**FAITH AND ACTIONS WORK TOGETHER**

November 18, 2012

James 2:1-26

Key Verse 2:22 “You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.”

The purpose of James’ epistle is to exhort believers to Christian maturity and holiness of life. To gain spiritual maturity, a believer must have true faith. What is true faith? The philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, tells the story of a make-believe country in which only ducks live. “One Sunday morning all the ducks came into the church, waddled down the door and into their chairs, and squatted. Then the duck minister took his place behind the pulpit, opened the duck Bible and read, ‘Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Use your wings!’ All the ducks yelled ‘Amen!’ and they all waddled home.” That’s the kind of hearing that goes on every Sunday morning in multitudes of congregation in the world. People encounter truth but respond to it in a way that never changes them--James asks, “Can such faith save him?”

I. Mercy triumphs over judgment (1-13).

Look at verse 1. “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism.” “Favoritism” is treating one person or group over others based on outward appearances such as clothing, wealth, or position.” In verses 2-3, James uses a practical example to vividly describe such favoritism. Suppose two people come into worship service. One wears a gold ring and fine clothes, and the other wears shabby clothes. If we show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” we are guilty of favoritism. Why is favoritism such a serious problem? In verse 4, James says such favoritism comes from “evil thoughts.” Evil thoughts mean wicked thoughts that come from our human sinful nature and corrupted value system. We treat the rich people nicely because of our selfish desire to get some benefit from them. But the poor people have nothing to offer.

There is also favoritism based on one’s race and color. In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that during his student days in England, he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. So one Sunday he decided to attend a service at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go and worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned. "If Christians have caste differences also," he said, "I might as well remain a Hindu." That usher’s prejudice not only betrayed Jesus but also turned a person away from trusting him as Savior.

Favoritism is wrong because it violates the royal law. Look at verse 8. “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right.” Here James calls ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ the royal law. The royal law means the kingly law. This law is decreed by God, the King of kings. It is also fit for God’s children, princes and princesses. Furthermore, this law is the king of laws. Jesus says in Matthew 22:37-40, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’This is the first and greatest commandment.And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Think about how difficult it is to keep this law! “Love your neighbor as yourself.” We should care for others as we care for ourselves. We should be willing to share our material possessions with those who are not as privileged as we are. Above all, we should do all in our power to see that they have the opportunity to have the eternal life in Jesus Christ. But in our sinfulness, we try to justify our actions for not loving our neighbor. Perhaps the usher excused his action toward the rich man by saying that he was just trying to love his neighbor as himself. He was trying to draw the boundary on who is his neighbor. But according to the parable of the good Samaritan, our neighbor is anyone who has a need which we can help to meet.

Look at verse 13. “Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” We fail to love our neighbor as ourselves due to our selfishness and self-centeredness. Yet when we show mercy to others instead of judging them based on their outward appearances, God will show his mercy. Being merciful is the evidence that we belong to God, who does not show favoritism. Having God’s heart is the way to overcome favoritism. May God bless us to have the heart of God, so that we may grow as mature servants of God who can embrace and serve any kind of person!

II. True faith is accompanied by action (14-26).

James now talks about faith in direct relation to the theme of this epistle, our spiritual maturity. We believe that we are saved by faith. But James says there is a kind of faith that cannot save us. Look at verse 14. “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” Faith that has no deeds cannot save us. Why? For this kind of faith is dead. For example, in the previous verses, James emphasized love and mercy for our neighbors. Suppose we say that we believe in the importance of love and mercy, but if we don’t put it into practice for a brother or sister, who is without clothes and daily food, James says our faith is dead. Verse 17 says, “In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” Here “Dead” means inactive, lifeless, and useless. We cannot expect anything, including salvation, from lifeless and useless faith. Jesus says in Matthew 7:21, “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 in heaven.”

