

SAINTS ON THE SIDELINES?

James 2:14-19

(CSB) What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed,' but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way faith, if it doesn't have works, is dead by itself. ¹⁸ But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one. Good! Even the demons believe—and they shudder.

INTRODUCTION

Focus on the Family Magazine for September 2002 featured the story, *A Light Named Al*. On the morning of September 11, 2001, Jeannie Braca switched on her television to check the weather report and heard a plane had just hit the World Trade Center. Jeannie's husband, Al, worked on the 104th floor of Tower One as a corporate bond trader. She remained calm. Al had survived the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, even after helping a woman with asthma escape from the building. She later admitted, "I knew he would stop to help and minister to people, but I never thought for a minute he wouldn't be coming home!" A week later, Al's body was found in the rubble. Jeannie and son Christopher, age 16, were devastated!

Then reports began to trickle in from friends and acquaintances. People on the 104th floor had made a last call or sent a final e-mail to loved ones saying a man was leading them in prayer. A few referred to Al by name. When Al realized they were all trapped in the building and wouldn't be able to escape, he shared the gospel with a group of 50 coworkers and led them in prayer. Jeannie smiled at this news. She and Al had often prayed for his coworkers' salvation. Al hated his job. He couldn't stand the environment grossly out of touch with his Christian values. But he wouldn't quit. He was convinced God wanted him there as a light in the darkness. Al took seriously **Jesus'** heart cry of **Matthew 5:14-16**: "'You are the light of the world. . . . ¹⁵ No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.'" Instead of seeking the security of the sidelines while his coworkers went to Hell or suffered the ravages of sin, Al stood boldly for Christ. He paid the price to "deny himself and take up his cross daily," as **Jesus** commanded His followers to do in **Luke 9:23** (ESV).

Al shared his faith with his coworkers, many of whom sarcastically nicknamed him "The Rev." But on that fateful day, September 11, in the midst of the panic and chaos, Al's co-workers looked to him—and Al delivered! Al tried to get a phone call through to his family. He asked an MCI operator to contact his family and, "Tell them that I love them." It took the operator more than a month to reach the Bracas, but the message brought them much-needed comfort. "The last thing my dad did involved the two things most important to him—God and his family," his son Christopher told *Focus on The Family*. "He loved to lead people to Christ. That takes away a lot of the hurt and the pain." Al Braca died as he lived: as an active follower of the Lord **Jesus** who served Him by being a corporate bond trader in the World Trade Center.

"Saints on the Sidelines?" is today's sermon. Peyton Manning led the Indianapolis Colts to their first Super Bowl victory in 2007. But the Colts released him after surgery for a severe neck injury forced him to miss the entire 2011 season. He signed with the Denver Broncos. After being named MVP of the NFL a record five times, he led the Broncos in winning the 2015 Super Bowl. Manning testifies that at age 13, "I committed my life to Christ, and that faith has been most important to me ever since. He always has to be your number one priority." As a Presbyterian, he declares regular church involvement is also a top priority. He says, "I find being with others whose faith is the same has made me stronger." He even admits, "I don't think God really cares about who wins football games, except as winning might influence the character of some person or group." Peyton Manning has not been on the sidelines as a Pro football player or as a saint.

SAINTS ON THE SIDELINES?

Why did Al Braca remain in a job he hated as a corporate bond trader at the World Trade Center; disgusted with coworkers promoting immoral lifestyles grossly out of touch with his Christian values? Al obeyed **Jesus** command to accept responsibility for the wellbeing of his workplace team. Al was willing to "deny himself and take up his cross daily," to die to his personal goals and desires rather than standing on the sidelines, in hopes his coworkers might not suffer the consequences of living and dying without **Jesus**. As a result, Al Braca succeeded in helping a number of his coworkers cross the finish line that gained them the victory of everlasting life in Heaven with **Jesus** as their Savior, before they perished on 9/11, 2001!

Could Peyton Manning have won any of his Most Valuable Player awards in the National Football League, or been quarterback on two Super Bowl Championship teams, without the mutual support of the great teams on which God blessed him to play? No. As a Christian, he's as faithful to follow the leadership of his church as he followed the coaching staffs of the Indianapolis Colts and Denver Broncos. Manning understands the necessity of commitment to and sacrifice for a team if victories are to be achieved, whether he's part of a particular sports team or part of God's team in a local church.

