

Faith That Works

James 2: 1-10, 14-17 and Psalm 146

In the church where Sue and I were married, if you lifted up the pew cushions you would find antique brass plates affixed to the wooden seats below. Each of these brass plates was engraved with a name and a number. The name identified the person for whom that seat was reserved. The number indicated how much that person had pledged to the church. The higher the pledge, the closer to the pulpit you were seated. Kind of the reverse of what you see today, when most people wouldn't sit in front unless *you* paid *them*! In those days, those who could afford to give the most were seated in front where their visibility identified them to the rest of the congregation for their generosity. Those who gave less were seated farther back.

The Epistle of James describes a scenario where a wealthy person is heartily welcomed to worship and a poorer person is barely tolerated. James asks them: "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism **really believe** in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?"

Didn't Jesus ... welcome the poor? Did they **really believe** in Jesus' lordship when their actions were so far removed from the example Jesus had set? Well, yes, of course they believed in Jesus in the sense that they believed what they had been told about him. But faith is more than just an intellectual acceptance of facts about someone. Faith is about trust. It's acting according to what you claim to believe. A genuine faith will be evident in faith-inspired actions; with works that are congruent with what one claims to believe. James challenged those Christians by asking, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?"

It's at this point that the question can be raised about whether what James is saying is a contradiction between what James is saying and the New Testament message about salvation by faith in the grace God offers and not by works that we do to earn it on our own. With verses like Ephesians 2:8-9 states, "For it is by *grace* you have been saved, through *faith*—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—*not by works*, so that no one can boast." But James isn't saying that a relationship to God is based on what you do to deserve it. He's saying that there is a difference between *professing faith* and *acting in faith*. And so, as James says, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." It shows no sign of life.

Good words do not earn us salvation, but they are the fruit of authentic faith. Jesus said much the same thing when he confronted religious leaders who were good at doing the God-talk but who failed to follow the God-walk. He quoted the prophet Isaiah: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Faith is not verbal agreement to a creed. It is a living relationship with the God behind the creed.

There is no contradiction in James' words. Those passages which proclaim salvation by grace alone were mainly directed to those who taught that Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross was not sufficient in itself for our salvation. They insisted that people were still required to follow the

Law of Moses to gain eternal life. James' was writing in his epistle to people who already understood that their salvation was not a product of their own works. But they were using salvation by grace as a pretext for evading the moral obligations to assist the poor and vulnerable, which Jesus taught through his words and by his example.

So, what does this message of James say to us about the way that our relationship to Christ should be visible in the ways we behave towards those in need? Are there ways that we play favorites? Are there times that we treat certain people as second class based on their being poor, or of a different race? Well, we don't reserve the best seats in the house for those who have the most to give anymore. And I can't imagine that a person coming to worship here would be intentionally treated less respectfully because of their social status.

Unlike James' day though, the poor among us aren't always so obviously identifiable by the clothes they wear. With the increase in the numbers of working poor, those who are employed in low wage jobs, those who are unemployed, or whose circumstances have created financial hardships, the poor we're talking about could be your own neighbor. It could be the person in the pew beside you. It could be you.

Poverty can be a vicious circle that keeps people imprisoned in their circumstances.

"A run-down apartment can exacerbate a child's asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes a mother's punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing." (David Shipler, "The Working Poor, Invisible in America")

Labor Day, celebrates the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country. One of the ways that we can put *our faith to work* is by striving to see that the poor, including the working poor, are able to share in that national prosperity and well-being. James' admonition to the church of his time reminds us, that when society plays favorites, inviting some to places of privilege while relegating others to the cellar of society, a living faith is one that responds in a manner that makes clear that we really believe in Jesus Christ, who comforted the poor and treated no one as a second-class person.

This passage reminds us that if a brother or sister is lacking the basic necessities of life that others take for granted, and our only response is to say, "Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill," while doing nothing to supply their bodily needs, we have not done the good work that embodies the faith we claim to believe in.

Faith that works isn't satisfied with merely offering the poor our charity while ignoring the systems of society that perpetuate poverty and injustice. It is written in Psalm 146: Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, who executes *justice for the oppressed*;

who gives *food to the hungry*. God's way is to give food to satisfy hunger *and* bring justice to replace oppression.

On this holiday that celebrates the worth of the work by which we make a living, let us exercise a faith that is *alive* because it is *working* for the growth of God's Kingdom.

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