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Matthew 5:14-16; James 2:14-26
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Faith and Deeds

One of my favorite theologians is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a pastor in the German Confessing Church of World War II which spoke out against the German Church and the way it had been cooped by Adolf Hitler and German Christian Nationalism. In December of this past year, a new movie came out about Bonhoeffer's life, ministry, and involvement to dethrone Hitler. It's called *Bonhoeffer, Theologian, Spy, and Martyr*. I highly recommend it.

Very aware of how the Nazis were creating extermination camps for Jewish citizens, Bonhoeffer wrestled with how one could confess faith in Christ on one hand and yet do nothing about this situation on the other. Bonhoeffer's own life exemplified his beliefs, as he actively participated in the resistance movement against Nazi Germany, despite the risks involved. He believed that Christians must be willing to engage with the world and to stand up for what is right, even when it is difficult or dangerous.

Our scripture today from James 2:14-26 talks about this dance between faith and good deeds. Listen now for the Word of the Lord.

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? **15** Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. **16** If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? **17** In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

20 You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? **21** Was not our father 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. **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. **24** You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

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? **26** As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Sixteenth century Protestant reformers rebelled against the Roman Catholic notion that our deeds could somehow gain us entry into heaven. And so we hear mantra like “Faith alone.” But James seems to indicate that Faith alone is only part of the equation. Indeed, works or good deeds should play an important part of our faith lives. But how exactly should faith and deeds work in concert with one another for a follower of Jesus? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in this? What is our role? And what might God be saying to us today?

Scripture is very clear. Faith is paramount for salvation. It must come first.

To new believers in Rome, the Apostle Paul said, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus Christ is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”¹

To the Church in Ephesus, he said, “For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast.”²

So clearly we see that faith in Christ is what saves us from sin and separation from God.

This verse also implies that the faith in Christ we do have is not even of our own doing. It is a free gift from God. God provides faith for us.

But then Paul doesn’t stop there. Good deeds must follow faith.

Listen to this, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”³

The Greek word for works is *ergon*. It means deeds, actions, or labor.

The word implies that we were created with a purpose for something we must do. What could that be?

Jesus in John 15 was clear. To bear good fruit.

Again deeds follow faith, not vice versa.

We cannot earn our way into heaven. For none of us would be good enough.

The Prophet Isaiah even said, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”⁴

¹ Romans 10:9-10

² Ephesians 2:8-9

³ Ephesians 2:10

⁴ Isaiah 64:6

Even our good deeds, apart from faith, aren't good enough to bring us to God. And so we need make sure we put horse before the cart, and not vice versa. The horse is our faith in Jesus. That's what does all the work to make us right with God. Our good deeds simply follow like the cart.

James tells us that the two go together as two parts of one equation.

In the military there were times when we needed to talk with other naval vessels over the open, unencrypted communication networks. But we didn't want anyone else to know what we were saying. So we would encode our messages to prevent people from understanding our words. To decode them, both parties would have to use the same authentication key to help us understand what we were trying to say to each other. When we received a message, we would ask them to authenticate who they were so that we knew we were talking to our friends and not our enemies. We would say, "Authenticate." And they would give us their secret code so that we knew they were safe to talk to.

In the same way, good deeds authentic that a person's faith is true. They prove that a person really is a follower of Jesus Christ.

Faith without good deeds is dead. Not a real faith at all. Just as good deeds cannot produce faith. That too is dead.

This was precisely the struggle that Bonhoeffer had with the German Church. It professed one thing, and yet when it came to holding Hitler accountable for his actions, it turned a blind eye and did nothing.

It was while he was at Union Theological Seminary in New York City when Bonhoeffer's eyes were open to this truth. Bonhoeffer witnessed first hand his black classmate's fight for equal civil rights. He was challenged that speaking truth to power was his Christian duty. This compelled him to return home to Germany, call out the evil deeds of the Nazis, and speak out for those who did not have a voice, namely German Jews.

Bonhoeffer fiercely rejected a "cheap grace"—a Grace that does not demand discipleship; he called the church to costly discipleship, the kind that risks everything for the good of others, even at great personal cost. He believed the church had no business sitting on the sidelines while evil reigned; the light of Christ was meant to shine, not be hidden. In his own words and by his very life, Bonhoeffer shows us that "the church has to be in the fray—either rescuing people or seeking to eradicate people who were doing the atrocities."

In 1867, a philosopher by the name of John Stuart Mill, delivered an inaugural address at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. He stated: "Let not any one pacify his conscience by the delusion that he can do no harm if he takes no part, and forms no opinion. Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing. He is not a good man who, without a

protest, allows wrong to be committed in his name, and with the means which he helps to supply, because he will not trouble himself to use his mind on the subject.”

