

Christ Community Covenant Church
Street Level Christianity - Faith: Taking it to the street
Pastor Dave Scherrer - October 25, 2015

Today we are going to continue in our fall study of what we are calling **Street Level Christianity**, with the little letter of James as my source work. We are about to study one of the great passages of scripture. This little book of James is only about 100 verses long, three or four pages but it found itself in the middle of a controversy in the middle of the 16th century Europe. After 15 centuries of church development, there came upon the scene a German scholar by the name of Martin Luther who protested a growing doctrine of something that has been perhaps oversimplified as the faith vs works controversy. Luther posted a letter of protest on the door of the All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany in an effort to reform the church back to doctrinal priorities and to correct church practices that he perceived were not Scriptural. Out of that protest that demanded church reforms was something historians called the **Protestant** (protest) **Reformation** (reform).

Luther had been unable to reconcile in his mind the teachings of the apostle Paul, especially in the book of Romans, who wrote of salvation by faith alone in a loving God and the growing habit in the Church of the sale of indulgences (the paying of money to the church for the forgiveness of certain sins). Oversimplified but not wrongly stated, it is this idea of working to pay off sin rather than seeking the forgiveness of God directly launched the works vs faith doctrine controversy.

A lot of this conversation is pretty heady stuff and I am not a scholar or historian of such things. I have done my share of reading in church history and of the works of Martin Luther and the subsequent Catholic Church response to the reformation movement at the Council of Trent, but honestly, I'm not an expert on this subject. So I don't want to get too bogged down in the nuances of this matter. And frankly, James wasn't trying to spark a controversy. He was helping us to get our head out of the clouds and back down to a street level faith that would help change the world for the better by simply showing the love of Christ to those who did not know of his love. But we can't help but talk about it at least somewhat as we are going to 'drive our car' right down the middle of this street level conversation. So here it is - the little phrase that started a religious fist fight;

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

Prayer

Father this is an important conversation this morning. Through hundreds of years, millions of silent prayers have been uttered in faith seeking to be saved from ourselves and the fix we find ourselves in, broken in heart with souls lost in sin. What we have not Father please give us, what we know not, please teach us. What we are not, Father please transform us. Father I know that this morning I need your mercy and forgiveness and I am glad you so lavishly give that to us when we ask in Jesus name. Thanks for that! Amen

Let's read our passage for this morning:

James 1:22-25

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

James 2:14-26

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ 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?

¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

There is nothing here to fight over

It seems like there might be a controversy between two great writers and leaders of the early Church history. Historians think that James wrote this little letter in 48 AD, only about 15 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The great Jewish scholar Paul wrote his earliest letter that became scripture to the little church in Galatia (in now Turkey) about this same time, 48 AD. James wrote things like this:

“ . . . *faith apart from works is useless*” (v20)

“ . . . *a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*” (v24)

Galatians 2:16

Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Romans 3:28

By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

James is saying something quite different from Paul is saying. But James is not contradicting Paul.

Have you ever had an argument where you get all heated up and say things like, “You aren’t listening to me” and “You don’t get my point.” Sometimes we use the same words but we mean different things by them. We expect that everyone uses words the same way I use words, but that isn’t always true. Sometimes when you simmer down and you listen a bit more to the context of the words and not just an emotional reaction to a word you find out that you are arguing about two different things. “Oh I agree with you on that but I was making a different point.” It turns out that there isn’t actually any controversy at all.

Both early church leaders agree that you are saved by faith alone, you can’t and don’t earn it. But what they are also saying is that this saving faith is so powerful and transformative that it changes the way you approach the world. Good deeds of kindness and generosity and self-sacrifice necessarily follow a life changed by this special kind of saving faith in God.

Ephesians 2:8-10

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Titus 3:8

The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.

“Paul is joining righteousness to faith and weaving them together . . . Faith without works of justice is not sufficient for salvation; neither is righteous living secure in itself of salvation, if it is disjoined from faith.”

