

Opening Scripture

Psalm 17:6-9

Scripture

James 2:8-20

Message

Putting Faith to Work

I love the Operation Christmas Child Shoebox campaign. Packing a Shoebox with gifts is an opportunity for us to demonstrate kindness to a child in need. For many of the children, this is the first time they have ever received a gift. When a child receives a Shoebox of gifts, they are reminded that there are other people in the world who are thinking about them in their time of need, and they are reminded that they are loved by God. Along with the gifts, the child receives a booklet which explains the gospel message of salvation through Jesus. Many children have become followers of Jesus as a result of this important ministry. Many of the children are enrolled in discipleship program where they learn what it means to follow Jesus. These children can also have an impact on their families. A shoebox full of gifts opens the door to share the good news about Jesus. If you are planning to pack a shoebox this year, I want to say thank you and I want to assure you that this act of kindness is significant and can have many positive results.

Expressing kindness and mercy to others is important to God and is an important part of who we are as followers of Jesus.

- God is a God of kindness and mercy. One of the very first things that we learn about God in the book of Genesis is that He is kind and takes great delight in blessing people. ¹⁵ ***The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*** ¹⁶ ***And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; (Gen. 2:15-16)***
- Throughout the Old Testament we see examples of God's kindness to His people – deliverance, Manna, Water, protection from their enemies
- We see Kindness in the life and ministry of Jesus – He healed the broken, feed the multitudes, set people free from evil. One of his greatest stories – the parable of the Good Samaritan – is about being a good neighbor to others that we encounter who are in need, no matter who they are or where they come from.
- In the early Church, we see acts of kindness in action – distribution of food for the poor widows, people selling property to give the money to others; collection of money for the Church at Jerusalem as they are experiencing a famine

Here at Germantown Church we encourage people to demonstrate their concern for others through acts of kindness. We provide opportunities for folks to do that – Shoeboxes, Collecting food for the Help Hotline foodbank, assisting at the Hagerstown Rescue Mission. Many of our people take advantage of those opportunities. Many of our people are expressing kindness and mercy to others in ways that are not so visible. I don't even know what some folks are doing. I say that not so we can "puff ourselves up", not so that we can boast or brag. Being kind and merciful to others is just a part of who we are. It grows out of our faith in Jesus.

I believe that is what James is getting at here in these verses that we looking at today. If you are familiar with the teachings of the Bible, you know that faith is something that is important. We come into relationship with God, we are forgiven of our sins, we are assured of eternal life in heaven through faith. There are people who believe that acts of kindness and mercy are ways that we earn our way into heaven. Through our good works, we build up points with God. At the end of our lives, if we have enough points, if we have more acts of kindness than sins, we win. God will let us in to heaven. But that isn't how it works. Salvation – or getting into a right relationship with God – is a gift that God gives us. We accept it by faith. Its not something that we earn or pay for with our good behavior. That is what the Apostle Paul teaches us. In Romans 5:1 he says that ***we are justified (made right with God) through faith, and that now we can have peace with God.*** In Ephesians 2:8-9 he writes: ⁸ ***For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—*** ⁹ ***not by works, so that no one can boast. .***

But what does this “saving faith” look like. In these verses from James, it sounds like he is saying something different than what Paul is saying. But I believe that James is actually just helping us to understand what true faith that saves us looks like – the faith that Paul says will save us.

In verse 14, he creates a realistic scenario that we ought to be able to relate to. Suppose we encounter someone who is experiencing very real physical or material need. How should we respond? James suggests that some may respond by simply wishing them well. **“Go in peace; keep warm and well fed.”** The modern day equivalent to that may be ***Our thoughts and prayers are with you.*** How often do we hear that expression following a tragedy or natural disaster. Now, letting someone know that we are thinking about them and praying for them is certainly important. We do believe in the power of prayer. But James suggests that sometimes people need more than our “thoughts and prayers”. They need clothes, or shelter, or food, or protection from danger. Maybe they need a shoebox

James challenges us to consider ways to express our kindness and mercy to them. He uses this illustration to help us understand what faith is. When we fail to express our concern through acts of kindness, our faith is insincere. It really is not Saving Faith.

He then pushes us even further to reflect on the sincerity of our faith. **JUST SAYING** that we have faith puts us in the category of demons who believe that there is a God, One God, just as we do. However their belief does not save them. They shudder in fear, knowing that God will hold them accountable for their evil. Their belief does not result in goodness or kindness. Their faith is not saving faith.

So James would agree with Paul who says that we are Saved by Grace through faith. And he would affirm that the faith that saves us is a faith that works. And I believe Paul would agree with James. I read Ephesians 2:8-9 earlier where Paul says that we are saved by grace through faith, and not by works. I did not read verse 10. Paul says in verse 10: ***10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*** There is a place for faith in James' teaching and there is a place for works in Paul's teaching.

So how do we apply this teaching in our lives. I think the answer is that when we have opportunity to show kindness and mercy to someone we should do so. Whether it is packing a shoebox, or giving food to the food bank, or supporting ministries that provide relief for people who are experiencing physical or material needs we should do so. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus teaches that we are to act neighborly to anyone that we meet who is in need. Even if they are our worst enemy.

I pray that God will open our eyes to the opportunities that He brings our way to be kind.

Prayer Time

I invite you to pray with me.

Prayers for friends in need

Prayers for those who are watching

Benediction

Questions for Natalie:

- Welcome to Natalie. Natalie is with me today to talk about a project that our Church is involved in every fall – Operation Christmas Child. Natalie coordinates this outreach effort for us.
- **What is Operation Christmas Child?**
- **What is the Shoebox campaign?**
- **Where do the Shoeboxes go?**
- **Why are you involved in Operation Christmas Child. Tell us your story**
- **If someone wants to participate, what should they do?**
- **Explain how to pack a Shoebox. Are there items that should not go into a shoebox?**
- **Can we pack more than one Box?**
- **What should we do with the box after we pack it? When is Collection Day?**
- **Does it cost anything?**

The best way to get information about the Shoebox campaign is online at Operation Christmas Child. There are videos about how to pack a box, some stories of how a shoebox changed someone's life. This year you can build a box online, if you are reluctant about going out to the store. There is a cost for that.

Thank you Natalie!

PRAYER