

"BEYOND BELIEF"
February 18, 1990

TEXT: James 2:17 "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

By the most scientific methods known, the Gallop Poll recently determined that 95 per cent of all Americans say they believe in God. I do not know what that statement means to you, but I remember my own reaction very clearly. When I read those findings, I thought to myself, "So what?"

After all, the Pharisees believed in God, but they fought Jesus every step of the way. The high priest believed in God, but he sentenced Jesus to death. The Romans believed in all kinds of gods, but they crucified him. Believing that God exists does not make us religious any more than belief in the existence of man makes us humane. And I probably have more respect for an honest atheist than I have for those who believe without any real commitment.

Please do not misunderstand. I am not saying that what we believe does not matter. I agree with the statement I once read that "What a man accomplishes depends on what he believes." Those who believe that life is a dog-eat-dog affair, that no one can be trusted, that worldly success is all that counts will build one kind of life. Those who say, with Grantland Rice, "It matters not who won or lost but how you played the game" will build something altogether different.

They will also be very different people. Beliefs affect not only our accomplishments, but everything about us. Thousands of years ago a Hindu scripture known as the Bhagavad-Gita put it this way: "Man is made by his belief. As he believes, so he is." One of the reasons for our present chaos may be that we do not really know what we believe. In the words of Sidney Harris, "We can say with vigor and precision exactly what we are against; but, when asked to profess our positive beliefs, we are vague, generally confused, and self-contradictory."

Yet, important as belief is, it is still not enough. When St. Paul wrote, "The just shall live by faith," he was not thinking of beliefs. When Jesus said, "Except your faith exceed the faith of the scribes and of the pharisees, you shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven," he was not thinking of beliefs. Certainly no one would ever have claimed that the

scribes and pharisees were atheists or even heretics. What caused Jesus so much concern, was something very different.

And the same can be said for most of us. As already noted, 95 per cent of all Americans answer, "Yes," when asked if they believe in God. But many of them do not seem to be much affected, morally or spiritually, by that belief. They are like Voltaire who once described his relationship to God this way: "We salute, but we do not speak!" They believe in God, but so what?

Let me tell you a parable. Two young women are lonely. Each says she wants someone with whom to share her life, a husband and a family. And to each there comes a young man who promises to be faithful, loving, and kind, who asks for her hand in marriage. The first girl answers, "I believe you exist. I suppose I have always believed that. I can't recall a time when I didn't. And I also believe that you're faithful, loving, and kind. I'm sure you would be a good husband." But she never gives him an answer. She never sets a date. And they never get married.

The second girl is different. She says, "I love you, too. And I trust you. And, yes, I will gladly marry you." So she sets a date, and they get married. Which of these had the kind of faith that really mattered?

Of course, the second girl was taking a very real chance. Her young man might not be as wonderful as she thought he was. Or he might change as the years go by. He might become an alcoholic or run off with another woman. He might die, leaving her lonely once more. But only by taking that risk could she ever know the kind of happiness she said she wants.

It is the same way with faith. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord! Lord!' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." Talk is cheap and so is belief. Only by taking certain risks, only by acting on our faith can we find the life that Jesus promised. In the words of this morning's scripture, "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works?"

But what kind of works? Here again James supplies a crucial hint. He wrote, "If a brother or sister is ill clad or in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith, if it has no works, is dead." (James 2:14-17)

When Jesus began his ministry, he announced his purpose in these words from the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18) And when the disciples of John came to Jesus asking, "Are

you he who is to come or shall we look for another?", he gave them this answer: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense in me." (Matthew 11:4-6) Whatever else Christianity is, it involves, not just faith, not just worship, but reaching out to the needs of others.

Just how we do that, of course, is a matter of personal choice. As members of this church you are already helping to comfort the sick through the chaplains at the county institutions as well as through our own ministers, to feed the hungry through the Wauwatosa Food Bank and the Saint Vincent meals program, to house the homeless through Habitat for Humanity. You are already serving the aged through the Congregational home and Mayfair Interfaith, teaching adults to read and write through Wisconsin Literacy Services, giving medical care through our clinic in Honduras, offering help to drug addicts through the Next Door Foundation, and much, much more.

But God needs more than money. God also needs people. People who will help in these ministries. This very day, between services, there is a meeting for those who can visit the elderly for our Partner Program, both men and women. The Congregational Home, for the first time since we built it, does not have enough volunteers. Beginning in March our Wauwatosa churches will need workers to help renovate a house for Habitat for Humanity. And, of course there is always a need for Sunday School teachers and choir members, ushers and greeters.

Or, like some of our people, you may want to work through Goodwill Industries, the Next Door Foundation, the Salvation Army, or the Wisconsin Hearing Society, to name just a few. The problem, you see, is not finding places to work, but finding people to help.

What we believe is important, but unless our commitment takes us beyond belief we have missed the whole point. "If a brother or sister is ill clad or in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?" When Jesus called his disciples, he did not say, "Believe in me" or even "Worship me." What he said was, "Follow me. Join me as I reach out in love to those in need." And when he spoke of judgement, he said,

"When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O

say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison, and you came to me.'

Then the righteous will say to him, "Lord, when did we do these things for you?" And he will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you did it to me." AMEN.