

"The Real Deal" - James 2:14-26

Ok, as most of you know, I like to lead sermons with a question. So, here's the question of the day: Is there a way to determine whether a person has saving faith? Can we look at the way a person does life and come to a conclusion about whether or not that person has faith that is the genuine article? Saint James suggests that yes; we can tell whether or not one's faith is the real deal. Let's read what he says:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (James 2.14-18)

James is concerned about Christians whose faith is based only on knowledge about God rather than on having faith that trusts God. As Christians, there is always the temptation to rely more on "head faith" rather than "heart faith". The Apostle James was pointed to a number of things that were going on in certain congregations that seemed to indicate that many people lacked true, saving faith. He pointed out such things as: Showing partiality to the rich in church; being calloused about the suffering of believers in need; and believers not demonstrating that their faith made a difference in the way that they lived their lives. You can almost hear James saying, "Head faith is not enough because that isn't the real deal!" And he caps off the argument with the very next verse, where he writes: You believe that God is one; you do well Even the demons believe—and shudder! (James 2.19)

Theologians have long struggled with the tension or maybe even the paradox that exists between saving faith and works of righteousness. Even Martin Luther found the Epistle of James challenging in his early ministry – so challenging that he once wrote that it didn't need to be part of Scripture. It is sometimes a struggle for us to ferret that out also! One of the theological constructs that may be helpful to us in talking about these things is the teaching on Passive Righteousness and Active Righteousness.

Passive righteousness refers to the wonderful blessings that God offers to us in Christ Jesus. What is this? Maybe the best way to conceive of this is as God's response to our sinfulness. We don't have to do anything to receive this righteousness – Christ earned it through his perfect, sinless life and at the great exchange – the Cross – He offers us this perfect righteousness in exchange for our sinfulness. Through this, He forgives us and makes us his beloved children. Saint Paul talks about this Passive Righteousness:

- 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. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

And also:

- For in it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." (Romans 1.17)

The Scriptures make absolutely clear that we are blessed beyond understanding. The Passive Righteousness that God freely gives to us can't be earned, can't be bought and is in no way deserved. Our Lord Jesus did it all and we simply receive it by grace through faith in his completed work.

Active Righteousness is a bit different. One of my very favorite verses in Scripture is John 1:16 – “Out of his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” God’s blessings in our lives overflow and begin to touch and affect the lives of other people. So Active Righteousness refers to our response to God’s wonderful blessing in our lives as evidenced by service to our neighbor. The Scriptures are also full of references to Active Righteousness:

- For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2.10)
- This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15.8)

Active Righteousness, therefore, is where we look to find the evidence of saving faith. That is what James is talking about when he writes: Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (James 2.18) It is, the test result, if you will, that allows us to make the diagnosis: This person has saving faith. His or her faith is the real deal!

Here is a good way to remember Passive and Active Righteousness: Think of the Cross. One of the beams on the Cross is vertical. This is symbolic of “Passive Righteousness”. It is up and down and so we know that this represents the righteousness that comes from God to us. It reminds us that we are connected to God – up and down – passively we did nothing to earn it. It is all Christ’s work! It reminds us that our salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone!

The other beam of the Cross is horizontal. It is symbolic of “Active Righteousness”. This horizontal beam of the Cross reminds us that we are connected to each other – to our neighbor. How we live out that connection is Active Righteousness; through the way that we live in relationship to our neighbor we demonstrate the evidence of our faith. In a very real way, we show our love for God by the way we love our neighbor.

And how does that happen? Let me use another example. Thirty-four years ago, there was a movie that is now relegated to Classic movie channels; the Karate Kid. From that movie I think we can learn a lesson about our faith-that it equips you to do things! Mr. Miyagi, the martial arts master had Daniel, his student, do all kinds of repetitive jobs around the house. In doing them, without realizing it, he was learning some important principle and skills. Well it’s easier to remake the scene. Let’s see, I need a volunteer who has seen the movie....

Please do the wax on, wax off scene...

Even more than repetitive chore, the joy-filled, faith reinforcing disciplines of Christian life, reading the Bible, spending time with our Master in prayer, worshipping Jesus because of what He has done for us; all these things prepare us to learn important principles, and then to go out and serve those in need around us. For the more time we spend with Him, the more we see His work, the more we realize that we can help others, because we know He will see us through.

We just heard/sang a hymn, written by someone whose faith was tested, and who endured, and whose works testify, not just of her faith, but of God’s faithfulness to her. Fanny Crosby – before Civil War – was blinded by doctor when just 6 weeks old...Blessed Assurance...

We don’t have to always have to plan how our faith will be seen in our works – but the works we find ourselves doing, scream about our faith! The very God who called us to be His people, will provide the gifts, and abilities that will cause us to serve, no matter what. It’s the real deal! Amen.