Properly understood, this is the essence of what James tells us in today's text. Our fetish for individualism and personal rights in this country has far too often reduced Christianity to a personal exhibition (like pole vaulting or golfing) instead of a team effort. An employee sent to Human Resources over complaints by his coworkers told the HR staffer, "I could be a more effective member of the team if the others would just shut up and go away." A survey of Christian researcher George Barna, "Three Major Faith and Culture Trends for 2014," states, "When it comes to the value of a local church, Americans [who profess God is important in their lives] are now essentially lumped into three groups" that "roughly divide the country's adult population in thirds": those who say it is necessary to attend church, those who say it is not, and those who are on the fence about the value of local church participation." You who are here today and all who faithfully participate in a Christ-centered church are to be commended. You still believe it's important to demonstrate your personal faith in the Lord **Jesus** by being committed to His team: a gospel preaching local church and the Church Universal composed of believers "from every tribe and language and people and nation," whom the Lord **Jesus Christ** has "redeemed" by His "blood" (**Revelation 5:9**).

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters," James asks us today in **vs. 14**, "if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can such faith save him?" The "works" James envisions are "deeds" (NIV) of grace and mercy that demonstrate Christ's heart beats within our heart. In **Galatians 6:10** (ESV), the Apostle Paul makes it clear we have special responsibility to demonstrate "deeds" of Christian kindness to members of our faith family, even beyond what we show to the world: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." The New Testament testifies unanimously that *faithless works*, deeds that attempt to earn God's favor or forgiveness without the need to abandon our sins in repentance and to surrender our hearts to Christ as our Savior, will not earn us anything from God. **Ephesians 2:8-9** (ESV) declares, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

On the other hand, James is telling us *workless faith* is *suspect faith*, giving us no guarantee we possess *saving* faith. James makes this point succinctly in **vs. 17**: "faith, if it doesn't have works, is dead by itself." "How 'dead'?" you may ask. James answers this question decisively in **vs. 26**, "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." James' repeated emphasis upon our responsibilities toward our fellow believers within our local church and community, throughout his practical and often blunt letter (as in **1:27; 2:1-10; 2:14-16; 3:13-18; 4:1-2; 4:11-12; 5:9; 5:13-16; 5:19-20**), makes clear he wants us to believe if we are not demonstrating our commitment to Christ by our active participation with His team, a local church, our "faith" that **Jesus** is our Savior from sin and Hell is questionable, if not useless. If we interpret James' words the most charitably, he is telling us *workless faith* is *sidelines faith*.

Have you ever wondered if your profession to be a follower of **Jesus Christ** would stand up in court, if you sought exemption to state law on the grounds it violates your "free exercise" "of religion" protected by the First Amendment? Could you prove beyond reasonable doubt your faith is true and genuine? In a landmark 1972 decision, our United States Supreme Court set guidelines to distinguish genuine faith from mere personal preference or a religious philosophy. In the early 1970s, Amish families appealed a decision by lower courts that convicted them of failing to send their children to school until the age of 16, as required by Wisconsin state law. The Amish argued this violated their Freedom of Religion under the U. S. Constitution. The Supreme Court's unanimous decision, in *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, ruled in favor of the Amish.

These were the leading points of Chief Justice Warren Berger's majority opinion: **1)** The lifestyle of the Amish proves that their "religion," "is not merely a matter of personal preference, but one of deep religious conviction, shared by an organized group, and intimately related to daily living"; **2)** Their "daily life and religious practice stem from their faith" and a "literal interpretation" of **Romans 12:2**: "be not conformed to this world"; **3)** Their "religion pervades and determines virtually their entire way of life"; and **4)** Their "religious beliefs and attitude toward life, family, and home have remained constant," which they "preserve against the pressure to conform" to "contemporary society." In brief, the Court concluded, the Amish religion bears "strong evidence of a sustained faith pervading and regulating respondents' entire mode of life."

In essence, this ruling means we have no legal standing to challenge state or federal laws on the basis of "the free exercise of religion" clause of the U.S. Constitution unless our "religion" is corporate, consistent, and comprehensive. We can not merely claim, "These are my deeply held convictions." We must be identified with and committed to a recognized group of believers who share our convictions. We must be able to identify an objective standard for our conduct, such as the Bible, and display consistency in following this standard rather than changing our convictions to conform to contemporary society. And we must display that our religious convictions impact what we do in every aspect of our lives.

