



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### **FAITH BROUGHT TO LIFE: WHAT DOES TRUE FAITH LOOK LIKE?**

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*~ Scripture: James 2:14-26 ~*

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#### INTRODUCTION

Last week, Matt opened his sermon by telling a story about my bringing in candy left-over from Halloween. We laughed as he told how the Mounds Bars disappeared first, then the Reese's Cups, then the Payday. Finally it was all gone.

Well, there's a sequel to that story. Marcie was in St. Louis working on a big project with Cindy Kern when I brought in that candy. When she got home and found out what I had done, guess who was in hot water? She made me promise to buy her at least one bag of candy to replace what I gave away. Well, I've brought it to give to her this morning

In giving Marcie a whole bag of Mounds Bars you might think I am trying to win her favor. And you're absolutely right! I am!

I wonder if we don't try to do the same in our relationship with God. We're not sure of our salvation. . our standing with God. . .or that we're "good enough" to make it to heaven.

Most people think the way you find favor in the sight of God is by works, by which I mean: (1) Trying harder, (2) Making sure the "good" we do outweighs the "bad", (3) Doing things for God to earn "brownie points" in the same way you would earn a merit badge in Scouts.

It doesn't work that way with God. The Apostle Paul is very clear that *good works* is NOT how you find favor with God:

- Romans 5:1f – *“Therefore, since we are justified through faith, we have peace [we are reconciled] with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”*
- Ephesians 2:8-9 – *“For it is by [God’s] grace you have been saved, through faith—and [even this faith] is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. [However, Paul goes on to say in v. 10, “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God intended all along that we should do.”]*
- Hebrews 11:6 – *Want to please God? Again the answer is FAITH: “For without faith it is impossible to please God. Any one who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek him.”*

So, HOW CAN I BE ACCEPTED BY GOD? That, I think, is the #1 question on people's minds. We all want to please God. . .stay on His good side. . .avoid His wrath. . .make it to heaven. The Bible is clear that it has nothing to do with how much I do OR how good I am. It's all about Jesus AND His sacrifice on the Cross AND our acceptance of that sacrifice for our sins and our sinful nature.

. . . *However* . . .

God is concerned about our spiritual maturity. He wants us to become mature, pure, authentic disciples. Out of that concern, the Apostle James brings all this talk about "faith and faith alone" all the way home. Let's see how he does it in the passage that is our Scripture for this morning:

~ Read James 2:14-26 ~

Some people read this and think Paul & James are contradicting each other. Not so! They are on two sides of the same coin:

[A] Paul is making the point that good works has nothing to do with *establishing* a relationship with God.  
[B] James is making the point that good works has everything to do with *maintaining* a good & right relationship with God.

What James is saying is: There is nothing I can do to merit God's favor. But the very faith that saves me will reveal itself in actions consistent with God's promises. You see, TRUE FAITH can never be a mere verbal or mental assent to God's saving work; it must become a deep personal and practical expression of trust.

Have you ever heard the criticism: "*The church is full of hypocrites. . .Christians don't practice what they preach. . .They don't live it!*" The world could never again level that criticism at us if we took this passage seriously!

Let's break it down this morning, and see how this passage applies to us!

I. RHETORICAL QUESTION -- "*What good is it if a person claims to have faith but has no deeds?*" [v. 14] Answer is in v. 17: "*Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*"

And dead faith takes you nowhere!

- What if a husband says "*I love you*" but never demonstrates it?
- What if a believer says "*I love the Lord*" but barely can find time for worship & service?

Words are not enough. Words can be empty & hollow.

II. HYPOTHETICAL BUT REALISTIC ILLUSTRATION [vv. 15-16]

It would be like seeing someone ill-clad and hungry, and giving them the old Jewish blessing—"Go in peace, be warmed and filled"—but not actually doing anything about their need. Such words somehow are not enough. They don't translate into actual clothing or food for a needy person.

Does that mean that you should give to every beggar who approaches you on the street. That's a tough question to answer. If there's a shelter or social service nearby, I try to direct them there. If I'm pretty sure I'm being manipulated, of course I don't give. If I'm not sure, I usually give; what they do with it is between them and God.

### III. NOW JAMES THROWS DOWN THE CHALLENGE [vv. 18-19]

To those who would separate *faith* and *works* by saying: “*You’re into faith. . .I’m into works.*”

It’s not an either-or proposition. You can’t have one and not the other:

- You can’t have the root (of faith) and not the fruit (of works) -- that’s dead orthodoxy;

You can’t have the fruit (of works) without the root (of faith)-- that’s do-goodism.

- You can’t just talk the talk. . .you’ve got to walk the walk.

They go hand-in-hand. They are integrally related. You cannot have faith in God without works. So James says in v. 18b: “*I will show you my faith by what I do.*”

How we live in the midst of our circumstances, how much we receive God’s peace in the midst of our anxieties shows to others the real nature of our faith and our trust in God.

Illustration: About 8-9 years ago, I was going through a series of trials, and one of the guys I play water polo with paid me what I consider one of the greatest compliments I’ve ever received. He said, “Steve, evidently your faith is very real to you, and it seems to be carrying you just now.”

Our “WORKS” are our good deeds. But they are also how we live our lives, face trials, relate to people, and approach the tough issues. That will reveal whether or not we are really counting on God.

