

Life on Mission

Matthew 28:18-20

Equip People with a Faith that Works.

1. Faith does work.

- *Ephesians 2:4-5, 3:12; Matthew 9:20-22, 21:21-22*

2. Faith that works.

- *1 Corinthians 3:1-3; Hebrews 5:11-14*

- **Disciples, not students.**

3. Faith and works.

- *James 2:14-26, 1:22*

- **Loving others.**

- **Social needs.**

- **More than knowledge.**

love.learn.live.
westvalleychurch.com



West Valley Church
Michael O'Neill
1/21/24

Life on Mission: The Ultimate Walk with Christ Equip People With a Faith That Works

One of the magazines I subscribe to is called *Christianity Today*, and there was an article a while back by an author and Bible teacher named Jen Wilkin, and she wrote about her reaction when “Facebook decided to kick off (the new year) with a challenge: Compare your first profile picture to your most recent one to see how hard aging hit you over the years.”

So I thought, I think I’ll do that. I scrolled through my Facebook profile and started looking at the profile pictures I posted way back then – all the way back to 2009 when I was fresh off of Myspace... (remember that?). I wonder whatever happened to Tom. Anyway... as I looked at my profile pictures from back then, I noticed that there were some things missing from those early pictures of myself compared to now...things were missing like gray hair...wrinkles...dark circles...There were also other things missing: things like daughters-in-law and a soon to be grandchild. But also missing were friends I’ve made since then – people who are a part of the family of God at West Valley Church, including the amazing things God has done at this church.

Later in that article, Jen Wilkin wrote, “Imagine if it had been possible to post a picture of your heart (15 years ago), laid next to another (now). A spiritual angiogram, before and after, a trajectory of the growth or decline of (Christlikeness). What would it show? (And) would you want to post it?”¹

She asks a great question. What if you *could* look at a picture of your spiritual heart from fifteen years ago and now. I would hope that what you’d find would be more than just the passage of time, but a heart that is wiser, kinder, more Spirit-filled, and more Christlike.

That’s because according to God’s Word, every Christian is expected to grow in their faith, and equipping you to do *that* is the second part of why our church exists.

We began this four-Sunday series last week to review and explore our mission statement as a church. We are spending these four Sundays revisiting each of the three components of our mission statement, and then unpacking our vision, reminding ourselves how important it is, and the vital ways that we incorporate it into our lives and culture here at West Valley Church. We’ll spend time in our small groups each week exploring these, as well.

All we’ve done in the last fifteen years has been driven by our mission statement. Of course, no one could have envisioned a pandemic would interrupt our church life for

¹ Jen Wilkin, “The Unexpected Ministry of Facebook,” *CT Magazine* (April, 2019), p. 24

over two years the way it did (in some ways we are still recovering from that as a church family), but you have remained faithful to God and God has remained faithful to us and we continue to see growth in our mission.

West Valley Church exists to:

- **Introduce People to Jesus Christ,**
- **Equip People with a Faith that Works, and**
- **Live as People with Purpose.**

To help make it even easier to remember we've reduced it to three words:

love, learn, and live.

We will love people enough to introduce them to Jesus, we will learn together and grow in our faith, and we will live that out.

Last week we looked at the first part of our mission statement, "Introduce people to Jesus Christ." This is the most important thing we are to accomplish as Christians and as a church: to make as many introductions as possible to people in West Valley who have yet to meet Jesus. That is the first of our tri-priority mission statement, and today we will look at the second.

We get our mission from a very important statement that Jesus made to his disciples (and therefore to us) after he was crucified, buried, and resurrected, and before he ascended into heaven. We find it in Matthew 28:18-20. It has been called "The Great Commission," because it is Christ's commission *to us*, and his commissioning *of us* – he commands us and authorizes us to carry this out until he comes again. This is what he said:

Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20, nlt)

The first half of that commission tells us that we are to go anywhere and everywhere to make disciples, baptizing them into faith in Christ. That is where we get the directive in our mission to "Introduce people to Jesus Christ." But notice that we are to do more than simply secure conversions; we want to see people become *disciples*; that is, we want to do all we can to help people grow in their faith – grow in their relationship to Jesus and Christlikeness. And so we have the second part of our tri-priority mission...

Equip people with a faith that works.

This reflects the second part of the Great Commission – making disciples and teaching people to grow in their faith.

Just as we chose the words in the first part of our mission statement very intentionally, we chose the words in this part on purpose, too.

So here is what we mean when we say that part of our mission is to equip people with a faith that works: First...

1. Faith *does* work.

Those of us who have put our faith in Christ have learned that it really *does* work! This faith works in our lives and our relationship with God. The Bible says:

“Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:4-5, niv)

Faith in Christ saves us from our former life of confusion and guilt and sin.

