

February 16, 2014  
Authentic Christianity

*Authentic Christianity Acts*  
James 2:14-26

**Opening words:** John Wesley once said, "*Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all people you can, as long as ever you can.*" I think it is safe to say, the founder of Methodism had a firm grasp on today's scripture lesson.

This is sermon number five in my seven-part sermon series on James, *Authentic Christianity*. Each one of these messages revolves around a different character that must be present in true discipleship. In our scripture for today, James brings up the topic of Christian authenticity, itself. Your Christian witness must include both good words and deeds. We have been looking at three examples that underscores this point. Two weeks ago, I developed the point that authentic Christianity must take a risk. The chances of bringing the world's needy to us is slim. Last week, I developed the theme that authentic Christianity must sacrifice. How much are you willing to sacrifice for God? This week, we are told authentic Christianity must act. May God give you ears to hear this morning's epistle and Gospel lesson, James 2:14-26 and Matthew 25:31-41. Today's message is called *Authentic Christianity Acts*.

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**James 2:14-26** What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? <sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> 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? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

<sup>20</sup> You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? <sup>21</sup> Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

<sup>25</sup> 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? <sup>26</sup> As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

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One of the places still on my bucket list is Halifax, Nova Scotia. With a population of approximately 400,000 people, it is the largest city on the Canadian Atlantic coast and the largest Canadian east of Quebec. However, those are not the reasons I want to visit her. The reason I want to go to Halifax is trivia.

Did you know Halifax is the site of the largest manmade explosion prior to the development of nuclear weapons? I learned that fact on the History Channel. This is the story.

The date was December 6, 1917. A French cargo ship, the SS Mont-Blanc, loaded with wartime bombs collided with a Norwegian vessel, the SS Imo. A fire broke out on the French ship, and twenty minutes later, the explosion shook the harbor district of the city. The explosion equaled approximately 2.9 kilotons of TNT. Approximately 2,000 people were killed in the debris, fires and collapsing buildings. Another 9,000 people were injured. I am glad that is not the end of the story.

The world was shocked by the explosion. Some tried to respond. The people of Boston responded. The authorities in Boston learned about the explosion by telegraph. Within twelve hours, a train filled with supplies and volunteers was headed toward Halifax. That train would not be the last. The people of Boston continued to respond, and a bond was forged between those two northern cities. That bond still exists today. Annually, the city of Halifax sends the city of Boston a Christmas tree to thank them for their help nearly one hundred years ago. That tree is the official Christmas tree of Boston, which stands proudly in the Boston Commons. If you have ever found yourself in need, then you know it is true. Responding to human need is important. If you can agree with that statement, say, **"Amen!"**

I hope this paragraph sounds familiar, because it is the now the third time you have heard it. We are at the end of the second chapter of James. The topic is authenticity. James reminds us how important it is for us to be genuine in our faith. We find genuine faith when we combine the right words with the right deeds. In other words, you are supposed to be able to tell people what Jesus means to you. You are supposed to be able to tell people what Jesus has done for you. You are supposed to be acting in a way that demonstrates to the world your appreciation for this great gift of salvation. James says simple words are not enough. After all, talk is cheap. James says good behavior is not enough. After all, you can't earn your salvation. Words and deeds must go hand in hand. Verse 14 says it clearly, *what good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?*

To underscore this single point, James gives us three examples. First, authentic Christianity must risk. The world is filled with needy people. We are called to go to them. They are not going to come to us. Second, authentic Christianity must sacrifice. How much are you willing to sacrifice for God? Third, authentic Christianity must act. Recognizing a problem is not enough. That takes no real skill. We must respond to basic human need. We must make sure everyone has clothes. We must make sure everyone has food. God has a great passion for people. God expects us to have a great passion for people. This is not an isolated case in the Bible. Jesus, himself, told us we are to respond to basic human need. That is what he is telling us in the parable of the sheep and the goats. You know the story.

It is found in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew. That chapter contains three great parables. The first is the parable of the ten virgins. The second is the parable of the talents. The third is the parable of the sheep and the goats. The thing that unites those three parables is the theme, judgment! The parable of the sheep and the goats is the most pointed. It is a scene that comes from their rural society. According to the Master, the righteous and the unrighteous will be separated, like a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. The Son of Man will only welcome the sheep into heaven. Who are the sheep? They are the righteous. During their lives, they responded to human need. They gave food to those who were hungry. They gave drink to those who were thirsty. They welcomed the lonely. They gave clothes to those who needed them. They visited the sick and the incarcerated. These acts were not unique to them. They were part of their normal activities. They didn't know they were really caring for Jesus. The point of the parable is clear. You don't need an advanced degree. Human need should be one of the great preoccupations of your life. Human need should be one of the great preoccupations of our church.

