

Series: Faith that Makes a Difference

“Faith that Works”

Introduction: You may recall that just over a year ago, I inherited my father’s Toyota Camry Hybrid and went down to NC to drive it back, somewhat worried, given the age of the car, that the battery would give out somewhere along the way. Well, fortunately it didn’t, and in fact it kept going for well over a year. But just couple of weeks ago, it finally happened – the “triangle of death” appeared among a bunch of other warning lights on the dashboard (it looked a bit like Christmas!), indicating that the hybrid battery had reached the end of its life. So, last Wednesday, a fellow from the Green Bean Battery Co. put in a reconditioned battery, at less than half the cost that Toyota would have charged, and with a lifetime warranty to boot. With only 88,000 miles, relatively new Michelin tires, and no rust (because it’s always lived in the south), this Camry should provide (Iela and Matt) many more years of faithful service.

But of course, without this new battery, the car would be nothing; its body would be just a shell. Without a battery a car will take you nowhere and it won’t do you, or anyone else, much good. We could say that a car without a battery is dead. In like fashion, James writes that a faith without works is dead; it’s just a shell. It will take you nowhere and it won’t do you, or anyone else, much good. James, as we have said, wants the faith of his readers to make a difference. As he will explain, a faith that has genuine love for God is inseparable from doing good things for others. Like a healthy tree, a living faith will bear fruit. [READ 2:14-26]

I. The Trouble with Faith that Does Not Work

A. Like last week, when we heard James invite his readers to think about the trouble with favoritism by having them picture their response to two men coming into their worship, one rich and the other poor, James has his readers begin to think about the trouble with a faith that does not work by doing some more imagining.

1. First, he says, imagine someone who is struggling in life. Maybe they’ve lost their job and can’t pay their rent or even afford to buy groceries...maybe they’re in the midst of a pandemic! Further, they’re not just someone you don’t know but imagine that they’re a “brother or a sister,” meaning that they’re a part of your family of faith. Imagine that things have gotten so bad for this person that they’re in need of the basics – food and clothing. And then imagine that all you can muster is a kind of greeting that says, “go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but do nothing to help make that happen. What good is that? James asks. Faith, if not accompanied by action is like a car without a battery; it will get you nowhere and it won’t do you, or anyone else, any good.

2. Second, James says, imagine someone saying, “You have faith; I have deeds” (V. 18). This person is trying to separate faith from good deeds. Some people are merciful to the poor, they assert, while others like to study the Bible. People have different gifts, after all. But again, James makes the point that the two can’t be separated. Faith and works are not special gifts that a follower of Jesus may or may not have. Only where works are present is there evidence that faith is genuine, and not just mental assent or “fire insurance.” To drive his point home, James remarks that even the demons believe that God exists, but such mental assent will not bring them into an eternal relationship with the living God or help get done what God wants his people to get done.

B. James is trying to head off an all too common problem in which affirmations of faith are made but they remain empty because they're nothing more than mental assent. So it's worth pausing and asking: Where might God be calling you to move out of your head and use your feet and your hands to take you to and help meet a place of need?

Know that our mission's committee began thinking freshly about this just a few nights ago as we considered our budget from the funds you all donate each month. We want to make sure that in these days of increasing humanitarian needs arising out of the fault line that is a pandemic, as well as the needs for justice in the wake of the fault line of racism that's been revealed in our nation, that we in no way are just saying "go in peace; keep warm and well fed." Instead, we want to ask, "How can we, as a church, use not only our treasure, but also our time and our talents to take help meet the basic humanitarian needs of all who have been created in the image of our good and gracious God?" We'd appreciate your prayers toward this end.

C. It's also possible that a discussion of good works scares you, or makes you uncomfortable because while James says that a faith without works is dead, Paul declares: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:8-9). So, which is it? Do James and Paul contradict one another?

II. The Complementary Nature of Faith and Works

A. In this vein, it is important to see James and Paul complementing, not contradicting one another. Picture them not as standing toe-to-toe in order to fight each other. Picture them instead standing back-to-back fighting two different enemies and together defending the genuine nature of faith. Paul is fighting a tendency to heap up good works thinking if we do enough good things God will love us. Paul wants us to know that God loves us before we've done thing one! Works then become the way in which we express our faith, as Paul describes it to the Galatians: "For in Christ Jesus ... the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself [lit. "working"] through love" (Gal. 5:6; cf. 1Th. 1:3; Ro. 1:5). James, on the other hand, is fighting a tendency by some to forget about works altogether, thinking that if we just have right theology, we don't need to worry about doing a thing. James wants us to know that right theology is affirmed by and when we do good things.

