

“Faith Works” (James) / Sermon 5: “Faith Works”

June 26, 2016

A story by Peter Rollins, from the book, An Orthodox Heretic (with a few adaptations by me)... In a world where following Christ is decreed to be subversive and illegal, you have been accused of being a believer, arrested, and dragged before a court. You have been under clandestine surveillance for some time now, and so the prosecution has been able to build up quite a case against you.

- They begin the trial by offering the judge dozens of photographs that show you attending church meetings, speaking at religious events, and participating in various prayer and worship services.
- After this, they present a selection of items they have confiscated from your home: religious books you own, worship CDs, and other Christian artifacts.
- Then they step up the pace by reading some of the journal entries you had lovingly written concerning your faith.
- Finally, in closing, the prosecution offers your Bible to the judge. It is well-worn, with scribbles, notes, and underlinings throughout, evidence, if it were needed, that you had read and reread this sacred text many times.

Throughout the case you have been sitting silently in fear and trembling. You know deep in your heart that with the large body of evidence that has been amassed by the prosecution you face the possibility of a long imprisonment or even execution. At various times throughout the proceedings you have lost all confidence and have been on the verge of standing up and denying Christ. But while this thought has plagued your mind throughout the trial, you resist the temptation and remain focused.

Once the prosecution has finished presenting their case the judge proceeds to ask if you have anything to add, but you remain silent and resolute, terrified that if you open your mouth, even for a moment, you might deny the charges made against you. Like Christ, you remain silent before your accusers. In response you are led outside to wait as the judge ponders your case. The hours pass slowly as you sit under guard in the foyer waiting to be summoned back. Eventually a young man in uniform appears and leads you into the courtroom so that you may hear the verdict and receive word of your punishment... That's all for now. I'll finish the story later.

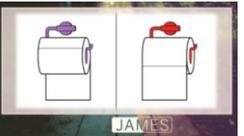
I found these on the internet; they are pretty good. There are two kinds of people in the world. Which are you ...

➤  Do you eat all of it, or do you leave the crust? How many of you leave the crust? By the way, that's wrong.

➤  There are two kinds of people in the world ... To check the time, do you look at your watch, or your phone? By the way, if you check your watch, you're old.

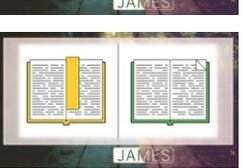
➤  Photo albums, or folders on your phone? I heard my grandson ask someone one time, "Do you want to see my pictures." And then he starts swiping his hand. It's a different world, guys.

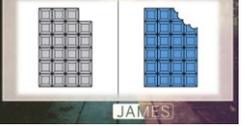
➤  How about this one. Do you squirt your ketchup all over your fries, or in a nice, neat pile? By the way, random squirting is very wrong.

➤  Remember: two kinds of people. How about this one. Over, or under? How many of you guys don't care? ... That's wrong! It's supposed to be over.

➤  How about this one? Do you wear it forwards, or backwards?

➤  I like this one. How many of you work it till you get it right? Now I like Sudoku – and I'm way too stubborn to scribble mine out.

➤  How about this one? Do you fold the page, or use a bookmark? By the way, folding the corner of a page is wrong ... unless it's just a book for play. Then who cares.

➤  Here's another. Do you break it off neatly, or do you just bite it indiscriminately. By the way, indiscriminately biting is wrong.

➤  One more, of these: Do you put all your apps neatly in folders? Or do you have page after page of a disorganized mess. My daughter is the phone on the left. I am the one on the right. She's wrong.

➤  Here is a bonus. There are two kinds of people in the world. Those who like bacon, and those who are wrong! Isn't that a great looking BLT? It's perfect. After all, a perfect BLT really doesn't need any lettuce or tomato.

Believe it or not, we're going to come back to this idea of two kinds of people in the world. And which kind you are on that one will really matter ... forever. But we'll get to that a little later. ...

Way back before God spoke our universe into existence he already knew we would exercise our freedom to push him away. Before he made us he knew we would rebel, he knew we would sin. So why did he create us anyway? ... I suppose it is not that different from us parents. We know our children will be ornery. We know they'll sin, they'll cost us a boatload of anxiety, and aggravation, and pain. But we have kids anyway. And we love them; and we'd die for them.

And so before God created anything at all, he developed a plan to pursue us, to win us back. As Mark Driscoll puts in, God decided a sinless Savior would come into our world as the sinner's Savior. So in the fullness of time, Jesus came into our world to do what God had planned in the time before time. He came to do everything that was necessary to save God's precious, ornery kids. He helped those who were hurting, healed those who were sick. He rebuked demons, and raised the dead. He preached God's truth. He showed us what God was really like, and what God really meant for us to be.

