

## TURNING THE CASUAL INTO THE ACTUAL

### Part IV: A Dynamic and Vital Faith James 2:14-26 (NLT)

*Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:17)*

I noticed something very strange when I made a visit back to the Philippines in 2002. My cousin was driving me down this busy street. By all account it was a normal ordinary street with its traffic lights, stop signs, and painted crosswalks. And because the city was so heavily populated, following traffic regulations was key to a successful drive around town. Except for one thing: nobody was following any traffic laws. People were ignoring the signs and lights as if they were invisible. Even the police officers who were hired to direct traffic were just standing there as people were violating the rules right before their eyes! I cringed in fear as cars zoomed past us with reckless abandon. I could not believe that the police were not issuing any tickets at all. Their inactivity made them useless and worthless.

What if the same situation occurred with the firefighters who battled the fire blazes here in San Diego County last year? What if all of them just stood there as houses, animals, and land go up in flames? What would a homeowner think if a firefighter with a hose chose not to turn it on and instead watch the structure burn to the ground? I assure you people would be up in arms if firefighters failed to do their jobs.

Then why doesn't the church ask herself the same question regarding her active faith, or lack thereof? Unfortunately, the church has become like the police officer who is directing nobody into nowhere in particular. We tend to exist in pointlessness, remaining still while the world continues on its downward spiral of futility and brokenness. We live invisibly by our lack of real faith in action. Our casual attitude towards our faith in God has hindered us from releasing transformational healing to those in need of a relationship with Jesus.

The letter of James speaks out against such casual upbringing. James challenges the community of faith to recognize the inseparability between what we believe and how that belief is put into action; they are both one and the same. Starting in verse 14 of chapter 2 James remarks:

*<sup>14</sup> Dear brothers and sisters, what's the use of saying you have faith if you don't prove it by your actions? That kind of faith can't save anyone. <sup>15</sup> Suppose you see a brother or sister who needs food or clothing, <sup>16</sup> and you say, "Well, good-bye and God bless you; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? <sup>17</sup> So you see, it isn't enough just to have faith. Faith that doesn't show itself by good deeds is no faith at all—it is dead and useless.*

1. True faith is an interactive relationship between **God and the church** worked out between **the church and her community**. (verses 14-17)
  - True faith goes beyond personal faith.

You see, in James' understanding, faith must be extended outward towards others. Our faith can only be proven through our actions towards others. Faith cannot remain on a personal level between God and the individual; it remains stagnant when left there.

- True faith goes beyond how we feel and think about God.

The reason why our faith remains stagnant when left on a personal level is because it becomes a selfish faith; only the believer enjoys the interaction with God. But, this kind of spiritual environment only breeds casual faith. The believer will gauge his spiritual growth based solely upon how he "feels" about God (emotions) or what he "thinks" about God (cognition). Faith becomes individualistic when we live in this manner. Attending all of these "spiritually high" conferences or taking seminary courses in systematic theology could very well bless the believer, but the blessing remains within the believer alone. For James that is not true faith.

- True faith presses the believer to embrace his/her community in love.

Faith comes naturally with action. It is useless to claim that we have experienced the power of God at a prayer gathering and then ignore a person who is hungry. It is worthless to participate in intensive bible studies but turn our backs on those who have been physically abused. Faith that connected the church to God must be lived out by the church towards her community. It is as simple as that, according to James.

This should not be new to the church. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is, he replied:

*'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*  
(Matthew 22:37-39, NLT)

God ↔ the church ↔ the community

True faith must be properly expressed outward, inviting those in pain to experience healing within the confines of God's unconditional love. The church must act out her faith to accomplish such a transformation. If we choose not to promote our faith in love towards others, our faith is dead and useless.

Let me give you a very tangible example from the movie "The Passion of the Christ." The Barna Group surveyed 1,600 adults about the lasting impact the movie made on them. Here is a quote from George Barna:

"Overall, one out of every ten viewers of *The Passion* (10%) indicated that they had changed some aspect of both their religious beliefs and practices in response to the movie.

Among the most startling outcomes drawn from the research is the apparent absence of a direct evangelistic impact by the movie. Despite marketing campaigns labeling the movie the "greatest evangelistic tool" of our era, less than one-tenth of one percent of those who saw the film stated that they made a profession of faith or accepted Jesus Christ as their savior in reaction to the film's content.

