

## “Living Faith” (James 2:17)      Pentecost 14, September 6, 2009

“**So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.**” I’ve been told that Luther was not a big fan of James and especially not of this verse. If that’s true, I have to wonder why? He certainly saw the importance of having a living faith. He even said, *“There is...no real faith from which the fruits of new obedience do not grow.”* That’s basically what James was saying, so what could be the hang-up?

I wonder if it was because this verse is so easy to mis-preach. [Is that even a word? “Mis-preach.” Well, you get my drift!] What I mean is that it would be so easy for a preacher to use this verse just to push people to do more “good stuff.” Do more “good stuff” to prove you have faith. You know: *“If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”* Now, that’s not a bad question to ask ourselves now and then. But coming from a preacher, it could be kind of self-serving. *“Do more ‘good stuff’ around the church to prove you have a living faith.”* Worse yet, it could send people home with the wrong idea – like, *“If I bring a casserole to a shut-in, or volunteer at the hospital, or drop off some old clothes at Good Will, or donate a can of succotash to the Food Panty, that’ll prove I’ve got a living faith.”* – which, of course, is not necessarily true. All it *may* prove is that we can be pushed or shamed into doing these things. That’s very different from what James is talking about.

The kind of works that show a living faith come forth spontaneously, without us much noticing or thinking about them. I mean, if you have to be prodded into helping a hungry person, does that make you compassionate? No. A compassionate person jumps in to help spontaneously. Or if you have to be shamed into helping a shivering homeless person, does that make you kindhearted? No. A kindhearted person jumps in to help spontaneously. It’s not just what we do that shows we have a living faith but how we do it.

And, of course, what matters most is why we do it. Suppose we did fix a casserole and bring it to a shut-in. Suppose we fixed dozens of casseroles and brought them over dozens of times. And suppose we even did it spontaneously. If we then patted ourselves on the back, thinking, “What a good Christian I am!”; if we then assured ourselves, “This definitely proves I’ve got a living faith!” – well, that would actually prove something different, wouldn’t it? It would prove we need to ask ourselves why we’re doing this “good stuff.” It would prove we need to take a closer look at our motivation. In fact, it would prove we need to watch out against self-righteousness. For patting ourselves on the back, priding ourselves on our living faith – that begins to sound an awful lot like the Pharisee in Luke 18: *“I thank You, God, that I’m not like other people are -- certainly not those lazy Lutherans. I bring shut-ins casseroles. I volunteer at the hospital. I drop off clothes at Good Will. Why, now and then I even donate cans of succotash to the Food Pantry.”* That’s not what James is talking about! And it’s certainly not the kind of motivation God desires! So when it comes to service,

what we do does matter, how we do it matters more, but why we do it— our motivation – that matters most of all!

Richard Foster really hit the nail on the head when he described the difference between self-righteous service and service that shows a living faith. He said:

- “Self-righteous service comes through human effort. True service comes from a relationship with God deep inside.
- Self-righteous service is impressed with the “big deal.” True service finds it almost impossible to distinguish the small from the large service.
- Self-righteous service requires external rewards. True service rests contented in hiddenness.
- Self-righteous service is highly concerned about results. True service doesn’t need to calculate results.
- Self-righteous service picks and chooses whom to serve. True service is indiscriminate in its ministry.
- Self-righteous service is affected by moods and whims. True service ministers simply because there is a need.
- Self-righteous service is temporary. True service is a lifestyle.”

So you see why I say our text can be easy to mis-preach. You see why the point can’t just be: *You need to do more “good stuff.”* Along with what we do, it’s important how we do it and why. But this being the case, what *should* we do with our text? **“Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”** How *should* we apply it to our lives? I’d like to suggest two ways.

The first is to use it as a diagnostic tool. Looking at ourselves, what good things do we do *spontaneously*, without any prodding, for the right reasons? That could actually tell us a lot about ourselves: where we are strong in our faith and where we need to grow.

Just as a hypothetical, maybe it could go like this. We look at our stewardship. First, there is financial stewardship, and actually, that looks pretty good. Long ago, we promised God we would tithe...for the right reason: to show Him our love and gratitude. So we don’t agonize over writing the check. We don’t really think much about it at all. It’s just something we do spontaneously...out of living faith.

Then suppose we look at our stewardship of time and talent. Well, okay, we do use some of our time and talent for God. Let’s say we teach Sunday School. And no one has ever had to beg us to do it. To the contrary! We love doing it, and we really give it our best! Why? Because we care about the kids. We care about their relationship with God. We want them to develop a living faith of their own. All of which is good.

But as we look at this area more deeply, suppose we detect one little weak spot. Yes, as much as we hate to admit it, sometimes it does bug us that no one ever says “thank you.” After all these years, after all our hard work, no one ever says

“thank you.” Hmm. We hadn’t really noticed that before. It’s not something we’re proud of. But...there it is. So what does this diagnosis tell us? Maybe that this is an area where our faith needs to grow. Maybe that this is an area where our motives need cleaning up, so that this gift of time and talent is more like the gift we put in the offering plate: something we do for God, not for praise, not for a pat on the back; something we do to show God our love and gratitude.

