

3-14 The Appearance of Faith James 2:18-26; Rev. 3:1-2

Behold, the pipe cleaner; a fuzzy and bendable product used for cleaning the inside of a pipe (not these kind of pipes...the smoking kind...although there are times when I think smoke will come out of these pipes too). I watched my grandfather use them on his tobacco pipes.

During the 50s, 60s and 70s, these fun and fuzzy tools were used more in education than in pipes. Between SS, vacation bible school and training union, I must have used hundreds. How many of you, during your childhood, used pipe cleaners to make something in SS?

I remember being asked to make something out of pipe cleaners that represented **love**. Some made **hearts**; some made **footballs**; and the really spiritual kids made **crosses**. With the advent of visual learning, I suspect that the pipe cleaners are on their last educational leg.

Creative representation remains a great learning tool, however. I'd like for us to do that for a moment right now. At the risk of losing half of you, I'd like for you to close your eyes.

Imagine that you are a gifted artist with an outstanding capacity to put on canvas what you picture in your mind. Now, you are in your studio, oils prepared and a blank canvass before you. The challenge: Create an image of your faith. Not God the object of your faith, but your faith. Paint something that most powerfully represents faith for you. Do you know what you would attempt to create? What would your brush capture? And, can you open your eyes now?

Many who teach leadership to students and executives, like **Robert Greenleaf** or **Mike Feiner**, have identified leadership barriers to forward progress in business, political and non-profit organizations. Chief among those barriers is the inability or unwillingness to imagine what their organization could look like in the future. Many businesses and non-profits go under because they can only see what worked in the past. It is nearly impossible to work toward goals you cannot first imagine...with or without pipe cleaners.

James was trying to help churches visualize what following Jesus looked like; what a community of faith looked like. That's what all the NT writers were doing. So hold on to the image of faith you painted in your head while we turn to **James, chapter 2**.

The book of James is known as a general or catholic epistle meaning that it was written to the church everywhere. Paul wrote primarily to specific congregations with particular issues. That leaves us with the task of discerning whether his words were meant for that situation or if they were meant to be universally applied. There is no question that James was giving universally applicable instruction to churches.

Let's pick up in v. 14. *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

We've been listening to Paul's letters in the past few weeks, and what comes through loud and clear for Paul is *we are saved by grace through faith...not of works lest anyone should boast*. Martin Luther took Paul at his word and declared that salvation was *sola fide*; by faith alone. In John 6 we read: *Then they asked Jesus, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."*

So what's up with James? Was he having trouble filling slots on his committees? Was he a frustrated educator trying to get more teachers? He sounds like it. What good is it, if you say you believe in God, but do not give your tithes and offerings? What good is it, if you say

you have faith in the cross but won't help in the preschool? Your faith is useless if it's disconnected from the work of God!

But James was stronger than that. Listen again. *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?* There's only one way in this context to answer those questions. First, it's not any good at all to have faith without works and second, hold on to your pews, no, faith alone can't save you. He added that even the demons believe in God; they have that kind of faith; but demons do the work of their Master—not God. v. 17, *So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

I don't think James and Paul are contradictory, only our reading of them. Paul and James would agree that faith is the only foundation of righteousness. They would also both affirm that the faith always find expression in works.

In my faith tradition, this matter of good works was distilled to 100 proof doubt about your salvation. Evangelists would come and first of all tell us the kinds of sins that will send you to hell. Then they would tell us about the good works that Christians ought to do. If we had credits in the sin column or debits in the works column, we couldn't be sure that we were saved.

But this is simply not the message of the NT. We are saved by grace, through faith. This is the work of God, not something we can achieve. As long as we live in these bodies, we will fall into sin but never fall from God's grace. And works are never presented as evidence of salvation, only evidence of true faith.

I had a Sunday School teacher that scared the bejeebers out of us 5th graders. The works he looked for were attendance, lesson studied, bible brought, offering, you remember those standards. When we couldn't check all the boxes, or if someone were absent, he would quote that phrase from James, faith without works is dead. If you don't do the works, you might not be saved.

James isn't on that wave length. Look at v. 26. *For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.* The body is a physical reality that is animated by the spirit of life. Bodies don't do anything if there is no life in them. For James, faith must be animated by works or it is dead like a body without a pulse.

James uses another analogy. V. 21. *Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.*

Abraham was justified or accepted and chosen by God through his works, seen most clearly in his willingness to offer his son as a sacrifice. James said that Abraham's faith was "active" (v. 22). His faith was more than a mental acknowledgement; more than intellectual assent.

Authentic Jewish faith has never been just about works. It has been about faith in God that is active; that shows itself through works of righteousness.

Look carefully at the last phrase in v. 22. **Abraham's faith was brought to completion by his faithful works.** Faith that does not act is incomplete faith. James isn't speaking about whether your faith is good enough to be saved. He's asking if your faith is active enough to truly Christian.

This term translated completion comes from the root teleos, which means goal or end. The goal of faith is not your personal salvation, with all due respect to evangelists. The goal of faith is not my personal salvation...or yours. That's the error James is addressing. The goal of faith is to do the works of God.

And we turn to Paul for the evidence in Eph. 2:10. *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

God did not create us to save us in the next life. God created us and Jesus transformed us so that we could do the works of a living faith. Faith is not some ethereal or abstract belief about Jesus. Faith is the beginning of being God's workmanship.

So what did you imagine in our opening exercise? What was your picture of faith? Was it hard to picture because it's something inside you can't see? When we think about faith, many of us picture Jesus on the cross; a tall steeple; a worship ritual; someone on their knees; someone being baptized. These are fine images, but...

James is showing us more. When we think of faith, James wants us to see the **works of faith**: shelter ministry; food collection; tutoring; visiting this sick; sharing clothes; teaching children; going to Jordan or Hungary; bereavement ministry; worship leadership; giving; nurturing. These works of faith do not justify you before God. They make your faith come alive. They complete your faith.

Some of you will relate to the story of **Julie** who made a profession of faith at age 12 and was baptized. She was active in her church until she went off to college and drifted away. She didn't turn from faith. She just put it in the attic.

A friend of hers was going on a trip Juarez, Mexico to work with orphans and to help build more space for them to live. Julie decided to go along, just to take a break from work and to be with her friend. Part of her was hesitant about the trip, however. She wasn't used to roughing it.

By day three, something had happened to Julie. The dormant faith...or can I say, the faith without works, came to life. She laughed and cried as she shared with the team how trivial her life had become. She was ashamed of her self-interest. She was overjoyed and animated by her newfound purpose. I could tell you dozens of stories like this.

But I could also tell you too many stories about people who were saved but never became God's workmanship; who never became animated by the good works God prepared for them; whose faith never reached this completion.

What kind of marriage do you have with a wedding ceremony followed by the bride and groom going their separate ways; different cities; different careers? You have a marriage in name, not a union that has been consummated.

James is challenging us to a consummated faith, the appearance of which is always visible in good works. That's the picture worth a thousand words.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. 2You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 4Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. 5You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 6Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. 7Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? 8If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. 24See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.**