

Actions Speak Louder than Words

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James 2: 1-10, 14-18

We all have, like it or not, a “morning routine.” Mine consists of fixing our lunches, watching the morning news, having devotions with Pam, and then working out for a half-hour before cleaning up and heading to the office. Unless it’s raining, I do enjoy my workout: I power-walk about 1.5 miles, lift free weights and do some other exercises. I’m told all this activity is actually *good* for me, but this morning let suggest a counter-proposal that might make my life a little easier. Can’t I just sit in front of the TV and *THINK* about exercise? Or *TALK* about exercise?

You know the answer. It’s not enough to just *think* about exercise or *talk* about exercise....one has to *DO* it....and in my case, I certainly need to do lots more of it! Why is that? It’s no good unless you actually *DO* it.....or put another way, actions speak louder than words.

That is precisely the message that James presents to us in our Epistle. Since we’ll be hearing James for the next month, perhaps a little background is in order. James was the half-brother of Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph. Growing up in Nazareth, James had rejected his brother’s ministry while Jesus was alive. After Jesus’ resurrection and especially after Pentecost, James was converted to Christianity and became a leader in the church of Jerusalem. Paul visited James personally after his Damascus road conversion and periodically until his final visit (Acts 21) before his trip to Rome and his execution.

As one of the leaders of the church, James was part of some amazing things; disciples were performing miracles, the church was growing tremendously, peoples’ lives were being transformed through the love of Christ. One day, however, an unexpected thing happened. A young Christian named Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, was debating with a group of Jewish men. He convincingly connected their Judaism with the Old Testament prophecies about Jesus and then, like pouring gas on the grill, confronted them with their role in His crucifixion. The meeting erupted in anger. Stephen was stoned to death and a persecution started against the Christians in Jerusalem.

Imagine if that happened here...Christians being rounded up, imprisoned and killed simply because of our faith in Christ. Can we even *fathom* something like that happening here? It did there.....and so many of the Christians quickly left Jerusalem. They scattered across the Roman empire to places where the Jewish-Christian debate wasn’t quite as lively and the living was significantly safer. Wherever they went, they shared their faith in Jesus.

James himself stayed in Jerusalem, writing this letter as his “last will and testament” to the church before he was martyred for his faith in AD 62. This epistle is quite easily summarized as “keep your faith alive through love!”

We’re going to study this book in detail in our Wednesday morning Bible class....starting September 16, but for today, we’ll focus on chapter 2. James makes what I

think is a rather startling statement: *'My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism!'* (2:1)

ME, a pastor, show favoritism? In the church? YOU, a good Christian layperson, have favorites in the church? After all, if we show favoritism, as James calls it, what he is *really* saying is that we, heaven help us, are being judgmental. His example is simple: two visitors come to church, one wearing an Armani suit and a Mr. T starter set and the other, shabby and smelly from sleeping on park benches. Which one would you want sitting next to YOU? And if the other one sat next to you, would you get up and move? Or share your bulletin?

James' illustration stands clear and cold: we do judge people and we do it all the time! I was listening to a talk-show on the radio when a caller made this statement, *"Me and my wife are both teachers."* Oh my goodness did I judge: his misuse of the King's English, glad my kids never had him as a teacher, what's wrong with the teaching profession, I guess he's just a gym teacher: he was tried, tarred and feathered in my mind, all in about 15 seconds!

Choose favorites? I blew this one a few days ago when I KNEW someone was here who was struggling with their feelings about our dear congregation and I failed to move myself across the room to talk to her!

James' words are so clear and so is his meaning: *we are ALL sinners, whether we skin the toe of just one commandment or break the entire Law, it doesn't matter in the eyes of God, who sees all, knows all, and is willing to forgive ALL because of what Christ did for us.. The playing field is level at the foot of the cross, for all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. God loves us all and God doesn't play favorites!*

We already know the truth on this one: If we keep the ENTIRE LAW of GOD perfectly and break just ONE TINY part of it, we are guilty of breaking it all.

