

We Are the Church

Part Seven: Equip People with a Faith that Works

Matthew 28:18-20

1. Faith does work.

- *Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9; 3:12*

- Faith that works is practical

2. Faith that works.

- *Ephesians 2:8-10*

- Faith that works must be practiced

3. Faith and works.

- *James 2:14-26; 2:8*

- Both faith and practice

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I'm sure there are many of us who use a steps-tracking device, whether an app on your phone or a device or watch on your wrist.

These devices hit their peak a couple years ago, but they continue to be a helpful tool for people who desire to be fit. They count your steps, give you stats on your heart rate, sleeping habits, and more. They're billed as a great way to get healthier and maybe lose weight in the process...well – maybe not. A recent study² claims that the users of these devices lost *less* weight than people who did *not* use them.

And it turns out the problem may not be the devices; it might be the people wearing them. The lead author of the study put it this way: "These technologies are focused on physical activity, like taking steps and getting your heart rate up. [But then the wearers of these devices] would say, 'Oh, I exercised a lot today, now I can eat more.' And they might eat more than they otherwise would have." As a result, the researcher concluded, "It doesn't look like (this) technology will make that big of a difference."

An article on NPR noted, "Ultimately these devices are most effective³ when the people using them are already dedicated to tracking their fitness. People who are less motivated might not get the same results."

In other words, it doesn't matter how much you *believe* what the product promises; just wearing the device isn't enough to bring about the necessary change. *You* are going to have to be the one to determine whether or not you are going to put it to good use, by changing your attitudes and actions.

That is kind of like spiritual growth for the Christian. Every Christian is expected to grow in their faith, but no matter how much you may *say* you believe in Christ, just going to church or Bible Study is not going to bring about the desired change and growth in your life. You've got to work in obedience to God's Word and the Spirit, so that your attitudes and actions actually *prove* what you say you believe.

¹ Based on a Bible Study by Francis Dixon, "Series 15, Study 2, *Andrew: Bringing Others to Jesus*," www.wordsoflife.co.uk

² *Weight Loss On Your Wrist? Fitness Trackers May Not Help* Erin Ross - <http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/09/20/494631423/weight-loss-on-your-wrist-fitness-trackers-may-not-help>

³ *Wearable Devices and Health Behavior Change* Mitesh S. Patel, MD, MBA, MS
<http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2089651>

That's the point of what we are going to look at today in this part of our series called, "We Are the Church," exploring some of the ways that we continue to be the church, even though we temporarily can't all meet together in one place yet. Regardless, God expects us to maintain our unity in Christ and not give up working to accomplish God's mission. Our mission as a church is really pretty simply stated, and it encompasses everything we do here. Our mission, if you don't know it, is:

Introduce People to Jesus Christ

Equip People with a Faith that Works

Live as People with Purpose.

Last week we looked at the first part of that statement about introducing people to Jesus.

That's the most important thing we are to accomplish as Christians, and God wants us to grow in our faith so that we can do *that* better and better. We equip people with a faith that works.

We get this from a very important statement that Jesus made to his disciples, and to us, after he was crucified, buried, and resurrected, and before he ascended into heaven until he returns one day. We find it in Matthew 28:18-20. It has been called "The Great Commission," because it is Christ's commission *to* us and his commissioning *of* us – he commands us and authorizes us to carry this out until he comes again. This is what it says:

"Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'" (Matthew 28:18-20, niv)

The first half of that commission is that we are to go anywhere and everywhere to make disciples, baptizing people into faith in Christ. That is where we get the directive in our mission to "Introduce people to Jesus Christ." But notice that we are to do more than just help people make decisions for Christ; we want to see people become *disciples of Christ*; that is, we want to do all we can to help people grow in their faith. And so we have the second part of our tri-priority mission, "Equip people with a faith that works" – making disciples and teaching people to grow in their faith.

We have chosen the words of this statement intentionally too, because they actually have a double meaning.

Let me explain, and as I do, I'm praying that the Holy Spirit will point out to you whatever may be lacking in your faith.

So here is what we mean by that statement that our mission is to equip people with a faith that works: First...

1. Faith *does* work.

Those of us who have put our faith in Christ have learned that faith really *does* work, doesn't it!?

