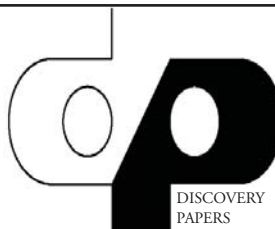


FAITH IN ACTION

SERIES: WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN



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James 2:14-26
8th Message
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First Corinthians 8:1b declares succinctly: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Spiritual pride, “puffedupedness” if you will, is an easily acquired condition.

As a new Christian, I fell in love with the Bible and rejoiced to learn the great truths that were on its pages. But it wasn't long before I became impressed that I knew them. The joy of discovery became self-serving. I observed early on that I knew very little about the Bible, but I was sure that the few verses that I had studied were the most important ones in the whole book, and the translation I was given to read was the best of all translations. My pastor was the best pastor. The discipleship group that I was in was the foremost of all such groups. “Puffedupedness” is an easy trap to fall into.

In this study we consider chapter two of James and the issue before us is pride in knowledge for its own sake. Such pride, we read, is the mark of a fool.

James 2:14-20:

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If 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? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. ¹⁹You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that - and shudder.

²⁰You foolish man...

James is challenging an immature church and he observes two groups of people. On the one hand are those who are engaged in conversations about themselves, self-

serving discussions about the language of faith. On the other are people in need of simple nourishment and warm clothing who are patronized and passed over. Hollow religious speech, James says, is lifeless and those who engage in it are fools.

How do we get into conversations like this where we are claiming to have faith, wanting to be admired? These conversations do not exalt Christ, they focus rather on the believer's analysis of himself—writing a blog about his reflections on his ideas regarding his experience of thinking about God. In verse 18 competitive living is added to self promoting speech. “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.” ‘My life outperforms yours.’ No one in this conversation feeds or clothes the poor believers standing right beside them. A useless debate about lifeless faith.

We can observe three particular shortcomings. The first is obliviousness. The hungry individuals mentioned here are not itinerant panhandlers about whom we know nothing. They are members of the church (‘a brother or sister,’ v.15). We know these people. They sit next to us in worship services. Their gifts contribute to the life of the church. The condescending statement, ‘keep warm and well fed’ indicates some awareness of what they need and yet we walk past them with no offer of help.

Second, it is clear that those in need aren't asking for a reorganization of the national economy; they aren't asking for the moon. A meal and some warm clothing is not an onerous requirement. There is no good reason for failure to help.

Finally, consider the level pride, which imagines that a fake smile and pat on the head from someone such as me (‘I have faith . . . I have deeds’) is the equivalent of real kindness. A phrase uttered by me in passing, a celebrity wave, changes hunger into happiness for the wretched and downtrodden. We should recoil from, not applaud, such condescension.

To be clear, James says faith that talks and does nothing in a circumstance like this is dead. It cannot save anyone. It amounts to nothing.

What are we taught in verse 19? ‘You believe God is one. Well good for you.’ This saying is a reference to a central affirmation of Judaism (known as the *Shema*), “Hear, oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” James is now addressing those who are proud of orthodox theology.

Knowledge by itself is also useless. It is possible to carry knowledge of God in our heads without changed hearts. To know about God with no inclination to love or obey him is dangerous. Demons have no illusions about the nature of God and his actions in history. They see him with complete clarity and hate what they see.

Living faith is not oblivious to a brother or sister in need, is not proud and self referential, does not substitute information for a relationship. Recall Revelation 3:1b: the word of Jesus to the church in Sardis, “I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.” James’ burden is similar, to shake his readers from a dangerous lethargy.

James 2:20-26:

²⁰You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

²⁵In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

James has challenged speech without action and head knowledge that does not penetrate the heart. But now, having been shaken from foolishness, what is a positive alternative? What is the proper way in which belief and behavior go together?

Finding this balance will vary from person to person and

obedience to the Spirit may mean that today should be different from yesterday for each of us. Should I hear the words: “cease striving and know that I am God”? Is that God’s word for me? Or, as in the first chapter of James, am I one who needs to hear: “Do not merely listen to the Word and so deceive yourselves, do what it says.”

We can imagine a physician looking at one patient and saying ‘you need immediate bed rest,’ and then saying to the next patient ‘you need more exercise.’ In my spiritual journey do I need to be called to more action, or do I need to be called to quiet, rest, and humble reception of truth?

Another analogy for considering the tension between knowing and doing: Who is a good husband? Is he the one who knows his wife, or the one who serves his wife? Is a good husband the one who listens to his wife and draws out her words by his own vulnerability? Or, is this a good husband: a man who protects his wife, cares for her when she’s ill and carries her when she’s weak. Is he someone who acts in love, or someone who pursues knowledge of his beloved?

Of course these are not either/or categories. They are mutually reinforcing. James 2:22 makes the point clearly: “You see that faith and actions work together. Faith is made complete by what is done.” What I know and what I do, what I believe and what I choose—these work together.

The final verses of chapter two are a continuation of James argument against deluding ourselves. But they also invite us to compare James’ teaching to that of Paul and Jesus. Some see contradiction between James’ discussion of faith and works and the teaching of other New Testament passage. Martin Luther, in particular, had this concern. These questions come to a point when the experience of Abraham is used to illustrate the nature of faith.

Let me read again a verse from our text. “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” The difficulty here is knowing what James means by ‘faith alone’? Does he contradict Paul’s teaching? Recall Romans 3:28: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.”

In fact, James and Paul have different, not contradictory, concerns. When Paul speaks of ‘faith apart from the works of the law’ he means this: Jesus went to the cross by himself. He defeated death and sin and hell with no contribution from anyone else. We fall to our knees before him and are born anew. We say nothing. We add nothing.

But when James uses the term ‘faith alone,’ he means

this: faith establishes union with Christ, and allows the benefits of his death and resurrection to apply to us, but it doesn't remain 'alone.' Faith is dynamic! We cannot help but be swept up by what Christ has done for us and be changed by it. Vital faith leads to life choices that are intrinsically beautiful and glorify God.

The second chapter of James ends with references to Abraham and Rahab. Abraham is, perhaps, the most significant figure in the Bible apart from Jesus. He is often used in the New Testament as an example of what it means to have faith. Rahab on the other hand is obscure, and James brilliantly uses each of their stories to teach us.

Abraham obeyed God when Isaac was on the altar. This occurred after decades of Abraham being 'the friend of God'—a recipient of divine promises, a witness to God's power.

Rahab was raised in a dark, evil culture and had become a prostitute. There are hints of family dysfunction. She was evidently the caretaker of her extended family—including father and brothers who should have protected her. She had no access to revealed truth about God, knowing only stories about the parting of the Red Sea.

However, with that scant information she drew this conclusion: "When we heard of it our hearts melted and everybody's courage failed because of you for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below." A miracle that occurred decades before captured her heart and she risked her life to protect the people who served the 'God of heaven and earth.' Great faith does not require a large library or a clearly articulated systematic theology.

May our faith be deepened and may good works flow from such faith. I commend to you a faith that works. Wake up. Strengthen what remains.