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Religious Freedom Sunday
"The Faith that Frees Us"
James 2:14-26

Jan. 7, 2014 -- A Southern California school district is under fire for preventing a first grader from handing out to his classmates candy canes with religious messages, NBC News Los Angeles reports today.

According to NBC, after conferring with the principal at Merced Elementary School in West Covina on Dec. 13, a teacher told the student, 6-year-old Isaiah Martinez, "Jesus is not allowed in school."

"I was shocked," a lawyer for the student said. "I was like, 'Wow, they really just said no.'"

Each gift consisted of a traditional candy cane with a message attached that recited the legend of the candy cane. The legend references a candy maker who created the candy cane to symbolize the life of Jesus Christ.

The student's older sister told him about the legend of the candy cane and he asked if he could share it with his teacher and his classmates.

The student and his sister then purchased candy canes, printed the candy cane message and tied a copy to each candy cane.

It is reported the teacher threw the messages in the trash before handing the candy back to him to pass out to his classmates.

Debra Kaplan, the superintendent of the West Covina Unified School District, wrote in a statement, "At the present time, we do not have any reason to believe that the teacher or any other district employee had any intention other than to maintain an appropriate degree of religious neutrality in the classroom and to communicate this to the child in an age-appropriate manner."

Today many churches are celebrating Religious Freedom Sunday. Since 1996, US Presidents have declared January 16th Religious Freedom Day.

In last year's proclamation, President Obama stated, "Foremost among the rights Americans hold sacred is the freedom to worship as we choose. Today, we celebrate one of our Nation's first laws to protect that right -- the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. Written by Thomas Jefferson and guided through the Virginia legislature by James Madison, the Statute affirmed that "Almighty God hath created the mind free" and "all men shall be free to profess . . . their opinions in matters of religion." Years later, our Founders looked to the Statute as a model when they enshrined the principle of religious liberty in the Bill of Rights."

Later, he states, “Today, we also remember that religious liberty is not just an American right; it is a universal human right to be protected here at home and across the globe. This freedom is an essential part of human dignity, and without it our world cannot know lasting peace.”

In a letter this week from Rev. Pierre Bynum, Chaplain & National Prayer Director of the Family Research Council, he reports that “With January 1, the deadline for non-profit religious groups to begin providing their employees access to insurance covering contraceptives, sterilization and abortifacient drugs, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor granted a temporary order restraining the Obama/Holder Justice Department from enforcing the HHS mandate against the Little Sisters of the Poor. The Sisters are a 175 year-old order of Catholic nuns based in Denver that cares for the elderly poor. The Justice Department acted quickly to defend the mandate saying it would not be imposed upon the Little Sisters if they would simply sign a certificate authorizing others to fulfill the mandate. But the Sisters say signing it would be giving permission for abortifacients to be distributed by someone else, also unconscionable for them. The administration's behavior is part of a pattern of unconstitutional acts against religious groups. These acts by the federal government have given boldness to others at the state and local levels to similarly disregard the constitutionally guaranteed religious liberties of their constituents. If the administration wins

this case, the Little Sisters would be subject to unsustainable fines, as they will not violate their convictions, and have to close their doors. This is but one of 90 lawsuits filed against the HHS Mandate, including those by Hobby Lobby and Conestoga Wood, which are a priority for prayer this year. Secretary Holder's offer to the Sisters, "just sign the certification, and you'll have no further obligations," sounds far too much like Caesar's offer in the 2nd Century Rome: "Just confess that 'Caesar is Lord,' and you may continue to practice your religion as you please"

It occurs to me that Religious Freedom, to be preserved, must be not only believed in, but practiced. It reminded me of some people that the Lord's brother, James, addressed in his letter to dispersed Christians. He urged his readers to be not just hearers of the Word, but doers as well.

One might say of Religious Freedom, “Use it or Lose it !”

James elaborates on this theme in James 2:14-26. If you and I want to have Religious Freedom, we need to have a faith that does not simply stand alone, but a faith that works; that is seen in what we DO. This alone is “the Faith that Frees us”.

In James 2 beginning at v. 14, James asks, "Does Your Faith Work?"

1. There is a so-called Faith in God that doesn't work: v. 14-16

A. A question: Can a Faith that is not followed by deeds save?

V. 14 (ESV) "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?"

What does mean by "save"? He uses it in ch. 1:21 in regard to faith in God's word: (ESV) "Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls."

What follows are the familiar words that speak of being "doers" of the Word and not "hearers" only.

So true Faith is the kind that saves from the "filthiness and rampant wickedness" that condemns one to God's judgment.

Is there a Faith that does not work to save us?

B. James answers with an illustration: v. 15-16

"If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?"

In the illustration, the witness to another's need notices the need and has sympathy, but does not act.

Does such a person truly have the love of God in him? No, he only has words! Jesus did not just say He loved people, he healed and helped them.

The implication is that to notice a need and feel sympathy over it is not saving Faith. There is a "faith" that is cold, dead, loveless and lifeless.

Trans: So how do we know the difference?

2. Faith that is true Faith is revealed by its loving service to God: v. 17-19

A. There is a counterfeit Faith.
v. 17 "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, [i.e. works that demonstrate love] is dead."

