

QUESTION #34:
“HOW DO FAITH AND WORKS WORK?”
(James 1:22, 2:14-26)

3.22.20

INTRODUCTION

We have a great question to consider this week, as we continue working through our “Big Questions” series. The question, #34 if you’re scoring is: “How do faith and works work?” It’s an important issue to look at, with a lengthy history.

Two thousand years ago the Pharisees of Jesus’ time thought that they could “earn” God’s favor by living pure lives. Unfortunately, they were the ones defining what was pure and, beyond that, they could never please God on their own efforts anyway. Scriptures that they themselves would have known pointed this out very clearly:

- 1) *Those who trust in themselves are fools — Proverbs 28:26a.*
- 2) *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away — Isaiah 64:6.*

In the culture in which we live, another idea, just as false, has crept into mankind’s thinking: that God is a God of love and, therefore, no matter our lives or lifestyles or sins or anything else, everybody goes to heaven — I have heard that as a quote. In other words, we’re going to heaven no matter how we live.

So, are either of those right? Does faith even matter and, if so, what role does “doing good works” have in the overall view of biblical Christianity? Let’s go to our text:

TEXT

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. In 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? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead — James 2:14-26 (quoting from Genesis 15:6).

ANALYSIS

What is James saying? One simple thing: Deeds are an outgrowth, the completely natural, spiritual consequence of a life surrendered to Jesus Christ. It is a reflection of a life transformed from being turned inward to turning itself outward. It is not an alternative to faith but rather an evidence of faith, a companion to faith.

So how do they work together? We're going to look at this process and compare it to a race. When the apostle Paul was nearing the end of his life, he wrote these words to Timothy: ***I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith — Paul, II Timothy 4:7.*** When Paul mentions "the race" in the Greek, he uses the word DROMOS (drom^o-os) — which means "course," which metaphorically reflects "a career, course of occupation, or of life." In other words, he has completed the course that God set out for him; he has lived the life that God designed him for. He has hit the finish line of a race faithfully run in its entirety. That "race" comprises the works of his faith. Paul's works were, according to James, literally as foundational to his faith-life as our heartbeats and breaths are foundational to our physical life. They reflect the reality of our spiritual life in Christ — the presence of the life of his Holy Spirit in us.

APPLICATION

So, let's look at the "race" we are each intended to run. And let's include the three (3) most basic components of a race:

- 1) The start line,
- 2) The finish line and, of course,
- 3) The course.

OK, so for Christians, it is our coming to faith in Jesus Christ, our surrender to him, our confession of our sin and our lives that can now be washed clean by his blood, that signals the start of the race. That's the start line for the race — a moment we call "justification," or our "new birth."

- 1) ***In [Jesus Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace — Paul, Ephesians 1:7.***
- 2) ***[Jesus our Lord] was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ — Paul, Romans 4:25-5:1.***
And because of the truth of those words —

3) [T]he blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness — I John 1:7b-9.

Now on the opposite end of the start line is the “finish” line which, for Christians, is something that human words can scarce express or our minds even begin to imagine. That finish line is heaven where, according to Scripture, we will live in the presence of our Heavenly Father and his wonderful Son, Jesus Christ, for all eternity. When a life is surrendered to God through Christ, that is the outcome, the guaranteed outcome, the finish of one life to begin an eternal life which, in place of sorrow, will only know joy; in place of tears, will only know celebration; in place of darkness, will only know eternal light. Now that’s a finish line.

But in between the start line of “new life in Christ” to the finish line of heaven is the race itself, the course for which God has designed us and prepared us. That course is the “works,” the outgrowth of our new life in Christ. It is why we aren’t immediately “beamed up” to heaven. God has work for us to do — his work, for his kingdom, for his glory. That’s what we’re here for.

But look at the incredible foundation upon which I will “run the race” God has set before me — and it starts here: Directly because of being justified, cleansed from my sins by the blood of Christ upon my surrender to him, and God’s declaration as the righteous judge that, in his eyes, I am now “not guilty,” three things become true for me, that I can claim because of Christ’s saving of my life:

- 1) Contentment — I am a child of the King. I have need of nothing this world thinks it can provide because my King provides so much more, allowing me to live in the freedom of contentment in him:
 - a) **“[Y]our Father knows what you need before you ask him” — Jesus Christ, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:8b.**
 - b) **[M]y God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus — Paul, Philippians 4:19.**
- 2) The “hammock” — I rest in the life of my King. I have no need for anxiety of any kind, for any reason. I can truly rest in his hammock, knowing that he is holding the ends:
 - a) **The fear of the Lord leads to life; then one rests content, untouched by trouble — Proverbs 19:23.**
 - b) **You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you — Isaiah 26:3.** And then, from that place, beginning the “race,” beginning to run the course God has set out for you.

- 3) Reflecting the image of God — I am an ambassador for the King. That is exactly what Paul told the Corinthians they were in his second letter to that church: That God had given them (and us) ***the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us — Paul, II Corinthians 5:17-20a.***
- a) ***“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard” — God speaking, Isaiah 58:6-8.***
- b) Or, as Jesus himself put it during his Sermon on the Mount: ***“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” — Jesus Christ, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:14-16.*** That's what we're here for.