The Bible says this about our relationship to God:

“But God is so rich in mercy; he loved us so much that even though we were spiritually dead and doomed by our sins, he gave us back our lives again when he raised Christ from the dead—only by his undeserved favor have we ever been saved.” (Ephesians 2:4-5, tlb)

Our faith is in what *that* says; because God loves us so very much, he has made a way, through his Son Jesus, for us to have life. That's not something we can generate; it is simply faith in what God has done for us:

“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.” (Ephesians 2:8-9, niv)

And so, because of that, we have this new, dynamic, life-transforming relationship with God through our faith in Christ:

“In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” (Ephesians 3:12, niv)

This faith works because we are saved into a relationship with God himself, and we can talk to him in prayer about anything and know he will take care of us. As a result of faith, we see many, many times in the Gospels that Jesus was able to work in people's lives, restoring their hope, their sight, their strength, providing healing and wisdom and power – all because they had faith; they trusted Jesus to do it. So can we. Faith really works!

This **faith that works is *practical***.

It has a practical role to play in our lives, helping us to live our best lives in the day to day decisions we make and circumstances we face. As a church, we want to equip each other in this faith.

If we were to go around this room and asked each of us to share a story about how this faith has been proven to work in your life, even with the limited number of people we are allowed to have in this room, we would run out of time long before we run out of stories.

An important part of our mission is to equip people with this faith that really works. That's why we have times like this – whether you are here in the sanctuary or are joining us online, we do *this* to help equip us in our faith. That's also why we have small groups – whether you meet in person or over zoom – so that we can equip each other in this faith that works in very practical ways in our lives. You can join a group now!

We are all in this together, and we're here to help each other. It doesn't matter where you are at in your spiritual journey; we accept each other and help each

other. Some people think that church is supposed to be like a new car showroom – full of perfect people without any scratches or dents or dirt – all shiny and clean and running perfectly. But that’s *not* the church; the church is more like the service department, helping each other buff out our dents, repair broken parts, and helping each other get in running order. But that also means we are not a junk yard – we are not just a bunch of unusable, broken down parts for scrap. None of us are showroom perfect, but neither are we junk. We’re all moving along, even if sometimes we have to tow each other into the shop. We help equip each other.

But there is something else about this faith; it is a...

2. Faith *that* works

In other words, it is a faith that results in action. Remember in the Great Commission, Jesus said that he has been given all authority by God the Father to authorize us to go out and make disciples of all people. It is very important that we see that Jesus says we are to...

make disciples – not students.

You might see that and think, what’s the difference? There is a *big* difference. A *student* sits in class all the time, and is a passive recipient of information. A student is in a constant state of input; of receiving. A *disciple* is an apprentice; it is on-the-job-training. You are expected to put into practice what you are learning *immediately – at the same time that you are learning it.*

One of the biggest things we’ve done wrong in the church is that we approach our spiritual growth like we are in school – we’ve turned Christians into *students* instead of *disciples*. I’ve asked it before and I’ll ask it again: at what point does a person graduate from Sunday school?! At least in high school and college you *graduate* – which means you go out and get a job; you put your learning to work! But we’ve got people in our churches that have been in classes and Bible Studies for decades and still don’t introduce people to Jesus or go out and serve others!

So we think we have to keep learning more and more information about the Bible – we have to gain deeper knowledge and insight all the time but we rarely practice it. I’m not saying we shouldn’t study the Bible – we should! But when we study, our question should not be, “How can I learn more?” Our question should always be, “How can I put into practice what I currently know and am learning?” Or to put it more simply, “God, help me start obeying what I already know, so that then I can learn more!”

When we say “equip people with a faith that works,” it means that we approach our spiritual growth with the expectation that it results in action; we will obey what we know. You see, this faith is practical, but also...

faith that works must be *practiced.*

God expects us to put it into practice; to get to work.

Going back to our opening illustration, you can't just put the FitBit on your wrist and expect it to make any difference in your life. You've got to do the exercise and healthy eating or else it just sits there, on your wrist, while you get more out of shape and heavier. You can't just sit there in the fact that God saves you and just feel good about yourself. You must now put your faith into practice, by doing good things in this world.

Remember that passage I read earlier that said we are saved by faith, and not by works? Let's look at that again, but this time let's keep reading to the very next verse, because it says *we are saved to do good works*:

“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. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:8-10, niv)

You might think that's a contradiction, but it's not – it's a confirmation!

You have become a new creation; your faith really works. You are not saved *by* works; you are saved *to* work. And God has given you his Holy Spirit, so that you can put into practice this faith that works; now you can begin living this life of purpose, making a difference for Christ in this world, doing the good things for others that he's always had in mind for you to do. We aren't saved *by* good works, but we are saved *to* do good works. The Bible defines good works as *selfless acts of love for others*. (repeat that after me) *This is the faith that works.*

See, what we are really talking about when we say our purpose as a church is to “equip people with a faith that works,” we are talking about both...