It is important for everyone to understand that there are those who say they have Christian Faith, but do not have "saving Faith," but "dead Faith."

Does James mean that you are not saved by "Faith alone" as Paul teaches in Rom. 3:28 "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."?

No, but he is saying that there is a counterfeit!

The crucial difference: True Faith rests not only in the mind, but also and primarily in the heart.

B. What is the role of obedience to God? v. 18

The objection is made that faith and works are separate things that can exist independently in people.

v. 18a “But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” i.e. “Some people have faith without deeds, some have deeds without Faith, and a few have both.”

In question here is not two kinds of Faith, but people who say they have Faith, and may even think they have Faith, but in fact have a counterfeit.

James contends that someone who is truly a follower of Christ will do so in both Faith and obedience, an obedience motivated, not by duty, but love.

Obedience from duty without Faith will never save because God’s standard is perfection, and as v. 10 says, “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.”

Faith without obedience will not save because it has not embraced Christ with the heart as well as the mind. Such may be some of you!

Sometimes we are so glad to find someone who says they are a believer that we ignore things in their life that come out of an unchanged heart.

v. 18b-19 reveals the foolishness of this: “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!”

Some think that faith means believing the God of the Bible is the true God. James says, that’s great, but it’s not any more than the demons believe!

Demons even know they are sinners and that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of sinners.

But saving faith gives up on being saved by being good or finding fulfillment, trusts Jesus Christ to forgive and destroy your sin, and completely relies on the merciful Jesus to lead you, love you, and transform you.

This is why, when people ask to join this church, we look for evidence of a changed life; evidence of faith that loves God and loves people unconditionally.

Deeds do not give Faith its saving quality, they only indicate its quality, as Paul says in ...

Eph. 2:8-10 (ESV) For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing;

it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

The deeds of a person’s life are the only means given in the Bible to discover whether a person has true Faith: 1 John 5:13 “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.”

And the test? 1 John 3:14 (ESV) “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides [or remains] in death.”

True Faith not only ASSENTS to the truth, but CONSENTS to take Christ as Lord of one’s life.

Trans: So Faith that is saving Faith is revealed by its service to God:

3. James gives 3 illustrations of Faith that works: Abraham, Rahab and a dead body. (v. 20-26)

A. Abraham was not saved by a Faith without deeds, but by a Faith that was declared by his deeds: v. 20-21

“Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?”

Isaac was the child of the promise. The incident is recorded in Gen. 22:1-12.

According to Heb. 11, Abe believed he would be killing his son and God would then resurrect him!

It was an act of absolute Faith.

B. The effect of love-driven obedience on Abraham’s Faith was Maturity v. 22

“You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works [what he did].”

It was a test of his Faith that demonstrated his faith to be real.

Would your Faith hold up under suffering or tragedy, loss of job, rejection by friends or family, or loss of everything you own?

Survival of trials bring maturity and assurance. God gave Abraham assurance in Genesis 22:12 (ESV) He said, "now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

C. Now James reminds us that he agrees with the apostle Paul about the primary place of Faith in v. 23 “and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"— and he was called a friend of God.

- In that sense, Abe was saved by Faith ALONE.

D. Having established all this, James makes the statement that seems to contradict the apostle Paul and is difficult for so many: v. 24 “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

The important thing is understanding the meaning of the word, “justification” and the different ways it is used.

The word is a legal term meaning “declared righteous”. Say it, “declared righteous”.

The difference between what Paul and James say is who is doing the declaring and what is declared.

When Paul says we are justified by Faith, he says that God declares people righteous on the basis of Grace, through the gift of Faith.

When James says we are justified by works, he is saying that our works declare the genuineness of our Faith, so we are “declared righteous” by our deeds.

There is, in fact, no contradiction.

B. The example of Rahab reinforces James’ point.

James 2:25 “And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?”

The story is in Joshua 2.

Again, her deeds were the result of her Faith: Heb. 11:31 “By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.”

Why is Rahab brought up? Before the test of her Faith, her life was as evil as Abe’s was good.

You see, it is not the quantity or longevity of Faith that makes it saving, but its quality.

Faith that works saves even the worst of sinners, because it is a gift of the unmerited Grace of God.

C. Example #3: A dead body

James 2:26 “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”

This is intended to be a very practical illustration.

Remember that the word for “Spirit” also means “breath”. The picture is of a body without breath.

The people of James' day knew 2 things about dead bodies: they smelled and they were useless.

This is the graphic thing James wants to say about counterfeit Faith, Faith without deeds: It smells so you don't want it around, & it is useless.

What kind of Faith do you have? Will it Save? Will it set you free? Is it a faith that frees you?

There is a so-called Faith that doesn't work.

Faith that is true Faith is revealed by its loving service to God.

What does your life declare about where your heart is?

Action: Ask yourself honestly, "Do I have a faith that makes a difference in the way I live?"

Ask, "If I do obey God, is it because of fear or because of love?"

Ask yourself, "Is my faith dead or alive?"

Decide at least one thing you will do this week out of love for Jesus Christ.