Equally surprising was the lack of impact on people's determination to engage in evangelism. Less than one-half of one percent of the audience said they were motivated to be more active in sharing their faith in Christ with others as a result of having seen the movie."

(<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=167>)

We cannot depend solely on a single event such as a movie to change people's lives. We cannot personally get emotionally or intellectually high from the movie and expect that the world will know Jesus. True faith must extend beyond our personal faith into active communication and help towards our neighbors. The church must constantly embark on a mission to impact lives, and we can only do so if we embrace our community in love. We must always remind ourselves of Jesus' command to love God with all of our being and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

In fact, James strengthens this point in verses 18-20:

*<sup>18</sup> Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." I say, "I can't see your faith if you don't have good deeds, but I will show you my faith through my good deeds." <sup>19</sup> Do you still think it's enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror! <sup>20</sup> Fool! When will you ever learn that faith that does not result in good deeds is useless?*

2. True faith and spiritual action are **indivisible**. (verses 18-20)

The church has made it very convenient to believe that faith and action are two completely separate things. But, that is not true. Faith and good deeds are one and the same; they cannot be separated at all. As an illustration look closely at a coin. On one side you might have a picture of a famous person. On the other side you might have a motto or saying. Now both sides might look different, but in reality they are not. Both sides make up the same coin!

The same is true when it comes to faith and good deeds. They may look different, but on closer inspection they are two sides of the same coin. One cannot exist without the other. True faith will always produce good deeds towards others. And good deeds receive their foundation upon a faith in God alone.

- What we believe manifests itself in good deeds towards others.
- Separation of faith and action is **impossible!**

People who choose to separate faith and action are those who do not want to wholly follow the will of God. James makes that powerfully clear: faith that does not result in good deeds is useless. And claiming that there is only one God is not enough to say that you have true faith; even demons believe that there is only one God. The only way faith can be seen is through a tangible practical expression of that same faith. To love God means to love one's neighbor unconditionally.

James supports his argument by presenting an illustration of two known people of faith:

<sup>21</sup> Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was declared right with God because of what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see, he was trusting God so much that he was willing to do whatever God told him to do. His faith was made complete by what he did—by his actions. <sup>23</sup> And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, so God declared him to be righteous." He was even called "the friend of God." <sup>24</sup> So you see, we are made right with God by what we do, not by faith alone.

<sup>25</sup> Rahab the prostitute is another example of this. She was made right with God by her actions—when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road. <sup>26</sup> Just as the body is dead without a spirit, so also faith is dead without good deeds.

3. True faith believes that **God is always right**. Our good deeds testify to that. (verses 21-26)

Both Abraham and Rahab demonstrated that one can have true faith in God because God is always right. Isaac was truly a blessed child given to Abraham and Sarah since both parents were old when Isaac was born. And yet God demanded that Abraham sacrifice his only son as an offering. I think many of us will agree that God is in the wrong for commanding Abraham to do such an insane thing. But not Abraham. He never once questioned God's intention. In faith Abraham believed that God was right, and in action Abraham followed through on his faith. When God saw this he stopped Abraham from killing Isaac and presented a ram instead for offering. Abraham was declared righteous because of what he did, and not just what he said.

The same situation took place with Rahab. Rahab lied to her own king and hid the very spies that were coming in to destroy her own people! But, Rahab never questioned God's intention. She recognized God's righteousness over the situation – her people must suffer because of their terrible sin against the Lord. She protected her own "enemies," sparing their lives so that they could plan their strategy to destroy the city of Jericho. Rahab was made righteous in God's sight because of her actions.

- Faith and action are one and the same; they complete each other.

Faith in God should manifest in godly action and good deeds towards others. Both support and fulfill one another. Abraham was not faithful because he believed in God; he was faithful because he was ready to kill his own son for the Lord. Rahab was not faithful because she believed in God; she was faithful because she played an active role in completing God's purpose.

- Faith without action produces **inexistence**.

If the church fails to play an active spiritual role in God's work, she does not exist. If the church chooses to remain comfortable rather than promoting the welfare of others, she does not exist. If the church decides that a casual faith is enough, she will be sadly mistaken. God equates true faith with good deeds. Faith accompanied by action is faith that is alive and changing lives. Faith expressed through good deeds draws the broken and disheartened back to the God of healing and transformation. Faith with godly works is a faith that is in dynamic interaction with the Divine reaching out to the orphans and widows of the world. May this truly reflect the identity of the church today.

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