So you see how this verse could serve as a good diagnostic tool. But once we’ve got the diagnosis, what then? The second way we could use this verse is as a guide for growth – a guide for where we want our faith to grow.

Now, here again this would be so easy to mis-preach! **“Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead?”** *Okay then, let’s work on those works. Let’s clean up that motivation. Let’s stop needing to be thanked and make ourselves do it all for God. We just need to try harder. Then we’ll have a living faith, right?*

Yeah, right... Trying harder isn’t always the best solution. For instance, if someone tells you to stop being so defensive, what’s your likely reaction? To become more defensive. And the harder you try not to be defensive, the worse it gets. Outwardly, you may hide it, but inside, it’s a losing battle. *“I’m not going to get defensive. I’m not. I’m not. I’m not! And who are they to tell me not to be defensive, anyway?! That’s just so over the line! But even so, I’m not going to get defensive! I’m not!”* Yeah, right...

And it’s the same way with our Christian motivation. The harder we try to improve it, the worse it can get! Going back to the example I used a moment ago, suppose you are a Sunday School teacher and you’ve decided to try really hard not to let it bug you that you never get thanked. So it’s Sunday morning, and class is over. Parent #1 comes to pick up his child. “Have you got all your stuff?” he asks him. The child nods. Then, without even acknowledging your presence, he takes off. *“But that’s okay,”* you tell yourself. *“I don’t need to be thanked! I’m doing this for God, after all. Just for God.”* Then comes Parent #2 and picks up her child. She notices some glitter on her child’s hands. “Kind of a messy art project today? Well, let’s go get you cleaned up.” You just smile, again telling yourself, *“That’s okay. I don’t need to be thanked! I’m doing this for God.”* Then comes Parent #3, and in the sweetest tone she says, “You know, there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you for the longest time.” Ah! Finally! Here it comes! “Yes?” She says, “I know you’re just a volunteer, but my child really doesn’t get much out of this class, and I can’t help thinking that if you just...” That’s all you hear. The rest is just blah, blah, blah, for you’re exploding inside: *“I do not need to be thanked! I am doing this for God!”*

You see what I mean. Trying harder isn’t always the best solution, especially in our spiritual lives. What we need to do instead is open wider – open wider to God, open wider to His grace, so that He can supply the help we need in this particular area of our faith. Remember how Jesus said, **“If you abide in Me and**

**I abide in you, you will bear much fruit, but apart from Me you can do nothing”?** Well, this is the kind of situation He was talking about. Faith is not something we create on our own; it is a gift of God. So faith is not something we can grow and improve on our own. That, too, must come from God.

So, again using the example of being Sunday School teachers, suppose that instead of trying harder not to need thanks, we take it to the Lord in prayer. We confess it as a weak spot: *“Lord, I want to do this just for you, not for thanks, but pride gets in the way.”* We reflect on what this might say about our faith: *“Lord, is it that I’m not thankful enough for all you have done for me that I can’t do this just out of sheer love? Or is it that the privilege of shaping young lives is not rewarding enough that I want praise to be my reward?”* Then we ask for help in dealing with this weak spot: *“Lord, I can’t overcome this on my own. You’ve called me to this ministry, and you’ve promised me the kind of power that’s made perfect in weakness, so please supply me with what I need to overcome this weakness and grow.”* Then, last but not least, we might even pray, *“Lord, as I open wider to You, help me open my heart wider to the parents I find so disappointing.”* Think how that kind of prayer – not just prayed once but repeatedly – could help us grow in ways that trying harder never could.

The next Sunday, even if the exact same things should happen again, we would surely handle them with a better attitude, for we would have a divine Partner to help us handle them with a better attitude. And each time we turned to God, each time we cast our anxieties on Him, we’d be exercising our faith – doing something positive! – instead of giving ourselves an ulcer! Why, we might even be able to see these parents with a little more compassion. Poor Parent #1, so stressed out trying to get everything done! Poor Parent #2, so worried about having everything just so! Poor Parent #3, so concerned about her child having a good experience growing up in the church! Yes, they could deal with all that a little better. Yes, there’s definitely room for growth. “But,” then we’d think, “that’s true for all of us, isn’t it?” At which point, maybe...just maybe...we could even manage a little smile, thank God for this little bit of growth, and move on.

Personally, I think James would be very pleased to have us apply his words this way: as a *diagnostic tool* and a *guide for growth*. When he tells us, **“faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead,”** it’s not to prod or shame us into doing more “good stuff.” It’s to show the need for a living faith that spontaneously does the right things for the right reasons. That won’t come just from trying harder. It will come from opening wider. And that it is the invitation we take home with us today: opening wider to the God whose **“power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine!”** Amen.