

09-06-09

James 2:14-26 (Living with the Tension of a Faith that Saves)

Introduction

Do any of you here this morning know the name “Doug Larson”? If you don’t, Mr. Larson is a writer whose columns appear in newspapers around the US. I can’t claim that I’m deeply familiar with his work...but I have run across enough of his stuff to appreciate his insight—especially when it comes to human nature and American culture. Here are just a few of his observations:ⁱ

- “Life expectancy would grow by leaps and bounds...if green vegetables smelled as good as bacon.”
- “If the English language made any sense, a catastrophe would be an apostrophe with fur.”
- “Accomplishing the impossible only means that the boss will add it to your regular duties.”
- And perhaps most relevant for us today...“If all the cars in the United States were placed end to end... it would probably be Labor Day Weekend.”

And here it is—Labor Day weekend! And rather than being stuck in a traffic jam somewhere...or hanging out at the beach or in the mountains...you’re here—and I’m grateful. I’m grateful that you care enough about your brothers and sisters in Christ to spend a few minutes sharing fellowship with them...and I’m grateful that you care enough about your relationship with God to spend a few minutes offering worship to Him.

- Of course, that’s not to say that those who aren’t here - don’t care about those things. But hey! They didn’t show up today. So let me get you to reach up with your right hand...and give yourself a pat on the back.

For most of us, I suspect, Labor Day Weekend has become primarily a holiday that marks the move from one season to another. It’s the end of summer and the beginning of fall. It’s the end of baseball season (except for the playoffs) and the beginning of football season. It’s the start of a new school year...and a new church year. And so we pull out the barbecue and try to squeeze-in one more day of relaxation...before we get back to work and start putting our noses to the grindstone and our shoulders to the wheel.

- It might do us some good to recall, therefore, that the origins of Labor Day have almost nothing to do with barbecues and back-to-school...and almost everything to do with American workers. Labor Day became a national holiday in 1894...when President Grover Cleveland called for street parades that would exhibit “the strength and esprit de corps of trade and labor organizations.”ⁱⁱ Sounds fairly noble, doesn’t it?
- Most historians note, however, that President Cleveland had violently put down a labor strike just a few months earlier...so the holiday probably had less to do with esprit de corps...and more to do with calming the anger of the unions.ⁱⁱⁱ
- In any case, the fact that many of us get a little free time tomorrow is tied historically to the efforts of the American Labor movement. Eight-hour workdays...safety regulations...insurance and other benefits (and, of course, a day off on the first Monday in September)—all of those are blessings we enjoy because we are workers in the greatest country on earth.

Now I’d be willing to bet that most of us would agree: those blessings come with certain responsibilities. If you want the benefits of being a worker—like insurance or a day off or a paycheck—then you have to do the work. We heard the lesson loud and clear growing up: There’s no such thing as a free lunch. You can’t get something for nothing. Quite frankly, it just wouldn’t seem fair if things worked any other way.

- And yet, I wonder...especially as we look at our passage from James ... whether we’d be willing to apply that same standard to our faith. “What good is it,” James says, “if people claim to have faith but won’t work...or have no deeds? Can such faith save them?” Can you get the benefit without the responsibility? “Faith by itself,” he says, “if it’s not accompanied by works or actions, is dead.”
- What does that mean? And what does it imply for us—people who’ve been called to be workers—not just in school or on the job—but in the eternal kingdom of God?

Sharing My Dilemma

When you get right down to it, I guess that what I'm inviting you to do this morning is to share my dilemma. I'd like you to experience the tension (that I've struggled with for much of my Christian life—and that I feel even more strongly as a pastor) between the 'gift' and the 'call' of the gospel—between faith and works... grace and demand...between the call of Jesus to receive abundant life...and the call of Jesus to take up our cross and follow.

You see, I believe that THE greatest truth of the Christian faith...in fact, the greatest truth of life, the universe and everything...is that God loves us...period. There is nothing we can do (and this is important, too—nothing we need to do) that would make God love us any more. And there is nothing we can do—or need to do—that will make God love us any less.

- Quite simply put: it is all a gift, offered freely and generously by the Father who loves us more than words could ever say. Everything that we have...everything we can do...everything we ever hope to become...all of it is grace.
- And when God sent Jesus, he demonstrated that grace in its deepest and highest and most powerful form. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God declared to each and every one of us: "I want to give you the most amazing, most joyful, most deep-down-peace-filled life you've ever known. In fact, I want to give you life better than you ever dared dream was possible—life lived in my power and my presence. You don't deserve it. You can't earn it. But it's yours... my gift to you...bought and paid for with the body and blood of my Son. All you need to do—in fact, the only thing you can do—is say, 'Yes.'"

