

Genesis 5:21-24, James 2:14-26
“Houston, we have a problem”

We had a wonderful weekend as a family. My oldest daughter graduated after 4 very hard years of work that made her father very proud. We had a family gathering yesterday and I was reminded of the weeks before my graduation from college, one week in particular. The underclassmen had just declared their majors and chosen their classes and one political science major was complaining because he couldn't fit a political theory class into his schedule. I said, don't worry about it, I'm a political science major and I never took a political theory class.

The room got very quiet. Bob, are you sure you didn't take a political theory class. Positive. Well, then you have a problem, a serious problem. You can't graduate unless you've taken a political theory class as a political science major. I spent the entire week before I graduated trying to solve this problem. We take so many things for granted until we discover that we have a problem then we recognize what we really have.

I looked out on all those kids throwing their caps in the air and I could only think of the potential that was present in that area. Our secular culture does teach us to live a good life, be a good person, do good things. There is a general encouragement to altruism and heroes are recognized.

Back in Jesus' day there was a common way of thinking, it was called Stoicism. If you were a Stoic the goal of life was serenity. Everyone wanted to live a peaceful life. And the best way to achieve serenity was to pursue what was called apatheia. It was an attempt to live with the absence of feelings. Virgil stated that the perfectly happy man has no pity for the poor and no grief for the sorrowing.

Our Scripture gives us another goal in life other than the security of the 1st century, or the cultural norms of today that tells us to live a good life and be a good person. James tells us to put our faith into action, so much so that we are to consider our actions if not more important at least at the same level as our faith. That's a problem because we have all been raised and taught that we have been saved by grace through faith and not on the merit of works. We have a problem today between James and our normal theology. Let's try to resolve it together.

READ

I'll never forget the day that I was examined on the floor of Presbytery in order to be ordained into the Presbyterian Church, pretty much 20 years ago today, give or take a week. The first question I received was: If you had to choose between faith and works which one would you

choose? If you had to choose what was most important between believing and having faith in Jesus or the works that come on behalf of our Savior which would you choose? I refused to give him a satisfactory answer and said I would never separate the two. They are equally important.

Which one would you choose if you had to? John Calvin tells us “it is faith alone that justifies, but faith that justifies can never be alone” without works. Our Scripture in James today is another in a long list of Scriptures that highlights our good deeds, our works, our actions as being crucially important, even to the point where it has a role in salvation. And that’s a problem.

Remember Matthew 25 when our Savior states: “Come you that are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food at your foodbank, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink at the memorial day parade, I was a stranger and you welcomed me at New Beginnings, I was naked and you gave me clothing at Waterstreet, I was sick and the deacons took care of me, I was in prison, and when I came out you mentored me.

The problem with these verses is that as Protestants we have not traditionally used them as part of our narrative that leads to salvation. The verses we have normally used are the ones Paul has made famous: Ephesians 2:8-9, II Corinthians 5:7, Romans 3:28, and 4:6.

We seem to have a problem, because in these verses 3 times we read this statement in vs. 17, vs. 20, vs. 26. He calls those who don’t understand this foolish. It is almost as if he is taunting us or blowing in our ear just to go against what we have all along been taught. Faith is all you need. Works is a response to faith. Not so, it seems James is telling us. Works by itself is all you need and your faith is worthless without works. So, if James were on the floor of Presbytery we know which one he would have chosen.

But maybe we get a hint, an understanding, of what Paul is saying in regards to works and what James is saying. If you look at Galatians 2:16 Paul speaks in regards to works as being the works of the law. The works that Paul references is the law, the sacrifices, the hundreds of directives that bound people to a life of legalism. Paul had no love for the law, especially when it got in the way of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

The law was not to be followed at the expense of turning someone away from the person of Jesus. That was happening in the life of the earliest Christian community. These are the works, the laws against which Paul testifies.

When James refers to works he made reference already to a law that was very different from that which Paul mentions. It wasn't the law of the Old Testament but rather a law, a work, that brought them closer to Jesus and to each other. Do you remember that work, that law? You can find it again in verse 8, the royal law. So as Protestants we have been taught that legalism doesn't save us, following the rules doesn't save us, but a relationship with Jesus as seen in our faith does.

James really is not saying anything different, he is just trying to redirect our understanding of the law and legalism from a list of thou shalt nots to you must love your neighbor. The example he uses describes a brother, a member of the church, who is in need, and those needs are pretty specific and they are well known by the community, and all that was done was to say, I'll pray for you, go in peace, I hope things get better for you, keep warm and eat up. But if we don't actually do anything to help create peace or give them clothing or food, then we have a problem. It is useless if you don't supply their bodily needs.

This past week we had another meeting with our housing group that the ministerium is putting together. Michelle Holland and Leslie Crabtree came and spoke to us about the housing needs in the L-S school district. Last year 20 families were homeless and could have been helped if there were a housing project.

We have done something here at First Presbyterian that not many do, and you need to be aware of our thinking and why we are doing it. We have not been satisfied doing mission at arms length. Not many would choose to own a home on their campus that houses a family in need. What this means is that every Sunday you come to church, or every day you come here for Bible Study or anything at all during the week you should be faced with a crisis of conscience. We have chosen to invite them into our house where we are forced to encounter them if not physically at least visually and so we are forced to ask, how can I do more with them than what I am personally already doing? And if I am not doing anything with that family, why not? Have I taken the kids out to play, have I made them a meal? Faith without works is dead.

Then we've chosen to house a food bank here where those in need have to come inside our church to get food. Again, we force ourselves into situations as followers of Jesus Christ where we must be asking ourselves what other needs do they have? It would be easier to send money away somewhere else because then the people would go somewhere else and we can remain untouched and not bothered by a crisis of conscience where my faith actually is

challenged by a potential action. Or we want to control our own actions, when we take them and with whom. Mission work is a real problem, it is a real mess, if we choose to be so personally involved.

You are a unique people that has chosen this type of ministry where your works can challenge your faith every day, if you choose. I have heard from so many of you who told you of perfect strangers who walked up to you and thanked you for what your church did on memorial day. There is no better way to honor our veterans and be a part of the community as feeding people for free. Jesus knew something about that. He didn't charge them \$5 a head for that bread and fish.

Some would say that faith is simply believing in spite of the evidence. But after reading these verses in James I would redefine it as obeying God or working out our faith in spite of the consequence. As Presbyterians we inherit a tradition where intellect is highly valued at times over and against pietism and pragmatic action. Even at times faith has been seen as not requiring any relationship and certainly no obligations to others. But we need to be involved here in a paradigmatic shift where we understand our faith not as an individual venture. Jesus never confused the elect with the elite.

We cannot come to Christ and stay the same person just like if we encounter a 220 hot wire we are going to change, we are going to receive quite a shock that will affect us somehow. There really does not exist the statement it is between God and me. No, it is not, we are involved too. We are a part of your life.

So which is more important? Faith or works? If you were in a row boat if you only focused on one what would happen? You'd go around in a circle. You have to row in tandem, in the south they called it you have to jihaw. Sometimes when the streams of culture push you in one direction you have to row harder on works, or sometimes on faith, but always together.

Let me leave you with I John 3:17-18.