

TURNING THE CASUAL INTO THE ACTUAL

Conclusion: Turning the Casual into the Actual

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

For nine whole weeks I was completely lost in one of my psychology classes. We were studying how the brain impacts the way we learn and interact with the world. The class was heavy on physiological terminologies and I had a hard time understanding the concepts that were thrown my way. I studied very hard for the class, had several office visits with the professors, and attended every group study. But, I still could not pull everything together. All of the ideas seemed scattered in my head; I was literally failing to apply what I was learning in a class about *learning*!

It was now the tenth week of the quarter; final exam was the following week. I resigned to the fact that I was going to fail the class. Our last week in class was to be a review session. I remembered asking myself why bother to attend the class when I could not even understand anything for the last nine weeks! I sat down in back of the auditorium and I was preparing myself to daydream for the next three hours. But, as the professor began to summarize all that we have learned for the quarter, somehow everything clicked for me! As he went over one concept after another, I began to understand my notes in a way that I could not before. Suddenly, the words on my papers were making sense and I was able to figure out all of the terminologies and how they fit into the scheme of learning and the brain. In a mere three hours I finally got what the class was all about, and the results of my final exam testify to that.

For the last two-and-a-half months we have been studying the letter of James. We have covered many spiritual principles and applications from this short but powerful work. Yet, when we look at the big picture of the letter it seems like all of the ideas are scattered in our heads! What exactly is the main point of what James is saying to the church today?

The theme of James is this:

1. Theme of James: **a faith that behaves** (i.e., **an actual faith**)

A key text in the letter is James 2:17 - *Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

The central message of James resides in the truth of faith in action. Faith is more than just mere belief values, or ideas. Faith has to be carried out in our active behavior towards God, towards other people, and towards creation. Faith is very real and tangible, not something that is floating in the clouds aimlessly. Faith can and does change lives when put into action.

But, it is important to know where to receive such an actual faith. According to James, true faith can only come from one source, God himself.

2. An actual faith **turns to God for clear direction.**

If you need wisdom—if you want to know what God wants you to do—ask him, and he will gladly tell you. He will not resent your asking. (James 1:5 [NLT])

The true foundation of wisdom resides in God. That is why James defines wisdom as *if you want to know what God wants you to do*. An actual faith will tap into this spiritual source of righteousness. And righteous wisdom is what God wants us to do, not what *we* want to do. We follow the purposes of God and not ours.

My dear brothers and sisters, be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Your anger can never make things right in God's sight. (James 1:19-20 [NLT])

When we pursue after God's wisdom God directs us to live in holiness. When we refuse to live according to God's ways, God will not be pleased with us. It is God who defines for us what is right and wrong. It is God who determined that anger is not good. Instead, we need to be quick to listen and slow to speak. In that way, we reflect the holiness of God in our lives.

Whatever is good and perfect comes to us from God above, who created all heaven's lights. Unlike them, he never changes or casts shifting shadows. In his goodness he chose to make us his own children by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his choice possession. (James 1:17-18 [NLT])

Why can we trust that God's wisdom is excellent? It is excellent because every good and perfect thing comes from him alone, including wisdom. Whenever we choose to turn to God for clear direction, we will always experience everything that is good for us. That is God's ultimate promise. Choose to live under his commands and you will experience peace and righteousness in your life.

But, an actual faith should never exist only between the individual and God. It must extend to cover the community that surrounds the believer:

3. An actual faith **grows in community.**

We live in a world today where the individual is put up on a pedestal. Community is sacrificed in favor of selfishness and self-interest. But, God did not design relationships to develop in this way. Community is important to God; that is one reason why the church is created. Our faith, in order to be real, must be enacted in our dealings with one another. James highlights at least two ways where faith can grow in this manner:

- No preferential treatment

Yes indeed, it is good when you truly obey our Lord's royal command found in the Scriptures: "Love your neighbor as yourself." But if you pay special attention to the rich, you are committing a sin, for you are guilty of breaking that law. And the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as the person who has broken all of God's laws. For the same God who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." So if you murder someone, you have broken the entire law, even if you do not commit adultery. (James 2:8-11 [NLT])

- Control what we say

People can tame all kinds of animals and birds and reptiles and fish, but no one can tame the tongue. It is an uncontrollable evil, full of deadly poison. Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it breaks out into curses against those who have been made in the image of God. And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! (James 3:7-10 [NLT])

What we have to keep in mind here is that if our faith is integrated in God's wisdom, then our actions will always favor the promotion of good and righteousness towards others. It is a fallacy to say that we are believers in Christ yet we dislike connection in community. Serving one another is an active extension of our faith in God! This can never be separated at any point in our spiritual journey. Hence, the Christian faith always encourages the acceptance of people and the baggage that they carry in life. We should not endorse sin in people's lives; but, that should never stop us from loving the person himself/herself. We love because God first loved us.

Lastly, when we create a community of care through God's wisdom, our faith builds within us a character that is strong and mature:

4. When developed, an actual faith **produces strong character**.

James emphasizes at least three areas in our lives that need to be spiritually established:

- A life of integrity

If you are wise and understand God's ways, live a life of steady goodness so that only good deeds will pour forth. And if you don't brag about the good you do, then you will be truly wise! But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your hearts, don't brag about being wise. That is the worst kind of lie. (James 3:13-14 [NLT])

- An absence of boasting

Look here, you people who say, "Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit." How do you know what will happen tomorrow? For your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, "If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that." Otherwise you will be boasting about your own plans, and all such boasting is evil. (James 4:13-16 [NLT])

- Maturing in patience

Dear brothers and sisters, you must be patient as you wait for the Lord's return. Consider the farmers who eagerly look for the rains in the fall and in the spring. They patiently wait for the precious harvest to ripen. (James 5:7 [NLT])

Turning the casual into the actual – that is James' calling for the 21st century church. Our faith must actively produce transformational change in people's lives today. We must engage the culture in penetrating tangible ways; people need to experience Jesus in a real manner in their lives. Break free from what is comfortable and experience life the way God designed us to exist, in actual real faith.

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