When we think, feel, say or do beautiful things we do so because, at least to some extent, we are within the energy field of the kingdom of God. When we think, feel, say or do mean or hurtful things, we do so because we have placed ourselves outside the force field of the kingdom of God. This happens because or when we are egocentric rather than God-centric.

The Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or atheist person who does something beautiful for his/her parent, partner, child, or friend, who reaches out to another in love or charity, may not know that this kind or loving act arises from God, but I believe it does. The person may believe that it arises from Yahweh or Allah or Krishna or just from enlightened thinking. I don't care what they think or what name they use. That stirring of the heart – in love – is of God.

In chapter 3 James tells us to watch what we say. He reminds us of the power of the spoken word to help or to hurt, to heal or to wound, to comfort or to give offense. The tongue is a fire that can set a forest ablaze, but it can also give warmth and comfort. James tells us that bridling our tongue is important to the creation of genuine Christian community. I agree. It is important in all relationships, especially in our relationship with those whom we love.

Once again, however, I would have said it differently. If we have faith, if we truly have faith, we don't have to watch our mouth. We don't even have to think about it. If we really took on the heart and mind of Jesus, certain words would flow forth from us and others wouldn't. It's as simple as that.

Actually, it's not quite that simple. We have to have faith. Not belief. Not beliefs, but faith. I guess that in the last analysis I agree with the apostle Paul. If there is one thing that will save us, that will heal us, it is faith: the quality of our relationship with God through Jesus. This and this alone can open the door to the kingdom or realm of God, to the experience of heaven right here on earth and then to the possibility of creating heaven, of helping to make it a reality not only in our churches, but also in the world.

James says,

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

I guess I agree with James when he says, "faith without works is dead." I just would have said it differently. I think that what James is really talking about here is belief, not faith, or at least not faith as I understand it. I would agree with James that we can hold an orthodox belief system, we can believe that Jesus was the Christ, the incarnation of the Logos, the Word of God, and still not reach out to our brother or sister who is in need. I would agree that we can even believe *in* Jesus, that we can worship him as Lord and Savior, and not reach out to our brother or sister in need.

I just don't see how we can have faith, a personal relationship with God or Jesus, and not feel moved to respond to the plight of our brother or sister. I don't see how we can take on the heart and mind of Jesus and hurt others with our tongue. I guess in the last analysis I agree with St. Augustine when he tells us to "Be a Christian and do whatever you like." If we really are Christians, we will be filled with the Spirit of God. It is inconceivable that this will not show forth in all we say and do.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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