

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“The Intersection Between Faith and Works”

By Eric Howell

James 2:1-17

September 6, 2009

Some of you may have heard me describe my first encounter with the lectionary. I'd never heard before about the three-year cycle of scripture texts that a church might follow from Sunday to Sunday from Advent through Lent and Easter and through ordinary time. I'd certainly never heard of anything called Lectionary Breakfast, like we have each Friday morning.

So, when I attended worship in a Methodist church on the Sunday morning my first week of my first year in seminary and the pastor preached on James 2, about how we should not favor rich, powerful people over poor, powerless people, I thought it was God speaking to the church. Then when I went to class on Tuesday as the professor of theology opened class with a scripture reading from James 2 about how we should not favor rich, powerful people over poor, powerless people, I thought it was God speaking to the class. By Wednesday afternoon, when I attended a seminary student-led chapel service, and James 2 was read along with a sermon on how we should not favor rich, powerful people over poor, powerless people, I finally figured it was God speaking to ME. Why else would I have heard this message repeated? So, I panicked. God, I don't know if I even know any rich people. But if I do, I promise not to like them very much. Show me where I am sinning, and I'll change my ways. I have heard your word, Lord, and am convicted. Forgive me, Lord! I even sought out a friend, so desperate was I about my sin, that I consulted a fellow student, a Methodist Texas Longhorn—I was that desperate—about the situation. I said, please pray for me. I feel so convicted. What's the problem? I explained. Oh, he said, that's the lectionary text this week. What's the lectionary? He explained. Oh, so, that's not God, it's the Methodist church. Well, I can ignore that.

The lectionary, which some Baptist churches follow, too, has brought us around again to this text, and for some of you, it's your first week in seminary, or college, or first grade. And I want to say to you—you shouldn't ignore this. The admonition of James to his first-century audience is a word from God to us here today, and maybe you'll find it to be a word from God speaking into your life.

It's more than just a word about a particular problem of a church usher's tendency to favor rich visitors over poor visitors by giving priority seating. James takes on that problem and then moves from that example of a disconnect between what a church says they believe and what they practice, he moves from there to a more general statement, “Faith without works is dead.” He says it three times, verse 17, verse 20, verse 26. Actually, verse 20 says, “Faith without works is useless or sterile.” But it's the same idea. There's no true faith without works that give evidence to the faith and live it out.

This, of course, is what the protestant reformers stumbled over so dramatically. Martin Luther in particular, couldn't believe the whole book of James, much less this particular passage, even belonged in the Bible. And it does pose some thorny questions to believe that somehow salvation depends on our outer works and not just inner faith.

What kind of works?

How do you quantify the work that earns salvation?

What about Ephesians 2: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Luther and others ran headlong into these problems in a time when salvation had been reduced, at least in the minds of many, to living a good life, doing the churchly things—like being baptized and taking communion, with no need to make the faith your own. Luther sees this passage in James, his eyes go red, and he scratches in his Bible, “*Sola Fide!*” Faith alone.

So what about us? I wonder if DaySpring’s approach to faith raises some particular questions as well about the passage and the way we do church, understand spirituality, and the intersection between faith and works.

We are a congregation that from the very beginning has tried to keep things simple. Fewer committee meetings. Fewer programs. Fewer activities. Less is more. By doing this, we can be focused on worship, prayer, the inner life, the spiritual journey toward the Sacred. Sacred and simple they called it. Of course, many people who have come to DaySpring have found retreat and repose in the Sacred and Simple, in the liturgy because life out there has been anything but simple and anything but a retreat. And I think this is true in two ways. First is the reactive. There is a busyness of activity in life that is present for most people some of the time. Work, school, kids, taking care of parents, trying to make and keep friendships, taking care of the house, looking for work, paying bills. And each of these aspects of life can bring with it a truckload of anxiety and concern. Then sometimes, a health or job or relationship crisis hits that compounds the struggle of life.

So there’s that part of life. There’s a country song on the radio these days about a guy lamenting all the troubles he’s got and his friend says, “It sounds like life.” So there’s life that we react to. And sometimes that’s enough to overwhelm and crowd out anything but a few moments on Sunday morning to come and sit and be quiet and try to remember your True Self and seek your true identity in God. And DaySpring has been a place of rest for many people at that point in life when all you’ve got is nothing and you need to be able to come empty handed and just Be.

So that’s the first way we might say that life can be anything but Simple out there. The other way is a more proactive way than reactive. Many people sometimes can carve out time and energy, and many prioritize it, to serve people in our community and beyond. Even if it means they give up some of their ‘free time’ or ‘disposable income,’ they serve. Many of you do this. Some people come to DaySpring to just ‘Be,’ not only because of the stuff of life, but because you are giving yourself, pouring yourself out into people’s lives in this city. And you are doing it because you are a Christian and you believe this is how Jesus can use you. One of the best parts of being pastor is getting to hear your stories of how God is using you in ways that are not official DaySpring ministries. Right now, you are: helping a Cuban boy come to the U.S. for medical treatment, tutoring students in an inner-city school, being available for addicts coming out of rehabilitation, raising money for cancer research, making friends with and investing your life with dancers in a strip club. You are visiting homebound senior

citizens, and hospital patients in their rooms. You are building homes for low-income families, and you are trying to bring relief and dignity to people without any homes at all. You are trying to help people coming out of jail to re-enter society and get their lives on the right track, you are counseling broken marriages and hurting people, and feeding the world, and you are quietly whispering in the ear of hurting, lonely, seeking people: Would you come to church with me on Sunday? I think I know of a place where you can find rest for your soul.

