

# “The Works of Faith”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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## James 2:1-10

*My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please’, while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there’, or, ‘Sit at my feet’, have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?*

*You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.*

## James 2:14-17

*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.*

God. Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, our faith, our lives, all of who we are to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take whatever is within us, whatever distracts us, whatever fills our hearts or our minds with worry or joy. I pray that you would take that this morning, as well as the words we offer in song and in prayer, this reading from the second chapter of James and the words that you've laid upon my heart to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these words and images into the word of God, your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. And let that word do its work in us. Let that word grow in our souls and in our hearts and in our minds, let that word fill our hands and our feet, and let that word be on our tongues as well, that we might become the embodiment of the good news of Jesus Christ, that we might bless others, that we might love our neighbors as ourselves. I ask this in the faithful name of Christ. Amen.

We have a distinct advantage in this service as we sit before these beautiful windows that Elder Ray Lester talked about not too long ago. It says right under the feet of Jesus in the middle behind the cross, "By grace are you saved." And now for millennia, the people of God have always said, "Yes, by grace I am saved. By faith, that's it. I believe and I'm saved, period." The entire New Testament says that except for this one letter from James. Now, I don't have a very accurate recollection of my church history class, but I believe that about 1,700 years ago some bishops got together and decided that they were going to have a vote on which letters and documents would become part of the canon of the New Testament. They started out with the obvious ones, the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, all of those got a majority vote, some of them even probably as high as 70%, and then the Gospel of Thomas came along, and there were questions and doubts and the vote on that was less than 50%, so it got kicked out. Anything written by Paul pretty much made it in. They knew who Paul was. They trusted his writings. They voted them in one after the other. General Electric Power Company. Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Corinthians [laughter].

Hey, I went to seminary. That's how they taught it [laughter]. A few others along the way, Timothy, Peter. And then they came to James. And if I remember correctly-- and like I said, I could be making all of this up. I think that the vote to put James in the Canon was at 50.00001%. It made it by one bishop's vote. And the reason is obvious. Because it says, "Can faith save you?" And the implied response is, "No, it can't." And then at the end of our reading, it says rather succinctly, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." And 49% of the church was horrified that it said that. Faith by itself with no works is dead. So we come to this text with some serious misgivings, as Presbyterians who trust that we are saved by Grace or by faith alone. And we ask what is James up to? What is he trying to get us to understand? What is he saying to us? Is he teaching theology here, or is he trying to speak to a community of faith that has come to love and trust the message of Jesus Christ, but has forgotten how to treat their neighbors? Is it a word written to a community that is able to get along in and among itself, but thinks that its neighbors don't belong in the community? Anyone who's different need not come in. So James goes all the way back to that devotional masterpiece of Leviticus to find a single phrase that he lifts up. And he says, "You would do well to fulfill the royal law of Leviticus 19, love your neighbor as yourself." So there have been two worship services before this one. And I asked the question at both, how many of you use Leviticus as a devotional text? I kid you not, there was one hand raised. I couldn't have planned it any better. One woman at the 9:05 raised her hand and said, "Yes, I read Leviticus along with the other Old Testament lessons as part of my devotion." And I thought, good, at least there's one person in the room who's read it. Because I sure don't read Leviticus as a devotional text. Are you kidding me? Every time I read Leviticus, I think I'm going to you know where. Got mixed clothes. I love crab, no shellfish, on and on and on. I've done everything wrong according to Leviticus.

This week, I decided, all right, I'm going to go look at the passage, the sort of reading where you shall love your neighbor as yourself is embedded. And I was stunned because I think you could actually use parts of Leviticus 19 as a devotional text. It begins by the Lord saying to Moses, "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them," now, listen this is the first thing that God tells Moses to tell the people, "You," the people, "Shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. You shall each revere your mother and your father and shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the Lord." Well, that preaches. That speaks to my heart. I want to be holy before God, and here in Leviticus God speaking through Moses says you are holy because God is holy, and then you start to hear the 10 Commandments sort of ring through. It goes on to say, "Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am the Lord. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare. You shall not gather a grape fallen from the vine. You shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord. You shall not steal, you shall not deal falsely, you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear falsely by name, profaning the name of God: I am the Lord. You shall not defraud your neighbor. You shall not steal. You shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God: I am the Lord. You shall not render an unjust judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great. With justice, you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin. You shall reprove your neighbor or you will incur their guilt. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people. But you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." With that resounding refrain, "I am the Lord," God through Moses speaks to the people and tells us this is how we need to live our lives. And, to be honest, in today's world, I wish I had a platform big enough and knew all the languages of the universe that I could stand upon and simply read this to everyone and then tell them to just go out and make it happen because it seems to me that our world has forgotten these things. First of all, it has forgotten that God alone is Lord, not you, not me, not any of us. God is in charge, not us. And then it tells us how to live with ourselves, our family, our community, our neighbors, and those outside of it, the poor and the alien, as it says. And it wasn't until this morning as I was actually preaching it at the 9:05 that I realized that the third refrain of I am the Lord says when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You

shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes from your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the alien. It wasn't until I was preaching and standing behind the Communion table that I realized that's talking about Communion bread and wine. Don't take it all for yourself, the profits from your company or your salary or whatever it is. Don't use all of it. Save some so that other people can have bread, and people can have wine. In a sense, people can have that Passover meal, which has become transformed into our Lord's Supper. This is one way we care for the poor and the alien.