Our faith in Christ allows us to come before God freely about anything we need:

“In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” (Ephesians 3:12, niv)

This faith really works!

The Gospels are filled with stories of Jesus being able to work in peoples' lives precisely as a result of their faith; for example, in Matthew there's the story of a woman who had suffered from hemorrhaging for over twelve years, who approached Jesus:

“Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, ‘If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.’ Jesus turned and saw her. ‘Take heart, daughter,’ he said, ‘your faith has healed you.’ And the woman was healed at that moment.” (Matthew 9:20-22, niv)

This faith we have really works! It doesn't mean that if we have enough faith we will *always* be healed, but it *does* mean that Jesus will be able to work freely in whatever ways he wants to in our lives when we have faith in him. That's why Jesus said:

“Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” (Matthew 21:21-22, niv)

So when we say that as a church, our purpose is to equip people with a faith that works, we are wanting to provide the opportunities for people to grow in this faith that really does work. We do that in worship services and sermons, we do that through the different classes and Bible Studies that we provide, and we do that *especially* through our small groups. I can't encourage you enough; if you are serious about growing in your faith, then it's essential to be in a small group of people who love you and care about you and will encourage you and pray for you! I

don't know how you grow without it. But there is something else about this faith; it is a...

2. Faith *that* works.

In other words, it is a faith that results in our action or works. Remember in the Great Commission, Jesus said that he has been given all authority by God the Father to authorize us to go out and make disciples of all people. It is very important that we see that Jesus says we are to make...

- *disciples – not students.*

You might see that and think, what's the difference? There is a *big* difference. A student sits in class all the time, and is a passive recipient of information. A student is in a constant state of input; of receiving. A disciple is more of an apprentice; it is on-the-job-training. You are expected to put into practice what you are learning *immediately – as you are learning it.*

One of the biggest things we've done wrong in the modern church is to approach our spiritual growth like we do school – we've turned Christians into students instead of disciples. So Sunday School classes became a big thing. But I keep asking, when does a person graduate from Sunday school?! Every other school we go to, we are expected at some point to put things into practice. At least in high school and college you *graduate* – which means you go out and get a job! But we've got people in churches around the country today that have been in classes and Bible Studies for decades and still don't introduce people to Jesus or serve others!

So we think all that growing in faith means is we have to keep learning more and more information about the Bible – we have to gain deeper knowledge and insight all the time, but we rarely practice it. I'm not saying we shouldn't study the Bible – we should! But when we study, our question should not be, "How can I learn more?" Our question should always be, "How can I put into practice what I currently know and am learning?" Or to put it more simply, "God, help me start obeying what I already know, so I can learn more!"

The Apostle Paul challenged the Christians in the church in Corinth about this with some very harsh words. Listen to what he said to them:

"Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?" (1 Corinthians 3:1-3, niv)

In other words, he was saying that, for all their knowledge, there was no clear change in their behavior and attitude. He couldn't teach them anything more, because they weren't obeying what they already knew.

This is a similar problem that we see in the letter to the Jewish Christians in the book of Hebrews. To them it says:

“There is much more we would like to say about this, but it is difficult to explain, especially since you are spiritually dull and don't seem to listen. (*Whoa! In other words, you must not be really listening because you are not putting it into practice.*) You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do (*how to what? Do*) what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.” (Hebrews 5:11-14, nlt)

These are harsh words, but it is important that we hear them, because the Word of God applies to us today, too. We don't get to exempt ourselves from the hard things the Bible says just because we've been going to Sunday School for forty years. So if you think I'm coming across harshly, I'm sorry but I can do no less than what the Scriptures tell me and tell you.

When we say, “equip people with a faith that works,” it means that we approach our spiritual growth with the expectation that it results in action; we will obey what we know. So as a church we create opportunities to grow and to obey, with things like classes and especially small groups, and then also in our ministries in our church like children, youth, worship, congregational care, and then in ministries to our community like Upward Soccer, Backpack to School, Homework Club, Christmas Connection, Trunk or Treat and Breakfast with Santa.

See, what we are really talking about when we say our purpose as a church is to “equip people with a faith that works,” we are talking about both...

3. Faith *and* works.

Faith and works go together – this faith that we have really does work – it does all that the Bible promises us it will do. But the Bible is also incredibly clear that if we have faith, we are expected to *get to work with it*; there is an expected change in both our attitudes and actions. Faith and works are inseparable.

