



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Labor of Faith”

James 2 :1-10, 14-17

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¹My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ...

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

He stepped out in faith. He heard of the great things the church did in his community. He even met many of the members while they volunteered at places like the Roanoke Rescue Mission and the Presbyterian Community Center. He thought they were all very nice and very warm, always smiling, welcoming and approachable. He even had lunch with Jerry, one of the church members,



at the Rescue Mission one day. They sat beside each other and talked about all sorts of things: growing up, memories of family and friends, the sports they played and the sports they still love to watch, the things each of them do for fun, and the ways faith has shaped who they are. It was a lovely conversation, a conversation that was deep, open, and personal. The man explained, “I believe faith is what keeps you going when times are hard. Faith is what got me through the death of my wife.” His lunch partner, Jerry, replied “How long ago did you lose your wife?” “It was a while back actually, 16 years now I believe. She developed a serious illness about 20 years ago, and the doctors could not figure it out. They tried several different treatment options—but nothing seemed to work. So, we carried on best we could.” Jerry, shaking his head in sympathy, said, “That must have been hard on both of you?” The man continued, “Yeah it was. Trying to manage the medical bills, juggling work, and helping her. I had two jobs, and she even had to keep working off and on while she was sick. It was the hardest times of our lives. That is until she got worse a few years later.” Jerry really didn’t know where this was going but asked, “What happened?” “Well, we went back to the doctors, and they ran some tests and then admitted her to the hospital. It turned out to be some form of cancer.” Jerry knew a thing or two about cancer diagnoses. “Yeah my mom battled cancer for a while. It was tough on my dad too. They were both retired when she fell sick, living at the lake. But like you say, ‘Faith is what keeps us going during the hard times in life.’”

Turning their focus to their plates of cafeteria spaghetti, they sat in silence for a few moments with all that had been shared. Then Jerry jumped back in, “How are you doing now?” “That’s a hard question to answer,” the man said. “When my wife died, I didn’t know what to do, I still don’t really know what to do. Now I am back and forth out of places like this. Trying to survive really.” The man let out a half-hearted chuckle. Jerry then said, “I am a member of the Downtown church. I am there almost every Sunday. I would love for you to come worship with us.” Their conversation then turned to more superficial topics, you know the surface topics that keep things light. They both really didn’t want to go that deep again.

A few months past. Jerry was head usher for the eleven o’clock service one Sunday. He did this quite often. He was an elder of the church, was chair of the Missions Committee, for the second time, and was a leader in his church in many ways. A man dressed in his Sunday best came through the sanctuary doors. Jerry greeted him with a handshake, welcomed him in, and gave him a bulletin. He didn’t recognize the man who just walked in, so he asked if he was visiting. The visitor, who was wearing a double-breasted suit by Tom Ford, with a pressed shirt, and a matching silk tie, said, “I am in town for business and visiting today.” Jerry replied, “Well then, welcome! It is nice to have you with us today,” then offered to walk him to his seat. Walking down the aisle, Jerry introduced the visitor to several other members as they were finding their way to their “assigned seats.” Jerry took the visitor down towards the front, offered him a seat on the pulpit side of the sanctuary, introduced him to those members seated around him, and then returned to his post at the sanctuary doors.



A few moments later, another man walked up to the church. This man was not wearing a double-breasted Tom Ford suit, pressed shirt, and a matching silk tie. He was wearing a dirty t-shirt, jeans that were two sizes too big, worn-out boots, and a baseball cap—actually, these were the only clothes he owned. Jerry asked, “Can I help you?” The man replied, “Where do I go for the service?” Jerry, hesitating, pointed toward the sanctuary. Stepping out in faith, the man began to walk into the sanctuary.

But Jerry quickly caught up to him, “We are about to start,” he said, “just find a place in the back as to not disturb other people.” The man quietly walked to the last pew and sat down in the corner.

I offer this modern version of the hypothetical James poses in our passage for today to help us imagine the context of what James is saying. As I told that story, did you think about the doors of this sanctuary? Could you see the cafeteria at the Rescue Mission, the plastic tables, and foldable chairs? As you listened, who did you picture? Is there a “Jerry” you know? What person came to mind wearing the suit? What person came to mind wearing the dirty t-shirt and baseball cap? Who were you in the story? And how did it make you feel?

I also tell this more contemporary and illustrative version of James’s hypothetical for us to consider more deeply the where, and how, and why we operate like Jerry. Open and vulnerable at one location. Suspicious and biased at another.

The number one critique of Christianity today I believe, is that our words and our actions are not consistent. This is not helped when people who loudly and proudly bear the identity of Christian are helpful and compassionate to neighbors one day, then threaten and ridicule another neighbor the next—and too often it is the neighbor that is foreign, poor, struggling, or happens to have a different skin tone. Partiality to one person over another, to one that is “higher” over one that is “lower” is not consistent to the message of faith and Christ-like behavior.