Later on in James’ Letter, he says, “Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.”⁵

My friends, I think Bonhoeffer, Mill and James are on to something and are speaking loud and clear to our American Christian Culture today.

How can we as American Christians sit back and watch first hand the intentional starvation of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian people, mostly innocent, in Gaza and say nothing. Regardless of what we think about the political situation and the terrorism that Hamas initiated, this isn’t right. We must say and do something. It’s time that our government stop turning a blind eye and pretending that it isn’t happening. Just like those Christians in Nazi Germany, we are complicit.

Let me clear up a huge misunderstanding in our country today. Speaking out against a humanitarian crisis in Gaza is NOT antisemitism.

Blaming the Jews for it, well that would be antisemitic. We aren’t doing that.

But my friends, Israel’s actions right now as a nation are not in keeping of what one would find in the Old Testament of what God expects from His people.

The same could be said here at home. Yes, millions of immigrants might have taken advantage of loose borders and made themselves at home here illegally.

But making up lies that most of the people are rapists, murderers, and gang members and then detaining them in awful concentration camps doesn’t make it right.

The Bible tells us clearly to care for vulnerable people in our midst, particularly those who are undocumented.

Exodus 22:21, “Do not mistreat an alien or oppress them, for you were aliens in Egypt.”⁶

Leviticus 19:34, “When an alien lives in your land, do not mistreat them. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt.” And then he puts his stamp on this saying, “I am the Lord your God.”⁷

Now if someone indeed violates the laws of our land, then yes, deportation should be a natural consequence of their actions. But the consequence needs to be commensurate with the violation. Simply escaping violence and poverty in one’s homeland and desiring a better life for your family, should not warrant being labeled as a violent criminal and then deported.

⁵ James 4:17

⁶ Exodus 22:21

⁷ Leviticus 19:34

Thank God, Egypt didn't deport Jesus and his parents when they sought asylum from the violence of King Herod back in Bethlehem.⁸

Now I don't claim to smart enough on how to figure it all out. These are very complex issues. But I pray that God will give our elected officials the wisdom to know what to do and the courage to follow their consciences to do what is right.

But how do we know the good we ought to do?

For one, the Bible tells us. So we are without excuse.

In fact, Jesus gave us something even better. He said, "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."⁹

And so upon putting our faith in Jesus Christ, Jesus implants his Holy Spirit in us. The Holy Spirit is what transforms our hearts and minds to be inline with God's heart and mind. It provides us guidance and wisdom to know what to do, and also equips us with the fruit of the Spirit which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.¹⁰

We cannot create this fruit in and of ourselves. They are a natural outflow of a life that has remained connected to the the vine of Jesus Christ.

So what then is our role in the dance between faith and good deeds?

Well Jesus supplies the faith and the fruit of the Spirit. And we simply provide the obedience. Jesus said, "You are my friends, if you do what I command."¹¹ We must make choices that cause us to remain connected to the vine of Jesus Christ who said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. If a person remains in me and I in them, they will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."¹²

Apart from Jesus, we can do what? NO thing!

In closing, what is God calling us to do today?

Maybe some of us have yet to put our true faith in Jesus Christ. If that is the case, he is knocking on the door of your heart and is waiting for the invitation to live in you. Our job is to say, "Yes, Jesus, come into my heart and live."

Maybe some of us don't understand the ministry and role of the Holy Spirit. That's ok because I'm going to preach on that later this fall after we finish our series on prayer. Our job is to be open and learn more.

⁸ Matthew 2:13-18

⁹ John 14:26

¹⁰ Galatians 5:22

¹¹ John 15:14

¹² John 15:5

Maybe some of us are trying too hard to do good deeds in our own strength, with our own power. Our job is more simple than that. It is to trust the Holy Spirit in us.

Maybe some of us need the courage to confront someone of their wrong doing. Our job is not to convince them that we are right and they are wrong, but to share what's on our hearts, pray for them, and then let God take care of the rest.

Maybe some of us are stubbornly refusing the Spirit's prompting to forgive someone who has wronged us. Again, our job is to share what's on our hearts, pray for them, and let God take care of the rest.

Maybe some of us are convicted of some secret wrong doing that is short circuiting the Spirit's production of fruit in our lives. Our job is to confess our sins and receive the healing that we need.

Maybe some of us are simply struggling to love our neighbor as we do ourselves. Our job is to love them.

However God is speaking to us today, may we trust that the Holy Spirit will give us the wisdom, power and strength to do all of this and more.

I want to close this morning with the words of Jesus from The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:14-16.

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. **15** Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. **16** In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

So may we see that faith without action is no faith at all. May we believe that good deeds spring forth from genuine faith and serve as an outward sign of our commitment to follow Jesus. And may our true discipleship shine His light in our hurting world, regardless of the cost.

Amen.