

Matthew 25:31-46

James 2:1-26

October 11, 2015

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Good Stewards of God's Grace

WORDS AND ACTIONS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

They say, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

This morning, four little pictures are worth forty-two words.

Look at the Peanuts cartoon on the back of the bulletin.

Poor Snoopy! If dogs could talk, Snoopy might say these forty-two words to Charlie Brown and Linus (or is that Schroeder?), "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" (James 2:15-16)

When Nancy and I were members of New Hope Presbytery in northeastern North Carolina, we became friends with two Egyptian Presbyterian pastors who were serving churches in the Williamston area. Occasionally they would come to our house for dinner and fellowship. During one visit, Raafat told us about how hard it was to be a Christian in Egypt. He described the severe restrictions, even persecutions, that Christians had to put up with to practice their faith. There were government restrictions on building churches, printing or even owning a Bible, and on evangelism.

Raafat told us about a particularly difficult time of persecution of Christians, when missionaries were banished from Egypt and Christian churches were shut down or destroyed. However, Raafat said, by and large the Presbyterian churches, schools, and clinics were left untouched, maybe even protected. Raafat told us, "The Egyptians respected the fact that, when the Presbyterians built their schools and clinics, they opened them to anyone and everyone, not just to Christians."

Still today, Presbyterian World Mission has a three-pronged approach in mission stations around the world (information taken from www.presbyterianmission.org)

- **Evangelism:** To train community leaders for transformation – "One of the most effective ways to grow the Church around the globe is to train local leaders to address the specific challenges they face in their own community, whether hunger, a natural disaster, injustice or the persecution of the Christian community."
- **Addressing the Root Causes of Poverty:** Promoting Quality Education for One Million Children by 2020 – "Education promotes human development, and basic literacy is a gateway skill that empowers the poor to emerge from poverty. Extensive research has shown that a quality education (regardless of gender, wealth, location, ethnicity, or language) is the best pathway out of poverty."

- Reconciliation: Speak Up! Stop Sexual Violence -- “Reconciliation is the heart of the Gospel message. We follow Jesus, the great reconciler, when we build ministries of reconciliation in our broken world. At this time, Presbyterian World Mission is working with mission coworkers and global partners to engage Presbyterians in a campaign to stop sexual violence. We believe this to be one of the most pervasive issues across cultures, both in the United States and across the world that we are being called to address.”

For more than one hundred years, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has shared the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world with both words AND actions. Our congregation has a personal investment in Presbyterian world missions. We proclaim that commitment at the top of our weekly bulletin: “We support Presbyterian Church (USA) mission co-workers, Rev. Dustin and Sherri Ellington, in Lusaka, Zambia, Africa.” Their work at the Justo Mwale Theological University is a great example of our Presbyterian emphasis on evangelism and training local leaders to help spread the gospel and grow the church. By extension, we share in that work of evangelism and training when we pray for the Ellingtons and the students and when we give the money each year to buy bicycles for the graduates to use when they go out to serve as pastors in the villages.

Mission is not just on a global scale. In a day and age when it is easy (and even popular) to badmouth the “institutional” church, my wife will bear witness to the inspiring and vital and creative ministries that congregations have going on in their communities. Nancy works with approximately sixty Presbyterian congregations from Beaufort to Shallotte, from Wallace to Wrightsville Beach. She is always telling me how much she enjoys visiting the churches and finding out how creatively and faithfully Presbyterians in southeastern North Carolina are trying to respond to Jesus’ command, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40)

Nancy frequently highlights these ministries as she presents programs in churches and for the presbytery. Earlier this year, she shared some of her excitement with us at the Presbyterian Women’s Mission and Issues program. One church plants, grows, harvests, and distributes sweet potatoes. Another church makes dolls for children to hug and love when they are going through difficult times. The dolls have a happy face on one side, a sad face on the other side, to help the child express his/her feelings. Another church provides bags of graded reading books for students at the local elementary school. Beach churches collect leftover food from summer tourists on Saturdays, when they are checking out of their rental houses, and distribute the food to food pantries. The list goes on and on . . . Recently, Nancy has included our own Prayer Shawl Ministry in her program.

Also near the top of our weekly bulletin we have “Minute for Mission.” You see it there every week, even when we don’t have someone lined up to speak. My hope (and goal) is to have someone from the congregation to share a story each week about the difference our church’s mission makes in someone’s life. If you would like to share your story, please let me know – even at the last minute! Last week we heard from Dr.

