

**Practical Faith for Everyday People:  
FAITH WORKS!**

**James 2:1-8, 14-18**

*Christian faith is best seen in action.*

A sermon preached by  
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In *Conspiracy of Kindness*, Steve Sjogren, pastor of the Vineyard Fellowship in Cincinnati, Ohio, tells the true story of Joe Delaney and his eight-year-old son, Jared, who were playing catch in their backyard.

Jared asked, “Dad, is there a God?”

Joe confessed that he went to church only a few times when he was a kid; he really had no idea.

Jared ran into the house. “I’ll be right back!” he yelled.

Moments later he returned with a helium balloon from the circus, a pen, and an index card. “I’m going to send God an airmail message,” Jared explained. “Dear God,” he wrote on the card. “If you are real, and you are there, send people who know you to Dad and me.”

Joe thought, *God, I hope you're watching*, as they watched the balloon and message sail away.

Two days later, Joe and Jared pulled into a car wash sponsored by Sjogren's church. When Joe asked, “How much?” Sjogren answered, “It's free. No strings attached. We just want to show God's love in a practical way.”

“Are you guys Christians, the kind of Christians who believe in God?” Joe asked.

Sjogren said, “Yes, we're that kind of Christians.” Starting with that encounter, Steve eventually led Joe and his son to faith in Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Many people may be only one act of kindness away from meeting a true Christian and knowing Christ. They will respond to something practical, meaningful, and helpful.

I think that’s what we’re all looking for, don’t you? When we come to church, we’re not necessarily looking for a theological debate or a historical discussion. We need a faith that is practical, meaningful, and helpful. We want something that will help us recover from last week, get through the next week, and give us a larger purpose for our lives. Can that happen? I believe it can! That’s why we’re spending a few weeks with the Letter of James and talking about “Practical Faith for Everyday People.”

Practical Faith is a balance between faith and works, between belief and action. This gets into a discussion that has been going on since the New

Testament was written. How are we saved? Is it by faith, or is it by works? Some will say, “All you have to do is believe.” Others will say, “Just be a good person and do the right things; that’s all it takes.” Which is it, faith or works?

The Letter of James has been a flashpoint for this debate down through the centuries. Several of the early Church Fathers discounted the value of James and didn’t even include it in their list of books for the New Testament. I mentioned last week that Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, called James, “an epistle full of straw, because it contains nothing evangelical.”<sup>2</sup> Luther had problems with James because the letter seems to fall on the side of salvation by works and doesn’t mention the passion, death, or resurrection of Christ. In fact, in our text today, James asks the question, “*Can faith save you?*”<sup>3</sup>

Actually, the answer is “Yes.” The bulk of the New Testament, and particularly the teaching of Paul, says that we are saved, we are justified before God, we come into a right relationship with God through faith and faith alone. Just one reference among many—Ephesians 2:8-9: “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*” Our standing before God and our hope of eternal life is based not on anything we do, but on the free gift of grace given by God and sealed on the cross by the blood of Jesus Christ. We accept the gift by faith alone and so are saved.

Here’s the balancing part. We respond to the grace of God by living out our faith. We do good things because of what God has done for us. Real faith works. Real belief is expressed in action. That famous Ephesians text goes on to say, “*For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus **for good works**, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*”<sup>4</sup> That’s the heart of the matter; God made us for action based on faith.

William Booth was a Methodist preacher who started The Salvation Army in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As you well know, The Salvation Army has a worldwide ministry with the poor and needy. General Booth once said, “Faith and works should travel side by side, step answering to

step, like the legs of men walking. First faith, and then works; and then faith again, and then works again--until you can scarcely distinguish which is one and which is the other.”<sup>5</sup> This is the Christian walk, the balancing act of the Christian life.

There are many ways this balance plays out in our lives. I just want to mention two, because they are right there in the second chapter of James. There are two ministries where works are absolutely essential.

