

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 don't know why I did that, you know I love you" 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 in which convicts were released early, if they would live under supervision and find a job. Everyone one of them first of all said "I was framed, I never did anything wrong." And most of them spent their days doing the same old stuff that got them into trouble in the first place.

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 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.

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. Solomon prayed to God for wisdom and then built altars to pagan gods in the same temple out of deference for his pagan wives.

Each of us says "I am a believer." But the imperfection of our lives moves us to a multitude of excuses and rationales for not living up to what the faith calls us to be.

James wrote to young Christians who were just learning the ropes. His words are great reminders for all of us who know better than his audience, but often live as we have been more pagan than Christian, and aren't convinced that we always want to live by faith. If asked, we say we do ... but in practice we often live as if faith isn't relevant for what we really want and feel and desire.

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

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?

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 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?

The letter from James is actually quite simple in its intent. This is the motive for what he has written. If I have faith, then how I live will then show what that faith means to me.

This is what James is driving at. Faith is more than just words. It is more than just knowing answers. It is more than voicing opinions. More than "cheap talk." For if there is not a servant love in what we do, we have cheapened the words of faith.

Many have James for his emphasis on WORKS, for the Gospel proclaims that GOD ALONE SAVES. In other words we are saved by faith and not by what we do. And that is the truth. But James is not saying that our actions save us.

He is simply saying, IF YOU BELIEVE IT – Then don't be afraid to live it!

Here is another way to understand James. All of us believe that a light switch on a wall will turn on the lights and chase away the darkness. So ... if you walk in a room, does simply knowing how a switch works chase the darkness away or do you have to ACT and flip the switch on?

In a more important way, if the gift of Jesus love in your life has value and meaning and power, then open that gift and let it flow throughout every thought, word and deed of your existence.

And, as we believe that 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.

In Mark 7 Jesus talked about hypocrisy of Pharisees who criticized Jesus' disciples for not keeping all ritual law. Jesus talked about Isaiah who said "the people honor me with lips but their hearts are far from me! "

For instance, Jesus' disciples ate meals with "sinners" which meant that everyone at the table was tainted by the presence of "unclean people." Jesus said, if your hearts are full of the clean love of God why would you not feed hungry people no matter who they are or what their social background might be?

The value in 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 sat back and waited to see what might happen. Instead he sent his SON who gave his life (DOING LOVE rather than saying it) ... TODAY we have opportunities to respond!

That is why on the night of Jesus' betrayal as he prayed about his love for his disciples, he then asked them to watch what he was going to do. And rather than make them

wait until later, he knelt in front of each of them and washed their feet. He asked, do you understand what I have DONE for you. Not, do you believe my words, but do you see how I showed those words in action?

Several Labor days back, 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.

So, never forget, as Jesus showed in the most perfect way, it is not the words we share about our love for God and neighbor, but the actions that put flesh and bone on those words. Jesus took the first step by arriving as a humble infant, washing his disciples' feet, and accepting the cost of our death. His love took on flesh. May our love for God be guided by his example and bring a loving light into all that we have been made to be.