
West Valley Church Mission: Learn

Matthew 28:18-20; Ephesians 4:11-13, 12b-13

1. Faith Does Work

- *Ephesians 2:4-5, 3:12; Matthew 9:20-22, 21:21-22*

2. Faith That Works

- *1 Corinthians 3:1-3; Hebrews 5:11-14*

3. Faith and Works

- *James 2:14-26, 2:8, 1:22*

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West Valley Church
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How many of you use a steps-tracking device, whether it is an app on your phone or a device or watch on your wrist?

The colorful, wristwatch-like fitness trackers seem to have taken the world by storm. They count your steps; give you stats on your sleeping habits, and more. Sounds like a great way to get healthier and maybe lose weight in the process, right? (*Cheaters?*) Well, maybe not. A recent study¹ claims that the wearers of these popular pieces of wrist wear lost *less* weight than people who didn't wear them.

And, even more surprising, 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 assigning someone wearable technology will make that big of a difference." As an article on NPR noted, "Ultimately these devices are most effective² 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. This is much like spiritual growth and the Christian. Every Christian is expected to grow in their faith, but no matter how much you believe what the Bible says, just going to church or Bible Study is not going to bring about the desired change and growth in your life. It is vital that your attitudes and actions *prove* what you say you believe.

This is the point of the second part of our church's mission statement, and what the church's role is in your spiritual growth.

We began this three-Sunday series last week, reviewing and exploring our mission statement as a church. We are spending these three Sundays revisiting each of the

¹ *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>

² *Wearable Devices and Health Behavior Change* Mitesh S. Patel, MD, MBA, MS - <http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2089651>

three components of our mission statement, reminding ourselves how important it is, and the vital ways that we incorporate it into our lives and culture here at West Valley Church. We'll spend time in our small groups each week exploring these, as well.

All that we've done in the last seven and a half years has been envisioned, and driven, by the mission statement. West Valley Church exists to:

- Introduce People to Jesus Christ,
- Equip People with a Faith that Works, and
- Live as People with Purpose.

Put more simply, love, learn, and live.

Last week we looked at the first part of our mission statement, "Introduce people to Jesus Christ." This is the most important thing we are to accomplish as Christians.

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, where will be 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 he said:

"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 them 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 simply secure conversions; we want to see people become *disciples*; 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." This reflects the second part of the Great Commission – making disciples and teaching people to grow in their faith.

Just as we chose the words in the first part very intentionally, we also chose the words in this part on purpose.

Let me ask you this: who do you think is responsible to carry out the mission and ministry of this church? If you say "the pastors," then you are wrong, because that's not what the Bible says. It is the job of *everyone* – not just the pastors. Everyone has an important role to play in the mission of the church.

Now the pastors *do* have a role, and it is to equip each person with the learning and resources they need to accomplish the mission. That's why the Bible says:

“So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:11-13, niv)

Do you see this? The pastors, among other leaders and teachers, are here to equip God’s people – Christians – to carry out “works of service” – the work of the church both within and without. In other words, it is the job of every Christian to serve each other and those outside the church. By being equipped and then carrying out those works of service...

“The body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:12b-13, niv)

“Unity, faith, knowledge, mature, whole measure of fullness of Christ.” In other words, spiritual maturity – *growth in our 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 it really *does* work! The Bible says:

“Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:4-5, niv)

Faith in Christ saves us from our former life of confusion and guilt and sin.

Our faith in Christ allows us to come before God freely about anything we need:

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

There are stories of Jesus being able to work in peoples’ lives as a result of their faith; for example, in Matthew there’s the story of a woman who had suffering from hemorrhaging for over twelve years, who approached Jesus:

“Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, ‘If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.’ Jesus turned and saw her. ‘Take heart, daughter,’ he said, ‘your faith has healed you.’ And the woman was healed at that moment.” (Matthew 9:20-22, niv)

This faith we have works! It doesn’t mean that if we have enough faith we will always be healed, but it does mean that Jesus will be able to work freely in our lives when we have faith – in whatever ways he wants to work. That’s why Jesus said...

“Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” (Matthew 21:21-22, niv)

So when we say that as a church, our purpose is to equip people with a faith that works, we are wanting to provide the opportunities for people to grow in this faith that really does work. We do that in worship services and sermons, we do that through the different classes and Bible Studies that we provide, and we do that *especially* through our small groups. I can’t encourage you enough; if you are serious about growing in your faith, being in a small group of people who love you and care about you and will encourage you and pray for you, is essential! I don’t know how you grow without it. 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 more of an apprentice; it is on-the-job-training. You are expected to put into practice what you are learning *immediately – as you are learning it*.

One of the biggest things we’ve done wrong in the church is to approach our spiritual growth like we do school – we’ve turned Christians into students instead of disciples. I keep asking, when 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! 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 meet the needs of the poor.!

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.

The Apostle Paul challenged the Christians in the church in Corinth about this with some very harsh words. Listen to what he said to them:

“Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?” (1 Corinthians 3:1-3, niv)

In other words, he was saying that, for all their knowledge, there was no clear change in their behavior and attitude. He couldn't teach them anything more, because they weren't obeying what they already knew.

This is a similar problem that we see when Paul was writing to the Jewish Christians in the book of Hebrews. To them, he wrote,

“There is much more we would like to say about this, but it is difficult to explain, especially since you are spiritually dull and don't seem to listen. *(In other words, you must not be really listening because you are not putting it into practice)* You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.” (Hebrews 5:11-14, nlt)

These are harsh words, but it is important that we hear them, because the Word of God applies to us today, too. We don't get to exempt ourselves from the hard things the Bible says just because we've been going to Bible studies for forty years. So if you think I'm coming across harshly, I'm sorry you feel that way, but I can do no less than what the Scriptures tell me and tell you.

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.

This is exactly why James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote about this. James was the oldest of several half-brothers to Jesus, because they shared the same mother but not the same father. James' and his brothers' father was Joseph, and Jesus' father was, well, God. Can you imagine what that was like? Mary would be like, “James, why can't you act more like your older brother Jesus?” James would probably say, “I'm only human!” But if James had any issues, he worked through them because he became a leader in the Christian Church and wrote a part of the Bible – the book of James. And he 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)

Thank you for standing in honor of God’s Word; may he bless it to our hearts and lives that we might understand and obey. You can have a seat if you want (or don’t! You can keep standing if you’d prefer!)

I want to take a few moments to walk us through the major points in that passage, because it will help each of us understand both what our responsibilities are as Christians and especially as members of this church.

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 “deeds” or the “works” in the passage we read 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. If we don't demonstrate genuine love toward others, then we have no faith at all.

The next thing we need to understand is that these 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 the majority over the poor or lowly or minority. He 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.
~ John Wesley

So when James says that faith results in works or deeds or action, he isn't saying that it means we obey the rules.

I think that in Christian circles, we have a tendency to judge whether or not someone is a Christian or "saved" by the rules they obey or by their adherence to certain social standards (for example, someone who doesn't drink and doesn't chew and doesn't go with girls who do), or by their church attendance, or by how involved they are, or how much money they give. But James would say that those things are "ritual actions and purity laws. "He would insist, "This is not what I'm talking about!"⁴ As individuals and as a church, we need to ask ourselves, "What are we doing to meet the spiritual, mental, emotional, social, and physical needs of our neighbors?" If our profession of faith does not come to life in action or works on behalf of those who are naked and hungry and living on the margins, then not only is our faith dead, but *they* will die!⁵

This is so important to understand that James even says that faith is...

³ John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, page viii.

⁴ C. Jeanne Orjala Serrao, *James: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO, 2010 pg. 101-102

⁵ Ibid, 102

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! In fact, the demons are even smarter than a Christian without works, because the belief demons have in God causes them to be scared to death of him! 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.

So when we say that our church is here to equip people with a faith that works, it is a statement that is deeply and profoundly rooted in Scripture. It means that we want to make disciples of everyone we can, because we really do believe that faith in Christ is a life changing and eternity changing encounter. This faith really, really *does* work. But it is also a faith *that* works; it gets to work on its growth. Its primary ambition is to grow in Christlikeness. And that means that it is faith *and* works; the evidence of it is how we love others by meeting their social needs.

This is why our small groups are so very vital. It is in these groups that we move beyond being students to being disciples. This is why James started out his book by saying:

“But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.” (James 1:22, nlt)

It is in our small groups that we discuss the Word as we've heard it from Sunday, and then encourage and challenge each other to *do it* – especially in our works of service. This is the reason why we strongly encourage every small group to do some kind of ministry or service project *together*.