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Deuteronomy 30.15-20

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

James 1.19-25

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act - they will be blessed in their doing.

“Partnering with God”

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Martin Luther, one of the great reformers of the church, did not like the epistle of James. Not only did he not like it - he called it an “epistle of straw” and thought it should be thrown out of the Bible. He placed it at the very end of his translation of the scriptures - hoping that perhaps it would be forgotten about someday. Luther is best known for ushering in the Reformation with a new understanding of justification by grace through faith. He believed we were saved solely by grace - not by works; he was fed up with the Catholic church and their selling of indulgences and trying to convince people that salvation was based on works. Luther was not at all interested in James’ focus on the necessity of “doing” things. “Be doers of the word...for if any are hearers of the word and not doers...” That didn’t fly for Luther. That wasn’t a gospel of grace - it was a gospel of works.

And then, again, in our reading from Deuteronomy - we find Moses’ final speech where he is telling the Israelites that if they obey God, follow God’s decrees and do the right things - then God will bless them. It seems as though it’s another version of a gospel of works, doesn’t it? So, why then - did I choose these two texts? Probably because these are not fun texts - they are not comfortable texts. These aren’t the types of texts you want to have appear in your morning devotion. Perhaps Psalm 23, or a passage about the unconditional love of God - but not two passages in a row about how we have to “do” things...

I spent each summer during college, and a few after, being involved in camping ministry in southern Idaho and California. Each summer, we tried to share the good news with students and families who came to the camp for a week - and that good news was always a message of grace. We didn’t invite students to camp simply so that we could tell them they needed to do things - that they needed to obey God and follow all of God’s commandments in order to be blessed. No, it was always a message of grace - a free gift with - how do we say it, “no strings attached.” That was the message I received at camp as a youth, and was the message I passionately shared with youth when I was a camp leader.

But in these texts, doesn't it seem as though we have a gift with some strings attached? James writes "...be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves..." and Moses instructs to "observe God's commandments, and then the Lord your God will bless you." According to James, it's not enough to simply hear the word of God - we are called to act on that word - to ENACT the word instead of being passive receivers of the word.

More and more in our society today - we are being called to engage - to collaborate with others. I am a bit of a tech junkie, and I own my own web and graphic design business - so it's very easy for me to sit in front of my laptop all day. Just ask my wife. While that doesn't seem like I'm actively engaging with others, new web applications are making that type of connection possible on the internet. Many of you may be familiar with some of these terms, or may have heard them on the news: Web 2.0, blogging, MySpace, Facebook, social networking, open source, Wikipedia. All of these programs and ideas have one thing in common: collaboration - partnership - action. It used to be that we would surf to a website, look at the words and images on the site, and then move on to the next page or a different website. These sites were static - unchanging. They were helpful, informative even - but they didn't require anything of us. We were passive observers and consumers of information.

While some of those sites still exist, they are no longer the norm. On my blog, for example, people read my posts and see photos I upload, but they also comment and contribute content of their own - which makes the site more dynamic and interactive. My profile on Facebook has enabled me to connect with "friends" I've known from highschool, college, seminary and other places. Because they constantly update their "Status Message" - I know what many of these friends are doing - and I can leave them messages and connect with them on a variety of levels.

Wikipedia is probably one of the best examples of this new phenomenon in dynamic, "open source" websites. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia which boasts close to 2 million articles in English and millions of other articles in 253 different languages. When you look something up, you can read it and consume information, just like any other encyclopedia you might have at home or at the library. But say you happen to know something about the topic that is not included in the entry. Well, you just add it.

You just push the “Edit this page” button, type in the additional information, and click “Save Page.” So now, not only am I consuming information and receiving it, but I am actively contributing, collaborating and interacting with millions of other users of Wikipedia.

So what does all of this about technology have to do with our spiritual lives today? Well, we live in a world of interaction and collaboration now. And yet - many of us are still comfortable and okay with being passive receivers of the Word. I can't count how many times I've walked out of church, having heard scripture and a sermon, and just gone about my business, not giving it a second thought. The epistle of James asks for something more.

