

The Christian Life
Part 2: Living Faithfully
James 2: 1-17

Have you heard the old story of a tight rope walker who came to Niagara Falls to perform? He stretched his rope across the treacherous waters that stretch between Canada and the US and proceeded to walk across the falls. Halfway across, he reversed course and walked backwards for about 100 feet, and then proceeded to run in the other direction till he reached the shore. He then put on a blindfold, and carefully walked across to the other side, where he grabbed a wheelbarrow and began to push it back across. The crowd was going crazy with excitement, cheering him all the way. Reaching the end of the rope, he asked the crowd a question- who believes I can push a man in this wheelbarrow across the falls? A small man in the front row waved his hands- I do! I believe you can do it he exclaimed. The tight rope walker said good- come and get in the wheelbarrow. Instead, the man turned away and went home. It seems he didn't believe after all.

True faith results in action. To put it more clearly true faith calls and motivates us to action. James says that another way in verse 14-17. **Faith without works is dead.** Martin Luther the father of the Protestant church recognized how that statement might be misunderstood and lead believers astray. One of the fundamental truths of Christianity is that salvation, sinful people being rescued from their sins, is by faith alone in Christ alone. Luther had grave concerns that James was perilously close to teaching that good works are also required, which would be contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures, in other words heresy. Luther would be shocked and outraged by the heresies of today, especially the attractive one that says that because God is love salvation must be universal. It becomes much less attractive when one considers the possibility that unrepentant suicide bombers will one day share in the glory of the triune God.

We do not have the time this morning to debate the merits of those age-old discussions, but we will find it an uphill battle to contend that verse 17 is outside the bounds of Scripture. Even more confusing is that Luther described the relationship between faith and works this way: "We are saved by faith alone but the faith that saves is never alone." That sounds like something we might read in James, like 2:17. The question for you and me this morning is **how do we live faithful lives for Christ?** Luther might ask how lonely is our faith? John Wesley would ask how is our faith at work?

One way to find answers to those questions is by looking into the mirror of our soul and reflecting on the way we see and react to other people. James reminds us that **we live faithfully by not showing partiality or favoritism**. That means we will not judge one segment of society or group of people to be more holy or more sinful than another group. James illustrates that truth in the first four verses of chapter 2 with the rich and the poor. Then and now, there is something about the rich and powerful that makes them oddly attractive. Wealthy Hollywood celebrities, sports figures and politicians usually attract a crowd and the poor usually do not. The unholy gap between rich and poor is something most of us can easily relate to. The ironic thing is that James does not focus on the outward appearance of the rich man but the inward reaction of those who are around him.

Critical thinking will lead us to the conclusion that there is a much greater context to those verses. We must avoid the temptation to fool ourselves into thinking that showing favoritism is solely limited to catering to the wealthy or famous. Consider this example. You arrive late for worship on Sunday morning and there only two seats left. One is in the back row next to a person you don't particularly care for because you heard from a friend of a friend that they said something mean about your sister's husband's cousin ten years back. The other seat is in the front row, in front of the pulpit, right next to a heavily tattooed person with long hair, a large earring in a place that you don't think was meant to have earrings, wearing an old camouflage t-shirt, dirty cowboy boots and a MAGA hat. What do you do? **Your choice will reflect your faith.**

Faith that is alone would have you choose to go back home or stand in the back, even though you know the preacher will be long winded and your feet are already killing you because you are wearing fancy new shoes that hurt terribly. Faith that is alone would have you sit down with either and tell yourself they are not even there. Faith that is alone would have you choose the seat by the person you don't like and completely miss the possibility that God saved that seat just for you so that a broken relationship might be fixed. Faith that works would have you choose the seat by the person in the camo shirt, introduce yourself and welcome her to worship. **True faith, faith that works is faith that does not make distinctions or judgments about people** based upon outward appearances or by what other people might say about them.

Faith that doesn't work, faith that is alone, is faith that looks at someone's outward appearance, assigns them a label, and then places them in some sort of humanly defined category. It is making distinctions and treating others in our own circles of influence differently based upon such things as lifestyle, skin color, social status, or education. James refers to that as making distinctions and judging with evil thoughts. **2:4** It is evil because it does not help bring us to a deeper love of Jesus or a deeper love for our neighbor. We are not living faithfully when we are guilty of judging with evil thoughts. In fact, we are guilty of breaking what James calls the royal law in **2:8. Living faithful lives for Christ is loving our neighbor as ourselves.** Living faithfully is remembering we are not the creator but the created. As our divine creator, God is the ultimate authority and judge over character and lifestyle.

James reminds his writers and those of us hearing his words this morning that God has chosen the poor *in* the world, the so-called common people, to share in His kingdom. **2:5 Living faithfully is believing that all of us are needy people, sinners in need of a savior.** That Savior is Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and rose Himself from the dead on the third day to save us, to rescue us from our sin. Without Jesus, our faith is futile, in other words useless and dead. **1 Cor 15:17-18**

Without true faith we are the worst kind of dead. There is physical death, funerals, coffins, and cemeteries, and there is spiritual death, which is dying in our sins. The cross is the healing remedy for both, and praise God the foot of the cross of Jesus is found on level ground. Despite our tendency to make distinctions and judgments, the only thing that will keep us from the power of the cross is faith that does not work. The only person that can keep us from it is ourselves.

It has been said that the task of the church is not to get sinners into heaven, but to get the saints out of bed. I'm not sure who first said that, but there is an element of truth in that statement. The church is powerless to save souls, only true faith in Christ, faith that works can do that. God does the saving souls part, although we must be willing to participate in that process. The church's primary purpose is to welcome that soul that God has saved by His grace and nurture him or her into a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps that person is us. **Living faithfully brings power to change ourselves and the world.**

When we live faithfully, we have power to be agents of change. We can change the world, but only when we change ourselves. Jesus is inviting us to faith to get in the wheelbarrow and believe He knows better than any of us how to navigate this tightrope we call life. I pray that we will continue to trust Him and have faith that works, today and in the days to come. Amen.