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Colorado Springs, Colorado  
September 7, 2014  
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## Perspective: Faith, Works, and Mission

Romans 4:1-5, 18, 20-22 What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness...Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." ...No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness."

James 2:14-18, 26 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and 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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith....For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

Perspective. What a difference perspective can make. When Barbara's and my youngest daughter Katie was about three, we were living in Indiana and we had a little garden in the backyard that Barbara had started. One day Katie and I were in the garden and we noticed a baby robin that had fallen from its nest. Now I knew that the chances that this robin would survive were just about nil but Katie was upset and wanted to do something, so I decided to show her a little lesson about caring for God's creatures. So I dug down with my hand down into the loamy soil of that garden, while Katie looked on with interest, and I found a worm. And then, in my best Mr. Rogers' voice, I told Katie about how we were going to try to help that little bird and began feeding bits of it to the robin. Whereupon, to my sheer surprise, Katie started crying and howling and went screaming into the house. For you see, it turns out, the very day before Barbara and Katie had also been in the garden, and Barbara had also showed

her the worms, how they worked in the soil to break it up and give it nutrients, how they tickled your hand when you held them, and what good friends they were to gardeners and little girls. One worm, two very different perspectives on it. Both Barbara's and my actions were motivated by something like the same thing – to show our child something about caring for God's creation – but the way we carried those out could hardly have been more different! And poor Katie was left to puzzle over the heartlessness of a father who could do such a thing to her friend, the worm. I think she may have even forgiven me several years later.

This morning's scriptures in their own way also present two very different perspectives. Both of these scriptures are about "faith," but they are oh-so-different, aren't they?. On the one hand, Paul says that human beings are "justified" before God by their **faith**, not by their works, not by the things that they do. Belief in God through Jesus Christ is, for Paul, the very *meaning, the very essence*, of faith. But James couldn't seem to disagree more: He says, in his pointed way, that if faith does not result in action, it is "dead"; "*for just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.*" And while you and I may not run screaming into the house at this difference in perspectives, we nonetheless may find ourselves puzzled. And rightly so, for this is one of those spots in the Bible where there do seem to be two rather opposite points of view. Yet both men were seeking to communicate the nature of the faith to the churches they served, and both were clearly sincere. And both of them ended up, by the common consent of the early church, as part of the New Testament, worthy, in the judgment of the church, of instructing us, of teaching us, of saying something true about God and about the Christian life.

Now, of course, the temptation that you or I often have in the face of scriptures that are seemingly contradictory is to simply ignore one or the other. We don't put it quite that way, of course, but we may decide that one is really much less important than

the other. That, in the course of Christian history, is how we have ended up with different denominations. One group will make one passage, one author, one approach the center of things and seriously downplay other approaches. One set of verses gets elevated to center stage and the others don't seem to play much of a role at all.

So what shall we say about Paul's and James' so apparently different perspectives on what it means to be a person of **faith**? The first thing to note is that similar differences in perspective are in fact found throughout the New Testament. Each of the gospel writers, for example, has a different approach to what "faith" means. Matthew, for example, is the gospel where Jesus is so often portrayed as a new Moses, those who would follow him, and Jesus' final words in that gospel say the job of Christians, the job of those who would have **faith**, is to believe in what Jesus commanded and to teach those right beliefs, going into all the world to do so. But faith as "works" is also present in the gospels, perhaps most dramatically in Luke's story where the followers of John the Baptist come to Jesus to ask if he is the messiah, or if they should wait for another. Jesus doesn't say "Yes, I am the messiah, have faith in me"; instead he points to his actions: "*And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them"* (Luke 7:22 NRSV).

As all of us have no doubt experienced, when questions about complex things get posed as either/or, black/white, all/nothing then chances are we are looking at those things much too simply. Because the truth is that each of these perspectives on faith – belief in God and doing good works – is important, and, even more telling perhaps, each when **over**emphasized can become the occasion for sin. What do I mean by that?

Well, let's take the first definition, the Pauline one, that faith is a matter of belief

in God. When oversimplified, it can lead to some pretty sour consequences. History is full of examples of people who counted themselves as Christians, who would have said that they believed in God, who would count themselves as persons of faith and yet whose lives and actions were distorted. Perhaps one of history's worst examples is those civil servants in Germany in World War II who were in charge of making sure the concentration camps ran well. These were not the leaders of the German Reich, but functionaries, cogs in the wheel, mid-level managers. And you can read stories of how they would go to church on Sunday in order to be strengthened to do their job, and to be comforted in the face of the terrible things that their jobs required. They believed in God, indeed; they counted themselves as persons of faith, indeed. But, in the face of such an example, you can begin to see why James has a point: is this really faith? Can one do such things, such works, during the week and call oneself a person of faith come Sunday?

But you don't need to resort to such dire examples to see how an over-simple emphasis on "just faith" can lead to consequences that no one intended. Churches and denominations sometimes find that having over-emphasized the simple fact of belief in God all by itself, they don't really know what they stand for. In one of my former churches, I was once one aisle over at the grocery store as I heard our church being discussed by two people. One of them said, *"Oh, that's the church where you can believe anything you want and it doesn't matter."* Ouch. Now I know why churches want to emphasize the right of folks to believe for themselves; we want to be respectful of people, we don't want to tell people what they "must" believe, we have seen too many examples of churches that would shut people out because they have the "wrong" beliefs or do the "wrong" things. But at the same time, every church that is vital and alive and growing must be committed to carrying on conversations with one another, informed by prayer and bible study, of what the **content** of our faith can be, maybe

even should be.