That's what the Christian faith is all about...not the issues and arguments that seem to occupy so much of our time and attention. In fact, I'd be inclined to say (along with others)—that if anything—we quite often make it more complicated than it is. We give the impression that it requires something else—some detailed doctrinal belief...some particular set of practices...some collection of political positions or moral standards.

- But none of that is it. Christianity rises and falls on what the British theologian G. K. Chesterton once called "the furious love of God."^{iv} That's why—when we're on our game—we quote that verse from the apostle Paul: For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

AND YET...(Sometimes, I feel like I need to tell people that I've got 'big butt' theology...because it always seems like there's a big 'but' in there somewhere)...AND YET (or but)...that very same passage from the apostle Paul (It's by grace you've been saved...it's the gift of God, not by works)...goes on to say, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:10).

- Somehow...in some way...what we do with the gift matters...and it matters a lot. Receiving grace...or 'getting saved', it seems, is not an end in itself. It's a doorway...that leads us into something else. And the tension—at least for me—is what to make of it when someone seems unwilling to go along for that journey. Again—as James asks—"What good is it...if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them?"

An Aside: My Story

Now, I need to tell you that this is deeply personal for me. Because of experiences I've had along the way, I feel this tension—not just at a 'head' level—but at a 'heart' level, too. When I was in high school...and going through a time of wondering about my faith...I remember reading in my Bible or hearing a sermon about Romans 12:2—"Don't be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." And I came away with a conviction—that if we're followers of Jesus Christ...if we're 'saved'—then there ought to be something different about us.

Problem was, I looked at people in my church...and I wasn't quite sure what the difference was. Oh sure, we came to worship on Sunday morning. (It wasn't always easy to tell if we were happy to be in worship.) But more important than that: it wasn't always easy to tell if we were allowing worship and all the other activities of the Christian life to change us. We didn't seem to be exceptionally kind to one another...or especially holy...or particularly willing to give of ourselves in sacrificial ways.

- And if you'll let me chase a rabbit for just moment: That experience makes me want to ask all of us here today—especially the adults—what difference do our lives show? Because our young people—our children and youth—they are watching. They're looking for evidence that the faith we claim changes us—that it gives us more compassion...that it makes us more willing to serve...that it makes us more like Jesus. And if they don't see that...then, what good is it?

Well as I say, I didn't see much evidence. So I became a Baptist (I was a Methodist before then). I started attending the Baptist church just down the street...where a lot of my friends went. And there, at least, the people brought their Bibles with them to worship. And when the scripture was read, they actually opened their Bibles and followed along. And when the preacher spoke they took notes. They went on mission trips...and they took their youth group to homeless shelters and soup kitchens. There seemed to be a difference...and my faith came alive.

So when I went to college, I was gung-ho. I got involved in the Baptist Student Union the day I walked onto campus. I started doing youth ministry at a local church. I got 'under conviction' about how much "stuff" I owned...so I started selling my music collection and giving the money to missions. I even worked hard to carry that difference over into my devotional life...with praying and studying the Bible and memorizing scripture.

- But then—in an experience I won't bore you with today because I've talked about it on other occasions—God used extreme brokenness to remind me that it wasn't about the 'good works' I was doing. When I was feeling cold and hungry and rejected and poor...(because I was a complete failure as a door-to-door book salesman far away in the great state of Washington)...God showed me here (heart) and not just here (head) that it really is all about grace...that I'm incapable of being good enough to earn His love...which happens to be okay...because I don't have to.

And largely because of that experience (and others like it) I've ended up in professional ministry. Here I am, a pastor. And I like to think that my ministry is focused on God's grace. I pray that when people come in contact with me, the thing they walk away with is a greater awareness of how deeply the Father loves them. AND YET (there's that 'big but' again)...

- I want us to be changed, too. I want us to be different because of that love. And to be honest, I want us to be different in a whole lot of ways.

The Difference a Faith Makes

I want us to be different in the way that we relate to people in need. Our scripture lesson asks, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?"

I want us to be different in the way we think about our theology. Knowing the Bible and having good doctrine is great...but our passage goes on to say, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." Believing the right things isn't enough. Doing the right things matters, too. Even Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven." (Mt. 7:21)

- I want us to be different in the way we handle our money...and our stuff...because we're the kind of people who lay up treasures in heaven...instead of treasure on earth.
- I want us to be different in the way we forgive...because we know how much we've been forgiven.

- I want us to be different in the way we welcome and reach out to people who aren't like us... because we know that—in Christ—the dividing wall of hostility has been broken down.
- I want us to be different in the boldness with which we share our faith...and in the passion with which we worship.

I've got high expectations...all of them rooted firmly in scripture. And the tension arises when I don't see the difference...when we say we have faith—but we don't have lives that show it.

- And at those times, even scripture asks: Can such faith save?

