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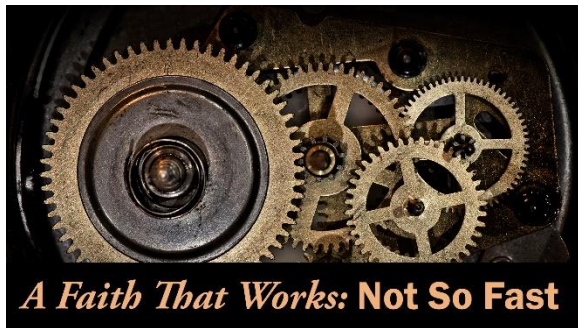
Title: A Faith That Works: Not So Fast

Preaching: Danny Gulden, Lead Pastor, Promise Road Campus

Text: [James 2:1-17](#)

E-mail: [Danny Gulden](#)

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We are continuing a new four-week worship series that we are calling A Faith That Works, based on the New Testament book of James. The title of the series is a bit of a play on words, pointing to the idea that we want a faith that is meaningful in our lives, helps us make sense of the world, one that helps us understand how God will

have us live. It also points to one of James' major points, that when it comes to faith, our work matters, that the things we do for others and the kingdom of God are important. There is an important correlation between what we believe and what we do.

Imagine for a moment that you walked into church this morning and the treatment you received was based purely on how you looked, how you were dressed. Imagine for a moment that those who were dressed the nicest, in the most expensive clothing were treated better than those who were dressed, well let's just say, not as nice.

Someone tried this experiment at a church served by a friend of mind. A woman who was a member of the church decided she wanted to test the congregation to see if they practiced what they preached. One day, she dressed for church like a person who would be experiencing homelessness. She made sure to disguise herself so that no one would know who she was. Her experience at the church that day was remarkable and not in a good way. Church friends who would normally come up and talk with her would turn their heads and not even make contact. Greeters at the door who would typically greet her in a welcoming fashion ignored her. When she went into the worship space, she could tell that the ushers were tensing up, almost waiting for a confrontation. They made sure she was seated as far away from others as possible.

This was a church that asked people to share out loud joy and concerns during prayer time. She stood up and you could just tell that everyone was waiting for something to happen...well something did. She revealed herself

to the church as who she was. The glares that people had for her turned to astonished faces and then turned to embarrassed faces. Following the worship service, people could not apologize enough. People were mortified but they were also convicted. Convicted that they were not the church that they said they were. Troubled, because they did not have the faith they claimed to have.

As we continue through the book of James, one of the early church communities is dealing with this same situation and James is addressing it. He is calling into question the different ways that different people are treated.

"My brothers and sisters, when you show favoritism you deny the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been resurrected in glory. Imagine two people coming into your meeting. One has a gold ring and fine clothes, while the other is poor, dressed in filthy rags. Then suppose that you were to take special notice of the one wearing fine clothes, saying, "Here's an excellent place. Sit here." But to the poor person you say, "Stand over there"; or "Here, sit at my feet." Wouldn't you have shown favoritism among yourselves and become evil-minded judges?" (James 2:1-4 CEB)

James is telling this community of faith that in treating the rich differently than they treat the poor, they are denying Jesus. They claim to love neighbor, to see everyone the same, as a beloved child of God, but they don't live that way. He's using the example of rich and poor because that is the issue they are struggling with, but he's clear that showing any partiality is a sin. He goes on to put this unfaithful way of living against an alternative way.

"You do well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself. But when you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, and by that same law you are exposed as a lawbreaker." (James 2:8-9 CEB)

In many ways, Jesus's ministry addressed the gap between the way things *are* and the way things *can* be. When Jesus encountered a person, he would move them from one station in life to a different station in life.

In life, we often find ourselves in the tension of this gap of what is and what can be. If we are being honest with ourselves, it can be more comfortable for us to live in what is rather than what can be. The book of James is pushing back on that here though. It's not enough to know and then not do. It's not enough to know the way that gives life, but not take it.

In a Faith that Works, we proclaim what we know to be true with our lips and we also proclaim it with our actions, with our lives.

This world can wear you down. The world can discourage you. When we feel this way, it is easy to lean into the trap of showing partiality. Thinking that our faith lived out in the community does not make a difference or that your faith and how you express that faith when you leave this place, does not matter.

James reminds us that it does. In fact, in his day the greatest turn-off to people regarding the church were Christians who proclaimed one thing and did a different thing. Today, the greatest reason that people want nothing to do with the church is that Christians proclaim God's love, but live differently. When churches say all are welcome, but in practice show partiality, welcoming some but not others, that is not faithful. All the ways how we show prejudice or discrimination, are matters of the heart. They are matters of faith. All the injustice we witness today is the result at least in part, of the broader issue of showing partiality.

"There is no room in the church for pride, a judgmental attitude, or arrogance." --Mike Yaconelli

A faith that works is a faith that is seeking to love without limits. Brother Will Campbell lived an amazing life. I came to know him through his memoir *Brother to a Dragonfly*. He was born and raised in the very rural and very poor area of Amite, MS. He was ordained by this local Baptist church at the age of 17 and played a central role in advocating for people of color in the rural South. He worked with many leaders of the Civil Rights movement and was one of four people who escorted the nine black students who integrated Little Rock's Central High School. He was the only white person who attended the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. As you might imagine, he often received hate mail from those who disagreed with what he was doing.

As he continued in the work of Civil Rights, he began to have this nagging feeling. He began to feel as though he hated those who were racist and bigoted. He began to feel the same hate in his heart that they possessed. As he stepped back, he thought it was strange that God seemed to hate all the same people he hated. He realized that he had created God in his image, and after his own personal and political likeness. As a follower of Jesus, he was struck by this.

"I came to understand the nature of tragedy. And one who understands the nature of tragedy can never take sides." Campbell saw how he had played favorites and taken sides; he had subverted the indiscriminate love of God for all people without conditions, limits, or exceptions.

As difficult as it was for him, he came to believe that no one was past salvation. No one was outside the reach of God's redeeming love. It wasn't enough for him to simply say it. So, he sought to get to know some of the people he hated. Those who had the hatred that he felt welling up in himself towards them. He started sipping whiskey with some of these folks. He did their funerals when no one else would do them. He emptied their bedpans when no one else would do it. This also made people upset.

Campbell concluded that since God did not play favorites, then, even as difficult as it may be, neither should he.

When we carry judgments against certain people or groups of people, it impacts the way we treat them. It impacts the way the church treats them

In a Faith that Works, we cannot pick and choose whom we love with acceptance. We can't pick between those we feel are deserving of the love of God and those who we believe aren't worthy. Because this is a false division that we have created. We don't get to determine who is worthy of God's love and who is not. It's what James was trying to get his community to see and today is still a powerful word to the church.

"You do well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself. But when you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, and by that same law you are exposed as a lawbreaker."

Praise God that God's grace and love cannot be contained.

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