

WHAT FAITH PRODUCES

How do we interpret what the Bible teaches? What goes into our thought process? Part of the process depends on our understanding of the nature of God. The process depends in part on what we have seen others do and in part on how far we have gone in putting to death the old nature -- self. In Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, he told us that our faith (that God has given to us) allows us to respond to God's grace and results in salvation; however, we also saw that there was to be an outcome to it all. God has a mission for each person that is accomplished through actions we take. "We are created in Christ Jesus unto good works."

With as many churches and professing Christians around today we should be abounding in good works throughout the world. In fact, much good is being done by organizations motivated by the love of God. Many more of us understand the basics of the nature of God. We know God is love and yet there is reluctance or inertia associated with turning that love into action. Just understanding (knowing) the nature of God is not sufficient. We are told that the love of God is put into our hearts by the Holy Spirit when we received the Holy Spirit and yet this does not guarantee that we will turn this love into action.

Many times just seeing or hearing about an example of a person who takes action and operates out of love will stimulate us to do likewise. Sometimes we lack imagination or wonder about the appropriateness of taking certain action. Seeing others act gives us the confidence to act also.

Is that all it takes? Many of us understand that God is love, we have seen numerous examples and yet we still do not get involved in expressing our love in concrete terms. Why? Usually, it is because we had rather do something else (typically for ourselves).

Jesus calls on each person who would follow Him to deny himself, take up his cross daily and then follow Him. Unless we get self out of the way, then we will be motivated by what pleases us and even if we help others, we will do so with the consideration of "what's in this for me?" James saw such considerations as leading to partiality.

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as law-breakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a law-breaker. Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!
James 2:8-13

We really need to consider what James said prior to these verses. We tend to treat people on the basis of their outward appearance. Someone in an expensive suit is likely to get more respect and accommodation than a person in blue jeans and a T-shirt. If we fall into that trap, then we are judging and evaluating the worth of an individual on the basis of his clothes. We also do the same things relative to another person's profession, race, nationality, religion, where he lives, etc.

In the first century (and in many parts of the world today), the rich were very rich and the poor, very poor. James was not suggesting we not show respect to the rich. We are to show respect to everyone. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. The issue is what motivates us to show respect. If we respect a rich person simply because he is rich and show no respect to another person simply because he is poor, then James characterized such behavior as sin.

We may argue that showing partiality is just a little sin. However, when we consider the consequences of such action on other people, then we can see that this "little" sin can have serious consequences. If we show partiality to a "rich" person, then we will cause him to conclude that the fact he is rich is important. This can lead that person to trust in his riches and to become prideful. Such attitudes (which are quite natural reactions) hinder people in their spiritual growth and make it difficult for them to really put their trust in God. If we show prejudice against a "poor" person, then we add to his sense of worthlessness that the rest of the world has been reinforcing for years. Such feelings can lead to despair and hopelessness that makes faith ineffective. When faith becomes ineffective, then the person may conclude that even God could not care for someone so worthless.

The alternative is to let the Holy Spirit have control of our lives in such a way to free us from prejudice and partiality. Paul tells us (2 Cor 3:17) "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." This liberty sets us free from the old ways of judging others and we are at liberty to be as God is in showing mercy and grace based on who we are in Christ and not based on the other person's status. Our salvation should matter in the way we live our lives.

We have a tendency to confine the religious areas of our lives to the Church and we operate in the secular world as if the Church didn't exist. This tendency is what leads us to be surprised to find that a particular person is a Christian. Is it reasonable to expect we can "tell the players without a program?" In other words, do Christians need to wear a sign that says "I'm a Christian" so the world will know we belong to Jesus? James doesn't think signs are needed.

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. James 2:14-18

Not everything we call faith is the real thing. If we have the kind of faith that does not result in action, then it is not the faith that leads to salvation. James called it dead faith. The example James used illustrates how ridiculous it is to think that an actionless faith can do anyone any good.

Some will try to confuse the teaching of this passage with "earning God's mercy." This is not the issue. The question here is the genuineness of the faith and the reality of the salvation experience. Many skeptics claim that the salvation experience the Church proclaims is nothing more than some emotional high that is self-induced. For some people, this may be the case. If it is genuine, then there will be results. It will be than lip-service. Genuine saving faith will produce works of faith. Even Jesus said, "By their fruit, ye shall know them." This is exactly by James meant by "I will show you my faith by my works."

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? James 2:19-20

If just believing the facts is all it takes, then the devil would have it made. He knows! Even Abraham's faith was validated in that he took action that proved he believed that God's word is true.

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. James 2:21-26

These verses state loudly and clearly that true Christianity is not an "easy believism." It is not found on "cheap grace." It is not just going to church to learn something that is never applied to daily living. It is, on the other hand, a way of life that brings the love of God to bear on and influence all of life. It is a belief that leads to action. It is really a question of whether the love of God is real in our lives. When we are saved, we are given the love of God in our hearts and it is His love that produces the life-changing results. Putting our faith into action is just an expression of our love -- that is, God's love -- the self-sacrificing kind of love.