But of course it's also possible, on the other hand, to overemphasize the idea that faith means to have the "right" works, to do the "right" things. And again, sadly, we have seen such an overemphasis at times in the history of the American church. And so some of those who go by the label "liberal" insist, for example, that you must do certain things if you are to "truly" be a Christian – you must have this particular position on school prayer, you must support that organization, you must not give your money or your time to certain groups, or you're not "really" a Christian. And those who style themselves as "conservative" do the same thing too at times: they insist that you can't "really" be a Christian, you don't "really" have faith, if you don't believe certain things about politics, or sexuality, or if you don't vote for certain candidates or support certain causes. Every one of us probably know folks who insist that your faith can't really be "true" if it doesn't show forth in certain specific practices. One of our children was once told by someone that her parents weren't truly Christians because true Christians wouldn't allow women to be ministers and a true Christian husband would know how to keep his wife "in her place."

You are probably ahead of me at this point in figuring out that where things go wrong is when either "works" or "belief" do not get corrected by the other one. **Either one of them by themselves is not enough for a mature Christian life.** Take James' emphasis on good works. Surely he is correct, that one's faith must show itself in good works. But good works alone don't suffice for Christians. The Rotary Club does good works. The Lions Club does good works. The Colorado Springs Downtown Partnership does good works. I am grateful for them and for what they do. But the good works that a **Christian** does are an expression of his or her faith. Let me illustrate with a story I've told before but which is worth repeating: A minister by the name of Anthony Robinson tells the story of how at the dedication of a new youth center in his community, a

denominational leader had been invited to speak. The mayor of the community was also there, and after the dedication ceremony, he said this to the denominational leader: "...[while] I ... appreciate your remarks today,... you are a Christian minister and I didn't hear you say anything that couldn't have been said by someone else. We need to hear something different from you. We need to hear... the gospel."<sup>1</sup> Without the ability to **talk** about why we do what we do, without the ability to **talk** about God and our belief that God calls us as Christians to live certain ways and do certain things and practice certain kinds of good works, folks won't know that we do these things **because** of our belief in God. And that will be a loss indeed. As true as that song "They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love" is, I would also say that we must go on and always make sure we add that they'll know we're Christians by the way we **talk** about **why** we love the way we do!

Now, let me tell you something: I am much less concerned, really, about the overemphasis in the other direction, that is, seeing faith as **only** about one's belief in God and that it doesn't matter what things flow from that and it doesn't matter what good works come out of it. Because that's just not this congregation's situation. The sheer number of the mission activities that we do for the sake of others, the good works for God's world that happen through so many people's gifts of time and money (often sacrificially), the unusual commitment in our church's Bylaws to take 10% "off-the-top" of contributions for mission beyond ourselves – all of these are truly wonderful expressions of a church that knows that faith must show itself through actions and good works for others. When I tell my colleagues around the country of these things, of how our building is used to make a home for so many community groups, of how we have such a large commitment to offering our musical gifts to the community – well, they are

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<sup>1</sup>Anthony Robinson, "Renewed Life: Seven Ways to Change Congregational Culture," The Christian Century Vol 117, No. 32, November 15, 2000; p. 1186.

often amazed and sometimes a little envious.

But here's what I want to say this morning: As we move into our fall season of church life and programming, what we need to all keep in mind is that the very notion of "mission" is about **both** perspectives, about **both** our belief and our works. The word "mission" itself comes from a root that means "to be sent." Yet, as we continue to go into the world, as Jesus continues to send us into the world in mission, I believe that **all** of us need to become increasingly better at sharing the "why" of our works. Why do we do these things? That's what you and I are going to need to become ever-better about talking about. Why? Because the world around us who are here and are looking for something when life is hurtful need to know **both** of our good works, of the kind of generous and welcoming people that we are, **and** they need our best **thoughts and words** about what God is like, what we believe, so that they will see that we are an alternative – *a life-giving alternative* – to those who would tell them what they "have to believe" or what they "have to do" or what they "have to think" in order to be a "real" Christian. It is, for example, a wonderful thing to give our money and our contributions of clothing to Urban Peak so that homeless teens will have a safe place to go, but we also need to be even better at talking about **why** we believe God wants us to do this, about why in a time when a the majority of teenagers are homeless because their parents put them on the street when they "came out" to them, we believe that every child needs a place of safety, healing, and hope no matter what. Every one of our mission activities is a wonderful thing to do, and it is also the case that we need to get even better at telling folks why we do what we do, in an era in which so many people experience the very idea of "church" as a collection of bigots. Do you need help with that, the telling part? I would urge you, then, if you aren't already doing so, to attend an Adult Sunday School class, or one of the small group studies about our faith that Norman Heimer will be convening this year.

The simplest way to talk about all of this is with a tag line that every one of you likely remember from grade school: “Show and tell.” Show and tell. For you see, our mission is always about both show and tell. It is always both/and. How will you better do both of those things in the coming months? I’m looking forward to how we will answer that question together, to the glory of God!