3. Faith *and* works.

Faith and works go together – this faith that we have really does work – it does all that the Bible promises us it will do. But the Bible is also incredibly clear that if we have faith we are expected to get to work with it; there is an expected change in our attitudes and actions. Faith and works are inseparable. It requires...

both *faith* and *practice*.

In the Bible, the book of James has a very powerful thing to say about having a faith that works.

It's a lengthy passage, but I want to read it here, so maybe it will help you if we stand together for the reading of this passage of Scripture – it will help wake us up, and it is the central passage of this message today and behind this portion of our purpose statement:

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a 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? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith *without* deeds, and I will show you my faith *by my* deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” (James 2:14-26, niv)

The first thing you need to know about this passage is that it builds on what James said in the first half of the chapter, which is teaching on the commandment to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (2:8). So what James means by the good “deeds” or the “works” in the passage is talking about **loving others**; he is not talking about obeying religious rules. He is saying that, if we claim we have faith, it will be *evident in the ways* that we love other people (not just by *saying* we love people). If we don’t *demonstrate* genuine love toward others, then James says we have no faith at all.

We also need to understand that these good deeds or works of love that we do as a result of our faith are primarily about **social needs**. James has been talking about a gospel that is social. He gives examples of some of these things. He talks about how love means we don’t show favoritism to the rich or popular or to the dominant ethnicity over the poor or lowly or minority ethnicity. James talks about how important it is to love those who are poor and in need. He talks about being merciful, about giving clothing to those who don’t have any. He talks about giving food and shelter and medical care for those who have none. And he says that if we don’t love people in a way that meets their social needs, then we have a *dead faith*; *we have no faith at all*. You cannot have faith without a social faith. You cannot have the Gospel without it being a social Gospel. You cannot have holiness without social holiness. John Wesley, one of the saints of the church and the leader of the Methodist movement, said this:

The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. Faith, working by love, is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.⁴ ~ John Wesley

⁴ John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, page viii.

We are to get involved, showing love in actionable ways to the less privileged. It is so important for us to understand, that James even says that faith is **more than knowledge**. To the person who equates faith with how much they know about God, James makes a very harsh point. He says that if knowledge or belief in God were enough to save us, then the very demons of Hell would be saved! At least the works-less demons know enough to fear God! A person who has a works-less faith isn't even smart enough to realize how much danger they are in! **Mere knowledge and acceptance of a belief is not enough to save a person, because it is not real faith.** *Real* faith acts on it, and *that* action is evident in the way the person loves others and introduces them to Jesus.

So, being in a pandemic is no excuse not to put your faith to work. Just because we can't meet together is no excuse not to put your faith to work. In fact, this time that we are in actually gives us an opportunity to put our faith to work. That has always been true of Christians, even from the very beginning days of the church.

Historical references tell us that "In the year 165 AD, a devastating epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. Some medical historians suspect this was the first appearance of smallpox in the West. Whatever the actual disease, it was lethal... During the fifteen-year duration of the epidemic, a quarter to a third of the population probably died of it. At the height of the epidemic, mortality was so great in many cities (they needed) caravans of carts and wagons hauling out the dead. Then, a century later came another great plague. Once again the Greco-Roman world trembled as, on all sides, family, friends, and neighbors died horribly. No one knew how to treat the (sick). Nor did most people try...(A historian from that time says that) "At the first onset of the disease, (people) pushed the sufferers away and fled from their (own loved ones), throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape"

(However, unlike anyone else, consistently during both pandemics,) Christians met the obligation to care for the sick rather than desert them, and thereby saved enormous numbers of lives!"⁵

The historians concluded by saying this: "What can we draw from these reflections by a social historian about the practices of early Christians during the two great plagues of the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D.? By all means, practice scrupulous hygiene, both for your own sake and for the sake of others. Wash your hands, cough into your arm, elbow-bump instead of shaking hands. (Wear masks). Even stay away from public meetings that your local health authorities recommend you avoid. But if one of your Christian brothers or sisters, or one of your non-Christian neighbors, contracts the disease and needs you to serve them...consider serving simply because you are a Christian."⁶

⁵ <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2020/how-did-early-christians-respond-to-plagues>

⁶ *ibid*

In the early church It was unthinkable that someone would call themselves a Christian, and not show it with good works – selfless acts of love for others and introduce them to Jesus.

Let's encourage and equip each other with this faith that works.

Pray