

Sermon ideas for September 6 Pastor Taylor

Remember those old posters from the Wild West?

There would be a mugshot, the face of someone who was evading the law.
and under it, it would read, “**wanted: dead or alive**”

That little phrase seems appropriate as we look at our second lesson from the book of James.

James is challenging us this morning to look at ourselves and see whether our faith is dead or alive.

So here are a couple of questions for you to assess your faith life

1. Does your faith make any real difference in your life?
2. In what ways do you live out your faith in Jesus?
3. What have you done this week for God that did not personally benefit you either physically or emotionally?
4. When is the last time you served the poor?

James warns his hearers that there are two kinds of faith.

Dead and Living...

And James challenges his hearers to look at themselves with a critical eye
And assess whether their faith is indeed dead or alive.

James goes so far as to say “**Faith without works is dead**”

Now for us Lutherans this comment is unsettling to say the least.

It seems contrary to everything we hold sacred.

Even Reformer Martin Luther, was not a fan of this book

At one point, in his introduction to the Book of James he called it an “epistle of straw”
The word epistle means “letter”

His issue with it is that he thought that it didn’t meet the standards to be included in the Bible..the cannon...

His reasons included:

That he thought it was not written by the apostle James.

He also believed it was contradictory to Paul’s writings.

and that it didn’t do enough speaking to Christ crucified and risen

So Luther wasn’t a fan.

But Luther also recognized that even if he couldn’t fully understand the book or agree with it, it still remained a part of the Bible

Later, he even took the negative description out of his translation of the Bible,
and said that James was a Good book
...expressing the law of God and containing some good kernels of wisdom ..

So here we are this morning.

With the same dilemma that Luther had.

The book of James is indeed a part of the Bible and a part of our Sunday morning lectionary.

And that means we can't just dismiss it.

Instead, we are called to wrestle with it.

Even if we may never be able to fully reconcile it with the rest of the Bible and with our Lutheran core doctrine of "justification by grace"

We are still called to hear it and wrestle with it.

So what then do we do with the book of James?

What do those of us who believe that we are justified by grace through faith, apart from works, what do we do with James' statements?

What word might they speak to us today?

One place to start is with the context of the book.

Who was James' audience?

Why might he have been so strong in his warnings against dead faith?

Some scholars believe that James was not writing to people who were struggling with their consciences.

He was not writing to people who were afraid that they were not worthy of eternal salvation.

He was not writing to people who needed to hear a word of comfort and affirmation that they are loved and forgiven no matter what.

Instead, scholars believe he was writing to a first century audience, people who were actually at the opposite pole.

It seems that James was writing to complacent Christians.

Ones who were sitting back, resting on God's grace,

Saying, "I'm already saved. Why should I do anything?"

People who would come to church and say they believe,

But then lived their lives as if God was not in it.

It's what theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, calls "cheap grace"

When we receive the gift and do nothing with it, we cheapen it.

We spit on Christ's sacrifice. We mock Christ's suffering.

We say that it doesn't matter to us the price that was paid for our acceptance by God.

It's cheap grace according to Bonhoeffer. It's dead faith according to James.

James reminds us that if faith is true faith, then it will show in our works.

Our works are not salvific...meaning they do not save us.

Instead, because we have the promise that we are already saved,

Works are a natural flow from that grace, from that acceptance.

If we have a living faith, we will be so grateful and appreciative of God's love, that we overflow with that love.

We will be so in love with God that we want to express that love to God's people, especially to the poor.

So perhaps James words are not as contradictory as they first might have seemed.

Yes, we are saved by grace through faith.

Jesus' sacrifice and our trust in that saving action is what saves us.

We cannot earn a place in God's kingdom.

None of us can. No matter how smart, or clever, or ambitious, we might think we are.

It is faith, not works, that saves us.

But if we have faith, then works must follow.

William Booth explained it this way

Faith and works should travel side by side, step answering to step, like the legs of men walking. First faith, and then works; and then faith again, and then works again -- until they can scarcely distinguish which is the one and which is the other.

Billy Graham explained it this way: **"There really is no conflict between faith and works. In the Christian life they go together like inhaling and exhaling. Faith is taking the Gospel in; works is taking the Gospel out."** Actually, what James is saying is: **you can't have one without the other.**

AW Tozer said, **"The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to obedience, nor does it recognize any obedience that does not spring from faith. The two are opposite sides of the same coin.**

And even Martin Luther said, **The true, living faith, which the Holy Spirit instills into the heart, simply cannot be idle.**

So I ask you again

How's your faith life?

Are you putting your faith into action?

Or is it a dead thing that you only bring out for an hour on Sunday morning?

Please know that either way, God loves you. God accepts you right where you are.

You are saved by God's undeserved love for you.

Those old posters in the Wild West wanted the person dead or alive in order to punish them.

But God wants us “dead or alive” in order to love us and save us.

Someone said that “Jesus meets people where they are, but he never leaves them there”

God will love us and take us “as is...”

Yet, God wants to move us from death to life.

God wants to “grow us”.

God wants to give us an active, living faith; a faith that serves.

So what will it be? Does God get you “dead or alive”?