

# biblestudy: february 2018

Belton Joyner, Jr.

Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

## February 4, 2018 Text: James 2:14-26 “Faith Without Works is Dead”

Some of you have heard me speak or write about a church I used to pass as I drove from Raleigh to Fayetteville. That congregation had a large outdoor bulletin board that carried an emphatic message every Monday: “Seven saved yesterday” or “Three saved yesterday” or “Nine saved yesterday.” The family of faith in that congregation may not have paid much attention to this week’s study text.

James is saying that you can’t say much about faith (about “getting saved”) until you see what happens when you go back to work on Monday, when you get to school on Wednesday, when you go shopping on Friday. “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:17). A Sunday profession of faith is important, very important, but the measure of that faith is in what happens next.

When I was in what our Sunday School called “the Junior Department” (fourth, fifth, sixth grades), there was a large banner hanging in our assembly room. It was the Junior Department motto: “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only...” (James 1:22). Often, we would recite that verse before we headed to our individual classes. Funny, isn’t it, that I remember that some seventy years later!

Martin Luther was afraid that this emphasis on “good works” might distract from teaching about salvation by faith alone. He called the Epistle of James an “epistle of straw.” He was writing in a time when some church leaders seem to be claiming that salvation could come from

good works, especially generous giving to the church treasury. No wonder Luther got so upset! Maybe it would have helped if he reversed the wording of the text and recognized that “works without faith are dead.”

Most students of the Bible feel that this epistle was written around thirty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps the author was kin to Jesus (Mark 6:3). Perhaps he himself had not always been a believer (John 7:5). Perhaps he became devout after the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:14). Perhaps he was a leading spokesperson in the early church (Galatians 1:19, Acts 15:13). Any of this—or all of this—makes James someone who has walked the uncertain walk that each of us does, and yet someone who surprisingly sees fruit growing out of the journey of faith.

### What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Top 10 United Methodist Beliefs*, (Abingdon Press), Don Adams wrote: “Works that are part of the process of repentance have no merit to save, but they can serve as evidence of a grace-enabled desire to walk in faithfulness.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord, Giver of faith, work that faith in my heart so it produces love and justice and peace...”

## February 11, 2018 Text: James 3:1-12 “A Disciplined Faith”

As I start looking at this week’s text, I am acutely aware that many, if not most, of the persons who read this are themselves teachers in the church’s educational ministry. Yet, here is James proclaiming that teachers of all people should be super careful because teachers are held to a higher standard of accountability (James 3:1). Oops! Can I get someone to substitute for me this week?

When I read on down into the next verses, I realize that James is addressing not just those who stand in front of a class and talk; James is writing of anyone who instructs. This includes the parent who teaches a child how to handle difficult relationships by the way the parent handles difficult relationships. This includes the driver who teaches passengers that it is okay to cheat as long as you don’t get caught, a lesson taught by driving 80 in a 55 mph zone. This includes the person who instructs others that truth is not important by twisting facts to make himself or herself look good. This includes the diner whose life is teaching when the diner tells the cashier “You gave me too much change.”

Indeed, James is clear in that sometimes our lives are teaching good things; sometimes the same lives are teaching bad things (James 3:10). What we say, what we speak—both verbally and by the way we act—has the potential of doing great good or doing great harm (James 3:5-6). The tongue—such a small muscle!—can run amuck

and cause great damage (James 3:8) and it can also be a great blessing (James 3:9).

It is tempting to think that what I say or do matters little in the grand scheme of things. James disagrees with that self-perception (James 3:5). The truth is that we may not even be aware of the forest fire of harm we have set with just the small flame of speaking wrong of someone, cheating just a little on our tax, becoming casual in our stereotyping the poor, letting our commitment to a tithe slip “just this month,” and so forth.

None of it seems like such a big deal at the time, but when the crop comes in, we are surprised that our salt water pond produces salt water. Calling it “fresh water” does not make it fresh water (James 3:12b). This week’s lesson is counsel to be disciplined in the little things.

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Homer Noley (*First White Frost*, Abingdon) quotes Peter Jones as saying, “...I would be almost persuaded to become a Christian, but when I looked at the conducts of (some) of those who were called Christian...I fell back again to my old superstitions.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Guard my tongue, O Lord...”

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February 18, 2018 Text: Acts 9:36-43, “Faithful Disciples”

There are multiple issues that emerge in this week’s study text: The coming to life of a dead woman (Acts 9:41), the account of that woman’s generosity (Acts 9:36), the willingness of Peter to hike a quick dozen miles from Lydda to Joppa (Acts 9:38-39), the parallels with other New Testament accounts of an upper room (Acts 9:39, Luke 22:12, Acts 1:13, Acts 20:8), the comparison of two healings to life (Acts 9:40, Mark 5:41), John Wesley’s wondering if Dorcas would be pleased to be called back to live in this world (Wesley, Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament), and so forth.

However, I want to ponder with you another dimension of this account: the willingness of the disciples in Joppa to ask for help. Did they want Peter to conduct an appropriate service of burial? Did they hope that Peter could comfort the grief-stricken mourners? Did they think Peter might have a suggestion for someone to succeed Dorcas in her charity work? Did they seek the honor of having this well-known disciple come to their community? Or, did they really hope that Peter would be able to “pray up” a miracle of a return to life for Dorcas? The text does not tell us.