But to some degree, that was all set up. And on the eve of the second most important event in history – his death – Jesus paused to pray. And in this longest prayer of the Bible he says to his Father: "I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do." (John 17.4) Wouldn't you love to be able to say that to God? "God, I have done everything you have called me to do." That would be the perfect life, wouldn't it? Jesus knew exactly what his Father wanted him to do, and he did all of it.

And then he went to the cross – which is part of what God sent him to do. He took our place, he suffered the punishment we deserve, that he might win the salvation only he can give. And while he was on the cross he says those incredible words. He says: "It is finished." (John 19.30) It is done; it is complete. And he's not just talking about his life, he's talking about his work. The work of salvation is done. There's nothing more we can add to what he's done. It's not about Jesus + a moral life. It's not about Jesus + religion. It's not about Jesus + my success. It's not about Jesus + anything. It is only Jesus; only Jesus saves. Do you buy that? Well, God does. And it's his opinion that matters, isn't it?

What he requires from us is ... faith. Just ... faith. But the kind of faith he's looking for goes way beyond "belief." It's about way more than just believing in who Jesus was and what he did. You see, there's a misunderstanding that is going to cause a whole lot of people a whole lot of pain. It may cause some of us a whole lot of pain. You see, we can believe all the right stuff and still come up short with God.

Here we go, James 2.14. James says, "What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?" Now, James is not talking about people out there, who don't claim to be Jesus followers. He's talking to us. He says, "What good is it, dear brothers and sisters..." That's us! What good is it if we believe it, but we don't live it? What good is it if we talk the talk, but don't walk the walk? Which describes a whole lot of Jesus followers, doesn't it? It may describe some of you.

He says, "Can that kind of faith save anyone?" Is God going to respect that kind of faith? Is that what he's looking for? Now guys, we're going to need saving – from our sin, from death, from the wrath of God. That's not stuff we can handle on our own. We're going to need a Savior. Well ... is that kind of faith, belief without action, going to be adequate to secure the salvation he offers?

Then James makes it real. He says, "Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well" -- but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?" (James 2.15-16)

- So you see a brother or sister in trouble. Again, guys, that's family. He's talking about spiritual family. There is a brother in your life group, a sister sitting near you in worship, a kid in our children's ministry – and they are in trouble.
- In this case James says they are naked, which means their clothes are simply inadequate; or they are hungry, without the resources to get food. But you can expand this to a whole lot of other ways our brothers and sisters seriously need our help. Suppose you see a brother or sister in need, in trouble, in a mess ...
- And you say ... "I am so sorry! I'll pray for you." Guys, what good does that do? What good does it do if you talk the talk, but don't walk the walk; you believe in him, but you don't do life his way?

He says, verse 17, "So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless." ... Now ... Here's a question for you guys: What do dead people do? The answer is, "Nothing." So what does a dead faith do? The answer is ... nothing. It is lip service, but it's not lifestyle. It's kind of like a guy who says, "I love my wife." Cool! "Do you really talk to her?" "Well, No." "Do you selflessly serve her?" "Not really, I guess." "Do you do whatever you can to honor her and build her up?" "Well, some, maybe. But get off my back, don't judge me!" "Well, it looks like you talk the talk, but you don't walk the walk. Do you think love is just words? Dork! Do you think God would call it "love"?"

You see, guys, real faith goes way beyond just believing the truth. There are a whole lot of people who believe in God. They believe he is powerful and good. They believe there probably is life after death, and there probably is some kind of judgment. So they ... talk the talk. And yet ... They discover that the single mom sitting not far from you lost her job and is facing a financial disaster not of her making. Or the old guy sitting in front of you has just received a terrible diagnosis from his doctor, and he's scared, and alone. Or they discover that kid who is here every week, but lacking social skills... They discover his home life is flat out terrible. And with all sincerity, they tell him, "I'll be praying for you." Now, you have the capacity to do more, you even feel the nudge to do more, but what you offer is words. And you tell that mom, with all sincerity, "When God closes a door he opens a window." And you tell that scared old guy, "I'm praying for you." Did you know that prayer can be reprehensible to God when it is used as an excuse for inaction? You see it's not just about talking the talk. So James says, "If you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?"

