

GRACE FOR THE JOURNEY—CONVICTIONS
James 2:14-18

Grace For The Journey Message Series
June 7, 2015
Pastor Nathan J. Thompson

You're sitting in worship like today. At the appointed time the congregation stands to affirm the Apostles' Creed. Standing not too far from you are two men who both, with lots of boldness in their words, affirm the words of this creed: *"I believe in God..."*

Yet it is what happens after this service in the personal lives of these men that is most revealing. The one man is a wonderful example in his daily life of graciousness and care for others. He treats people with respect, gives generously to others, lives in peace with his relationships, worships and prays regularly.

On the other hand, the second man is one who is pretty much the opposite. He is very selfish in the way he lives; he doesn't care much about others; he does not like to give to anyone. He is vulgar in his talk, lies and cheats in his business, is a nice guy only to people he likes.

Now of these two are both of them believers and living out the convictions they confessed in the creed? Because they both affirmed these creedal words with boldness does that mean they both believe the same things? Does simply reciting words in worship automatically mean something?

This, of course, is one of the fundamental questions when it comes to faith; the question of whether just because someone says they are a Christian; just because they say the right liturgical words that this is a guarantee of one's faith. Is faith more than words?

It is true that one of the reasons why many in our world today have doubts about Christianity; are skeptical of our convictions is because they don't see those words being lived out. Many are turned off by how we often piously say one thing while our actions say another.

The great historical figure, Gandhi, was a Hindu who also spent a lot of time studying the Bible along with the life and teachings of Jesus. He really liked Jesus and his example, yet he was quoted as saying that he would have liked to be a Christian but for the Christians.

Gandhi loved the teachings and example of Jesus but failed to see that same example being lived out in those who called themselves followers of Jesus. He failed to see the love, forgiveness, peace, non-selfish behavior. I would be a Christian but for the Christians.

Our Scripture reading for today from James 2 says these words, *"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food."*

"If one 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 actions, is dead."

Wow, these are some pretty strong words. In fact, some theologians through the years have discounted this idea that faith and actions somehow go together. They have argued that since a person is not saved by their good works—doing good works does not guarantee faith.

It is true that we are not saved by our good works—we are saved only by God's grace through faith. Yet doesn't it follow that if we truly do live by faith that actions and fruits will be the result? Jesus said, *"By their fruit you will recognize them."* (Matthew 7:16) Faith, if it is truly faith, is to be seen in one's words and example.

Jesus also said, *"You are the light of the world...In the same way, let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."* Being a follower of Jesus means that we don't hide our lights and good works; we let them shine so all can see.

Of course this does not mean that our works and actions are always perfect. We are sinful beings and there will be times when our actions are contrary to our beliefs. There are times when the light we shine forth is more about our own selfishness than about giving God the glory.

Yet because we live by faith we will be willing to be convicted of our sins; we will repent and ask for forgiveness; we will receive God's forgiveness and new life. Our repentant and forgiven hearts will then in turn shine forth the actions of forgiveness, understanding and care for others.

We will seek to humbly treat others as Jesus has loved and treated us; we will not judge them lest we be judged; we will humble ourselves as servants of others.

One of the questions however that is often raised is how some people who are not believers (who never go to church) how some of them live better and more "Christian" lives than lots of people who call themselves Christians.

There are some non-believers who are more loving and forgiving; have better morals than people who say they have been walking by faith in Jesus for many years. There are some non-believers who put us Christians to shame with their generosity and giving spirit. Why?

I like the quote of theologian Frederick Buechner: *"Thus many an atheist is a believer without knowing it, just as many a believer is an atheist without knowing it. You can sincerely believe there is no God and live as though there is. You can sincerely believe there is a God and live as though there isn't. So it goes."*

These words can be very convicting. Are my convictions that I believe in God, yet am I living as if there is no God? How about you? It is definitely easy to say one thing, to proclaim our convictions about God when we are in a place like church.

Yet what about how we live our lives day by day? Do our words match our actions? Can people tell by the way you treat other people; by the priorities you live by; by the words and language you use that you are a believer in God? We need to remember that our lives are often the only sermon about Jesus and faith that some people will ever hear.

Another major challenge about faith is how easy it is to say that we believe in God, in God's promises, yet how difficult that belief can be when challenges and testing come. In other words,

it is easier to affirm our faith when things are going very well; it is more difficult when the world seems to be crumbling around us.

One example: It is easy for me to stand up here and preach about trusting in Jesus in the challenges of life; about how Jesus is walking with us each day and will give us his strength and help. These are promises I believe to be true from the very bottom of my heart.

Yet when my world is rocked by a major challenge; when my life seems out of control; when the actions of others cause me to question myself and my faith it is then that my actions often don't shine forth the faith and trust I preach about.

At times like that rather than demonstrating the faith I talk about I am rather filled with anxiety, worry, frustration and feelings of helplessness. At times like that I can become a basket case of wondering if I will ever make it through. It can be pretty scary.

Yet I believe that the good news of Jesus is that he knows and understands that there will be times like that in my life—in the lives of each believer. Jesus knows that there will be times when our faith will be tested, when we may feel that we don't have the strength to go on.

That is why, I believe, that God has given us and wants us to be fully connected in a community of faith. It is why God wants us to develop some close relationships with other believers in his church. It is why there is no such thing as a Robinson Crusoe Christian.

The truth is that it is at those times when our faith seems to feel depleted; it is at those times when we can hardly pray; it is at those times when we feel all alone that we need the faith and support of others to surround us.

We need the faith of others to pray for us; to reassure us that God has not abandoned us; to keep us focused on God and his hopeful future. When faith is depleted and dry, it is only through the faith and support of others that our faith has any hope of being renewed.

I want you to know that I have experienced this countless times in my life of faith. In fact, I would have given up being a pastor many years ago without this support. It is when people pray for and encourage us; when people remind us of ways that God is working and has not abandoned us it is then that we can have the courage to go on.

If you are struggling with your faith and have not experienced this kind of support, I encourage you to get connected at Messiah; to get involved in some mission opportunity, study, place to serve. Developing a Christian network is essential to living by faith.

If you on the other hand are in a good place in your life as far as faith; if you are feeling strong in God's love I encourage you also to develop a community with others where you can use your faith to encourage those in need. That is your ministry now. Then when you sometime have doubts and challenges (which you certainly will) those you have encouraged can then help you.

So faith, my friends, can easily be lots of premises, words, convictions. Yet where the rubber meets the road is whether we actually put these beliefs into action. May you think and reflect these days on how your faith is being lived out and put into action. Let us all seek to continually grow in ways that our faith is not just nice words.