The first one is welcoming people into our fellowship. Jesus was all about accepting people wherever they were to be in fellowship with him—rich and poor, tax collector and prostitute, Pharisee and fisherman. We want acceptance to be one of the hallmarks of our church. But do we do all we can do to welcome strangers and guests into the circle of our friendship? Do we accept all people, even the ones who are not like us racially, economically, educationally, vocationally, politically?

The church in the time of James was beginning to experience some class distinctions. They really enjoyed having the “upper crust” come to visit. Maybe Christianity was becoming cool! But James had noticed some disparity in the ways different people were treated. Somebody would come in wearing fine clothes and jewelry, and the Christians would fall all over themselves to clear out the best seat for them to sit on. But a poor person would wander into the church, and the Christians would tell them to stand at the back or to sit on the floor. James reminded the church that the poor could be rich in faith, and God had a special place for them in the Kingdom. His brother Jesus used to say the same thing.

People haven’t changed much in 2000 years. Max Lucado, the best-selling author and pastor in San Antonio, tells about one Sunday when David Robinson attended the early service at his church. David Robinson, at the time, was the star player for the San Antonio Spurs professional basketball team. You can imagine the stir that occurred when that seven-foot star athlete walked into the auditorium. At the end of the service, people mobbed him. Kids all wanted his autograph. Dads lined up, allegedly to get things signed for their kids, but everyone knew the truth. They just wanted to shake David Robinson’s hand. The commotion

finally settled down and Robinson went his way, and they began the second service.

As Lucado stood to do the announcements for the second service, something happened that had never happened before in his church. A homeless person walked in the back of the auditorium, came down the center aisle with his backpack, ratty jeans, torn T-shirt, unshaven face, and distinct odor. He walked down to the front, and he sat down.

Lucado said, “The contrast struck me. When David Robinson entered, he was immediately swarmed. People wanted to touch him and be close to him, be next to him. However, I'm sad to say that nobody jumped up to run and sit next to the homeless man. After two or three awkward minutes during which I was trying to act like nothing was happening, one of our elders got up from his seat and sat by the man and touched him. I was struck. Wouldn't you have been as well?”

“The message that I received in my heart that morning was: Which of these men do you think touched Jesus? If you want to touch Jesus, whom do you touch? Jesus said, ‘Whatever you've done for the least of [these members of my family], you've done also to me.’”<sup>6</sup>

How do we touch those who come in our doors? How do we welcome the stranger in our midst? That is an important work of faith. It's how we touch Jesus.

The other ministry I want to mention today is the ministry of helping those who are in need. James points to that also as an important work of faith. There are so many needs in our world today—food, shelter, safety, clothing, counseling, education—the list goes on. Too many people belong to the 5-H Club: hungry, homeless, helpless, hugless, and hopeless.<sup>7</sup> This is a club we don't want anybody to join. 4-H good; 5-H bad. How can faith make a difference?

James says, “*If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*”<sup>8</sup> Faith takes action to help those who are in need.

We have seen so much faithful action lately in the wake of the devastating hurricanes Harvey and Irma. I read an article in USA Today that said the majority of the relief work is coming from faith groups. The article mentioned the United Methodist Committee on Relief, the Seventh Day Adventists, and several other faith groups. FEMA, the government agency, is doing its work primarily with logistics. But in terms of putting food and water in the hands of people, and in terms of flooded homes getting cleaned up, about 80% of the work is being done by non-profits, most of whom are faith based.<sup>9</sup>

Rev. Scott Moore is the disaster response coordinator for the Texas Annual Conference, and he talked about the “God-moments” he saw in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. God moment #1 was when a friend of Scott’s called to say he would be sending some water, and by the time the friend was through, he shipped a semi-truck trailer full of bottled water to Houston. God moment #2 was when Scott was trying to figure out how to deal with a truckload of water, and a Boy Scout troop showed up out of nowhere to help unload the truck. God moment #3 happened when Scott was trying to figure out how to get the water to Beaumont, Texas, because their water system had failed. But Beaumont was surrounded by floodwaters, and no highways were open. The Boy Scout leader showed back up and said the Catholics had access to an Army Reserve helicopter, but not much water. So 50,000 pounds of water got airlifted to the people in Beaumont.<sup>10</sup> God’s fingerprint has been all over the response to these natural disasters lately. It always is.