Then James comments this to us: *If you really keep the ROYAL LAW found in Scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right!* (2:8) What makes this law "royal" isn't that Jesus said it or that it applies only to kings and presidents, it's the wonderful truth that *love trumps everything else!*

The world needs love. People need love. You and I, we all need love. The love James is talking about is FAITH in ACTION. God didn't just sit about *thinking* about loving and forgiving us, He acted on that by sending Christ to the cross. Faith, James says, that is not accompanied by action....by works....is dead, useless, meaningless, empty, and absent. Faith is love in action. Love is faith in action.

Hope Lutheran Church is, by God's grace, just weeks away from the beginning of a period of construction. We've been working for almost a year with our architects and designers. We've raised almost \$800,000 in pledges and collected over a fourth of it. We've even broken ground back on Memorial Day weekend! All the prayer and talking and voting and planning will coalesce into new and improved spaces to DO MINISTRY. ENVISION HOPE

is about us making a difference in the lives of people who don't yet know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior! But, and this is James' warning, it cannot happen and will not happen if we, as God's people, do not act in, with and through the love of Jesus Christ.

This coming week the vast majority of the children in the United States will be heading back to school for another year of 'reading, writing and 'rithmetic.' What is it that we actually expect? We expect that they will LEARN. We expect that they will DO their homework. We expect that they will EXERCISE during gym classes. We expect that they will GROW. We expect that they will meet certain sets of standards.....and they are tested and evaluated to see that it all works.

Friends, the world is watching us, testing us, and evaluating us Christians day in and day out to see if we are LIVING our FAITH in Jesus Christ. And what the world sees, far too often, is people who 'talk the talk but don't walk the walk.' It should speak volumes that Jesus' sharpest criticisms were directed NOT at those outside the church, but at those who inside the church who failed to put their faith into action....the action of love.

Faith and Deeds. Deeds and Faith. The deeds, we good Biblical theologians know, don't save us....but faith without deeds.....that, James says, is dead and a dead faith can't save anyone either!

Most of us have spent time in hospitals and seen all the gizmos to which people are hooked up when they are in critical condition. There are gauges to measure heartbeat, breathing, temperature, blood pressure, and I guess lots of other things that actually show whether we are living or dead. Yet all those indications don't actually DEFINE life....they just ILLUSTRATE life. But if they are gone, there IS no life.

Thus it is, James says, with our faith. If we aren't putting it into action, it's dead and therefore, useless.....not just to others, but even to ourselves! And the way we put it to work is to realize.....appreciate....and actualize how Christ first loved us. He didn't judge us.....our own sins do that for themselves. He accepted us, sacrificed himself for us, and went out of his way with His Holy Spirit to call us, gather us, enlighten us, forgive us, sanctify us and.....here it comes.....give us gifts for use in the service of His church and His kingdom.

CS Lewis wrote this and I think it is worth paraphrasing. There is someone I love, even though I don't approve of a whole lot of what he does. There is someone I accept, even though some of his thoughts scare the cookies out of me. There is someone I forgive, even though he hurts some of the people who are closest to me. That person is *me*. There are plenty of things I do that I don't like. There are plenty of things I think that I don't approve of. But if I can love myself despite all this, I can certainly love other people without approving of everything they do.....you included.

And when that truth becomes absorbed into my life, it means that my faith can truly come alive.....in thoughts, in words, AND in deeds.

In the movie *My Fair Lady*, the rather rough Cockney girl named Eliza Doolittle is well under way to becoming a cultured English lady under the good Professor Henry Higgins. Another man, named Freddie, falls in love with her, but the best romance he offers is lots of words. Fed up with the whole thing, Eliza screams, *"I'm so sick of words! Don't talk about love, SHOW ME!"*

We live in a broken and lost world that is already condemned by sin. What that world needs is the people of God, starting right here at Hope Lutheran Church, to reach out through the "Royal Law of Love" and bring them the only thing that allows peace and forgiveness.....the love of Jesus Christ.

May our faith truly sow itself in the world around us..... by our actions and our deeds!

AMEN.