Getting Off the Horns of the Dilemma

For what it's worth, I'm not the only one who's struggled with that tension. Ever since there have been Christian scriptures getting passed from one believer to another...there have been those who have noticed a certain dilemma in the Bible...if not an outright contradiction.

- Paul says in Romans 3:28, "For we maintain that a person is justified by faith, apart from works of the law." But then here's James, saying in 2:24, "You see that people are justified by what they do, and not by faith alone." How are we supposed to handle the apparent discrepancy? What do we do with the tension?

Well, some have opted (more-or-less) to ignore James entirely. Very early in the history of the church, there was even some question about whether James should be in the Bible at all...at least in part because of this seeming disagreement with Paul about faith and works. Even the great reformer, Martin Luther (whose theological credentials were pretty solid) wrote that the book of James was "a right straw-y epistle."

Others—especially those who pay closer attention to fine points of biblical interpretation—point out that when Paul and James seem to disagree about faith and works, they're really talking about different things.

- When Paul talks about 'works,' he's talking about things we do for the express purpose of 'earning' salvation. He was writing to Jews...many of whom apparently thought—that just because they did certain things (like get circumcised and attend synagogue and keep dietary laws) just because of things like that, they racked up 'brownie points' with God. They deserved God's favor.
- But when James talks about 'works,' he's talking about things that we do as an overflow of having been given God's favor. It's not that we're trying to earn anything from God. We simply know how good he's been to us...and the things that we do as a result are an expression of our gratitude. And—for James, at least—where there is no gratitude expressed...there is no gift received.

So we could say that Paul is talking about the root of salvation...how we become a believer...and James is talking about the fruit of salvation...how we behave like a believer. There's not a contradiction between the two at all.

- However, we are still left to wonder: What about someone who says they've become a believer...but who doesn't behave like one. What if they've got the root but there is no fruit? Is that person still saved?

Recently, I've come across some writers who've helped me—at least, I think they've helped me—by suggesting that we might ease the tension...by thinking a little more carefully about what it really means to 'be saved.' Sometimes, you see, we talk as though the whole point of the gospel (the goal of grace or the end result of salvation) is to get your soul into heaven when you die.

- And if that's what salvation is all about—if it's really just 'getting your ticket stamped for glory'—then you can understand why some people might feel like Christian living is of secondary importance. You can understand how people might say, "Well...I am saved by grace, right? I'm going to heaven when I die. So maybe anything else—any transformation or any difference in my life—is just icing on the cake."

But what if salvation is about more...than heaven when we die? What if there's the work that God has done for us (forgiving our sin through Christ, making us his children, promising us a home in heaven)...but there's also the work that God is doing in us^v (changing our hearts and minds and lives so that they more closely resemble the heart and mind and life of Jesus)? One preacher I've read puts it like this:

- "It's as if we've taken what is—for Jesus—a starting line and turned it into a finish line...Maybe salvation isn't something we 'get' and then consider the option of joining God in his grand mission. Maybe salvation is what we experience and spread in the process of joining God in his grand mission...The real issue isn't an emotional crisis or the experience of being 'saved' or 'born again' ...The issue is following Jesus, joining him in his adventure and mission of saving the world and expressing God's love."^{vi}

Does that resolve the tension? Well...maybe and maybe not. It does make our 'work' (our transformation into the image of Christ) a more integrated part of the Christian life, and not just an add-on. But there are still some challenges to think through—both biblical and theological. So for the time being, I'm still working on it.

Conclusion: Living in the Tension

And in the end, maybe that's a good thing. Maybe we're supposed to feel some tension...and learn how to live in it, rather than trying to get away from it. Maybe scripture comes to us in the way it does—through Paul's message of grace and James' message of works—to remind us that there is an ebb and flow in life with God:

- Sometimes we need to be reminded that we are loved...that when we've tried as hard as we can, and our lives still aren't as holy or joyful or filled-with-peace as we want them to...that's okay. Because ultimately, it's not about what we do; it's about what God has done...and what He's done is offer us life...as a free gift.
- Other times we need to be reminded not to take that gift for granted. "God loves us enough to accept us as we are," someone said. "But he loves us too much to leave us as we are." He wants to make us like Jesus...so that through us, His kingdom comes and His will gets done on earth as it is in heaven.

Which reminder do you need today?

May God help us live in the tension...and hold-on tightly to the faith that saves. Let us pray...

ⁱ <http://www.quotesdaddy.com/author/Doug+Larson>.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.dol.gov/opa/aboutdol/laborday.htm>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.slate.com/id/2106168/>.

^{iv} Quoted by Brennan Manning in *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. (Multnomah Books, 1990), p. 18.

^v This way of putting things comes from Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Zondervan, 2005), p. 108.

^{vi} Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (Jossey-Bass, pp. 130-32).