

Proper 20 (25) - September 21, 2025

Zechariah 7:8–14; Psalm 10:1–14; James 2:14–19, 24–26

“Life of faith and works”

1. When our boys were little, to be a student at their Indianapolis Public School they were required to wear a uniform.
  - a. To be fair, the boys weren't thrilled about having to wear a uniform. They wanted to wear whatever they wanted.
  - b. The schools did show some flexibility, since the students had three colors to choose from for their shirts, and also three colors for pants. But that was it: you had to be within that range.
  - c. When I was growing up we had to wear a school uniform only Mondays and Fridays (why only two days I don't know), but our uniform had no flexibility.
    - i. For elementary school it was a white button down shirt, dark blue tie and pants, and black dress shoes
    - ii. Girls: dark blue skirt and white blouse, and black dress shoes
  - d. As a parent I will say that having a school uniform for the kids made shopping for supplies and clothes much easier. It was less stressful.
  - e. Also as a parent, I have to say there was something nice about coming to the school for an assembly or special event, and seeing all the kids nicely dressed in their uniforms.
  - f. I don't know if that makes me old fashioned or means my aesthetic is limited
  - g. Now, of course, just because someone is wearing a uniform doesn't make them a student.
  - h. There are schools where uniforms aren't required, and those young children can be students just the same.
  - i. Perhaps I liked the uniform because it was a way to communicate that they were in a learning community, together.
  - j. It offered a visual representation of their commitment to each other, they knew that teachers and students were ready to learn together, to be curious, to help each other, to be a community together.
  - k. Having that common look perhaps also made them able to overlook who may have been richer or poorer, who may have had good grades and who struggled. The uniform had a kind of leveling effect.
2. At the time of the writing of the letter of James, there was a question about how a follower got to be part of the church and how that would be apparent to others.

- a. There were certain requirements and rules for someone who wanted to become Jewish, and there are examples of people who did that (you can think about the story of Ruth or Rahab, who was mentioned in this passage).
  - i. And since the following of Jesus has its roots in Judaism, as in fact Jesus was a Jewish man living in Palestine, there would have been some who wanted there to be some overlap in requirements for becoming Jewish and becoming Christian
  - ii. But that proved tricky: should people deciding to follow Jesus (especially if they were not Jewish to begin with) have to obey all the dietary and purity laws, and for the males to be circumcised?
  - iii. Some, like the Apostle Peter, thought that of course people would have to follow the rules AND if an outsider wanted to come be saved, to be part of the movement, these so-called Gentiles had to fully convert (circumcision and all)
  - iv. On the other end was the Apostle Paul, who felt called to the Gentiles, and who understood that following Jesus had more to do with a change of heart, a conversion, being baptized, and then following the lessons Jesus taught. He believed that it was God's grace that saved someone.
  - v. The issue got so heated that there had to be a big meeting in Jerusalem, and they came to a compromise solution. You can read about it in the book of Acts chapter 15. The Gentiles didn't have to follow all the Jewish laws, but they should behave decently, and have nothing to do with idols.
  - vi. Basically they were recognizing that God acted directly in the hearts of people, and saved them, that is, claim them and embrace them.
  - vii. That all sounds well and good.
- b. But then we have James noticing something among the believers (and these would have been Gentile believers)
  - i. There were some believers who were all too happy to say "I have faith" but then they didn't seem too interested in having that faith change the way they behaved.
  - ii. So faith, knowing that love, grace and forgiveness comes from God, we know it to be a gift from God, not something we earn.
  - iii. But just like wearing a uniform doesn't make you a student, only having faith is not what it's all about.
- c. For the writer of James, there was a priority to make sure to live out our faith through actions, specifically actions of compassion and service.

- i. What makes us be in the right relationship with God isn't just saying in our hearts "I believe in God" but it is also acting accordingly.
    - ii. God commands us to take care of the orphan and the widow, and so James is saying: go and do those things!
    - iii. But please understand: That's not our ticket to heaven. God loves us because of God's grace. We don't earn our way to God's heart with the things we do. We are already freely welcomed.
    - iv. And so it is out of gratitude that we serve others. We do the works which are consistent with what God would have us do.
  - d. You can see how that got tricky: so should we emphasize faith or works?
    - i. People have a hard time separating the two, faith and works.
    - ii. Some 1,500 years after all this, people were still puzzling over it
    - iii. Martin Luther, the Reformer, didn't want this book of James in the Bible, because he felt that it contradicted the Apostle Paul who said that we are saved by faith (not by works). Others thought that what was important was the direct impact on others (through service)
    - iv. James simply says: you can show your faith better through your works.
    - v. Or, to say it in the negative: if you have faith but don't do works to match it, that looks like your faith died on the vine.
  - e. American poet James Baldwin once wrote "I can't believe what you say, because I see what you do." If your actions don't match your beliefs, you're not fooling anyone.
- 3. Our task as followers of Jesus and doers of his work is to live out our faith in gratitude for God's love for us, in worship, in community, and in service
  - a. Here at the church as we are entering our third century as a congregation, we are transitioning to a new strategic plan, and you'll be hearing more about it in the newsletter and in worship in a few weeks.
  - b. Today we got to read parts of our Mission statement as a church from the strategic plan which was written about 11 years ago
  - c. Those words in the Call to Worship frame how we've seen ourselves as a congregation in recent years. They frame a faith of inclusion and grace, a faith that God loves all people.
  - d. That's lovely, but just saying those words or just printing them on the bulletin or having a flag or a banner outside is just the beginning. We're called to walk the talk.
    - i. So we honor traditions in worship and faith, and we ask questions and challenge traditions (and invite people to ask questions)
    - ii. We invite into leadership people of all ages, and we learn from them

- iii. We include people in the life and leadership of the church across the spectrum of sexual orientation and gender identity, we actively support one another, especially people in the community who feel marginalized or targeted. People appreciated that we had a booth and a table at the youth tent at Pride.
  - iv. We have advocated and worked for racial justice in our community.
  - v. We embrace and learn from people from all socioeconomic situations and people of any mental and physical abilities
  - vi. We give each other the space to be the ones who have hope and also be the one seeking hope.
4. Faith and works go hand in hand, like with grace and gratitude, commitment and compassion. God's love is a gift, and our service is our thank you.

#### Reflection questions

1. Think of a time when someone showed you their love through actions, not words.
2. In James 2:14–19, 24–26 the author makes the case that works SHOW one's faith. Can you think of actions that show no faith?
3. If someone who is not religious acts with compassion, is that the same as if someone who is religious does the same thing? Why/why not?