FAITH AND ACTIONS WORK TOGETHER

James 2:14-26

Key Verse: 2:22

“You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.”

From the last three lessons, we learned that our faith becomes mature and complete as we face and endure all kinds of trials in life and as we withstand temptations. And we learned that sincere faith is not merely listening to the Word of God, but doing what it says. In the last lesson, we studied that God’s children should not show favoritism, but practice God's mercy and love.

In today's passage, James talks about the relationship between faith and actions. He mentions two kinds of faiths: dead faith and living faith. He emphasizes that the faith without actions is dead and living faith always work with its actions. To help us understand, James gives two examples: Abraham and Rahab. Through today’s passage I pray we may learn how our faith works with our deeds and how our faith can grow mature and complete in the sight of God.

1. Faith without deeds is dead(14-17)

Let’s look at verse 14. *14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?* James asks two rhetorical questions: “What good is it if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” These questions expect a negative answer. The faith without deeds is no good; it cannot save him. Ro10:17 says, faith comes from hearing the word of Christ. Then faith moves our heart and our hands and feet, and enables us to live according to God's will. This is the faith of God's children. However, if someone claims to have this kind of faith, but his life does not correspond to the faith, rather he lives the same as unbelievers do, can such faith be called good before God?

James points out the problem of such faith. Let's look at verses 15-16. *15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?* James’ supposition touches a very practical problem in their Christian community. In James’ time there were many poor people who lacked clothes and daily food. The churches were no exception. So James expected their faith to be presented in practical actions of serving the needy. Jesus had compassion on the crowd because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He challenged his disciples in saying “you give them something to eat!” This direction definitely demanded their faith and actions. We know the story of Good Samaritan. One man on the way to Jericho was beaten by robbers and left half dead. A priest saw the man dying, but passed by on the other side. Later a Levite saw him, but did nothing for him. But when a Samaritan saw him, he took pity on him and looked after him. The person who claimed to have faith, but did nothing for the brother or the sister is no different from the priest and the Levite. Is such faith really good in the sight of God? Can such faith save himself as well as his brothers and sisters? No! Faith without deeds, he says, is of no use to saving himself as well as others. Furthermore, such faith not only makes oneself hypocritical, but also seriously affects the church community. Apostle John mentioned in his letter that *“If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”* (*1 John 3:17-18)*

Let’s look at verse 17. *17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.* What a shocking word it is! Faith, not accompanied by action, is *dead*. Dead faith, in other words, is the faith without any fruits in life like a dead seed cannot produce its fruits. Dead faith remains in knowledge and doesn’t flow into the heart and then action. In hearing and accepting the Word, faith is formed in us. However unless we obey the Word, it becomes fossilized as "dead faith" with only a religious form. At a time Jesus warned his disciples to watch out for the yeast of Pharisees because their faith, full of knowledge, but lacking God's mercy and obedience to God’s word, was *dead*. In the book of Revelation were seven churches in Asia. One of them was the church in Sardis. Jesus gave them a message. Rev3:1-3 *“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.”* The reason the Sardis church was dead was their incomplete deeds, that is, their disobedience to God’s word. Jesus told them to remember what they had received and heard and to *obey it*.

A few days ago, my Christian friend told me that nowadays Christians have become weaker and weaker especially in the pandemic. There may be several reasons why many Christians think that way. I personally think that one of the reasons can be found in today’s passage. This passage makes me rethink about the essence of biblical faith. These days knowledge of the Bible is overflowing online in Wikipedia, Google, and Youtube. There are thousands of sermons. Christianity is dominant in Canada statistically. Then why do many Christian feel like powerless? Today’s passage says faith must be accompanied by actions. These actions are presented in many ways such as our obedience to God’s Word, our sincere commitment to God, and our sacrificial life for others, etc. I agreed with him, but I couldn't tell him anymore because it all eventually turns out my spiritual problem or agony, the disagreement between what I have received and what I have been practicing. I pray that each one of us may struggle to obey God’s words daily and each may struggle to devote oneself to God with what we have even if it seems small and insignificant. I pray that our faith may not be called dead, but may be called alive and active and it may be presented by our acts of faith.

1. Show your faith with deeds(18-19)

Let’s look at verse 18. *18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."* James tries to explain that faith and deeds cannot be separated. Let’s look at verse 19a. *19a Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.* If they can be separated, it is impossible to show our faith without doing any actions of faith. So faith can only be seen and proved by the actions of faith.

Apostle Paul had been persecuting Jesus in ignorance. The risen Jesus appeared to him and did not condemn him, but gave him the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness from God as well as a new mission. After that, he worked hard to testify to the gospel of salvation and resurrection to the Gentiles. His faith was not only expressed in words, but through his obedience, sacrifice, and commitment to God. His faith always worked with what he did. His faith and his life of faith matched together.