You see, you can *believe* in God, but not *trust* Him! Belief must lead to trust.

Illustration: You can say “I have faith in my doctor”, but if you refuse to sign the permission slip (for surgery), what good is it?

Illustration: Year ago, a French acrobat by the name of Blondin stretched a tight rope across Niagara Falls. A crowd gathered on both sides to watch him walk a tight rope across the Falls. Before he began this historic feat, he got behind a microphone and asked the crowd, “Do you believe I can walk across on this rope pushing a wheel barrel?” The crowd, familiar with this stunt man’s antics, chanted (almost in rhythm), “*We believe! We believe!*” Well, he did it! And when he got to the other side, he got up behind another microphone, and asked that crowd, “Do you believe I can walk back across the Falls on this rope pushing a wheel barrel with a man or woman in it?” Again, the crowd chanted, “*We believe! We believe!*” Then he asked, “Well then, who would be willing to get in?” A huge hush came over the crowd!

When it comes to our dealings with God, the most important question is NOT: “*Do you believe that God exists and that Jesus was His Son and that He offers salvation through Him?*” The demons believe that (according to v. 19)! They know it’s true!

The important question IS: “Have you acted on this? Have you personally put your trust in Jesus to forgive you and make you alive unto God?”

This is the kind of faith that trusts God so much that you get in the wheel barrel and let him carry you across life (which can be as rough as Niagara Falls sometimes).

### IV. SO, HERE’S THE PRINCIPLE [v. 22] v. 22 is our text!

Faith and actions work together. Faith is made complete by what we do (i.e.: how we behaviorize it).

James calls on two Old Testament Biblical characters to drive home his point: ABRAHAM & RAHAB.

## V. TWO OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES [vv. 20-26]

When you look at these two characters, you have to conclude it doesn't make a whole lot of difference what your background has been.

- ABRAHAM had been pretty faithful all his life; he's like the guy who grew up in the church.
- RAHAB, on the other hand, had a pretty sordid past. She came out of a life of prostitution.

But this they had in common: they both put their trust in God. I mean the weight of their lives, not just their words. No lip service here.

ABRAHAM: God promised to create a nation through his seed, Isaac. It had been a pretty good adventure in genuine faith to get to this point. Abraham wavered a little at the promise of God back before Isaac was born. But he believed. . . Isaac was born. . . and now God tests Abraham's faith. He asks Abraham to sacrifice the very means He had already provided to carry out His promise.

What would you say about the quality of Abraham's faith if he had said: "I really believe you will create a nation through Isaac, but I refuse to offer him up to you?"

If Abraham didn't really trust God, he would have never gone along with the scheme. He would have never obeyed. You see, true faith trusts God even when we can't quite figure out what He's up to. And when we really trust God, we will obey—no matter what.

Here we have faith & actions. . . belief & behavior. . . trust & obedience working together [cf. verse 22]. Faith is the force behind the deed. The deed is the proof, the demonstration, the evidence of faith.

RAHAB: Same thing. Her story is found in Joshua 2:1-6.

Joshua sent two spies to spy out Jericho. The king of Jericho found out about it and sought them out. The spies stopped at the house of Rahab. Evidently, God had a role for her to play in the Israelite's eventual victory over Jericho and conquest of the land. Her protection saved their lives.

She went out on a limb. She took a risk—not unlike getting into Blondin's wheel barrel. This is a working faith—or, a faith that works.

## APPLICATION

How about you? Do you stand confidently on God's Word today? Does your life display a faith that is real? Do you demonstrate it by trusting His promises and obeying His commands as given in Scripture?

Let's look at some possible situations that might come up in the life of a believer. . . . .

1. God promises you that he will provide for your *material needs*. He also commands you not to lie or engage in any financial dishonesty. You are tight for money and an opportunity for dishonest profit arises. What is the proof that you believe God's promise?
2. God promises you that he will supply you with the ability to verbally *share your faith* with others. He also commands you to do this as he provides you with opportunities to do so. An intimidating friend who is antagonistic to Christianity asks you if the rumor that you've become a Christian is true. Or a non-Christian neighbor shares that she is confused about what to believe. What is the proof that you believe God's promise?

3. God promises you that he will give you strength to *endure adversity* and work through adversity in your life to mature you and make you effective in your service for him. He also commands you to thank him during adversity and continue to follow him as well as you know how. You experience painful suffering in your life and have a strong desire to run away from God and numb the pain. What is the proof that you believe his promise?

## CONCLUSION

The world is watching the church. The world looks at us Christians and wonders if there is anything to this “Christianity” we profess.

People in this community are watching too. Even in this small, affluent community people are being “eaten up” by secularism, modernism, materialism, alcoholism. . .you name it! It’s so easy to forget this, but we are missionaries and Dexter, MI is our mission field!

How will we tell them about Christ? How will we share our faith with people in our community, our neighborhood, our work setting? According to James, people will only see God when they see Him at work in us, when they see authentic faith!

The old saying may just be true: *“You are the only Bible some people will ever read.”*

So, talk about our church every chance you get. Talk about our doctrine & our programs & our facilities every time you get an opportunity. But somewhere along the line, tell them what God has done *in you* and *for you*. And show them by the way you manage your life.

~ !AMEN! ~