And James himself gives us a hint earlier in his epistle when he says (and I love how the King James says it): ***[B]e ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves — James 1:22 (KJV).*** And the NIV translation is just as emphatic in its wording: ***Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says — James 1:22.*** The “doing” is the race!

OK, so “works” are things to be done for the Kingdom, as a means of expressing not only our identification with the Father through his Son, but also as a means of reaching to the world on behalf of the Father and his Son. So, what does that mean? How are those works accomplished?

- 1) Through our words; as the psalmist put it: ***I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations — Psalm 89:1.*** Simply using our words to reflect our faith is a great way of being “doers” of the word. Using our words to tell of God and using our words — not to mention our attitudes and even the demeanor of our faces — is a great way to mark us as different from the world, making an impact for the Kingdom. This can also mean something as little as a cheerful “good morning” to

somebody who may need that cheery greeting. And if the question, “So what have you got to be so happy about” comes up, you instantly have an opportunity to plant a seed for the Kingdom.

- 2) Through our actions; remember this story that Christ told during his Olivet Discourse at the end of Matthew 25: ***“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’”*** — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 25:31-40.*** And did you pick up on Christ’s words right toward the end? ***“Whatever you did . . . you did for me.”*** Whenever the Kingdom, literally, the “finish line,” is the goal of our words or actions, those works work as an outgrowth of our faith — exactly what they are intended for.

But didn’t Paul write about works being meaningless? Yes, he did:

- 1) ***We maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law — Paul, Romans 3:28.***
- 2) ***[A] person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified — Paul, Galatians 2:15b-16.***

So, what in the world is Paul talking about? He is basically talking about the Pharisaic model that we mentioned at the beginning — the belief that I could, if living my life correctly, earn my way to heaven, to God’s approval, by my personal righteousness. To go back to our “race” analogy, they are trying to run the race in their own efforts instead of being prepared by God through the justifying work of Jesus Christ. The course we are to run is often an obstacle course, but Jesus is right beside us every step of the way, giving us everything we need for every step. A person trying to self-justify is

like somebody trying to run a difficult course with no help, no training, no encouragement, no coaching — no nothing.

Another question: How do we know that we are doing the “right” works, in other words, doing what we’re supposed to be doing? The Bible makes clear that we are made, we are created by God, exactly as he wants to make us, that his purposes in us and through us would come to pass. Both the Old and New Testaments make that clear:

- 1) From the OT: ***[Y]ou, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand — Isaiah 64:8.***
- 2) From the NT: ***For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do — Paul, Ephesians 2:10.***

Clearly, God has done two (2) things for us: First, he made us to be the runners he wants us to be and, second, he set the course for us to “run” on our way to the “finish line” of our lives. So one way to go about this is to pray to God for a couple of things:

- 1) Ask him to show to you how he made you. Consider:
 - a) What are your passions? What are things that seem to move you in a way that few other things do? [Difference between fads and passions.]
 - b) What are some things you know how to do?
- 2) Ask for opportunities to pursue works for the Kingdom based on your passions or things you know how to do.
- 3) Ask for “radar,” in other words, to have a Spirit-led awareness to look for opportunities. This can be ANYTHING:
 - a) Holding the door for somebody.
 - b) Offering somebody a coupon at the gas station.
 - c) Paying for a police officer’s (or other first responder’s) snacks.
 - d) Offering to assist somebody in carrying something heavy or awkward.
 - e) Noticing somebody that seems sad, and offering to pray for them.
 - f) Calling a neighbor to see how they are doing.

But then — and here’s the key — verbally show your work as happening BECAUSE of Jesus Christ. Works with no ID don’t mean much. It’s connecting our actions, behaviors, responses, comments and so forth with the life-changing presence of Christ in our lives. People will see Jesus because the works they see are connected to the Savior they need to see.

Anything done for the Kingdom will bear fruit for the Kingdom. How do I know that? It’s the idea that our “little” becomes God’s “much” when he is the motivation for the work. Remember this example of that from the life of Christ? While the story is in all four (4) gospels, I like this telling from the gospel of John: ***Jesus crossed to the far shore***

of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. The Jewish Passover Festival was near. When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish — John 6:1-11. What started out as likely nothing more than one kid's lunch became a festival banquet for a crowd that maybe numbered as many as 15-20,000 — and not because of what that lunch was, but what it became in the hands of Christ!

And that's the critical deal: Our works do not create faith (any more than they could ever create salvation). We are born helpless; as David famously noted: ***Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me — David, Psalm 51:5.*** Our works are outbound — a powerful sign of our transformation as a result of Christ's life in us. As Paul said in his letter to the Ephesian Christians: ***[Y]ou followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts — Paul, Ephesians 2:2-3a.***

And our works are also a reflection of the love we have for our Master [EXAMPLE OF MARRIAGE AND WHAT WE DO FOR OUR SPOUSES].

CONCLUSION

We are not asked to be Billy Graham (we already had one of those) or have a doctorate in theology (we probably got too many of those) but simply be two things:

- 1) Faithful to who God made us to be, and
- 2) Faithful to each moment into which God places us to minister.

Our passions, our abilities, our strengths, our desires, when placed in the Master's hands, have the opportunity to achieve something wonderful — an impact for the Kingdom. That's what we're here for, that's the race we're set to run — and this side of heaven, that is the greatest life we can ever know. Let's pray!