

“The Faith and Works of the Saints”

James 2:14-24; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18 – Tesa Hauser
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 14, 2021

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might boldly commit to live out our faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Has this ever happened to anyone before? Now, I'm not saying it's from personal experience, it's just a story that I've heard. A parent asks their child to take out the trash. The child responds with, “yes, I can do that.” The parent is happy that their child has agreed to help out. However, a day goes by, and the trash is filled even more than the day before, and it's starting to create a smell in the house. The parent reminds their child about the trash. The child responds, “sorry I forgot, but I will take out the trash today.”

The parent is reassured once again and has faith that their child will take out the trash. Now by the second day, the trash still isn't thrown out and the house keeps smelling. I'm guessing the parent is losing faith that their child will throw out the trash. The parent decides to take it upon themselves and just throw out the trash themselves. Now, we can give the child the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they forgot, or have a lot going on, so it's a moment of forgetfulness. However, if they don't do it, how do we know that they meant what they said those two days before?

In the passage we read in James, the author is not worried about salvation when talking about faith. They care about a faith that is authentic, about a life as a

Christ follower that makes that faith come “alive.” They say that if faith is not accompanied by works it is dead. The author is cleverly using language that is pertinent to the Christian faith, death, and life. We know that death has been defeated and that Christ has promised us new life, but can this new life truly be obtained if we have a faith that is not accompanied by actions?

The author mentions Abraham and Rahab as examples of people who had faith and works; they are renowned in Jewish tradition above all for their hospitality (they lived out what they believed). These two examples are a stark contrast to one another but prove the point of the author. You *think* you know God, but can you be named as an example of a person who lived out their faith? Rahab is seen as having faith; although it was not stated or explicit, it was understood she had faith because of her actions. A great example of actions speaks louder than words.

Earlier in chapter two of James, the author is emphasizing the importance of hospitality to all people, especially to those who are in need. In a great story in Genesis 18, Abraham welcome three strangers, three men, and is incredibly hospitable to them. They turn out to be angels! Even Jesus notes that when you clothe and provide a drink to “the least of these,” those who are typically in need, it would be like you did it for him.

This is good news! We are meant to be transformed by our lives in Christ and the author of James is saying that what we do transforms us. In one

commentary I read it noted that for the author of James, “the real issue is whether making a Christian commitment is worth anything unless it changes the way in which you live.” Usually, it is easier to show people what you mean and explain those actions because of what you believe.

Have you ever heard of the Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman? I think they are good basis for understanding one another and loving one another, even with their limitations. The five love languages are: acts of service, receiving gifts, quality time, words of affirmation, and physical touch. These are used to help strengthen your relationship with your partner but are great for any relationship! The basis though, or the premise is that you love your partner/friend/child/parent. There is no question, this moves beyond I love you, to now I am going to show you that I love you. Even with words of affirmation, there are tangible ways you can provide someone with affirmation. If someone’s first or main love language is quality time, then think of all the ways and things you can do to show that person love. There are so many options and even if they don’t like every option, the hope is that they will see you are trying to show them love.

For the church in Thessalonians, they are facing outside persecution and pressure for their faith in Jesus. They have been moved to action, and Paul acknowledges that there are people in the church who are working hard, caring for others, and admonishing people. Then he says in verse 13, “hold them in the

highest regard in love because of their work.” He’s very specific here, acknowledge what they are doing, and love the heck out of them. Yet, he doesn’t name specific people by name or leadership positions. Why?

There are times in which you will be the helper and when you will be the helped. When you are helped, love those who help you, and the hope is that you will in turn become the helper when it is needed. This cycle is important to the sustenance of the church, even through incredibly hard times as the church in Thessalonica was facing. The phrase, rejoice always, is about the new age to come, as people who are facing local hostilities, they are looking for the day in which they will no longer have to worry. In that same light we rejoice not because of our circumstances which are every changing and fleeting, but because the truth in Jesus Christ who lived, died, and resurrected and ascended. We rejoice in that truth. We are transformed by that truth and hopefully we want to live a new and different life because of it.

Both communities are post-resurrection communities looking to live for God with this newfound faith and understanding. However, they are living two different realities. The church in James is fighting against those who are more worried about what they know and believe, instead of following Jesus fully and holistically. People think that if they can intellectually understand faith and Jesus, then they are doing enough. It hasn’t reached into their heart, where they are moved to action,

moved to be followers of Christ in action as those who he sent out. It can be easier to convince yourself and to say you'll take out the trash than it can be to follow through sometimes. However, I also think the author of James is warning us about something that is deeper and not always acknowledged.

For some people, if they say they are going to throw away the trash, it seems simple. You say you are going to do something, and you follow through, cause that's how it should be. However, the child didn't throw away the trash because when they were asked, they had a friend over who was going through a really hard time at home. They said they would throw out the trash out of genuine desire, but their focus was talking to this friend and listening to them share their hardships, their concerns, and their fears. The next day they also heard the reminder, but again, this friend was over, needing a place to go where they felt safe, loved, and cared for. It's easy to make assumptions in your head, than to acknowledge the complexities that people are going through and involved in.

In that trash story, the parent acknowledges the love and kindness their child is showing, not taking out the trash this time doesn't mean their child is lazy or doesn't listen. This time, they see that their actions reflect who they are, they love they have, the care they share for this friend, and that is more important than taking out the trash.

The faith and the work of the saints may sometimes look like taking out the trash, but sometimes it's talking to a guest who has joined us for the first time. It looks like preparing coffee hour. It's providing donations and time to help our unhoused neighbors. It's sending a letter to the congregation when they themselves need a letter of encouragement. It's being involved in intra-faith and inter-faith work to bring peace, to make sure people feel safe in their communities. What does faith in action look like for you? Alleluia and Amen.