



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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## **"Come Together"**

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Katie Suddeth at Myers Park Baptist Church*

*On June 16, 2024, from James 2:14-26*

Four years. It has been four years this month since I was an intern at Myers Park. It is surely good to be back to a church where it is easy to get to a sermon point that I know everyone will connect to in similar ways. It makes a preacher's job so much easier when you can really just preach to the choir as the saying goes, but wait...

When I left here, the church that helped raise me up as a young theologian on fire for social justice work, four years ago, I went to a smaller church in Colorado. I quickly learned that at this church there were people all over the religious, social and political spectrum so getting to a sermon point that didn't get "amens" from one side of the church and also angry post-service emails from the other side of the church was a challenge.

And I struggled... I did not understand how all these people from different sides of the spectrums of life could worship and be in community together. It caused distress for me in the beginning. However, as I began walking the journey of faith and life with this congregation, I found my own understanding of discipleship and faith being challenged... being stretched...

I quickly learned that I had a very narrow view of what the journey of faith looked like. I forgot about all the work of deconstruction that the young 22-year-old, who came to intern at Myers Park, fresh out of the Southern Baptist Convention, had to do to get where she was. I forgot about how painful and long that process is- how that process of faith is never over. I was an ignorant and arrogant seminary graduate, who thought she knew everything and was done with the process of faith- that is what a Master of Divinity means, right? I mastered the divine and now I was going to go tell these people how to master it.

However, I was served my slice of humble pie real quick. I started to realize that this church was full of love and acceptance. That they genuinely loved each other in ways I had never experienced before. When someone needed something, someone from the church was there. They piled money they had from government checks during the pandemic to create a rent and grocery fund for Church Members and Community Members who needed it. They hosted mobile food markets in their parking lot every week. When the church discovered that food stamps do not cover menstrual products or diapers, the church band together to collect these items and give them out to whoever needed them- no questions asked.

They had deep theological discussions about deconstructing the ideology that had been given to them as children around social issues. They walked through the hard process of transformation in real public ways- and this is not just one or two members. The entire church believed in Christ's path of love and liberation so much that they were really asking hard questions and challenging themselves to be stretched.



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They were so compelled by this love and liberation that they put their faith into real tangible action. They taught me that to engage in the hard work of love and liberation we must first engage in the art of transformation. We must start with challenging our beliefs and asking ourselves hard questions.

In today's scripture, James is discussing how if you are truly a person of faith- if you have truly allowed your life to be transformed by God's grace and love- then your behavior will reflect that. This scripture is misinterpreted as an argument that good works are how one is saved and that we cannot be justified by faith alone, however that is not what James is saying. The Greek word that James is using for works in these verses according to the strong lexicon is not a word meaning tangible works. It refers to a person's actions or behavior. James is saying in this verse that actions speak louder than words. He is simply saying that if you have truly been transformed and are a faithful person then your behavior will reflect that of a person who knows God's love and grace. It does not mean you will be perfect.

Faith is a process. This process is not linear. This process is full of highs and lows. It is full of doubts, anger, and fear. It is full of laughter and tears. And sometimes it feels like there is a whole lot of nothing and silence. This faith process is a cycle of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction- or in other terms birth, death, and resurrection as modeled for us by Christ's story. We know faith is a process, a lifelong one, but James is making the case that the process of faith, even a little bit of that process, will begin to transform you.

He confirms for us that is his argument in verse 19, James is saying anyone can believe God is real. That is not an impressive trait. The Greek word here is used to mark a belief that is simply something you know. It is not something you put your trust in or your confidence in. Faith in his context and world would have gone beyond belief. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen as the author of Hebrews tells us. Faith is trusting and putting your confidence in God and God's promises, which allows you to be transformed from the inside out leading to behavioral changes that reflect that.

When you invest money in a company's stock, you believe the company will grow in value based on what you know about it, thus making you money. When economic uncertainty comes around, you have to have faith this company will withstand the turmoil and continue to grow. With the pandemic, no one knew what would happen, economically speaking. We couldn't rely on belief because this was unknown, but we could have faith that companies would survive, and our money in their stock would be safe. The stock market did survive.

If you move beyond belief and into faith, then you will see that things will begin to come together. It is almost as if you won't even realize you have had this shift until you find yourself in actions that go against your own wants and desires to benefit others.



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This attitude shift and behavioral changes are not the same as legalism. It is not what you think is the right thing to do or a checklist of things you should do to look good to other people. People can be legalistic and have a checklist of things that are supposedly good works a Christ follower should do yet are not being transformed by Christ. They are not engaging in the process of faith or living in a way that reflects being a person of faith.

Back in verse 15 through 16, when he starts this section of his letter, he explains that good works for show are not reflective of faith. If you are truly a person of faith, then you are going to behave naturally like one-that means you are going to show the love of God and God's grace in your actions naturally. It doesn't require an audience or forethought. This happens because we are transformed and liberated by God's love and grace. This is when we actually do the hard work of love and liberation set out for us by Christ's example. It isn't just convenient allyship or listening to a social justice centered sermon and thinking you did your part. It is when we see a child of God suffering and we put their needs ahead of our own wants and desires to truly help however we can.

James is not saying we have to be perfectly good or make the right choice every time. It does not mean that we will know what to say or do the perfect thing. He is simply saying that if you are a person truly transformed by faith then your actions will speak for themselves. And when we do say the wrong thing or mess up, that we apologize and try and try again to get it right. That is powerful. He goes on further down to describe faithful actions of others. Things that people did in the bible because they were faithful to God. He is pointing out that just because you simply do good works does not mean you are saved. By saved, I mean the ongoing process of faith and transformation. The process of not getting it perfect yet trying again and again to get it right. The process of trusting God and trusting that God is faithful to us.

It is also allowing yourself to embrace the process- to embrace the love and grace that God offers freely to us. Not only to embrace it, but to allow it to do the holy work of sanctification within you that only a divine source could do. Righteous works without faith mean nothing. Faith without a transformed behavior means nothing. In verse 24- one could say a more accurate version of this in Greek according to the Strong lexicon would be "You perceive that a person is made righteous by their works, when in reality a person is made righteous by their faith." Have James and I hammered this in your brain yet?

There is no work or perfect life we can live that will make us worthy of God's grace and love. We just cannot do it. What we can do is work on accepting that unconditional love, as hard as it is to accept, and allow it to transform us from the inside out. Then, we will see an attitude and behavioral transformation.



The Greeks believe that faith is a gift from God. The Greek word that James uses here for faith reflects that idea of faith being a gift. This gift was meant to be a gift of liberation. A gift of freedom from the things that hold us back from God and a life of love. Faith is not to hold us down in oppression, to make us live according to a list of sins created by humans, or legalism. It is a gift of transformation and relationship. It is an ongoing process of growth. That is what James is stressing to his readers. That is what we should take away from James' letter. That we are loved just as we are, and if we allow the transformative love of God to do its best in our lives then we will start to reflect that love to others in the way we live our lives.

Amen