

PUTTING YOUR FAITH TO WORK, BOTH AND, NOT EITHER OR

James 2: 14-26

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Years ago I came across a book called *The Gospel According to Peanuts*. It features all of those beloved Peanuts characters including my all-time favorite, Snoopy. I've always had a special place in my heart for that little white pup sitting on top of his dog house. When I read the passage of Scripture that is the focus of today's sermon, I could not help but think of him, especially when I read verses 15-17. What James has to say is perfectly illustrated by a little cartoon strip in the book. Snoopy is sitting outside in the snow as Charlie Brown and Linus walk by. Charlie says to Linus, "Snoopy looks kind of cold doesn't he?" Linus replies, "I'll say he does. Maybe we'd better go over and comfort him." So Charlie and Linus walk over to Snoopy and say one after the other, "Be of good cheer, Snoopy. Yes, be of good cheer." Then they walk off leaving Snoopy shivering in the cold with a great big question mark lingering over the scene. Although Snoopy doesn't say anything, the question mark speaks volumes. You can't help but imagine Snoopy thinking to himself, "Thanks for the kind words, but where's the blanket?"

James, as we have already noticed, uses a very similar illustration to talk about the importance of faith and deeds. Sharing a word of encouragement to someone who is cold and hungry, but doing nothing to relieve that person's suffering is useless. In fact, it's worse than useless. Not only is it mean spirited, but it conveys the fact that the comforting words were really quite empty. If they were sincere, the person who had spoken them would have done something. He or she would have made sure that the person in need was both warm and well fed. James concludes that the same is true with regards to faith and deeds. Having faith that doesn't express itself in how we live is rather empty. In fact, that kind of faith calls its very existence into question. Or as James says in verse 17, "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

James then proceeds to create an imaginary scene in which he is speaking to a person who vehemently believes that faith and faith alone is all that is required. This individual says, "I believe in God. Isn't that good enough?" In response, James chuckles to himself and responds, "So you believe there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that and shudder" (James 2:19). In other words, belief in God is something that even demons can achieve, but that doesn't mean they are anxious to serve the Lord. Just the opposite, they're scared to death of Him.

James then goes a step further and shares two Biblical examples about how our faith, our belief in God must be confirmed by what we do. The first example is Abraham. He recites the well-known story about Abraham and Isaac. Abraham trusted the Lord so wholeheartedly that he was willing to sacrifice his very own son if that's what God wanted him to do. Of course, as we know that didn't happen, but his willingness, says James, confirmed that "his faith and his actions were working together and his faith was made complete by what he did." (James 2:22) That's why Abraham was considered to be righteous in the sight of God and why he became known as a friend of God. James then moves on to the example of Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho. She had placed her faith in the God of the Israelites and put that faith to work by hiding the spies that Joshua had sent into the city, as well as helping them to escape. Finally, James concludes this section of his letter by reminding everyone in verse 26, that a body without breath, without the spirit of life within it, is nothing more than a corpse. Likewise, faith without deeds is dead.

Now what does all of this mean for you and me? It appears that we have the makings for a grand argument between James and Paul and indeed, there may have been some friction between the two of them as evidenced in the fifteenth chapter of the book of Acts. In fact, one of the earliest controversies that arose in the Christian church was about whether a person could become a Christian without obeying the laws given to the Jewish people by Moses. Paul said, "Faith alone is sufficient." James was a bit more guarded. Keeping the law, at least its most basic tenants, was a way of validating one's faith. So, on the surface it would appear that we have two divergent ideas as to what it means to be saved. However, upon further examination, both James and Paul are really saying the same thing. Simply put, this is what they are telling us.

First, you can't work your way into heaven. There is nothing you or I can do to earn God's favor. It is a gift that He bestows upon us when we place our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says it best in his letter to the Ephesians, "For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9) That's simple enough, simple enough for anyone to understand. Nevertheless, I've run into folks every now and then who beg to differ. In particular I remember a couple who attended the church where I served in North Carolina. I shared the plan of God's salvation with them. They responded by saying, "You're wrong. We're good people and God will let us into heaven because of all the good things we have done for Him." I could not convince them otherwise and shortly thereafter they stopped coming. Trying to get to heaven on your own would be like jumping in the Atlantic Ocean at Virginia Beach and swimming to England. No matter how good you might be, you'd never make it. The same is true with regards

to trusting in good deeds to somehow earn you enough credits to gain God's acceptance. It's impossible.

Here's the second thing that James and Paul are telling us. **You can't talk your way into heaven.** Remember that verse of Scripture in the book of Philippians we examined during the sermon series awhile back. Paul says, "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). Sounds like Paul is contradicting himself. Not so. He's saying the same thing that James has been saying in the passage of Scripture that was read this morning. We are saved by God's grace, but once that has been accomplished, we need to forsake the ways of the world and begin living like Christians. Our lives ought to be a testimony to our faith. Yes, there will be times when we fail and must ask for forgiveness, but with God's help we've become a changed person. How we live and what we do for others must reflect that change. Otherwise, we've just been talking about faith without it really taking hold of our lives. Just like that couple who wanted to work their way into heaven, I've run into some people who want to talk their way into heaven. They make a profession of faith, attend a few Sundays and then you never see them again. Furthermore, upon examination, you discover that their lives are just as worldly and sin filled as they were before. They thought that salvation was like buying a train ticket to glory. Once you have the ticket, you can live any way you wish until the whistle blows and the train leaves the station. Not so according to Jesus. He said in His Sermon on the Mount, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Doing the will of our heavenly Father means for starters, "Loving Him and loving one another." It means living the Christian way of life, a life that honors God and a life that is filled with charitable deeds for others. In other words, you just can't talk your way into heaven.

This past Wednesday, we celebrated Valentine's Day. I hope you did something nice for your special valentine. Since it's a day in honor of love, let's picture in our minds that moment when a young man says to his girl, "I love you with all of my heart." I'm sure that makes her happy and she probably gives him a great big kiss, but that happiness is not complete until the day of the marriage. Otherwise that declaration of love is just words. It must be followed up by what he does if that love is true and genuine. In fact, imagining that scene in my mind, I'm reminded of an old song that goes something like this, "Love and marriage, love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage. "This I tell you, brother, you can't have one without the other." The same is true with regards to faith and deeds. You really can't have one without the other. So it's always **BOTH AND,** never **EITHER OR!**