

Edmunde Burke was an 18th century philosopher and British political figure. He once said, **“When good men do nothing, evil triumphs” – Edmund Burke.** Unfortunately, this is a message that is still relevant today, and not likely to fade into oblivion anytime soon. *Christian* men and women are not just to avoid evil, but actively do what is good and work for the cause of Jesus Christ. One part of the Bible that emphasizes this “work” and “doing good” more than any other is the book of James. The book of James has caused much consternation over the centuries because of its emphasis on works. It seems to fly in the face of the doctrine of grace and salvation through faith alone. Jesus regularly emphasized believing in him and trusting him and not our works, and certainly Paul was also a champion of salvation by grace through faith. The Reformation was a return of the church to emphasizing the grace of God and salvation by faith; and one of the fathers of the Reformation, Martin Luther, once said of the book of James, **“I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove” – Martin Luther.**

But the fact of the matter is, and Luther came to this realization: we need both faith and works. They go hand in hand and spur one another on. As Jesus once said, “If you love me, you will obey my commands” (John 14:15). Our spiritual health is impacted by faith and works, and we need both. And so we need a proper understanding of the relationship between faith and works. The Christian life is certainly not about works righteousness, making ourselves holy and right in God’s eyes by what we do. But it’s also not just about “believing” and “trusting” Jesus and then resting on our laurels doing nothing with our faith. And on this second point, we realize that life is too short to be lazy. Life is too short to believe in Jesus and then do nothing with our faith. **James 2:14-24 Here.**

Let’s dive a little deeper into this grace and faith compared to works theme. **Paul says in Romans and elsewhere that we are justified by faith, and not by works.** In other words, works are worthless for achieving a right relationship with God and for earning salvation. In fact, salvation and a right relationship with God can't be earned at all, but rather are gifts to us from

God. This is grace, God's gift to us through Jesus who did the work for us to become righteous. His work becomes our work, and that's grace. This grace becomes active and part of our lives through faith in Jesus, who also emphasized this belief and faith component. Throughout the gospels we see Jesus admonishing people to believe in him, to trust in Him, to trust in his Heavenly Father, to have faith. Certainly that was all that mattered to our Lord when one of the criminals who hung on a cross next to him placed his trust in Jesus and then he says to the man that "this day you will be with me in paradise." That guy certainly didn't *do* anything to deserve to be with our Lord in eternity. So, salvation by faith through grace is emphasized throughout the Bible.

Then we come to the book of James, which emphasizes our works. Faith without works is "dead," James writes in 2:17. He also writes, "What good is it to say we have faith without having works?...Can faith save you?...By my works I will show you faith..." What's going on here? This seems like a direct contradiction of Jesus and of Paul's understanding of grace and faith. But it's a misreading, of Paul and of James, that leads to this apparent contradiction. **Paul is addressing how we *begin* our relationship with God, while James is addressing how we *continue* our relationship with God.** No one can earn a right relationship with God through works; but the life of faith in God is worthless without works.

The great preacher Ernest Campbell of Riverside Church in New York City used this metaphor to explain it to his congregation. He said that Paul is dealing with obstetrics, the birth of life, while James is dealing with pediatrics and geriatrics and every medical field in between. In Christian language, we might say that Paul is talking about evangelism – which is the birth of faith – while James is talking about Discipleship – the developmental growth of faith. **To live a life stuck in the birth of faith without doing the work of growing and maturing is a faith that rests too much on grace.** Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this "cheap grace." It is possible to abuse God's grace. And that's probably why James wrote the letter that he did. A church, perhaps even more than one, was going too far in their application of God's grace in their lives, and weren't living out their faith. And so, James wrote them to give a word of correction.

When I lived in Sun Valley after college, I decided I should read some of the classics that I had not previously read. So, I read Dostoevsky's book, "The Brothers Karamazov" with plans to read others. I finished that one, but then didn't get to any more; I think my brain hurt too much after reading it. Later, when my kids were young, I decided to try again with more classics. So, I read "Green Eggs and Ham" and "The Three Little Pigs" and others like them. ☺ I found they were more at my level, let alone my kids.

And many of these books are full of great theology, or at least make for an interesting dialogue between faith and literature. For instance, take "The Little Red Hen." As you probably know, at each step of making a loaf of bread, from planting the seed to harvesting to mixing the dough it and so forth, the hen asks three of her animal farm friends if they'd like to help. And each time, they respond, "Not I..." Until the final step, when the bread is ready to be eaten. At that point, they all want to help. But the hen wisely says, "No way. If you're going to be lazy at each step of the way, then you're not going to enjoy what I've worked hard for." And so, the hen eats all the bread herself.

Now, at first glance, you might say, "Well, that's not very grace-giving. That's not what Jesus said to the criminal who hung on the cross next to him." But there's a difference: **The animals who continue to say "Not I" are already in the community, while the man who hung on the cross came into the community just hours before he died.** He had no opportunity to live a life of faith and works in response to God's grace. But the animals live on the farm from birth. They're already part of the community of grace. But they're *lazy*. They've experienced the gift of grace already in their lives, but they aren't willing to do the good works as an act of faith. And yet, at the end, they want all the benefits.