This is not to suggest that DaySpringers have it all together. We ourselves have been on the receiving end of the help of others, some on this list, some in other ways. We aren't serving always out of our wholeness, but just as often out of our own brokenness, and we sense that in our brokenness, God can use us in the lives of others who are broken, too.

This activity, these works, these Christian works of mission and ministry, through the lives of many DaySpringers may be one reason why we don't have a whole program of mission projects going on at any given time. People are already busy enough serving in all sorts of ways throughout the town that giving much more organization to that has been unnecessary.

What this produces, unfortunately, is the impression sometimes that we don't do work to go with our professed faith. It can appear that the retreat of DaySpring is functionally a withdrawal from the Christian vocation of service in the community. Despite good-hearted service on mission trips, Ridgecrest, Gospel Café (which we'll hear more about at the end of the service today), and all these other ways mentioned, it can seem that we neglect the outward part of the Christian faith, focusing instead on the inward path.

And maybe we do sometimes. We describe ourselves as a Baptist church in the contemplative tradition. This tradition, with its roots in the desert centuries ago, is more than just a decision to not have committee meetings. It's how we understand what we are doing, and who we are becoming in worship and in prayer and in spiritual formation. Contemplative prayer, while it can be a specific type of prayer, isn't just a single set of practices or a particular order to worship, though our practices and order of worship can make space for our communal and individual contemplation. More than just an academic exercise seeking knowledge and understanding, or an emotional expression seeking an experience, contemplation is a lifestyle of the heart, mind, and soul by which a person finds her true identity in God, in Christ, and in the Spirit, who prays in us when we do not know how to pray.

In a busy, loud world, the contemplative life creates increasing space to listen for God's still small voice. We do this by encouraging one another to read scripture slowly and carefully, to sit silently and breathe deeply, to frame our worship in a creative, yet focused liturgy of call and response, speaking and listening, tasting and touching. It means slowing down, being quiet, taking time to notice the presence of the divine in our midst. And that's hard work in and of itself. It's no accident that we say that our prayer is our work. It's hard work. There's nothing easy about it. And that's why when you come to worship here, it takes effort. We aren't going to do all the work for you by entertaining you for an hour. Rather, this is a workshop for the soul. And there's space here to let God work on you and do your work with God and that's different for each person. There are people who have just come and wept here for weeks on end because of

the work God is doing. And there are many more of us who would weep if we had the courage to cry in front of one another. It's hard work—this being true and real before God and even before ourselves.

Our prayer is our work. And our work is our prayer. And maybe this mantra from St. Benedict shows how a contemplative congregation can understand the relationship between faith and the works without which the faith is sterile if not dead.

Thomas Merton takes on this question pretty directly (in *Contemplative Prayer*). He looks at the question of whether 'contemplative prayer' is a problem for Christians, essentially asking, "does contemplative prayer exclude action?" such that if you are trying to practice a contemplative lifestyle, you will become a Christian who doesn't take any action—in short have faith but no works. If this were the case, the contemplative life would not be the gift God has granted to people to know and enjoy God, but a grant just for the privileged who have the luxury to have time to meditate and read. Merton suggests, helpfully I think, that contemplation does not exclude action; it transcends action. Contemplative prayer helps us be attentive to God in our lives—our faith and our work.

So, let us come to the point of it. Christians are called to serve in the name of and for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The outward movement of our faith—whether that's called action, work, the Chart, ministry, mission, evangelism, compassion, kenosis, or acts of mercy, is as much a part of how we come to the sacred center of our lives as any spiritual discipline or participation in the fellowship of a Christian community. Faith that is just inward looking and individualistic is not a Jesus-shaped faith and is for the Christian a faith that will end up sterile, if not dead.

Now, how any church, and specifically DaySpring, effectively organizes or doesn't organize itself to do this work is an important but derivative question. You'll hear in a bit about one such way to gather with other DaySpringers to serve lunch to dozens and dozens of homeless people. And you'll hear us talk about the Chart and all the ways that we are asking you to give some of your time to serve the church and community.

As we do these activities, remember: Our work is an act of prayer. That's the fruit of the contemplative life that grows out of the communal liturgy and daily private prayers. When we are doing the activity of life, everything we do—

when we study—whether it's theology or thermodynamics,

fix lunch—whether it's for homeless people or your third grader,

bathe kids—whether it's bathing them in prayer or in the tub,

pay bills—whether you are writing a tithe check or an electric bill

serve on the Chart—whether it's visiting the elderly and infirm, or sweeping out the sanctuary.

Whatever we do, in everything we do, our faith and our works:

Our prayer is our work and our work is our prayer.

© 2009 by Eric Howell