So after reading this Leviticus text and the I am the Lord refrain that carries on throughout and realizing that it's actually some really good Scripture that we can sort of sink our teeth into as we ask the question, "Okay, God. What do You want me to do? How do you want me to live?" the next thing that came about was me trying to channel some Albert Einstein. What? No laugh? No nothing? Come on [laughter]. Albert Einstein, really? I got my hair all messed up and-- no. I was standing at my whiteboard and this idea, Albert Einstein, comes from - I don't know - the Spirit, I hope. And I write up on the whiteboard  $E$  equals  $MC$  squared, the great equation of the theory of relativity. And as I'm sitting there looking at it, I think, "Can faith save you?" No. Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. So I wrote underneath  $E$  equals  $MC$  squared, faith plus works equals salvation. And that works, right? That's what James is trying to get us to realize, that we need to allow our faith to work itself out in our words and our actions for the benefit of others. But as I sit there holding that equation faith plus works equals salvation - I hate to even say this out loud - I went over and erased salvation, and I wrote the word wholeness. Faith plus works equals wholeness. And then in parenthesis, I added of self and community. When we combine our actions and activities with the faith of Jesus Christ that each of us has, allowing the Spirit that lives within us to come out through our words and our deeds and what we pray for and what we actually do, we make ourselves and our community more whole, more beautiful, more loving, more gracious, more attractive. Like a beautiful bouquet of flowers, each of us doing our thing, when we come together and do it, it's just it's something that we want more of. It has a fragrance of something magical. Now, I wish that I had a catalog of what your work is, but I don't. And to be honest, at times, I'm not even sure what my work is. So I can't stand before you and tell you, "This is the work that you need to do to allow your faith and work to come together for the wholeness of the community of faith, or the wholeness of the world, or the wholeness of Kirkwood, or wherever you draw the boundaries of community." I don't know the answer for you. But I know the equation. Faith plus works equals wholeness for ourselves and our community. And as I was sitting with that, I had a couple things just kind of come to mind. And I may have shared this before because it's something that's happened recently in the life of the church, but a young mom brought her two kids to the preschool one day. They're new to the community. They wanted just to check things out. She wanted to make sure the little kids were comfortable, that they knew the place, and Miss Sheri, and sort of where they were going to be. And as she's down there, she's talking to a volunteer at the desk and says, "Is there a bike rack here for when we ride our bikes from our house to the preschool?" And the volunteer, without blinking, says, "No, not yet. But I'll get you one." If you go down the ramp now to the Jefferson entry, right by the welcome center, at the end of the ramp, there's a nice gravel patch with a bike rack that this volunteer made happen. Why? Because her neighbor was in need. And without batting an eye, said, "I'll pay for it. Just do it. Let's get it done."

Another thing that's very concrete that I want to share was given to me this morning. And given that it's almost stewardship time, I thought, "Why not? This fits together beautifully." So Karen, who I took dinner to her and Scott last night, and was able to see her and talk to her and all those things, after I knew she wasn't going to be here. And I scrambled to get Gene Early and George to be liturgists. This morning, I thought, "I got to get there early. I got to make sure everything's ready for George and for Gene." And I grabbed all the stuff in my inbox, the bulletins, and just kind of picked them up and kept moving. And I noticed a little notecard envelope fell out of my inbox. Now, little notes to pastors on Sunday morning is kind of a 50/50 thing. Do you open it, or do you leave it sealed until Monday? Because little notes can either be wonderful words of blessing, or they can be what we in the ministry call stink bombs [laughter]. And so I just set it there underneath my computer, and I thought, "Okay. I'm just going to leave this and

not worry about it." And I go about getting all the bulletins highlighted and everything situated, and that notecard is sitting there, and I thought, "You know what? I'm grounded enough that if it's something not-- I'll be okay." So I open it up, and I pull it out, and the first thing I see is a blank piece of paper. I'm like, "Huh." And then, I flip it open, and it says, "Dear Dr. Holyan, I just wanted to let you know how wonderful First Pres has been in our lives and the life of our family over the past 25 years. My husband and I have decided to put First Pres in our estate plans. If you'd like to talk about any of the details, let me know."

Faith plus works equals wholeness for generations to come that we don't even know about yet because a couple decided that they were going to put the church in their estate plans. So I don't know. Are you going to help get a bicycle rack somewhere? Are you going to put the church in your estate plan? Are you going to volunteer at All Among Us, the women's shelter for whom we're having a luncheon? Are you going to bring food for Kirk Care? Are you going to teach Logos or Sunday school? Are you going to mentor a confirmation class? On and on and on it goes. But all of us have a work to do, and the invitation for us is to find it and to do it. Amen.