It asks for action - in fact - it demands action. Later on, the author will go so far as to say that “Faith without works is dead.” Faith alone isn't enough - this was the key point that Luther missed when he dismissed James. Being saved by faith, just because of who we are, who God is, isn't enough. It's not until we act, not until we live out the Word, that faith fully comes to fruition. For it is in the acting, the living out of God's commands, that the word is made flesh, again - and again - and again. It is in our living out of God's hopes and dreams for this world that faith flourishes.

In the Deuteronomy passage, Moses exhorts us to choose life - not death and destruction. James says that those who choose to become doers of the word, will be blessed by their actions. In following God's commandments, we are choosing life, and this is the blessing. Now, this is very different from a prosperity gospel that you might hear from a televangelist - one that claims that if you give your life to Jesus, everything will be just fine and health & wealth will follow. That is not the good news of Jesus and the kingdom of God. Rather it is the gospel of our individualistic, consumer culture - hoping for a quick fix and success in the world. It's the gospel of some men and women who realized they could make a quick buck by selling false hope. This is not the blessing we should expect to receive.

The blessing is always life. A life that is connected to the Creator of the universe - a life that is spent partnering with God to bring about God's hopes and dreams for the world today. That is a blessing. And it doesn't stop there - you've probably heard the phrase before, "blessed to be a blessing." We may be blessed when we follow God - when we decide to partner with God and become doers of the word. But that is not the end goal. The end goal is never to be blessed - the end goal is always to be a blessing to others in the world - to be a blessing to the Others in our lives - those created in the image of God - just like us - who are not treated as such by the world.

It is for that reason, that we are blessed by God.

And that type of blessing makes the blessing never-ending - instead of the end being with us as we are blessed, it becomes cyclical. We are blessed so that we may bless others - who in turn may continue to bless others. When we are blessed by God - and then sit content with that blessing - we are ceasing to continue on with the cycle of blessings - and thus, not helping God share God's blessing with the rest of creation.

The epistle of James is a wake up call for Christians - a controversial wake up call. James wakes us up from our grace-induced slumber and says, "Yes - you are saved by grace. Good. We got that taken care of. But now - what are you going to do?" James urges us to no longer be simply hearers of the word - for without works, our faith is dead.

Last Wednesday was the 10th anniversary of the death of Mother Teresa. A few weeks before then you may have seen the cover story in TIME magazine which discussed Mother Teresa's faith in light of some of her letters that were recently published in a book entitled "Come Be My Light." The book portrays Mother Teresa not as one who had the strongest and deepest faith of any saint, but rather of a woman who dealt with a 50-year "dark night of the soul" in which she questioned God, didn't feel God's love and struggled with her work in Calcutta. The book shares a completely new perspective on one of the world's most revered modern saints.

To some - it could be devastating: "if Mother Teresa doubted God - is there any hope for me?" I find it to be strangely comforting - to know that a woman who was able to do so much for the kingdom of God also had questions and doubts like I do - I find that more a source of comfort than of despair. Amidst her anguish and doubt, what was able to give Mother Teresa the strength to continue to serve God for more than 50 years in Calcutta? Perhaps one could argue that it was because she continually, every day, actively engaged with her faith, enacted the word of God - perhaps it was her works of charity that enabled her to continue to seek after God amidst depression? "Faith without works is dead" - and perhaps it was Mother Teresa's works that saved her faith.

Rather than hearing these texts as lists of all that we must do to bring blessings into our lives and the world, let us hear these texts as reminders of why we have been blessed. As reminders of what our call is. As reminders of who we are to be in the world: our call is to be a blessing. The old song really did have it right: "and they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love - they will know we are Christians by our love." Not by our theology, not by our denomination, not by our adhering to specific political or religious beliefs or morals. They will know we are Christians by our love - by our actions - by the way we live out the word. It is about looking in the mirror and walking away and remembering who we are and who God calls us to be.

Hear these texts this morning as friendly reminders and encouragement to live the life that God has called you to - a life that is not unlike an entry on Wikipedia - a life where you are not just consuming religion and getting the necessary information, but a life where you are actually contributing content and engaging and collaborating with God. A life where we can actually work alongside God to help bring about the kingdom of God in the world today.

We are saved by grace through faith. But we must also be doers of the word. In doing the work of God, we enter into a partnership with God, experience life as a blessing, and continue to be blessings to others in the world.

AMEN.