

Explore the Bible: With Works

October 16, 2018

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Nov. 4 focuses on James 2:14-26.*

This is where the book of James easily can be misunderstood if we are not clear and careful. In the previous lesson, we discussed obedience and being listeners and doers (1:22), which is plain and simple. But now we get to discuss faith and works in regard to salvation, and we need to be clear about (1) what salvation is, and (2) what salvation produces.

Perhaps the best precursor is to read Ephesians 2:8-10 as a reminder that “grace through faith” is what allows a person to be saved, and the saved ones are expected to “do good works.” Be sure to direct your group’s discussion so it does not become a battle over what really saves a person. James’s intent is to talk about what salvation produces.

As the lesson states, “True faith produces visible change.” *Ask your group to share examples of something that visibly changed on the outside, and what caused that change.* Ideas could range from mold on the ceiling being caused by a roof leak, to a friend’s temperament being better after he or she got adequate sleep. We need to notice the causes of visible change.

Dead Faith (James 2:14-17)

Start by looking at the bold statement in verse 17 that “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” A morbid understanding of this is a physical body by itself is dead without the action of breathing, among other life-sustaining actions. Faith needs action to be alive.

From a church and ministry standpoint, the example of verses 15-16 is likely familiar. Ask your group: *When have you seen this scenario happen?*

Have you ever been guilty of this exact response to someone? Encouraging a person to have faith without showing your faith (through deeds) actually paints an untrue picture. It is “no good” to proclaim faith if you are not showing the fruit of your faith.

Augustine is credited for saying, “Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe.” *Do we want to see something dead as our reward for a dead faith?* We should hope not. Rather, we and others should see a faith that is alive, not dead.

Working Faith (James 2:18-19)

Considering recalling 1:23-25, where there is a clear difference between listening only to God’s teachings compared to listening and obeying. Only listening is forgettable, but listening and obeying can be memorable. A working faith is more visible than faith by itself.

Notice how verse 18 is like a competition of two boxers, each trying to prove himself bigger and better than the other. In one corner, there is the heady I-have-faith and in the other is the showy I-have-deeds. By themselves, they are simply “hot air” and empty beings. However, as faithful followers of Jesus, we can do both by having a faith that shows itself in how we act.

Also, do not miss the sarcastic intent of verse 19. If someone says: “Hey, be proud of me. I believe God exists,” James would reply: “Oh, good for you! You have as much faith as a demon.” *How does this strike you? If you were to give this reply to someone in a conversation, how would they probably respond?*

Saving Faith (James 2:20-26)

There are a few stories from the Old Testament that would have rung true to an informed audience, but let us center on James's statement in verse 22: faith and actions work together, and a person's faith is made complete by what he or she does. It is not an either/or scenario; it is a both/and reality.

Ask your group: *Why would we want to separate faith and action? What benefit is it to see them separated instead of together?* The two bring about something complete and whole. Like a friendship necklace set (two halves of a heart), it is when two girls are together that the two halves of a heart can become one. This is how faith and action make one whole Christian.

Justification in verse 24 points to the action of faith. Remember that Jesus proved his love for us by dying for us. He "put his money where his mouth is," and his greatest action brought justification. His action proved his love, and so our action proves our faith.

Conclusion

A true and living faith cannot stop short of true and live-giving action. This is simple cause-and-effect. It is meant to be simple and natural. The forcefulness of religious obligation cannot save a person, because that action is out of fear. However, the opportunity of salvation reveals actions out of a love for the one in whom we place our faith: Jesus Christ himself, who loved us first.

Encourage your group to think on these questions: *How would I describe my faith? Am I living out my faith, or am I settling for less? How can I become more "whole" as a Christian?* If there is opportunity, allow some time to share their thoughts.

In our discussion on Galatians, we spoke at length about the change in a person when the Spirit of God lives inside the believer. *How might verse 26 connect with this?* Our individual spirits are made whole when God's Spirit resides in us, just as we are whole when we connect faith and action together.

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