

Why is it so easy for us to be quick to speak and yet so often we are slow to act? How is it that we can voice such strong opinions about what others should do, but back away when someone asks if we will get involved too? When we hear the saying, “talk is cheap” we know all too well exactly what that means!

For instance, how often has an alcoholic promised, “I will never drink again” only to start again the next day or week? How often has an abusive husband said, “I won’t do that again, only to have the same patterns of misconduct continue? How often have we apologized, profusely, only to inflict the same pain over and over?

When I was on vicarage in Miami, I worked at a halfway house for convicts who were released early, if they would live under supervision and find a job. It was an eye-opening experience for me. One of the first things I heard over and over again from many was that they had been victims of mistaken identity, or the police just had it out for them. The words of many were they had done nothing to deserve being arrested.

And most of them were in custody for the second or third time. I quickly learned not to believe everything that I heard.

There is nothing theological about any of this. It is basic human nature. Paul had it right when he said, “the good that I should do, I don’t, and the bad that I shouldn’t do is what I do.” No matter how good we proclaim we are, we often aren’t. We say one thing and do something else. We say we are Christians and yet often acts as if we weren’t. We call that brokenness “sin. It simply means we are self-protective, self-absorbed, and quick to say and promise what we have trouble following through on. We are human which means our words and actions don’t always line up as they should.

This is nothing new. God delivered Israel from slavery, and as they sat in his presence at Sinai, they built a calf of gold in a feeble attempt to control the God they could not see. David proclaimed his love for God, but his love for another’s man’s wife made Bathsheba more important to him than his love for God. Solomon prayed for wisdom and built a magnificent temple to show his loyalty to the God of Israel, only to later erect altars to pagan gods in the same temple out of deference for his pagan wives.

It is easy to say we are believers, but the imperfection of our lives often calls into question what we are really believers in. We are quick to point out the shortcomings and selfishness of others but often forget how often we have done the same. Just as children need guidance from parents, God has come to us, first with laws from Sinai and then the example of Jesus to teach what shapes faithful living should take.

James wrote to descendants of Abraham who had been scattered throughout the regions of the Mediterranean. Some were still practicing Jews while others had lost a desire for such faith. All of them were seeking to follow the teachings of Jesus, who had brought them back into a relationship with God. But they needed someone to guide them in this new life.

James was one of the many teachers in the early Church who was inspired to be a catechism teacher for young Christians who were just learning the ropes. Most had grown up had lived with no moral guide or any sense of what we understand as love for others. His goal was to move them beyond just knowing the elements of Christian belief and inspiring them to put their faith into action. In other words to practice what they said they believed.

His words also serve as wonderful guidance for all of us who know better than his audience did, and sometimes live as we are more pagan than Christian.

The simple truth is that faith often gets in the way of what we really want and feel. We really do want Jesus to guide our lives but often get weak-kneed when such a commitment is hard to keep. None of us is perfect and have to admit that we often live as if faith isn't relevant for what we really want and feel and desire. For such reasons, James wrote the words of his letter.

Here is a short version of what James is encouraging people of faith to stand in front of a mirror and wrestle with before taking any next step in life:

If I believe God is the Father and Creator of all that is, HOW will my living actually reflect that God is the reason behind everything and everybody I encounter? It is easy to say God creates, but we must also handle every aspect of our living as a gift from God.

If I *believe* in Jesus Christ as my Savior, how does the way I live reflect his servant love in my actions with those around me? If Jesus loves me so much, how will my actions show the change that love has made in me. And how will that love spill into how I live?

If I believe in the Holy Spirit, how will my actions have the confident and faithful discipleship that I was blessed with in the gift of Baptism? If I know God's breath is indeed my life, how will what he instills in me become the gift I share with others?

The letter from James is actually quite simple in its intent. He reminds us that if we have faith, how we live should reveal what that faith means to each of us. Talk is easy, and to carry Jesus' cross is a burden, but one we should be willing to embrace. If the love of God means anything, it should mean everything!

How we live is not to make others see me but see and feel the love that God has implanted in me for no other reason than his grace.

Here is James' bottom line: Faith is more than just words. It is more than just knowing answers. It is more than voicing opinions. It is more than cheap talk. For if there is not a servant love in what we do, we have cheapened the words of faith.

James places a great emphasis on our actions, for they show what we do or don't believe. We are saved by grace alone, not by what we do. However, what we do reveals the joy and wonderment of being loved so much by God. As with any gift, our response shows whether or not there is appreciation for the gift.

My grandmother usually often sent me a handkerchief for birthdays (sometimes two.) At the time I felt cheated by such a cheap gift. As I grew older, I realized how little she had and it was the love behind the gift that was more important than the gift. My selfishness as kid missed that. I needed to grow up to understand how to be truly thankful, and that is the purpose of this letter from James.

Here is another way to understand James. We know that a light switch will turn on lights and chase away the darkness. That would be the right answer on a science quiz. However, if you do not actually reach out and flip the switch darkness will remain when light could be available instead. Knowledge is useless if we don't act on it, and so it was with faith.

In a more important way, if the gift of Jesus love in your life has value and meaning and power, why would we not open that gift and let it flow throughout every thought, word, and deed of your existence. As we believe Jesus had bought our lives back as gifts to us, then we must harvest that gift. Fruits left on the vine will die or rot, but if they are picked they can serve the purpose for what they were planted for in the first place.

One Labor Day weekend, my son Chris asked if I had written a sermon yet. (I had, but I asked him "why do you ask?") He told me that he had some ideas about how Labor Day fits into Jesus' labor of love for us, and that he wanted to write a sermon for me. Now, he could have left it at that point, but he did write a sermon and sent it later than day. What I will always remember is not the words that he wrote, but that he was moved to do something which he felt might be a help for me. He understands servant love, and because of him, I understand it much better as well.

The value of any words is how they take on flesh, how they become faith in action.

Think about it this way, God could have simply said "trust me, I love you," and then just sat back and waited to see what might happen. Instead, he came in the flesh to actually love, even to the point of death, rather than just leaving words. With such a love in our hearts and minds, how can we do any less?