Gregory of Nyssa

Faith without works is like a bird without wings; though she may hop with her companions on earth, yet she will never fly with them to heaven. ~ *Francis Beaumont*

James is addressing a different problem than Paul. In the early church, it was made of the cast offs of society, women, widows, children, the poor, outcasts. And these people had no social system to take care of them. So the church became a place much more than just emotional or spiritual support, you could get a hot meal and a place to sleep and protection from first century villains. So people who did not really believe in Christ were saying “I’m in - I’ll recite a creed if afterwards I can have a sandwich.” What James is saying is that you can’t simply kind of shrug your shoulders indifferently to Jesus. That kind of faith to James is a dead faith (vs 17, 26). It cannot save you. It looks like here that James is going on and on about works but I would suggest that James is going on and on about the nature of saving faith. Saving faith of the heart and soul changes you James says into a loving person willing to do kind things simply for the sake of kindness. With no expectation of getting anything in return. These good works are evidence or demonstrate the justification of the living faith that saves. Do you see the distinction? Paul warned us of trying to earn our faith; James warns us that a faith in word only, simply mouthing the words “I believe in Jesus” as though it were a kind of password isn’t good enough. James rightly says the demons know who Jesus is and they shudder. Knowing who Jesus is and yielding authority to Him are two very different kinds of response to the truths of Jesus Christ.

A confession of faith that never makes a difference immediately or lifelong will never make a difference eternally.

True Christianity permeates everything in life

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. True Christianity not only hears God’s word but does God’s word

Here James makes it clear that true Christianity permeates our relationships, our behavior, everything in life. As far as James is concerned, true godliness is integrated, not segregated. That is, it permeates all of our life and relationships. Everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Isn’t it interesting, that in diagnosing our claims of Christianity, James goes immediately to the practical issue of a Christian’s behavior in relationships. Listening is a relational action. Speaking is normally a relational action, although some people have conversations when nobody’s there and then you begin to wonder about them. Anger is again a relational response, an emotional response in the context of a relationship and James goes right to these things and says, these things must evidence the reality of the new birth. In other words, in the Christian life the evidence of the new birth is a new life. Our speech ought to evidence a new life. Our listening ought to evidence a new life. Our control of our emotions, our emotional disposition and temperament, is to reflect the new life.

Why does he choose to talk about these things? Because it is in these things, not in our quiet time, not in our small group, not even in our Sunday morning attendance in the pews at 9 or 10:30, not even there, do we see the measure of our Christianity, but it is in our life, our character, our responses, our relationships that we see true Christianity. Spiritual life is not something practiced privately. There are private components to spiritual life, but spiritual life is meant to be lived in community. Spiritual life is woven into the fabric of who we are; it is manifest in all of our waking hours and in every relationship of life.

A segregated spirituality encourages us to live a parallel life – a compartmentalized life. On the one hand, reading the Bible, praying occasionally, meeting with a group, doing devotions, and yet that same person participating in that activity, living a life which is essentially worldly, making worldly choices, acting with a worldly value system, doing immoral things, living in his business relationships in a way which dishonors God, living in his family relationships in a way which dishonors God. That kind of parallel life is characteristic of segregated spirituality.

God's plan is to transform us by grace, and anger, which is out of control and inappropriate, is a sign that something is deeply wrong. Our emotional life, our speech, the way we listen, our relationships, all of these things provides an indication of our living faith. They are a test of our real godliness. They show us the state of our Christianity.

True Christianity not only hears God's word but does God's word

Secondly, in verses 21 through 25, James goes on to say that true Christianity not only hears the word of God but does the word of God. True godliness doesn't merely ascent to the word of God, it lives the word of God. James reminds us in this passage that true godliness involves both a negative and a positive activity. It's both active and passive. In this case in verse 21, James enjoins a negative activity. We are to put aside sin. It kind of reminds us of Paul's word about putting off and putting on. We are to put aside the remnants of sin in our own lives. We are to get rid of it, we are to deliberately seek to expunge it but correspondingly he speaks of a positive activity. And that activity is receiving the word of God implanted, and by the *word* he means the Scripture, the Law of God, the royal law, all of it, the whole of Scripture.