Now I know none of us can respond to every need. There are way more hurting people than any of us have the time, or the resources to help. But if your faith is doing nothing, it is probably dead. Listen, there are some who claim to be Jesus followers who go to church week after week. But when you are here you don't really worship, and you don't really give, and you don't really serve, and you don't really care. And James says, "Guys, that kind of faith won't cut it." You can grow up in church, be baptized in church, get married in church, sit in church week after week, have your funeral in church, and wake up in ... hell. Because the church doesn't save us. And religion doesn't save us. Jesus saves us ... but he requires a faith that goes way beyond talk. Guys, you need to hear this. The stakes are way too high to blow this off.

Any of you guys pushing back at all? Well, it's going to get worse. James has been talking about faith without works, faith without action – he calls it a dead faith. Now he's going to talk about another way people mess up with God. Guys, this is huge. You see, faith without works is an epidemic among Jesus followers. But works without faith is an epidemic outside these walls. People you care about – members of your family, some of your neighbors, some of your friends – they think works without faith will be enough. And it won't be.

James says, “Now someone may argue, ‘Some people have faith; (well ...) others have good deeds.’” (James 2.18) And there are people in your family who still believe that poppycock. You've got friends who are banking on it. Guys, I don't care how good you are, it's not going to be good enough. I don't care what you do; it's not about what you can do; it's about what he has done. Just being good won't cut it.

I suppose I hear it at funerals most. “He was a good guy. He'd give you the shirt off his back.” Or, “She loved life, she loved her family, she was a good person.” Guys – I'm sorry. That . won't . be . enough.

Now, you've probably heard this old joke. There were these two old guys who were flat out rich, and flat out evil. Well, one of them died. So his brother goes to the preacher with this huge check and he says, “This check is big enough to pay off your mortgage. There's just one condition. At his funeral, you've got to tell people that my brother was a good person, that he was a saint.” Well, the preacher gave his word and deposited the check. And here's what he said, at the funeral. He said, “This old guy was an evil man. He cheated on his wife, he abused his family, he was unethical in business, and he played games with God. But compared to his brother, he was a saint.” I think that's pretty funny; but it's not what you'd hear at a funeral. You'd hear them try to convince themselves that the old guy might have done enough good to get in. As if it's about what we can do.

If you look at the stats, most people out there who are not Jesus followers still believe in a God. And most people out there who are not Jesus followers still believe in some kind of life after death, some kind of heaven. And most people out there try to convince themselves that God grades on a curve. “I'm a pretty good person. I'm certainly not as bad as he is. As long as I do more good than bad, I figure I'll make it.” Ever hear that nonsense?

You see, it's epidemic out there: They tell us, “You have faith,” well “we have actions, we have works.” “You have your path to God, we've got ours.” “We'll

tolerate your path to God, as long as you tolerate ours. We really shouldn't be judging each other, right?" The problem is, guys, it's not about me doing it my way, and you doing it your way. It's about doing it God's way. You see, Jesus said, "I am the way – the only way; I am the truth – God's truth; I am the life – the only real life." He says, "No one – no one, no one – comes to the Father except through me." (John 14.6) And if God raised Jesus from the dead, we don't get to change the rules. So, faith without works won't cut it; and works without faith in Jesus won't cut it. Because it's not about what you can do for God; it's about he has done for us.

Now, if you've been here at Capital City a while you know that C. S. Lewis is one of my heroes. Well, here is one of my favorite stories about C. S. Lewis. Apparently there was a conference at Oxford University comparing different religions. The question they were debating was this: Is there anything at all unique to Christianity? Well, the debate was raging when Lewis wandered into the room and he asks, "What's the rumpus about?" They said, "We're trying to see if there is anything fundamentally different about Christianity." And Lewis said, "Oh that's easy. It's grace." And after thinking about it, they had to agree. You see, unlike every other religion, we believe it's not about what we do for him, it's about what he has already done for us.

Listen, guys, every other religion – every other religion – is about what we do to earn God's approval. Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam – they are about what we do. Christianity is about what God has done. Ravi Zacharias puts it like this. He says, "Every religion – every religion -- except Christianity says there is a savior, and you meet him in the morning when you look in a mirror." Not us.

Remember: you are on trial for being a Christian. The evidence seems overwhelming. The judge is pondering your fate. The hours pass slowly as you sit under guard in the foyer waiting to be summoned back. Eventually a young man in uniform appears and leads you into the courtroom so that you may hear the verdict and receive word of your punishment.

