

“This Epistle of Straw: 1) Faith and Works”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “So faith by itself, if it has no works is dead” (James 2:17).

The month of June (along with May) has traditionally been the occasion for graduation exercises for high schools, colleges and universities, and graduate schools as well. One of the characteristics of these graduation services is that they furnish an occasion for commencement addresses and for Baccalaureate sermons as well.

Through the years commencement addresses have at times provided a remarkable forum for some very powerful statements. In the years following World War II Winston Churchill, speaking at the graduation ceremonies at Fulton College in Missouri, spoke of what he called “an iron curtain” that had been drawn by the Soviet Regime in Eastern Europe. In 1947 General George Marshall, in addressing the graduates of Harvard University, laid out a proposal for rebuilding Western Europe after World War II, a program later referred to as “The Marshall Plan.” In 1978 the great Soviet dissenter Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn gave a powerful address at Harvard University entitled “A World Torn Apart,” in which he spoke of the threat of “spiritual exhaustion” facing the West.

In recent years I have noted with interest that many schools have moved toward speakers who are entertainers or celebrities. One of the graduation speakers at Harvard two years ago was the comedian Will Farrell. This year Jodie Foster spoke at Yale.

One of my favorite commencement addresses was given by the late night talk show host Conan O'Brien, who is a graduate of Harvard, in which he assured the graduates that they need not worry that the college would forget them. He assured them that the development departments would hound them for the rest of their lives. He pointed out that Harvard had just raised \$3 billion dollars. Apparently they started with their alumni directory under the "A's". O'Brien observed that by the time they had gotten through the "B's" they had raised the money. One night, he reported, they called his home, asking for money. He told them he had just read that they had raised \$3 billion dollars. "Why do you need my money?" he asked. "Oh, we don't need it," the caller replied. "We just want it." Frightening!

I like what the speaker this year at Yale University said. He noted that he was sorry that Osama bin Laden had not attended Yale. He went on to say that had bin Laden attended Yale the development department would have found him by now.

I.

Both the Old and New Testament contain "Wisdom Books" that, like commencement speeches, speak practical words of wisdom to the faithful. The Book of Proverbs is such a book. The Book of James is one as well.

The Book of James has always been surrounded by a storm of controversy. One controversy centers on the author of the Book. In the first verse of the first chapter we read: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (James 1:1). The ancient church held that the author was James, the brother of Jesus and a "pillar" in the early church. In more recent times scholars have questioned in fact whether the brother of Jesus was the author of the book, although there is a great deal of credibility for that assertion.

A second controversy centered on the content of the book and whether that content was consistent with the teachings of Paul and Jesus. That conflict was present in the early church, but by the time of the Protestant Reformation of the Sixteenth Century the storm had become a hurricane. Martin Luther called the Book of James "an epistle of straw." He believed that the Book of James taught "salvation by works" and Luther wanted it removed from the New Testament canon.

In recent years the Book of James has come under a weight of criticism for other reasons. Some see it today as one of the most inflammatory books of the New Testament in that he tends to pit the rich against the poor and serves as a critical reminder of the way that social distinctions undermine the effectiveness of the church.

Over the next four weeks we will look again at the Book of James and four of the themes that are contained within it: 1) The Relationship between "Faith" and Works;" 2) The Power of the Tongue; 3) Understanding the Will of God; 4) The Peril of Privilege.

So, first the relationship between "Faith" and "Works."

II.

The Book of James contains a profound insight into the intimate relationship between “Faith” and “Works.” Christians, according to the Book of James are called to be ‘doers of the word and not hearers only’ (James 1:22). That is to say, the Book of James places a great deal of emphasis on the Christian life. “Faith without works,” James insists, “is dead.”

Now, it is not hard to see Martin Luther’s discomfort with this book. Luther fought hard against the abuses in the medieval church with its emphasis on the selling of indulgences, pilgrimages to holy places, and other human means to ensure one’s relationship with God. Luther, along with the Apostle Paul, insisted that salvation is by grace. We cannot earn it with our works. Luther’s haunting question was this: “If men and women can earn their own salvation, then why did Christ have to die.”

Some years ago I came across a book by a Latin American theologian by the name of Jan Sobrino. The title of the book is *Theology at the Crossroads*. Sobrino makes the point that in the North American church we have placed a great deal of emphasis on orthodoxy (i.e. right belief) and not as much on orthopraxy (i.e. right action). For many years, notes Sobrino, the church struggled hard to understand the relationship between Jesus and God. Was Jesus of the “same substance” with God or was Jesus of “like substance.” Now these are important issues, but Sobrino’s point is that they miss the heart of the New Testament. The call of the New Testament was to follow Jesus. You see a person can believe all the right things about Jesus and not really follow Jesus.

Following Jesus, however, takes us into a different realm. It has to do with the association with those who are “down and out”--street people, people with alcohol and drug problems, people with mental illness. These are the ones that Jesus called the “least of these.”

That is why when I think about the people whom I admire the most, they tend to be people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Albert Schweitzer, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Mother Theresa. These are people that did not just talk about their faith. They lived it!

So, the Book of James has a point. Faith without works is dead!

III.

But, if it is true that faith without works is dead, it is equally true that works without faith are dead. Throughout the history of the church we have seen numerous occasions where individuals sought to substitute the doing of good deeds for authentic faith in God and Christ. Jesus certainly came face to face with that. The Judaism of his day was a cold, hard attempt to observe the Law of Moses and to make that law the essence of religion.

But, Jesus taught a higher righteousness. In the Sermon on the Mount he reminded his hearers that true righteousness is not just refraining from killing, but anger as well. It is not just keeping the sanction against adultery, but it has to do with purity of thought as well. It has to do

with loving the enemy, praying for those who persecute you, of going the second mile. That is to say, Jesus always warned us against the notion of pretending we are righteous, when we are not.

Recently, I came across a book by Harvey Cox, who has for a number of years taught at the Divinity School at Harvard University. The title of the Book is *When Jesus Came to Harvard*. It came out of a class that Cox taught at the University, "Jesus and the Moral Life." Cox began teaching the class in the 1980s and designed it for "anyone dissatisfied with moralistic fundamentalism" as well as "do your own thing relativism." The class became so popular that it began to draw between 800 and 900 students and had to be moved to Memorial Hall, a venue usually reserved for rock bands and symphony concerts. The class drew Jewish and Muslim students as well as Christians, even agnostics and atheists who were able to see how ethical and moral issues raised in the gospel could apply to their own lives.

In the classes Cox talked to students about the things that were on their minds: issues like money, paying off student loans, choices in relationships and marriage, sexual intimacy, peer pressure, and the use of drugs.

Cox thinks we have underestimated our young people, and I agree. They are filled with cynicism and self-resentment, yet they cannot help but imagine that there is more to life than just getting ahead, making money, and living in big houses.

The Book of James says that we are called to be "doers of the word and not hearers only."

Maybe we ought to make that our motto for awhile.