J Parker about the difference our Summer Reading Program makes in the lives of first and second graders at Wallace Elementary School. It's safe to say, our Summer Reading Program makes a difference in the lives of the volunteers, also. We were able to celebrate with Harriet's announcement that our reading program has received a \$1000 grant from the Duplin Foundation for Youth Advancement.

None of this is to say, "Look at us! Look at what a great job we're doing!" None of this is meant to give us a big head. I offer these examples, from our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), our sister congregations, and our own church to illustrate what James writes in his letter – "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead." (James 2:14, 17, 26)

As heirs of the Reformation, we Protestants sometimes get a little uncomfortable when we start talking about faith AND works. Don't we believe that we are saved by faith alone? Isn't it God's grace, and grace alone, that brings us salvation? Isn't that what I preached from this pulpit just last Sunday – "Grace As a Gift" – as we came to the Lord's Table for communion? The answers to those questions are, "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

But it's pretty obvious that what James says about faith and works is true. That's why I included two quotations from the great reformer, Martin Luther, in the margins of our bulletin this morning, next to the Opening Sentences and the Assurance of Pardon. Take a minute to look at what Luther wrote about good works. Luther didn't have much use for the Letter of James – he called it "an epistle of straw" – because Luther emphasized so much that we are saved by God's grace alone. Having said that, it's interesting that his first quotation – the one next to the Opening Sentences – comes from Luther's commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans, which really is all about God's grace saving us in Jesus Christ.

Why don't we let Paul himself speak to this? In his Letter to the Ephesians, he writes about faith and works, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." (Ephesians 2:8-10) Another quote that is attributed to Martin Luther, and echoed by many other people, says, "Faith alone saves, but saving faith is never alone."

Today's sermon is just one of several in September and October under the overarching theme of "Good Stewards of God's Grace." Last week, I preached about God's "Grace As a Gift" and asked, "Now what are you going to do with that gift?" Today's scripture from the Letter of James helps us answer that question: "You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (James 2:8)

There's nothing at all wrong with saying to someone, "Go in peace" or "God bless you." If we really believe that our God is a gracious God who loves us and wishes the best for us and everyone he has created, we ought to be eager and quick to share that good news. But if a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, it's not enough to

say “Go in peace” or “God bless you.” It makes a greater difference in that person’s life to offer our blessing along with our actions.

I’ve shared this story before, but it’s worth being reminded. A dozen years ago, when the steering committee was working on organizing what we now know as Duplin Christian Outreach Ministries, we talked about what to name the crisis center. As we researched other crisis ministries, one group told us they had chosen not to identify as a “Christian” organization, even though that is who they are. They thought such an identification might disqualify them from some grants. Our steering committee members respected their decision, but were committed to having the word “Christian” in our ministry’s name. I remember one person saying, “That’s who we are and, more importantly, that’s why we’re doing what we’re doing!”

That sums up what James is saying – we do good works **because** we are saved by God’s grace through Jesus Christ, not in order **to be saved**. Can people who are not Christians do good works? Of course they can. But that’s not James’ concern in his letter. He is writing to believers and encouraging them to put their faith into action. As someone has said, “If you’re going to claim to be a faithful Christian, there should at least be some evidence there.”

Mark Twain said, “Actions speak louder than words, but not nearly as often.” That is what James is warning us against as people who say we believe in Jesus Christ. Although the order is very important – faith then works – the two have to be connected – words AND actions – or else, “just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.”

We have plenty of opportunities to let our actions speak just as loudly as our words here in the Wallace Presbyterian Church. We say what we believe and we are called to put those beliefs into action. As we think about being good stewards of God’s grace – and good stewards of our time, our spiritual gifts, and our material resources – let us hope and pray and work toward letting our mission determine our giving and our stewardship of what God has given us.

One night the elders and I were talking about the special offerings we take up on a regular basis during worship. We wondered if we should keep collecting all of them. I’ll never forget Bill Saunders saying, in his deep, rich baritone voice, “People don’t necessarily have to contribute to every offering. But if we don’t give them the opportunity to give, they won’t have the chance to be involved in these important ministries.” Wise counsel, indeed!

As “good stewards of God’s grace,” how does our faith in Jesus Christ shape our lives, not only in what we say, but also in what we do?

As Paul the apostle says, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Colossians 3:17)

Let us pray: Gracious God, you have taught us that all our deeds without love are worthy nothing. Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love. Nourish us with all goodness and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Response to the Sermon (sung by the choir; Hymn #717 in Glory to God)

For the life that you have given, for the love in Christ made known, with these fruits of time and labor, with these gifts that are your own: here we offer, Lord, our praises; heart and mind and strength we bring; give us grace to love and serve you, living what we pray and sing.