

Deeds Without Faith is Dead

James 2: 14-26

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 righteous," 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 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."

Faith without deeds is dead. Growing up in the Anabaptist church, this principle was drilled into my head. My faith means nothing if I do not act upon it. This has been a cornerstone of Anabaptist faith since it's inception in the 16th century. The Catholic Church was perceived as pious. They were talking the talk but not walking the walk. To counter this Catholic mentality, early Anabaptists decided to place heavy emphasis on showing their faith through their actions.

During this past June, I took an intensive course on the book of James. Despite being a short letter, which has slipped under many Christian's radars, Today's passage has not been forgotten, especially by Mennonites. Throughout the course, we took a deep dive into each of the five chapters and tried to decipher what the words meant to the original audience and how those words can be interpreted by modern audiences.

In today's sermon, I wish to examine the statement of 'faith without deeds is dead' and its modern implications. The idea for this message came from a lunch conversation with my classmates after one of our James sessions. We were sitting at the table and a fellow classmate said something to the effect of, 'Mennonites place too much emphasis on social justice and not enough on Biblical study.' While I do believe that social justice is a core aspect of the faith of many people, this classmate's sentiment has stuck with me for the past few months. As a result, I want to conduct a thought experiment and try to understand why faith needs works to be alive and why deeds must be done on the basis of a strong faith.

So, we know that faith without deeds is dead, but can deeds be dead without faith? The short answer is absolutely. Take for example the parable of the rich man and the poor woman. The rich man offers a small percentage of his wealth to the synagogue and feels proud of himself. While the poor woman only gives a single coin. However, the single coin was all she had.

The actions of the rich man are not rooted in a strong faith. Rather, they appear to be rooted in social expectations. As for the poor woman, she gives her wealth to the synagogue because she has faith and knows it is the right thing to do. Therefore, the rich man's deeds are dead because they were not rooted in faith and the poor woman's actions are alive because she acted out of faith.

If we are to truly use deeds to express our living faith, then we must first have a faith upon which to base our deeds. Giving all our energy to deeds is akin to focusing on the effect with little regard for the cause. In order to have informed and good deeds, we also must have a strong faith foundation for those deeds.

I strongly believe that it is through our actions that people see who we truly are and what we view as valuable. If a person spends most of their time sitting in a coffee shop and chatting with friends, then that person's actions may show that they are a person who yearns for meaningful connections and deeply cares for their peers. Actions are important to our faith. But again, they mean nothing if those actions are built on an unstable foundation.

For example, let's say that I am a wealthy man and my dad tells me to give some of my wealth to charity. He keeps badgering me to give the money to charity, so I do it just to make him stop nagging me. This is not a good act of faith because I did not give the money for the right reason. My heart was not in the action and as a result, I did not display good faith or good actions.

Something that I have noticed about my faith communities throughout life is people love spreading the Gospel word through their actions. These actions are fantastic and I do believe that for many people, the actions were built on a strong foundation of faith. As a result, I believe that we are doing our job well and not simply focusing on the actions of our Christian faith. Rather, I see people take

what they have learned from the Bible and use those lessons to inform their actions.

In the James passage for today, the author tells the audience that faith means nothing if you do not put that faith to work. You can understand the most complex atonement theories and know what the original context of each book of the Bible was; but if you do not put that knowledge to good use, then that knowledge will waste away in your brain. Therefore, it is crucial that Christians learn to use their spiritual knowledge for the betterment of the world. In doing so, we show our global neighbors what it means for us to be followers of Christ.

This sermon itself is an example of taking my Biblical knowledge and using it to inform my actions. During the James course at Grebel, we reflected on the fact that James has not been given the attention it deserves. Even Martin Luther himself did not believe that James belonged in the proper Bible, so he threw it into the appendices at the back of the Bible instead. Luther and so many others have found that James is significantly less important than say the Gospels or Paul's letters.

However, James still holds deep value. Which is why I am giving this sermon. I want to help give James the proper attention it deserves and show to my community that it is a helpful book. Therefore, this sermon is an example of me putting my faith to work because I am bringing your attention to a key component of the Christian text which seems to be at times neglected.

Putting our faith to work is important for Christians because we have been called by Jesus to spread the Gospel across the world. Take a second and contemplate how well you could share the Gospel if you were not allowed to show examples of faith through your own actions. Not being able to use actions makes sharing Jesus' teachings much harder. Even Jesus himself would use action pieces to establish his lessons. When he performed miracles, those who experienced those miracles would be inclined to believe in the power of Jesus and his teachings.

Something that we need to consider when building our faith and putting that faith to work is how they inform one another. If one were to say they love their neighbor one day then the next day steal from their vegetable garden, those words and actions would contradict one another. When we say things like 'I believe that my neighbor deserves love and care' we need to think about the implications of that belief. How can we implement that belief into our own actions?

Similarly, we may know that baking fresh bread for a local children's breakfast program makes us feel good. But why? If we do not understand why this action is right, then we should look into our faith and discover why baking the bread is so important. When Christians use their faith to inform their actions and vice versa, both the actions and faith will be deepened and given more meaning.

Christians must learn that faith and deeds need to work together. You cannot have strength in one without an understanding the other. In the past there has been

heavy emphasis on faith alone and heavy emphasis on works alone. This is not what the letter of James is calling us to do. The author states that, “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 righteous,’ and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.”

Abraham has been remembered for two primary reasons. The first reason is reflected in this passage from James. Abraham had a deep love for God. He showed his love for God through his commitment to God’s commands. The second reason Abraham has been remembered is his wait for a child from God. Abraham pleaded with God to send him and his wife Sarah a child, but they would wait years for their child to finally be born. Throughout all these years of waiting, Abraham kept faith in God.

These two aspects of Abraham’s biblical narrative show the importance of both faith and actions. We need our faith so that we can remain steadfast in times of trial. And our actions is how we prove to the world and to God what our faith means to us.

Faith and deeds are equally important in a Christians' life. This fact has been overshadowed by the simple 5 word Sunday School phrase, "faith without deeds is dead." We must do our best to remind ourselves that the reverse also is true. Our deeds are dead if we do not ground them in a strong faith. Therefore, I encourage all of us to examine our faith and works. Strive to understand why social justice is important to our faith and use that knowledge to inform our future actions. Indeed, faith without deeds is dead, but we must find a balance between emphasizing deeds and emphasizing faith. May our faith inform our actions and our actions inform our faith. Amen.