God calls us to action in the service of faith. God calls us to welcome the stranger and to care for the needy. Jesus says, *“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”*<sup>11</sup>

And we say, “Lord, when did we do all of that?” And Jesus replies, *“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”*<sup>12</sup>

Tony Campolo is a nationally-known author, preacher and professor of sociology from Pennsylvania. One of my favorite Campolo stories I’ve

shared on Wednesday night, but it bears re-telling today. Tony was walking down Chestnut Street in Philadelphia one morning when he was approached by a filthy bum. The guy was covered with soot from head to toe and had a huge beard. There were pieces of food stuck in the beard that had been there for a while. He was walking down the street mumbling to himself with his hands cupped around a cup of McDonald's coffee.

When he spotted Campolo, dressed in his suit and overcoat, he said, "Hey, mister, want some of my coffee?"

Campolo wanted to be nice, so he took the coffee cup and drank some of it. He gave it back to the man and said, "You're being pretty generous giving away your coffee this morning. What's gotten into you that you're sharing your coffee?"

The man said, "Well, the coffee was especially delicious this morning, and I figured if God gives you something good you ought to share it with people."

Tony could feel the set-up coming, but he walked right into it anyway. "Is there anything I can give you in return?" He expected a hit for five bucks at least.

The man replied, "Yeah, you can give me a hug."

Tony would rather have given him five dollars. The man put his grimy arms around Campolo, and Tony put his arms around the bum and tried to avoid contact with that humongous, food-encrusted beard. Then he realized the man was not letting him go. He was holding on! There they were, the bum off the street and the nationally-known professor and speaker, locked in an embrace on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia. People stared as they passed, and Campolo felt embarrassed.

But then his embarrassment turned to awe, as he realized whom he was hugging. He heard the voice echo down the corridors of time: "I was hungry. Did you feed me? I was naked. Did you clothe me? I was sick. Did you care for me? I was the bum you met on Chestnut Street. Did you hug me? For if you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me. And if you failed to do it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you failed to do it to me."<sup>13</sup>

What is the voice saying to you today? Does it have anything to do with welcoming the newcomer into our fellowship? Is the Lord speaking to you today about meeting the needs of someone in our church or community?

Let me give you a word of affirmation and challenge today. I think to a large extent we get what James is saying to us today. I hear from new members that they felt welcome when they first visited. We fed 100 neighbors this morning in our Last Sunday free breakfast for the community. We are making a special effort today to support the Sack Lunch Program. We *are* a caring church. I want to affirm and congratulate you on that; you were like that before I got here.

But I also want to challenge you to maintain and strengthen the balance between faith and works in your own Christian walk. There are many needs out there, and we can't deal with all of them, but we can do more than we're doing. Together, let's be the best we can be at welcoming the stranger, accepting all people, helping the hurts and meeting the needs in our community. Let this be the hallmark of our ministry. Let's be known in Fort Smith as the church where faith works!

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Lundeen, *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching* (Nashville:Baker), PreachingToday.com.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Preface to the New Testament*, quoted by William Barclay, *James* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 6.

<sup>3</sup> James 2:14.

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 2:10.

<sup>5</sup> William Booth in *The Founders' Messages to Soldiers*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 36, no. 10, PreachingToday.com.

<sup>6</sup> Max Lucado, "Touch of Christ," *Preaching Today* No. 197.

<sup>7</sup> A phrase shared by Dr. Joycelyn Elders, former Surgeon General of the United States, at a meeting of Church Women United, Hot Springs, Arkansas, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> James 2:15-17.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/09/10/hurricane-irma-faith-groups-provide-bulk-disaster-recovery-coordination-fema/651007001/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/god-moments-spur-pastors-harvey-relief-efforts>

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 25:34-36.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 25:40.

<sup>13</sup> Tony Campolo, "Year of Jubilee," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 212.