



Chris Taylor's Sermon – 9/09/18

James 2:1-10, 14-17

Faith Works

In his book, *And There Was Light*, author Jacques Lusseyran speaks, at one point, of his work with the French Resistance during the Second World War. He was a brilliant student, part of what was called the “Upper First” at university which was the elite – the students marked for great things. He notes, though, that of the two Upper Firsts in his school, some ninety students, only six including himself became part of the Resistance. The rest, he says, never considered it.

These were the best and brightest. Why couldn't they see the need to take a stand; the need to commit themselves, amid all the lies of Nazi propaganda, to ensuring the truth of what was taking place got out? For some, Lusseyran says, it was moral laziness; “others because of the disease that often goes with an overdeveloped intelligence, the inability to choose; others because of bourgeois selfishness, even at nineteen; still others because they had cold feet.”¹

Ask those students if they loved their country, I suspect they all would have affirmed it. Ask them if they were against the German occupation, and again, nearly all would have said yes – except those two or three collaborators who had chosen the other side. But while they might profess their love of country on the one hand, the fact is almost all of them failed to do anything about it on the other. Eighty four out of ninety chose to sit safely on the sidelines when the very future of France and of Europe itself was at stake.

When we look not at what they professed, but at what those students actually did (or didn't do), we might well wonder just how real their love of country truly was.

Here in our text this morning, James speaks of a faith that proves itself in action. He offers two examples of what that faith looks like. First, it refuses to discriminate. Apparently, in at least some churches the wealthy were being treated with a special deference that wasn't being extended to the poor. James says real faith won't go there: it won't treat the rich one way and the poor another. It understands that we are all children of God; that we are all equally loved, equally valued in the sight of God, and puts that understanding into practice.

Second, he says, real faith does something in the face of need. Saying the right thing isn't enough. You have to do something about it; something that will make a tangible difference in the face of that need.

The two examples serve to illustrate his deeper point: real faith, genuine faith, expresses itself in what we do. He sums it up in the seventeenth verse: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." It is, in other words, no faith at all. To put it differently, if our faith is real we should be able to point to specific things in our lives that we are doing differently because of it; things that we wouldn't ordinarily do but that are driven by our faith.

The same principle holds true with virtually any belief, any feeling that we might profess. The proof, as they say, is in the pudding. Every American I know, for example, would say they love this country. But how deep does that love run? A couple of years ago when we had two candidates with radically different visions for the country, only 139 million people out of 250 million voted. What that means is that for all their professed love of country, almost half of the voting population couldn't be bothered to sacrifice thirty minutes of their lives to exercise one of the greatest and most important rights this country offers: the right to vote. So just what kind of love do they really have – a love of convenience; a love that comes only with some direct benefit to themselves? That, of course, is no real love at all.

The real surprise of our text this morning comes in the fourteenth verse when James asks, "Can faith save you?" Our instinct is to cry out "Yes, absolutely!" That, after all, is the very basis of the Reformation. It is what the Apostle Paul kept pounding away on: that we are saved by faith and not obedience to the law. But James is saying "No, it can't." He is saying words alone or right beliefs alone are not enough. Verse 19: even the demons believe in God. That belief doesn't save them, and it doesn't because what they do takes them in the exact opposite direction: away from God and away from God's intent.

James isn't contradicting Paul here. What he is doing is offering a necessary addendum. For Paul, a faith that didn't express itself in action would have been inconceivable. Like James, he would have said that's no faith at all. What James is doing is making that connection explicit. He is addressing a common misconception that had emerged: that faith is just saying the right words. Real faith is far more than that: not just saying the right words but believing them enough that they actually shape our choices and our values. No we aren't saved by our works, but our works are exhibit A of a saving faith.

"Being saved" is one of those jargon phrases that carries a lot of baggage today. It is short-hand for "salvation", but what exactly does that mean? We tend to relegate it to the future and to the promise of all eternity. It is certainly that, but it is so much more. It is also about the present. It is about the Kingdom-kind of life – that realm, that space where God is fully present, and where his will is fully realized – here and now. This is the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed:

“The Kingdom is at hand!” It is not just our destiny, then, but a kind of life that we can begin to taste today.

Opening ourselves to that life necessarily involves making choices that reflect our faith; choices that reflect God’s intent. Think about joy, for example. Joy is part of the Kingdom. It is one of the fruits of God’s presence in our lives. That’s the promise. But if we choose to hang on to anger, or refuse to forgive or live self-centered lives, then our choices are going to lead us away from God just like those demons. How can we expect, then, to experience God’s joy? How can we expect to know the blessings of the Kingdom when we keep making choices to live outside it? Through Jesus the Kingdom is available to all, but not all are going to live it.

What we are talking about, then, is believing God and trusting God to the point of actual obedience. That’s faith that works. That’s the faith that helps us make the shift into the Kingdom of God.

Those eighty four classmates of Jacques Lusseyran figured they could sit back and reap the fruit of the Resistance without risking anything themselves. And they did. But the Kingdom of God doesn’t work that way. Faith, saving faith that opens our lives to the Kingdom, is something no one can do for us. If you want to know the Kingdom, you have to live it for yourself. You have to make the choice to put your faith to work.

Years ago, when we were still living in Colorado, my son Jonathan and I went rock-climbing one Saturday with a small group of other sons and their dads. A number of climbs were set up, and Jonathan and I chose one that looked moderately difficult but certainly doable. Jonathan went first with me on belay – holding that line that would catch him if he began to fall. Then it was my turn.

The climb itself was maybe forty or fifty feet. Once I got started, I moved up fairly quickly. I didn’t want to think about what I was doing. It was at the top that things got interesting. That’s when my fear of heights began poking at me. Standing there, it occurred to me that if Jono was harboring any anger or resentment issues, this whole thing could end up badly.

I called down, “Are you ready?” “I’m ready,” Jono called back, “Go ahead!” I realized then that this whole day was about so much more than just having fun together. I realized how powerful it would be for Jonathan to see that I loved him enough and trusted him enough to put my life into his hands. He was holding the line that would mean the difference between safety and disaster for me. Can you imagine how powerful that would be?

So forty feet up with nothing but space behind me, I leaned back into the void (my heart pounding) and to my great relief, Jonathan didn’t let me fall.

A faith that works doesn't mean we are never going to have fears or questions. It certainly doesn't mean we are never going to get angry, or disappointed or confused. What it does mean is taking what we profess with our mouths, and putting it into practice. It means, in the midst of our fears and uncertainties, leaning back out into the void, and making the choice to trust him; to obey his will no matter how great the risk, no matter how daunting the apparent cost.

¹ Jacques Lusseyran, *And There Was Light*, (New World Library, Novato, 2014), p. 173