How does our faith govern our actions? “Faith without works is dead!” James says. These two go hand in hand: faith inspires our works; works is our faith in action. They are not mutually exclusive. You cannot have one without the other.

But you might say, Wait a minute! What’s this talk about works righteousness? Isn’t faith a gift of God’s grace, not works. Is this not a foundation of our reformed tradition?

Of course! Following the teaching of Apostle Paul, we believe we are saved by grace through faith. Because no one is good enough to be saved based on actions; faith is a gift, and works will never earn God’s love. But faith that is too small and doesn’t produce an operative response to God’s grace is half-hearted. Half-hearted discipleship, as James cautions followers then, is easily swayed by temptation and desire: temptation to favor those who are like us, those whom we wish we were, those whom we aspire to become, over and against the people whose situation might



make us uncomfortable in our good fortune and privilege. This then promotes our desire to remain comfortable, the desire to consume and gain fame, the desire to experience only life's ups, and the desire to be insulated from life's downs, the desire to be shielded from the wounds of the world.

James urges his readers to adopt a whole-hearted faith, one that is lived out, acted upon, and bestowed to those whom God has shown particular care, the widows and orphans. James says, "God has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that God has promised."

Whole-hearted faith is works as a grace-response. A faith that is alive in you will come alive in and through your actions.

Here at Second, I have seen evidence of whole-hearted faith in action.

- The Local Relief offering surpassed the \$90,000 mark this past week, financial giving over and beyond your normal pledge amounts.
- I have seen donations of clothing and furniture go to immigrant and refugee families seeking shelter here in the Valley.
- I have witnessed members of this congregation give up their lunch hour to pack snacks for Roanoke School's Pack a Snack program.
- I have seen youth give up a Saturday to serve at The Rescue Mission, the Presbyterian Community Center, and help clean out and organize the Intersection.
- You have pledged over 1.1 million dollars to the mission build campaign, and you have further pledged a ministry of presence with all four of these ministry projects.
- And behind the scenes work, the work that is not known...Many volunteer their time here at the church and for our mission partners and give in so many other ways that I am not aware of...

This is whole-hearted faith, sacrificially working for others, a labor of faith.

It is interesting to have this passage in James, paired in the lectionary with the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7.¹ There, Jesus set out to the region of Tyre. A Gentile woman came before him seeking healing for her daughter who was possessed by a demon. His response to her, "Let the children be fed first; it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Let me translate that for you: Who do you think you are, coming to ask me, Jesus, to heal your daughter. You are a Gentile, a Syrophenician, a woman even, and you want me to heal

¹ Mark 7:24-37; it is also told in Matthew's gospel, Matthew 15:21-28



your daughter before all the children of Israel are healed. It's not fair to focus on you, the outsider, the beggar, instead of my people. Or to use our contemporary version of the scenario in James: You are a gentile woman; you need to sit in the back of the sanctuary and please do not touch anything.

When Jesus says this to her, the Gentile woman responds, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus is being caught by his own assumptions and his own prejudice. His biases and preconceived understanding of who he is to heal are called into question. Jesus' response may make us uncomfortable. And the uncomfortable nature of it tempts us to sanitize this encounter and protect Jesus. But we cannot overlook this for what it is. It may be hard to hear. We are confronted, as is Jesus. It is a confrontation that leads to change, a confrontation that leads to the daughter being healed and leads to a new expansive ministry that includes Gentiles in the fullness of Christ's healing.

So, how are we to pair our faith with our actions? How do we keep an awareness of the innate biases we own, consciously or subconsciously, in order to be fully present to others?

We follow Jesus' lead. Jesus didn't avoid the conversation with the woman, he stayed in it. He responded and engaged in dialogue. Then, Jesus stated his own thoughts and perspective, and listened intently to what the woman had to say. They were open with each, and open to each other. And in doing so, both were changed.

To be open to change is to stand humbly engaged with the world.

I was downtown one weekday afternoon outside of the Roanoke Chamber building dropping something off for Valerie. As I was putting whatever it was in her car, a man walked behind me. We made eye contact. I noticed his scuffed-up tennis shoes. I noticed the holes in his shirt. I noticed the rips in his jeans. And I noticed I started making assumptions.

Seeing the North Carolina plate on the car, he asked, "Hey man, you from Charlotte?" "Yeah, just moved up here." He continued about how his mom lived down there for a while. After some small chit chat, we were about to go our separate ways, but he then said, "Man, I live on the streets, don't do any drugs or drink. Do you happen to have some spare change?" I thought to myself, That's perfect. Roped me in by talking about Charlotte. Good icebreaker. I don't carry cash, but I did have some change in the center console. I gave it to him. "Thanks man. Hey man, what do you do?" "I am a pastor at Second Presbyterian Church. Just over there off Mountain Ave." He didn't know where it was. But I jumped at the chance, "Why don't you come by one Sunday. We would love to have you worship with us." He replied, "Man, I don't own a suit. I don't have any nice clothes. Is your church welcoming to people like me?" I sure hope so...

Amen.