Illustration: Imagine (in good, Jamesian fashion), that you and a few friends have been out boating and your craft unfortunately goes down, sunk in a storm. It's a long way back to shore but all is not lost as you do have a small, blowup lifeboat which will fit one person. Fortunately, your friends suggest you climb in and go get help for them, which you of course promise to do. So, you row a little bit but then the sun comes out and you're tired from fighting the storm so you decide to put your feet up, float a bit, take a quick nap, and catch some rays while you enjoy and celebrate not drowning. If this is how you respond to your rescue and the opportunity of new life you've been given, you will do no one any good, especially if you fall asleep! You will drift out to sea and your friends will eventually drown.

Paul is concerned we recognize that by our own efforts, we cannot swim to safety; we need to climb into the lifeboat that God has sent in Jesus instead of trying to swim to shore on our own. James is concerned that when we get into the gift that is the lifeboat, we will appreciate it and use it to do good for others, not just float aimlessly around.

B. Interestingly, both James and Paul turn to Abraham to support the particular battle they're fighting and the particular emphasis they're making. They just emphasize different points in his life. In Romans 4, Paul affirms that Abraham was not declared to be in right relationship with God by means of his works but by believing God's promise that Abraham would indeed have an heir and begin the line that would become the nation of Israel, and eventually see the arrival of Jesus, all of which would be the means through which God was going to bless the world (cf. Ge. 12:1-3; 15:1-6). James emphasizes a later point in Abraham's life when this declaration of faith was put to the test when God asked Abraham to sacrifice this son, Isaac (Ge. 22). That Abraham made preparations to do so, to the point of picking up the knife before an angel of God stopped the proceedings, James sees as Abraham's faith being translated into action: "You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did" (v. 22). The battery was in the car and the car was driving nicely.

C. The Westminster Confession sums up well what we've been saying:

Mighty God, remind me today that faith is a verb, an active trust in Jesus. I don't want a coffee-table faith that's mostly display, a Sunday-only faith that's limited to piety, or a bookish faith that only lives in my head. Give me a faith that lives and breathes and walks out the door into everyday life, carrying with it joy, peace, and love for all, always trusting in what Jesus has done for me. [WC 11.2]

III. Not Just Sunday-Only Faith

A. James then adds the story of Rahab to the mix to further bolster his point and we'll return to her next Sunday. At this point, I want to turn our attention to this coming Saturday, to help us make sure we don't have just a "Sunday-only faith."

This Saturday is, of course, the celebration known as Independence Day, or "the Fourth." For many this means images of flags and family and friends and fireworks and barbecued food. But for others it brings great pain to the surface. Such pain was communicated on July 4, 2016 by a man named Lecrae, a black, Grammy award winning hip-hop artist who has over one million Twitter followers. On that day, he took to Twitter and posted a picture of seven African Americans picking cotton in a field with the following caption: "My family on July 4th 1776."

Numerous white, evangelical Christians, who have supported Lecrae over the years, were incensed. They accused him of putting race, and not Jesus, at the center. What he didn't tweet in response, but certainly could have gone on to declare, is that his "family" of black brothers and sisters went on to experience a Declaration of Independence that claimed all people had been created equal, all people, that is, except black people. And that they went on to be identified in the US Constitution as only 3/5th of a white person. And that when a slave named Dred Scott sued for his freedom in 1857, the Supreme Court ruled against him, 7-2, declaring that black people were "an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race." And he could have wondered why this nation rightly honors the 2,996 people killed in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, but completely ignores the 3,959 lives lost to the horror of lynching. And these are just a few of the things that have stood out to me as I've tried to become aware of the history of our country that I simply ignore or at least am not forced to think about too much.

The problem with trying to separate race and Jesus is that Jesus came to bring reconciliation, and take down walls of hostility that exist, not only between us and God, but also between people of all colors.

Which makes race very much at the center of what Jesus is all about. Without acknowledging the need for, and working toward, such reconciliation in our daily lives with people who've been oppressed over the centuries, we'll only have a coffee-table, Sunday-only, bookish faith at best. So as we mark our country's birthday later this week, may we be aware that it is not a happy one for all, and that great healing still needs to take place. To that end, may God give us a faith that enables us to walk out the door and live a life of joy, peace, and love, a faith that moves us to do the work of being reconciled to the neighbors who have been oppressed.