

BURN-IN

SHERARD EDINGTON

James 2:1-17

I have here a check that I am going to place in the offering plate. It is a personal check from me which I have written made out to First Presbyterian Church in the amount of \$100. This is not part of my pledge; rather, it is donation to go to Rise Against Hunger. This money, with your help, will go to feed people.

Now, if I gave the \$100 dollars to you and said, 'take some folk out to eat,' how many people could you feed? If you went to a nice restaurant, you might be able to feed two-three-four people. If you go to Chick-fil-A you could purchase 20 of their basic chicken sandwiches. If you hit the McDonalds dollar meal... you can do the math.

However, I can beat that. This \$100, with your help, will feed 238 people. How does that happen? Well, as I said, I need your help. I can't do it alone. But together we can participate in the Rise Against Hunger food packaging event and create meals. This will be the seventh year that FPC will have participated in this exciting ministry.

On Saturday, October 12—four weeks from now—I will need 30 to 40 of you to commit to gather at the church from 9 in the morning until noon. You can be any age—from the smallest kids up to as old as you want to be. There is a job for everyone. The scouts from Troop 434 have already committed to join us that day. And one thing that I need to point out, if you haven't participated before, the meal packaging event is fun. There is music, and hairnets; there's a gong, and more hairnets. We always have a great time. Who said that doing ministry had to be a misery?

On that Saturday morning, we will gather to assemble 1692 food packets. Each packet will feed six people. We are going to package 10,152 meals.

The meals themselves are simple. They consist of rice and dehydrated vegetables, plus a nutrition/spice packet.

Preparation of these meals is foolproof. The user just pours the contents of the packet into a pot, adds two liters of water, and cooks for twenty minutes. We've cooked this meal here and tasted it. It is basically a rice casserole. It is filling and nutritious but bland. Whoever prepares the meal is free to add local spices and proteins.

The food we package on October 12 will be placed on pallets which will be taken to a local warehouse. From there, they will be placed into a container and shipped to

where it is needed—places of drought or flood, famine or conflict—places such as Haiti, Honduras, India, Syria, South Sudan, and more. We will be informed when our food reaches its destination.

Each meal that we create costs 42 cents. Of the past seven years, the cost has increased by 12 cents per meal. In 2018, our first year with Rise Against Hunger, each meal cost 34 cents. This year, we need to collect \$4263.84.

Why do we do this? Very simple. Because people are hungry. And Jesus commands us to *feed the hungry*. If we have faith, then we must respond by obeying Jesus' commands and actually doing something. We can't talk a belly full. Lip service is not enough.

In our reading for today we continue with the New Testament book known as the Letter of James. We know little about this letter or its author. James identifies himself only as *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*. The letter is written to Christians offering them instruction on how they should be living out their faith.

In the first chapter of this letter, James offers ethical teachings to his readers. He encourages them to accept trials and persecution as a test of their faith. But more than anything, he encourages his readers to put their faith into practice. As we read last week, James commands the people to *Be doers of the word. Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves*, he says.

We can talk about our faith all day, but it means little if we don't back it up with action. That action can be acts of charity and compassion, it can be prayer, it can be giving. What is crucial is that we do, we act.

Here in chapter 2, James confronts the reality that believers do not always follow this command to be doers. And he offers a case study to make his point. Imagine, he says, that you are gathered in your worship assembly (we would say imagine you are sitting in church), and two people enter the room. One is clearly well-to-do. You can tell from their fine clothes and jewelry—maybe it's the Rolex watch, or the Armani suit, or the Hermes scarf, or the Louis Vuitton bag. This is a rich one.

The second person to enter the room is wearing dirty, stained, torn clothes and is obviously not just poor but barely hanging on to the lowest rung of the social ladder. James asks, "How do you treat these people?" To Ms Louis Vuitton do you offer them a prominent, comfortable seat? And to the poor person do you point to the back corner telling them, 'You can stand over there,' or even worse, 'You can sit on the floor...next to my feet.' When we do this, James argues, even if it is just in our heads, we are judging these people. We make distinctions. We become *judges with evil thoughts*. And we are not following the law of God.

James argues that being poor is not a crime. Being poor does not mean a person is incapable of being rich in faith. And he poses this question, ‘when has a poor person ever hurt you?’

The rich, he says, they are the ones who oppress you; they are the ones who will drag you into court; they will trash your good name. So, why then do you treat them with favoritism? How does James want us to treat the rich? So, how does James want us to treat the poor? By following what he calls *the royal law*. The royal law is this, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. Showing any partiality to any person is a sin. We can’t judge and show favoritism. We are to love equally.

Just imagine what our world be like if each person loved their neighbors without discrimination, if we set aside our prejudices and favoritism and loved those whom we might despise as much as we love those we cherish.

Ultimately, our faith, as James might say, should be burned into us. Think about those old television sets and computer monitors that displayed the same image for weeks or months on end. Eventually, the image would burn into the screen. From then on, everything on the screen would reflect this ghost image. Our faith should be like that. Our faith should be something that people see when they look at us no matter what we are doing. Our works should be the ghost image that colors everything that we do. Every action, every word, every thought, should reflect our faith.

As I mentioned last Sunday, the Letter of James is not without its controversies. Martin Luther, the great Reformation theologian, did not like this book at all. He strongly objected to James’ emphasis on works. Luther interpreted James to say that we can earn our salvation by doing good works. In other words, if we do enough good things, then God will be forced to welcome us into the Kingdom.

And it is true that James does emphasize works, but he does so as a response to faith, not in place of it. James asks this question, *What good is it... if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?* For James, the answer is no. Our faith does not exist in a vacuum. Faith demands a response. In our reading for today, he offers an example of someone who is naked and hungry. If a Christian says to them, *Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill*, and yet does nothing to actually assist them, James says that is pointless. That is not faith. Faith must be accompanied by actions. If we have faith, then we will be compelled to act, to love our neighbors without discrimination, to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, to embrace the poor, to feed the hungry.

And this is why we will gather on October 12—to create 10,000 meals so that we may say, “Go in peace, eat your fill,” and have it mean something. By feeding the hungry and healing the broken we are doers of the word; we are building God’s house, we are acting our faith.