And so he is speaking of the word of God as a means of grace for sanctification. It is the way that God grows us, it is the instrument that God uses in our lives to grow us in grace. Sitting under the reading of the word of God, sitting under the proclamation of the word of God is not merely to tickle our ears, or to tickly our fancy, it's not merely to interest us or to inform us, it is designed to transform us by God's grace. We cannot be passive listeners, sitting back, to be merely spectators in the preaching of God's word.

James delineates to kinds of people - Hearers vs hearer/doer.

Our response to the word of God is a diagnostic of our spiritual condition. The test of whether you believe God's word is whether you obey it, especially when it runs counter to your desires. That's when you know whether you are a hearer and a doer of God's word. And true Christianity not only hears the word of God, but it does the word of God. In terms of our church and the ECC, we sometimes say that we pursue Christ and His priorities in the world:

Pursue Christ and His priorities in the world

James summarizes for us quite well what a useful religion should look like:

James 1:27

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

What we want to remember this morning is that a loveless faith has no purpose –

Loveless faith is a useless faith

James calls it dead faith. This is where the street level power of James kicks in. He would like to ask you have you considered the wonderful love of my Savior Jesus. Have you given his claims half a chance, because that is all He is asking for? He can carry you the rest of the way. If you have, is it a

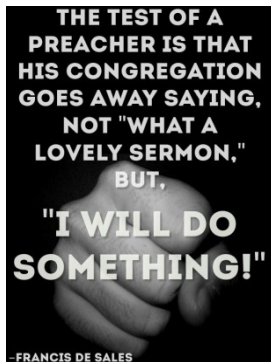
consideration that changes your life, because he would say of course it must have evidence of good works borne of love.

Galatians 5:6

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, **but only faith working through love.**

“Faith working through love”

What he is saying here is that religious ceremony is neither here nor there. It may be helpful; it may not be. What counts, what is important, what is essential and non-negotiable is ***faith working through love!***



My hope for 4Cs is that someday our community around us will treasure that we are here. They will say “We hope that 4Cs never moves, they love us, they sacrifice for us, they live for us. We love those guys.”

“Anyone who thinks that sitting in church can make you a Christian must also think that sitting in a garage can make you a car.” ~ *Garrison Keillor*

Discussion Questions

What do you know of the Protestant Reformation? Did you know that the ECC is a denomination that comes directly out of these historic events (especially the thoughts and scholarship of Huldrych Zwingli). Without lots of research, how would you describe the protestant reformation movement of the 16th century. Why do you think it was important for Dave to make a point of these historic events in his sermon?

What have you heard of the so called “faith vs works” theological discussion? Just hearing those words, what do you imagine it might refer to?

Orthodox Reformation theology states that our salvation is the result of a confession of faith and a yielding of our hearts and will to Jesus Christ -

Galatians 2:16

- Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Romans 3:28

- By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

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- For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

When did you first hear this 'gospel'? Do you think it is human nature to include works into the formula somehow? How so?

Dave said that good deeds that are done in the world are 'fine' but he also said that "unless they are done in the name of Christ, these good deeds will have no eternal significance." What do you think of that statement? Does this disqualify all kinds of good deeds by many good intentioned non-believers? How so?

Dave said that "**true Christianity permeates everything in our lives.**" What do you think of that statement? Would you say that is true of you? How has your relationship with God changed you mentally . . . socially . . . physically . . . emotionally . . . financially?

What do you think of James' point that there is a "dead faith" or a "useless religion?" What do you think that kind of 'faith' looks like in the 21st century? Do you think there are people in the church who have a false sense of assurance that their faith is a 'saving faith'?

When you hear the phrase "Pursuing Christ and His priorities in the world," what do you think of?

We read the verse from Galatians:

Galatians 5:6

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only **faith working through love.**

What does it mean to you to have a **faith working through love**?