The history of the church is filled with Christian people responding to human need. I have no clue how many hospitals have been started by the church to help the sick and the maimed. I have no clue how many schools the church has started to educate the uneducated. I have no clue how many meals the church has prepared to feed the hungry. I have no clue how many homes the church has started to care for the aged. I have no clue how many homeless shelters the church has built to help the homeless. I have no clue how much money has been given away to help strangers. I have no clue how many prayers the church has uttered to support the down-and-out. We stand in the middle of a great tradition which has always responded to human need. We have no other option. We must continue to respond to human need!

The problem is, after all our work, human need has not been eliminated. As a matter of fact, our world seems to be growing more desperate. We no longer have the option of ignoring the suffering in our world. Modern transportation and communication have made our world very small. We see the pictures and hear the stories regularly. We appear to be outnumbered, and many are suggesting we don't even try. However, we must respond to the needy in our world, because that is what God has called us to do. This is the question that haunts every person of faith. How much do you really care about the suffering people in our world? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

The other night I was at home watching the Olympics. I was texting my sister in Colorado. Knowing about all the time we have spent in Russia, she began asking me about the "evil empire". Her first question was the best. This is the question. If the people of Russia are so poor, then how could Putin spend \$52 billion on the Olympics? Isn't that a great question? I have asked it myself. How much human suffering could be relieved with \$52 billion? Why did he do it? I will give you a one word answer to that question - priorities. The Russians are a proud people. They have always been a proud people. Their national ego is as large as our ego. Americans and Russians both believe God has a special place in his heart just for them. Americans and Russians both believe they are people of destiny. In many ways, we are parallel societies, except for one

important point. They are easterners and we are westerners. In the west, we value individuals. In the east, they value the whole. (Think about this. Jesus was an easterner. He sacrificed himself on the cross because it was best for the whole.) Putin can spend \$52 billion because it is best for the whole. Human need and suffering is not as important to him as a public image. He wants his country to be seen as a first-rate power. I am convinced that through the eyes of Vladimir Putin, the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi are nothing more than a massive public relations campaign. I am proud to be an American for many reasons. One of those reasons is that we care about human need. I believe we have the right priorities. People must come first. If you are glad that you live in America, say, **"Amen!"**

In my home, I have two pets. One is a long-haired white cat by the name of Madelyn. She is not always pleasant. She likes to take an occasional swipe at visitors. She likes to sit in the sink and wait for a drip. I have never been able to identify what she adds to the family, but she is part of the landscape. I am not really a cat person, I am a dog person. However, at some level, I guess I like her. Madelyn's arch enemy is my dog, Macy. She is a 13-inch beagle that we have had since she was a pup. She is a sweet dog, full of personality. She only has two enemies in this world, the newspaper man and the mailman. I will admit it. She is my prized possession. I feed Macy. I walk Macy. I give her a bath and I play with Macy. Every day I tell her she is the best. She likes everyone, but I am her favorite. She is always by my side and she has a good life.

Several weeks ago, Macy was sitting in my lap as I was watching the news. The human interest story at the end of the broadcast was about a woman who had a great passion for dogs. She was concerned about the number of stray dogs in her community, so she spent a fortune to help them. She opened a dog resort. Her guests only got the best. The problem is, caring for so many dogs is expensive. The news reporter told us she was going to sell her own jewelry to help the dogs. The estimated value of the jewelry was \$10.5 million. I petted Macy and thought, that is good thing. Dogs are the best. Then I read the scripture lesson for today and began to wonder about my priorities. How many needy people could be helped for \$10.5 million? The word is priority. While dogs are living in comfort, we have people living in the cold streets. While dogs are living in comfort, we have children dying because they did not get vaccinations. How much money do you spend keeping your pet comfortable? How much money do you give away to eliminate human suffering? It is a question of priority. What are your priorities?

Do you remember James' words for us today? Verses fourteen through seventeen say, *"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?"*<sup>15</sup> *Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food.*<sup>16</sup> *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?"*<sup>17</sup> *In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."*

Will you pray with me?