Faith and deeds are inseparable. True faith is accompanied by action. What then is faith that is not accompanied by action? Look at verse 19. “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.” Dead faith is at the same level as demons’ faith. They also believe in one God. They know that he exists. But that knowledge does not produce a change in their behavior. Instead, they shudder, then suppress the thought, and carry on with their evil-doing. In Mark 5, when Jesus and his disciples went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes and got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet them. The evil spirit knew and understood that Jesus is the Son of the Most High God. But the problem was that the evil spirit didn’t obey Jesus. He did not want to have any relationship with Jesus. There were no deeds in his faith. Therefore, if we know God without obedience, our faith is no better than that of demons. It is dead. Our faith should not stop at the Head, just the intellectual level, demons’ level. It should come down to our Heart. The Heart is the central faculty of our entire being. When we have faith from the heart, it moves our hands and feet to work. It should help us to commit our lives to God and resulted in a changed life. We have to pray that God may give us faith which results in a changed life.

James now gives us two biblical examples, Abraham and Rahab, to emphasize the importance of faith accompanied by action. Look at verse 21. “Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?” In Genesis 22:2, God commanded Abraham, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.” Think about Abraham’s situation! God promised a son when he was 75 years old, and after 25 long years, God finally gave him Isaac through Sarah. To Abraham, Isaac was like his own body and life. What a frightening command it was to sacrifice his one and only son as a burnt offering!

God’s command seemed totally unreasonable and even cruel, for human sacrifice is a thing Abraham knew God hates most. Yet Abraham immediately showed his obedience. He could obey God because he trusted in God even though he did not fully understand. He showed absolute reverence for God's sovereignty and ownership. On the way to the mountain, Isaac questioned “Father? The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham must have been momentarily shaken when Isaac asked him, “Father, where is the lamb?” But his trust in God’s love and his commitment to obey God’s word was not moved. Abraham did not doubt God’s love; he did not live by his feelings. He lived by faith in God’s word, and he expressed his faith in absolute obedience. He answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” Finally, “He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, ‘Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son’" (Ge 22:9-12).

Regarding Abraham’s faith, James says in verse 22, “You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.” Abraham’s faith was evident in his practice of Isaac’s sacrifice. His faith bore fruit in action. God acknowledged Abraham’s faith in his obedience, and called Abraham his friend (2 Ch 20:7; Isa 41:8). God did not call anybody his friend except Abraham. James concludes about Abraham’s faith in verse 24. “You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.” Abraham was justified by faith (15:6), but his faith was completed by his action of obedience.

Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho. She believed that Israel’s God was God in heaven above and on the earth below (Jos 2:9-11). She believed that Jericho was destined for destruction by God. She believed that God is God of mercy and the only way she could escape from destruction was to trust in God. She not only believed it, but as the evidence of her faith, she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction to protect them. Through her action of faith, God saved her and her household. Furthermore, God blessed her to become a great-great-grandmother of King David.

Through these practical examples in the Bible, we learn that action and obedience are not easy. They require much struggle and self denial. When Abraham tried to sacrifice his son, he must have greatly struggled inwardly to obey. In order to obey, he must have prayed the whole night as our Lord prayed at Gethsemane to obey the Father’s will to die on the cross. When Rahab protected the spies, she had to risk her life due to the action because it was an act to serve the interest of the enemy. We cannot act and obey without holy struggle before God and sacrificing our time, material and even our lives. Through this process, our faith is revealed to be either living or dead.

In verse 26, James concludes by comparing faith to the body. “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” Faith and deeds are as essential to each other as the body and the spirit. Apart from the spirit, the breath of life, the body is dead. There are absolutely no vital signs in a dead body: Heart beat, normal temperature and blood pressure, breathing, and any other signs of life. So a dead body remains inactive, cold, and lifeless. We call the dead body a corpse. Likewise, apart from actions, the evidence of faith, faith is considered dead. Dead faith is not the real thing. It doesn’t count. Only true faith accompanied by action counts. It is something that must be demonstrated in the way we live. It contributes to our salvation, spiritual growth and maturity. May God help us to have such faith and grow in spiritual maturity!