

LifeWay Family Bible Series for April 3: Works can illustrate faith to the world_40405

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Works can illustrate faith to the world

James 1:16-27; 2:14-26

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A father was scolding his teenage son for being lazy one day. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself," he told his young sloth. "When Abraham Lincoln was your age, he was busy building rail fences in sunshine. You won't even get off the couch and lay down your video games to do your homework."

"Sure," said the boy, "and when Lincoln was your age, he was president of the United States."

Whether a teenager or an adult, there seems to be an inclination these days to discover or create opportunities that shun hard work. Many like to believe they're hard laborers, but when given the chance, isn't it easier to cut a corner or get out of work all together?



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Unfortunately, this detrimental attitude has worked its way into the church. From pastors to members, trying to motivate Christians to put their faith to work sometimes feels futile. Many Christians have allowed their faith to become stagnant, creating dying churches and shallow believers. There is a desperate need for churches to discover a real faith for the real world.

James 1:16-27

The words of James give guidance as Christians looking for a real faith search for opportunities to become doers of the faith. The epistle of James reminds the reader there was once a considerable Jewish-Christian establishment within the region of ancient Palestine. While Paul and Barnabas were missionaries spreading the gospel among the Gentiles, a very significant Jewish-Christian church already was established and operating within Jerusalem. Peter was the leader of the Jerusalem church but gave way to James after Peter's expulsion from Jerusalem.

The significance of this information pertains to the notion of James' teachings. James was most certainly schooled in the intricate details of the Torah, which consistently has been about the public religious practice of

faith. In other words, spiritual works have been the essence behind the public practice of faith. So, when James writes that believers must not only be hearers of the word but also doers of the word, he comes to faith with an emphasis upon spiritual works and their place within faith.

James makes specific appeals for believers to care for the orphans and widows, while all the while making certain believers live their lives unstained by the world. Much has been said about what appears to be a surface-based conflict between the James and Pauline understanding of works. Yet the conflict, while very much present in the ancient church, gives way as one begins to understand Scripture from a broader perspective.

What both Paul and James seem to be promoting is a faith rooted in Jesus Christ that will not die, but remains alive and active. The living faith that brings hope to the world is not a works-based salvation, nor is it a means of accumulating heavenly riches for the sake of self-glorification. Living faith is a faith that has been resurrected with the living Christ and promoted through a sacrificial way of life.

James 2:14-26

James continues his teachings on the subject when he poses the perplexing question: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?" Again, James is not arguing for a works-based salvation. He is fervently arguing that those who profess faith in Christ give evidence of that faith by doing good works that portray loving one's neighbor.

James believes so fervently in this notion that he claims, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." The real quandary for many trying to understand this teaching is the misconception that faith and works are separate. James goes on to argue that separating faith and works is a shallow and fruitless

religion. There is nothing humans can ever do to merit salvation for themselves, it is a true gift of God. The expression of faith circulates within the practice of faith, henceforth works.

The question could be posed, what made Jesus ... well, Jesus? Let's say Jesus went around the countryside preaching a message of healing and restoration but did absolutely nothing to contribute to his words. Most likely, Jesus would have been marked as another well-intentioned demagogue who could not give life to his words.

Thank goodness, Jesus was not that person. Jesus backed his message up with actions. As he spoke about healing, he healed. As he spoke about mercy, he exhibited mercy. As he spoke about love, he loved those who were thought to be unlovable. And as he spoke about sacrifice, he made the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf. Jesus had a real faith.

Real faith is not a faith that sits still. Real faith is not a faith that stagnates, producing the stench of nothingness. Real faith is about life. Real faith is about producing fruit. Real faith is about being obedient to the teachings of our Lord. While salvation comes to us through the love and mercy of God, faith is nurtured through living out our love for the Father and our neighbor.

James shows his readers that faith without works is a dead organism, but faith with works creates a spiritual environment for the work of God to thrive.

Discussion question

- ♦ *Can faith and works become unbalanced on the works side as well?*

in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.