

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: September 9, 2012
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?”

James 1:1

A few minutes ago we prayed the Lord’s Prayer, as we do every Sunday. We know that **“Our Father who art in heaven”** hears and answers us, and that the content of that prayer is true and meaningful and powerful.

Kade just read from the Psalms and Matthew. We are confident that {Heb 4:12} **“the word of God is living and active,”** {2 Ti 3:16} **“is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”**

In a few minutes we will declare: **“I believe in God the Father Almighty... and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord ... I believe in the Holy Spirit.”** The creed affirms our core beliefs and identifies us as Christians.

We will recite it during the sacrament of Holy Communion. The simple act of eating the bread and drinking from the cup testifies to our reliance on Jesus for salvation. It also gives witness that **“Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.”**

We have sung a hymn, listened as the choir sang a psalm, and later in the service there will be some spiritual songs. As we sing we avow that the words are true and make their message our own.

We firmly profess to trust God, to love and follow Jesus, and to serve his Kingdom. Can I get an **“Amen!”**?

But what happens when this service is ended and we return to ordinary time? What happens when we leave this consecrated place and go into the world?

In what ways does our claim to a faith that is apostolic, catholic (with a lower-case “c,” in the sense of *universal*), Protestant, and evangelical change our daily existence?

What substantive difference does our Christianity make at home, on the job, at the store, and in the community?


How does our theology translate into practical attitudes, thoughts, words and deeds?

What positive impact does our religion have on me as a man, husband, father, son, brother, friend, neighbor, and citizen, and you in your various roles?

What difference does it make?

To be clear we are not rescued from sin, death, and the devil by our character (however admirable) or our deeds (however good) or our verbal confession (however true). **“For it is by grace [we] have been saved, through faith – and this not from [ourselves], it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast”** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Regarding the achievement of our salvation we cannot take even one iota of credit. It is the Father’s gift of mercy and kindness, accomplished through the death and resurrection of his Son. We do not deserve it, we are unable to earn it, and we cannot repay it.

 To paraphrase a line from the song *Who Am I*, we are saved

Not because of who [we are],
but because of what [he's] **done;**
not because of what [we've] **done,**
but because of who [he is]

Yet without diluting, diminishing, or denying the fact of our total inability to save ourselves, we cannot deny the necessity of a transformed life revealed in who we are, what we say, and what we do. **“For”** (Ephesians 2:10) **“we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance of us to do.”** While we are not saved *by* good works, we are most definitely saved *for* good works.

Therefore the apostle Paul, who doggedly champions the doctrine of justification by faith through grace alone, also commands us: **“continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose”** (Philippians 2:12-13).

Until Christ returns, ushering in his kingdom in all of its fullness, righteous character, words, and deeds (in combination with right belief) are the substance and evidence of our salvation. It is no exaggeration to say that we can go forward at the altar call, pray the Sinner’s Prayer, confess the lordship of Jesus, and hold to sound doctrine – yet if our faith does not make a concrete difference in our character and conduct, it is not *saving* faith.

It is a bold statement, I know. It raises at least as many questions as it answers. Some might find it disconcerting, possibly even threatening.

■ The principle originates, not with me, but with the Holy Spirit, who speaks to us through **“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”** (James 1:1).

We will dig deeply into his epistle over the next few months. Our author will guide us in an exploration of the interplay between belief on the one hand, and character, word, and deed on the other, from many different angles.

The Life Application Study Bible *Introduction to the James* puts it like this:

Christians...make great claims but are often guilty of belying them with their actions. Professing to trust God and to be his people, they cling tightly to the world and its values. Possessing all the right answers, they contradict the gospel with their lives. [Ouch!]

With energetic style and crisp, well-chosen words, James confronts this conflict head-on. It is not enough to talk the Christian faith, he says; we must live it. “Dear brothers and sisters, what’s the use of saying you have faith if you don’t prove it by your actions? That kind of faith can’t save anyone” (2:14). The proof of the reality of our faith is a changed life....

This letter could be considered a how-to-book on Christian living. Confrontation, challenges, and a call to commitment await

you in its pages. Read James and become a *doer* of the Word (1:22-25).

To that end I encourage you, not only to hear what I have to say, but to read James deeply yourself. Next week's text is listed in the worship folder.

I make no promises as to the ease of this journey. But I guarantee that if we come to this book prayerfully, earnestly, humbly, and openly it will challenge and convict and stretch us and we will grow, to the glory of God and the good of our neighbors. And our faith will make an even greater difference than it does today.