Let's reread our text [read]. James tells us our doctrine, what we believe about God, may be good. Our prayer life may be good; including prayers for God's blessings on others. Our pious feelings over the needs of others may tell us our hearts are good. Our prosperity, having more than we need to live comfortably, may tell us God blesses us because He thinks we are good. Yet, we may still be almost good for nothing, we may still be saints on the sidelines, if we are not participating with a team of Christ's followers who encourage others to experience the saving, transforming power of **Jesus Christ** in every aspect of our lives.

Who is more correct in their doctrine than "demons," especially about who **Jesus** is? In **Luke 4:31-34**, a demon-possessed man cried out in terror, "What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" Demons are good "believers," but they discourage people from following **Jesus**. Their "faith" does not produce a change of heart leading them to repent and surrender themselves to **Jesus** as their Lord. A ten-year-old boy was failing math in a public school. His nonreligious parents tried everything to get him to do better, but nothing worked. Finally, in desperation, they enrolled him in a Catholic school. From day one, this boy spent every night poring over his books. On his first report card, he received an "A" in math. "Son," his father asked, "what made the difference in math class? The nuns? New textbooks?" "Dad," he admitted, "I'd never taken math seriously before. But when I walked in and saw that guy nailed to the plus sign, I knew this place meant business!"

In **vss. 15-16**, James pictures believers aware of "a brother or sister" in the Lord who "is without clothes and lacks daily food." "What good is" our "faith," James asks, if we offer nothing more than pat answers or a pious blessing to our struggling "team" members, as in saying, "Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed," instead of the support they truly need? Thus, Biblical "faith," James contends, *begins* with right belief about the Lord but does not *end* with such belief. In other words, James adds in **vss. 17-18**, "faith, if it doesn't have works, is dead by itself." ¹⁸ But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show

me your faith without works, and I will show you faith by my works." The initial step of faith to entrust ourselves to **Jesus** as our Savior is like a decision to play on a sports team. What use is such a decision unless it's backed up by the commitment to cooperate with Christ, our Head Coach, as He transforms us into a supportive and selfless team player dedicated to helping our Lord's cause in achieving great victories!

A study of championship teams reveal they share Four Dynamics: 1) They have a clearly defined target; 2) They have a high level of internal trust; 3) Their members are dedicated to team goals over personal goals; and 4) They realize the value of each team member. Do these dynamics describe this church, and our commitment to our "team" players? If not, we can ask, What we can do as individuals to cooperate with Christ, our Head Coach, as we seek to make this team a Christ-winning team?

CONCLUSION

In 1988, Jack Lipton graduated with highest honors from the University of Arizona Law School. He currently works as a partner in a Los Angeles law firm. He's also principal bassist and a member of the Board of Directors of the Los Angeles Lawyers' Philharmonic Orchestra. Prior to becoming an attorney, Dr. Lipton earned a Ph.D. in Psychology and had a career as an academic psychologist. At a meeting of the American Psychological Association in the 1970s, he presented research on how members of the various sections of 11 major symphony orchestras perceived each other. What he discovered has relevance to our church. We will learn that even if we do not always like our fellow team players, or even if we find each other annoying at times, we can still achieve great results as a church if we keep our main goal in sight: to draw others to embrace in love the Lord **Jesus Christ** and to serve Him as our Savior and our King!

What did Jack Lipton's research reveal about how members of 11 major symphony orchestras perceived each other? The percussionists were viewed as insensitive, unintelligent, and hard-of-hearing; yet fun-loving. String players were seen as arrogant, stuffy, and nonathletic. Brass players were overwhelmingly described as "loud" by nearly all other members of their orchestras. Woodwind players seemed to be held in the highest esteem; being described as quiet and meticulous, though a bit egotistical. With such widely divergent personalities and perceptions, how could an orchestra ever come together to make such wonderful music? Dr. Lipton discovered the answer is simple: regardless of how those musicians view each other, they learn to subordinate their feelings and biases under the leadership of their conductor. Under his guidance, they overcome their petty dislikes and annoyances and still perform well in unison. Together, they achieve far more movingly beautiful and inspiring music than they could ever play by themselves. Without such teamwork, they would be an orchestra in name only and a disgrace to their profession.

How well do we submit our feelings and pet peeves toward others in our faith family to the leadership of our Conductor, our Head Coach, the Lord **Jesus Christ**? Without such teamwork, we can become His team, His Church, in name only, and we may disgrace our profession to be Christ's followers!