Once you have been seated in the dock, the judge, a harsh and unyielding man, enters the room, he stands before you, looks deep into your eyes and begins to speak. "Of the charges that have been brought forward I find the accused ... not guilty." "Not guilty?" your heart freezes. Then, in a split second, the fear and terror that had moments before threatened to strip your resolve are swallowed up by confusion and rage. Despite the surroundings, you stand

defiantly before the judge and demand that he give an account concerning why you are innocent of the charges in light of the evidence.

“What evidence?” the judge replies in shock. “What about all those loving words about Jesus I wrote in my journal?” you reply. “They simply show that you think of yourself as a poet, nothing more.” “But what about the sermons I preached, the times I wept in church and the long, sleepless nights of prayer?” “Evidence that you are a good speaker and actor, nothing more,” replied the judge. “It is obvious that you deluded those around you, and perhaps at times even deluded yourself, but this foolishness is not enough to convict you in a court of law.” “But this is madness!” you shout. “It would seem that no evidence would convince you!”

“Not so,” replies the judge as if informing you of a great, long-forgotten secret. “The court is indifferent toward your Bible reading and church attendance; it has no concern for worship with words and a pen. We have no interest in armchair artists who spend their time creating images of a better world after this one. We exist only for those who would lay down that brush, and lay down their life, in a Christ-like endeavor to change this world. So, until you live as Christ and his followers did, until you challenge our beliefs and become a thorn in our side, until you die to yourself and offer your body to the flames, until then, my friend, you are no enemy of ours.” (Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic*) Huh! Could they convict you of being a real Jesus follower? Not by your words, but by your actions?

Now James gets a little mean when he drives this home. Listen to what he says. He says, “You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. How foolish! Can’t you see that faith without good deeds is useless?” (James 2:19-20) So you believe there is a God, he says. You do realize that demons believe in God too. Did you know that there is not a single demon in the universe that’s an atheist? There are some people who are atheists, but there are no demons that are that foolish. James says, “Even demons believe in God ... and they tremble.”

What he is saying is kind of rude. He says, believing in God up here (head), without living it out puts you right there with the demons. That’s pretty blunt, isn’t it? But when you think about it, there is a lot in common between how demons interact with God, and how some of us do.

- You see, demons know who God is, and they know what God wants, but their knowledge doesn’t change them. Guys, it’s not just what we know

about God, it's whether that knowledge changes us. How can you come face to face with Jesus, how can you come face to face with your creator, the one who is infinitely powerful, infinitely wise, and infinitely good, and not let him change you?! Guys, here it is: Is Jesus changing who you are and how you live?

- And demons know who Jesus is, but they don't love him. In fact, they actually hate him and what he stands for. So let me ask you: Do you actually love him? I'm serious, Do you love God? Do you love Jesus? Would those who know you best testify that you love him – not because of what you say, but because of who you are and how you live? Is there enough evidence to convict you of really loving God?
- And because demons don't love him – they don't obey him. You can see it in their interactions with Jesus. They'll tell Jesus, "We know who you are: the Holy One of God." But they never bend their knees to him. And that's how all of us are sometimes, and that's how some of you guys are a lot. We know who he is, and we know what he wants. But we have the audacity to tell him, to tell God: "I don't care. I don't agree with you on this one." That's demonic faith, guys. If you know who he is, and you know what he wants, are you willing to let him be your God?

You see, it really boils down to this: there are two kinds of people in the world: those who have a faith that works, and everyone else. Those who have a faith in Jesus backed by action, and everyone else.

- Maybe you consider yourself a Jesus follower, but your belief isn't backed by your actions. Yours is more lip-service than lifestyle. You are part of the everyone else.
- Or maybe you don't really consider yourself a Jesus follower, but you do believe in a God, and you figure you are good enough. If there is a God, you have done enough to get in. Well guys, you are part of the everyone else.
- Or maybe you don't believe in a God at all. You certainly are part of the everyone else.

Guys, he's looking for a faith that is more than words. It's way more than talking the talk. Are you trying to live the life he created you to live? Are you trying to do the things he prepared you to do? Are you loving the people he has called you to love? Are you nudging people around you who don't follow him yet towards him? Are you looking for ways to serve? Are you receptive when he calls you to be generous? Are you letting him transform you?

Guys, I'm not preaching a works salvation. We don't save ourselves. He saves us, by grace, through faith. But it isn't real faith if it isn't backed by actions. Faith ... real faith ... works. ...

We're going to sing a song in a moment. Now some of you guys may need to talk more than you need to sing ...

The mountains shake before You,
The demons run and flee
At the mention of the name: King of Majesty
There is no power in hell,
Or any who can stand
Before the power and the presence of
The Great I AM