One day a father and his four-year-old son were having Bible study as usual. The son said to his father in frustration: “I cannot see God, I can’t hear, or touch Him.” It sounded like the boy didn’t go with faith in God. The father was embarrassed at the moment. He had thought that his son believes in God just like a child. Yes, the boy cannot touch or piggy back on His back. How can little children or unbelievers open up their heart toward God? How can we help these souls to let them encounter Jesus personally and experience God? It is through our good deeds of faith along with the word of God. Jesus said in *Matthew 5:16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.* In that sense, our acts of faith are so important because they may see God through our acts of faith. On the contrary, we can imagine good works, but without faith. Is it good in the sight of God? Does such deed save us? Absolutely not. Without sincere repentance and faith in Jesus no one can be born again and come to God. Therefore, faith must be accompanied by action of faith.

Let’s look at verse 19b. *19b You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that-- and shudder.* James gives the example of demons to explain the falsity of their claim: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that–and shudder” (19). According to the gospels, demons recognize Jesus as the Holy One. But they never confessed Jesus as their Lord and Savior. They never loved or obeyed Jesus. Instead they trembled because they knew their destiny. Our faith must be accompanied by wholehearted love for God and obedience to his word(Dt 6:4-5). Jesus said, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.”(John 14:23). Obedience to Jesus is what separates believers from demons. So obedience requires action and that action requires faith. In other words, faith includes full commitment to God. Demons have no commitment to God, no love for God or obedience to his word.

1. Evidence of living faith with actions(20-26)

Let’s look at verse 20. *20 You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?* Here “foolish” means completely lacking understanding about faith. The word “useless” means that it accomplishes nothing; it is inactive. James gave two evidences of living faith. Let’s consider Abraham’s faith. Look at verses 21-22. *21 Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.* James emphasizes that Abraham was considered righteous for what he did. In Genesis 15, Abraham was exhausted after a war to save his nephew Lot. He was fearful and had a sense of loss. At that time the word of God came to him in a vision: “Do not be afraid! Abram; I am your shield and your very great reward”(Gen 15:1). But Abraham complained in his heart that God had not given him a son. God took him out to look up at the night sky and count the stars. As he counted numerous stars in the sky, God said, “So shall your offspring be.” It was beyond his imagination. Yet the Bible says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6). This faith pleased God and Abraham was justified by his faith. His faith grew continually until he received a son, Isaac, and Isaac became a young teenager. God tested Abraham’s faith. God commanded him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham did not hesitate to obey because he fully trusted God and reasoned that God could raise the dead based on his promise, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned”(Heb 11:17-19). He obeyed fully from his heart with action. God was moved by Abraham’s obedient faith. God confirmed with an oath his covenant promises to send the Messiah through his offspring. Look at verse 23. *23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend.* This evidence of his faith underpins that his faith and his actions work together in harmony. And his faith was complete by his obedience and commitment to God. Look at verse 24. *24 You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.* James concluded, “A person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone” (24). When Paul said that we are justified by faith alone, this faith includes obedience. That is why he said, “the obedience that comes from faith” (Ro 1:5). So in essence, Paul’s view of faith is the same as that of James.

Now let’s consider Rahab’s faith. Verse 25 says, *25 In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?* Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho, the first city to be destroyed. Joshua sent two spies. When they stayed in Rahab’s house, their identities were discovered and reported to the king. Their lives were in danger. At this critical moment, Rahab decided to protect them by having them hide on her roof. When the king’s soldiers looked for them, she was not intimidated. Rather, she sent them off in a different direction so that two spies could flee in another direction. She put her own life in danger. If discovered, she would be called a traitor and could face execution.

How could Rahab do such a thing? When she heard what God had done for Israel by delivering them from slavery in Egypt, parting the Red Sea for them, and giving them victory over kings Sihon and Og, she believed that the God of Israel was the Creator and the one true God (Jos 2:8-11). Everyone who lived in Jericho also heard the same message, but they fell into great fear. Only Rahab responded with faith and acted courageously. If she had faith but did not act, she would have perished with all the others. It would have been useless faith. But she was considered righteous for what she did. Though she was sexually immoral, or a traitor in the eyes of people, to God all that mattered was her faith with her act of faith. God blessed her faith. She was included in the genealogy of the Messiah (Mt 1:5).

God has revealed Himself to us through His Word of prophecy that He is Creator God and the LORD. Not only by the Word but by actions God showed His existence and truthfulness. He humbled Himself, became flesh like us and dwell among his creations. We call Him Jesus the Son God. He taught the kingdom of God and the way to the kingdom. And by his actions of giving his life on the cross, He proved that His love and truth are so real and genuine. Through the actions of his death and resurrection, we finally gain his forgiveness and salvation as well as his life. As children of God, we become heirs of His kingdom. His faith with deeds saves us, and through faith with actions we indeed see, feel, and experience living God. He wants us to learn from Him. He wants our faith to grow mature and complete by our acts of faith. James concluded, “*As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (26).*

I thank God that our church members have struggles to obey God’s word and to serve God and God’s people. I thank God that there are acts of faith among us: faithful one-on-one Bible study, serving brothers and sisters with God’s Word, intercessory prayers by waking up the dawn, keeping faithful worship, and serving brothers and sisters in need through material and prayer. I pray that our faith may continue to be alive and grow mature and bear good fruit.

In conclusion, we see that faith and actions work together. Our faith can grow mature and complete by actions such as our obedience and commitment done by faith whether it is big or small. All these deeds of faith are the proof that our faith is not dead, but living. Such faith will be rewarded with God’s abundant blessing.