What the text does tell us, however, is that they were willing to ask Peter to come. We often think of someone’s willingness to help as that person’s spiritual gift. Perhaps it is also a spiritual gift to be willing to acknowledge one’s own need for help. Of course, asking for help maybe an expression of an unhealthy dependency, but it is more likely

a sound expression of our awareness that we are incomplete without one another. As John Donne wrote, “No man is an island entire of itself...”

What happened that day in Joppa took place because the disciples there were willing to seek out Peter. When was the last time you asked someone to pray for you? When was the last time you asked a companion Christian for spiritual advice? When was the last time you asked someone to walk beside you during a tough time in life? When was the last time you asked another believer to share her or his insights about a passage of Scripture? When was the last time you asked a young Christian or a mature saint to share perspective on some current issue? When was the last time you were willing to ask for help?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Granger E. Westberg has written (*Good Grief*, Fortress Press): “People of faith do not just suddenly get that way. Like the athlete who must stay in training, these people are always in training for whatever may come at any time.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Gracious God, grant me such genuineness of humility that I am willing to seek the gifts of others...”

February 25, 2018 Text: 1 Timothy 6:11-21 “The Good Fight of Faith”

The other day I passed a church outdoor sign that read “We are the perfect church for people who are not.” Another congregation put this notice before the passing traffic: “Wanted: More Sinners.” And I have a pastor friend who insists on wearing jeans and a polo shirt as he leads worship because he wants to communicate “Come as you are.” It is one thing to “come as you are,” but it is another thing to “stay as you are.” The Gospel is an invitation to change.

Just before these study verses, Paul has been writing about how the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10) and then he says, “Shun all this!” (1 Timothy 6:11) You’d have to say that Paul does not sugarcoat the faith journey. In just this handful of verses he uses words like “shun” (v. 11), “fight” (v. 12), “charge” (v. 13), “keep the commandment without spot” (v. 14), “unapproachable” (v. 16), “uncertainty” (v. 17), “guard” (v. 20), and “avoid” (v. 20). In light of that, it would be false advertising for a church to promote an easy prosperity.

The word translated “fight” in 1 Timothy 6:12 is agōnizōmai. Do you see in that the English word “agonize”? This faith walk is going to be a struggle! This faith walk is going to encounter opposition! This faith walk is tough sledding. Why would anyone bother? Look at 1 Timothy 6:19 and there is the hint of an answer: “so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.” In one of the verses of Charles Wesley’s hymn “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” (one of the verses we

usually don’t sing; see 58 in United Methodist Hymnal), Wesley penned this description of his conversion: “...my second, real, living life I then began to live.”

Seeing an elderly saint die in peace invites us to believe that the faith struggle is a good thing. Seeing some injustices broken down so all God’s children are treated fairly invites us to believe that the faith struggle is a good thing. Seeing a broken addict find a new beginning because a congregation said “Welcome” is an invitation to us to believe that the faith struggle is a good thing.

Do you remember when Radio Shack’s motto proclaimed “You’ve got questions? We’ve got answers!” Perhaps the church should advertise: “You have questions? So do we. Come on in and let’s struggle with them together!”

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Japanese Contributions to Christian Theology* (Westminster), Carl Michalson wrote: “To look persistently to relations with others for deliverance from nothingness of life is futile because these others are immersed as we are in nature and infected as we are with culture.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God, You are in my struggle...”

The next time you are washing your hands and complain because the water temperature isn’t just how you like it, think about how things used to be. Here are some facts about the 1500s:

Most people got married in June because they took their yearly bath in May and still smelled pretty good by June. However, they were starting to smell so brides carried a bouquet of flowers to hide the body odor. Hence the custom today of carrying a bouquet when getting married.

Houses had thatched roofs-thick straw-piled high, with no wood underneath. It was the only place for animals to get warm, so all the dogs, cats and other small animals (mice, bugs) lived in the roof. When it rained it became slippery and sometimes the animals would slip and fall off the roof. Hence the saying “It’s raining cats and dogs.”

The wealthy had slate floors that would get slippery in the winter when wet, so they spread thresh (straw) on the floor to help keep their footing. As the winter wore on, they kept adding more thresh until when you opened the door it would all start slipping outside. A piece of wood was placed in the entranceway. Hence the saying a “thresh hold.”

In those old days, they cooked in the kitchen with a big kettle that always hung over the fire. Every day they lit the fire and added things to the pot. They ate mostly vegetables and did not get much meat. They would eat the stew for dinner, leaving leftovers in the pot to get cold overnight and then start over the next day. Sometimes the stew had food in it that had been there for quite a while. Hence the rhyme, “Peas porridge hot, peas porridge cold, peas porridge in the pot nine days old.”

Those with money had plates made of pewter. Food with high acid content caused some of the lead to leach onto the food, causing lead poisoning and death. This happened most often with tomatoes, so for the next 400 years or so, tomatoes were considered poisonous.

Bread was divided according to status. Workers got the burnt bottom of the loaf, the family got the middle, and guests got the top, or “upper crust.”

Whoever said that History was boring?