

“Walking the Way of Faith: The Partnership of Faith and Works”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: October 27, 2024



In order to talk about faith and works, it helps to start with a little history lesson . . . there was a dramatic shift that took place in the church’s perspective about 250 years ago.

Prior to that time, the prominent question about faith was “how do I walk faithfully with God?”

But about 250 years ago, the burning question about faith shifted from “how do I walk faithfully with God?” to “what does it take to be saved?”

It is not surprising, of course, that humanity would wonder about salvation.

If you are familiar with the writings of Paul and of James, you will know that there has always been a question about salvation.

But this 250 year old shift was seismic because it re-positioned salvation from being AN issue to being THE issue.

In one fell swoop, this shift pulled our primary focus away from God and onto ourselves, and it transformed our primary pursuit from a relationship with God to a transaction for ourselves.

Can you hear the shift?

Instead of being interested in how we might partner with the sovereign God, we have become distracted by what is in it for us. Like our forbearers in Eden, we are following the pattern of taking center stage.

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Long ago, the Apostles James and Paul weighed in on this question of salvation.

Paul answers the question of “who gets saved?” with some wonderful news.

Paul puts it simply — it is our faith in God alone that saves us.

Our works cannot save us. Our deeds cannot save us.

All that is needed is faith.

Paul seems to suggest that all we have to do is say the words, “I believe in Jesus Christ” and we are good to go.

At which point we all might collectively expel a huge sigh of relief and say: “Whew! I sure am glad that was so easy.”

But this morning, we hear James saying . . . not . . . so . . . fast.

Now James agrees with Paul that faith in Jesus is critical.

But James suggests that it cannot simply end there.

James asserts that it cannot simply end with ourselves.

James is not saying that we have to do works to be saved.

But James is saying that faith does not find true expression in the phrase “I believe in Jesus Christ.”

The true expression of faith is made known in the life of the believer.

True faith is something we see.

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Saint Augustine put it this way: “the faith that saves is the faith that goes to work.”¹
The faith that saves . . . is the faith that goes to work.

We don’t have to look any further than Jesus to see a faith that goes to work.

Pause just a minute to think about a story in the Bible that relates to Jesus as an adult. You can even think of our first reading this morning.
How do you envision Jesus? . . .

When I think of Jesus, Jesus is doing something. Jesus is active in the world. His faith is one that goes to work.
Jesus listens.
Jesus calms people and calms storms.
Jesus teaches.
Jesus heals and resurrects.
Jesus weeps.
Jesus corrects.
Jesus notices the unnoticed.
Jesus lovingly gives.

One of the things that I love most about Jesus is how interruptible He is.
We see Jesus going to check on the daughter of a synagogue leader who is said to be dead . . . but on the way, He pauses to tend to a hemorrhaging woman who was healed when she touched His robe.
We see Jesus eating dinner with a very important religious leader yet He makes room for a woman who wants to wash His feet with her tears and her hair as a statement of gratitude — all while Jesus’ host wants to make fun of Him.
We watch as Jesus speaks truth to power.
We watch as He speaks truth in love.
We watch Him give in every possible way to those around Him.
Sometimes it is to the rich, sometimes it is to the poor.
Sometimes it is with people He knows well, sometimes it is with people He knows hate Him.
To James’ earlier point, Jesus does not show partiality.
We watch Jesus move in love; listen in love; talk in love; heal in love; answer questions in love; spend time with sinners in love, pray to God in love; teach a group of clueless disciples in love; go to the cross in love; and pass through death in love to show us the path of new life.
It is little wonder that scholars call all of this the saving work of Jesus.
All of these acts of love are Jesus’ works of faith.

¹ Quoted by Martha L. Moore-Keish in *James*, Belief Theological Commentary on the Bible, 102.

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We watch Jesus living out the command to love God, love our neighbors and love ourselves. The Hebrew word for this kind of love is “ahava.” Embedded in “ahava” is the Hebrew word “hav” which means “to give.”² To love means to give. Jesus shows us the generous way that God loves.

Jesus is literally a man on a mission. That is true for when He was walking our earth, and it is still true today.

And we are called to live in the same way.

We are called to follow God’s way, each day.

We are called to reclaim the question — “how do I walk faithfully with God?”

When I was younger, I used to ask God to help me with all that I had planned for a day. If God would just bless what I had planned, all would be fine.

I hope you can hear that I was opting for transaction rather than relationship.

I was in charge if God would just come along and lend aid when needed.

As I have aged, I have been trying to live more relationally, to live more in the Spirit than in my own strength. Now I ask God to guide me in the works that God has planned for me, to watch for what God might want to be doing.

I ask God to open me to interruptions, to open me to thinking in new ways about people and situations, to be generous with others.. I may still ask God to bless what is ahead of me, but it is because of our relationship not the transactional need.

Can we together move toward faith and works and to collectively hold the question anew — “how do we walk faithfully with God?”

² ² <https://www.messianicbible.com/feature/love-and-the-hebrew-language/>