It's a great story that illustrates for us the interaction between "faith and works." To rest in God's grace through faith, without works is spiritual laziness. Now, laziness is something that afflicts all of humanity. The word that theologian Karl Barth liked to use was "sloth" and he put it right next to "pride" as the two foundational pillars for sin. To paraphrase the Edmund

Burke quote using Barth's word: "When good people succumb to sloth, evil triumphs." And this is absolutely true not just in a social justice way, but in our personal lives of faith. I would suggest that we can literally do nothing – like the animals on the farm – *or* we can be really busy; but either way it's possible to be spiritually lazy, to be slothful in our faith. In fact, probably the biggest problem in our society, including in the Church, is that we're too busy to attend to our spiritual life; we do all kinds of "stuff" but we leave Jesus and our faith out of it. And so, we cheapen God's grace.

The question we all should be asking is, "Am I doing the *right* 'works' and for the *right* reasons?" "Am I doing what God wants me to do? Is my personal faith growing because of what I'm doing? Is my community of faith growing because of what I'm doing? Am I looking for what Jesus is doing here, and how I can be a part of it?" This is why James wrote what he did. People of the churches to whom he wrote were spiritually lazy. They heard Paul loud and clear when it came to faith and grace...but they forgot to live it actively. They were good people who were doing nothing.

This is also why the Old Testament Prophet Amos wrote what he wrote; well, others, too. But we'll look at Famous Amos. He's letting the Northern Israelites (divided nation, north and south, but still all one in many ways) know that they're resting on their laurels and eating too many of his chocolate chip cookies. OK, not the cookie part. That comes 2,500 years later. At the time that Amos wrote, Israel was one of the most powerful and influential nations in the Ancient Near East. By and large, they were in a great place materially and politically. Spiritually, however, there were cracks beginning to develop.

And so, Amos writes these harsh words of warning where he scorns them for their laziness. He writes, "**Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria** (capital of northern kingdom)...**You lie on beds adorned with ivory and lounge on your couches...You drink wine by the bowlful...and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph [metaphor for Israel, southern kingdom in particular)]...Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile"** (Amos 6:1-7). He's writing to the people in Israel who have grown lazy and aren't paying attention to the cracks that are developing in their

community, and in their relationship with God. They're complacent, and that's cheap grace, and there's a price to pay as a result: They're going to be the first part of the nation to go into exile if they don't make some changes. They didn't make the changes, and they were the first to go into exile. Spiritual laziness has consequences.

Now, before we close this message out, I just want to say: this is a tricky message to preach because I don't want you to come away feeling accused of laziness, or think that our church is on the verge of going into exile, whatever that would look like in today's world. First, let me remind you: I'm just the messenger – the Bible verses were already there, ok? I didn't write those verses in Amos or James. So, take it up with God. And the fact is, there are many of you who probably actually need to re-watch the sermon from a few weeks ago about life being too short to work all the time. But, God's word is applicable to people across the ages, and I do think many of us, if not most of us, on an individual basis, and our church as we pull together: We could have more impact for Jesus if we put our faith to work a little more. I think coming out of Covid we are struggling some – and this is true in a lot of churches – we're struggling some to put our faith to work and re-engage in ministry.

So, I am asking each of us to consider: **What good works is God calling me to do, so my faith would be put into action and made complete...so my faith might further the cause of Jesus Christ?** Notice that as James writes, the assumption he makes is that our works are simply part of our faith. Our faith and actions work together, as he illustrated in verses 21 and 22 with his example of Abraham. "Abraham's faith," James writes, was "made *complete* by what he did." They go together, and faith is actually incomplete or maybe even invalidated, when we don't step out and put it to work. We actively demonstrate a *lack of faith* in God when we don't put our faith to work. It's worth asking yourself: Is my faith "completed" by putting it to work?

As I mentioned two weeks ago: Faith isn't sitting in a rocking chair looking at the path God has put before us; Faith leads us to actually *walk* down the path God has put before us. Faith leads to action, or in the language of James, it leads to works. And I don't just mean doing "church" stuff, but living out our faith wherever we are and whoever we're with. Do we put Jesus into the closet when we get ready to go to work or a party or watch a game with

friends? We want to bring our faith, and bring Jesus, to those places and those relationships. *That's* faith that isn't lazy; it's faith that works.

That being said, there *are* many ways to live out your faith through ministries here at Rose Hill that will enrich your faith, will build relationships with people in the church and help you feel more connected to the body of Christ here...and will help Rose Hill to flourish for Jesus. Helping in children's ministries as that is growing; Youth ministries during our interim time as we look for a new director; working with our global outreach team...I mean, the list goes on...and the impact of our church would be so much greater with faith-filled people stepping into these roles that are currently empty or running thin on faith-filled servants. We literally have a list on our church website and in the lobby at the Information center, which I encourage you to take a look at and consider how you could put your faith to work for Jesus here, as well as where we live, work, and play, as I already mentioned.

So, Let's put our faith to work, because life is too short to be lazy. God wants faith filled people to do something, not just so evil wouldn't triumph, but so that good would flourish; So disciples of Jesus would be made; So the kingdom of God would grow...so you and I would grow spiritually as we grow in age. Let's do the good works that God puts in front of us. In our places of work, recreation, and in our homes...and right here in our church...let's make our faith complete in the name of Jesus, for the glory of God the Father, and by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. Let's pray....Amen.