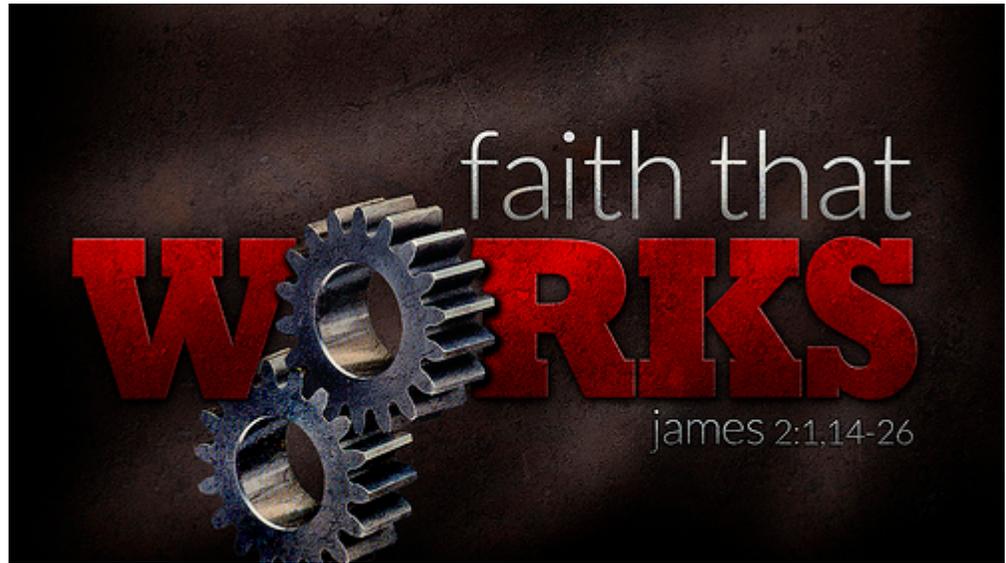


Very early Christian tradition says Jesus' brother James wrote today's epistle lesson. The consensus among New Testament scholars today is that someone from the Church in Jerusalem after James had died wrote the Book of James using his



leader's name. Either way, though, as learned opinion goes, what we read in James reflects James' perspective and teaching.

Jesus DID have a younger brother named James. Mark (6:3) lists Jesus' family members by reporting what people in his home town said of him. "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?"

This scripture passage is a challenge to those who believe that Jesus' mother was forever a virgin. "These siblings have to have been Joseph's children by a previous marriage," they reason.

Well, let's ignore THOSE distractions and think about who James was, besides the next-younger brother to the Messiah. Scripture makes plain this James was NOT one of Jesus' 12 apostles. Instead, James became a follower of his older brother after Jesus' resurrection.

The apostle Paul tells us James was visited by the risen Christ when he appeared to "Peter, the 500, to James, and all the apostles." I had always assumed this report from First Corinthians (15:5-8) was James the brother of John and thus one of the so-called "Sons of Thunder." Instead, though, this James was "Brother of the Creator."

One of my preaching heroes, a Lutheran pastor from Seattle named Edward Markquart, teased out the story of James. The New Testament makes clear that Jesus brother James became a major figure in the very early Christian Church. James was the head of the Mother Church in Jerusalem. He's listed first in Galatians (2:9) AHEAD of Peter and John, making him the senior bishop of the first church, if there had been such a thing back then.

If you scour the Book of Acts you will discover James at the center of many events involving either Peter or Paul, if those events occurred in or connected with Jerusalem. A secular historian, Josephus, writing at the time, says James, the brother of Jesus was stoned by order of the Sanhedrin in 62 CE. The only other of Jesus' disciples whose death Josephus reported was Simon Peter's. In other words, Jesus' brother James was a VIP in the founding of Christianity. And he lived on 30 years or so after Jesus' resurrection. This is the person whose perspective is reflected in our epistle lesson today.

Ironically, despite this close connection to Christ Jesus, the Book of James almost was NOT included in the canon of scripture. Why? The whole book only mentions Christ Jesus twice, and the text doesn't cover any of the topics deemed most important in Christian faith: sin, atonement, redemption, baptism, and the like. None of those things.

Instead, James insists that worship alone will not suffice. James argues today that our actions, our charitable acts of love, are what is essential.

Does James say our actions alone are what "save" us? Definitely not. But he's very clear that, without putting our faith into action, our beliefs and our worship are "worthless." That's James' word, "worthless," without value or merit.

Martin Luther didn't like the Book of James, particularly the part we heard today. Wanting to be assured of his eternal salvation, Martin channeled St. Paul by asserting that by grace alone, by God's actions not ours, we are "saved."

Can't you envision James writing his letter as a corrective to Paul's views about works versus faith? Or rather, as a corrective to how people might have mistakenly INTERPRETED Paul: "If we can't do anything to save ourselves," they might have reasoned, "why help those in need? We'd better show God how much we love him by worshiping him a lot."

"No," James says, "worship is worthless unless it inspires us to help those in need." James advocates the same thing as the ancient prophets: show mercy and compassion to each other, love justice, and care for those who cannot care for themselves. James says God has "implanted [his] word" deep within us. And, James says, God's implanted word leads us to do the same thing that Jesus taught with his summary of the Law: "Love God and love others as if they were one of our family, one of our tribe, ourselves."

"BUT," **Paul** reminds us, "good works alone, charity alone, are not enough."

So now we see the big picture of why the Bible includes James' book. We need both James' and Paul's input. And really, if we drill way down, both James and Paul say the same thing, but from

different ends. Once again, the answer to the either/or question of whether works or faith saves us is “YES.” We need both; one without the other is “worthless.”

I know YOU know James’ answer: individually and collectively we live our faith each time we help someone in need in Jesus’ name. Church of the Resurrection has an impressive list of “works,” as do each of you.

I know, too, that YOU know Paul’s answer: You live your faith each time you show up for worship, each time you pray, each time you sing praise to our creator and savior.

These two halves of our Christian life—faith and works—are an unbroken circle, one leading to the other and back again. In first century Palestine and Asia Minor where James and Paul told others about Christ Jesus, people were more prone to worship God than to help others not of their family who were in need.

“Help them,” Jesus said, “and you help me. Love them,” Jesus implied, “and you show your love for me.”

Today, at least in our culture, things are more likely to be the other way around. “I’ll help someone else,” I might decide, “because I’m a good person or because THEY are a good person and deserve my help.” And we try to teach our children and grandchildren to be good people by teaching them to help others. What we need to teach them, James tell us, is that the urge to do good, the desire to be “good people” is God’s word planted deep within us.