This is exactly what James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote about. James was the oldest of several half-brothers to Jesus, because they shared the same mother but not the same father. James' and his brothers' father was Joseph, and Jesus' father was, well, God. Can you imagine what that was like? Mary would be like, “James, why can't you act more like your older brother Jesus?” But if James had any sibling rivalry issues, he worked through them because he became a leader in the Christian Church and wrote a part of the Bible – the book of James. And he has a very

powerful thing to say about having a faith that works. It's a lengthy passage, but I want to read it here, so maybe it will help you if we stand together for the reading of this passage of Scripture – it will help wake us up, and it is the central passage of this message today and behind this portion of our purpose statement:

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 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? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

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. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

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

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? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” (James 2:14-26, niv)

Thank you for standing in honor of God’s Word; may he bless it to our hearts and lives that we might understand and obey. You can have a seat if you want (or don’t! You can keep standing if you’d prefer!)

I want to take a few moments to walk us through the major points in that passage, because it will help each of us understand both faith and works – what our responsibilities are as Christians and especially as members of this church.

The first thing you need to know about this passage is that it builds on what James said in the first half of the chapter, which is teaching on the commandment to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (2:8). So what James means by the “deeds” or the “works” in the passage we read is talking about...

- *loving others.*

He is not talking about obeying religious rules. He is saying that, if we claim we have faith, it will be evident in the ways that we love other people. If we don’t demonstrate genuine love toward others, then we have no faith at all.

The next thing we need to understand is that these deeds or works of love that we do as a result of our faith are primarily about...

- ***social needs.***

James has been talking about a gospel that is social. He gives examples of some of these things. He talks about how love means we don't show favoritism to the rich or popular or the majority over the poor or lowly or minority. He talks about how important it is to love those who are poor and in need and putting others' needs ahead of our own. We talked about this last week too when we explained our incorporation of Spanish language into our worship and communications. See how that fits? James talks about being merciful, about giving clothing to those who don't have any. He talks about giving food and shelter and medical care for those who have none. And he says that if we don't love people in a way that meets their social needs, then we have a *dead faith; we have no faith at all*. You cannot have faith without a social faith. You cannot have the Gospel without it being a social Gospel. You cannot have holiness without social holiness. John Wesley, one of the saints of the church and the leader of the holiness movement, said this: ***The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. Faith working by love, is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.***²

We'll talk more next week about holiness, or what Wesley called "Christian Perfection." So when James says that faith results in works or deeds or action it means we love and serve others – he isn't saying that it means we obey the rules.

I think that in Christian circles, we have a tendency to judge whether or not someone is a Christian or "holy" by the rules they obey or by their adherence to certain social standards (for example, someone who doesn't drink and doesn't chew and doesn't go with girls who do), or by their church attendance, or by how involved they are, or how much money they give. But James would say that those things are "ritual actions and purity laws. "He would insist, "This is not what I'm talking about!"³ As individuals and as a church, we need to ask ourselves, "What are we doing to meet the spiritual, mental, emotional, social, and physical needs of our neighbors?" If our profession of faith does not come to life in action or works on behalf of those who are naked and hungry and those living without Jesus, then not only is our faith dead, but *they* will die!⁴

This is so important to understand that James even says that faith is...

- ***more than knowledge.***

² John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, page viii.

³ C. Jeanne Orjala Serrao, *James: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO, 2010 pg. 101-102

⁴ Ibid, 102

To the person who equates faith with how much they know about the Bible or God, James makes a very harsh point. He says if knowledge or belief in God is all we needed to be saved, then the very demons of Hell would be saved! In fact, the demons are even smarter than a Christian without works, because the belief demons have in God causes them to be scared to death of him! The demons know more about God than a person who has faith but no works to show for it. A person who has a works-less faith isn't even smart enough to realize how much danger they are in! Mere knowledge and acceptance of a belief is not enough to save a person, because it is not real faith. Real faith acts on it, and that action is evident in the way the person loves others.

So when we say that our church is here to **equip people with a faith that works**, it is a statement that is deeply and profoundly rooted in Scripture. It means we want to make disciples of everyone we can, because we really do believe that faith in Christ is a life changing and eternity changing encounter. This faith really, really *does* work. But it is also a faith *that* works; it gets to work on its growth by action. Its primary ambition is to grow in Christlikeness. And that means it is faith *and* works; the evidence of it is how we love others, including by meeting their social needs.

This is why our small groups are so very vital. It is in these groups that we move beyond being students to being disciples; we help each other put it to work. Sign-ups are happening right now in the foyer, so if you've been in a group be sure to re-sign up, and if you haven't then now's the time! These groups will last 8-10 weeks before we have sign-ups again.

James started out his book by saying:

"But don't just listen to God's Word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves." (James 1:22, nlt)

Prayer

Benediction from Hebrews 13 and 1 Peter 3:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever...(May you) grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21, 2 Peter 3:18)