

©All Rights Reserved

Public or Private. FPCAllegan. 7/22/2012

James 2:14-26, ¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. ¹⁹You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.²⁰ You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless^[d]? ²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,"^[e] and he was called God's friend. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. ²⁵In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Matthew 6:1-8

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁵"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

©All Rights Reserved

The year was 1989, and the principal of the Nathan Bishop Middle School in Providence Rhode Island asked a local rabbi to pray a prayer during their graduation ceremony. This was the standard procedure in that Rhode Island school system. At both the Middle School and at the High School Graduations, a rather generic prayer was traditionally offered by one of the religious leaders in the community. Normally the presence of the prayer was not questioned. However on this occasion, the Wiesman family, themselves Jewish, objected. They saw this public prayer as a violation of the separation between church and state. In protest, they requested a temporary restraining order to bar the Rabbi from speaking. When the court denied their request, the Wiesman family DID attend the graduation, but they also continued their litigation where the case eventually ended up in the United States Supreme Court in 1992.

The Supreme Court, as well as Christians everywhere were divided on how to define a generic prayer given by a religious authority at a graduation ceremony. Because it was at a public school graduation, was the prayer simply a tradition that was voluntary in its participation? Or was the prayer an example of the state establishing the practice of religion in violation of the first amendment to the constitution? The surprising majority opinion in the case was that a school

©All Rights Reserved

directed prayer at a public graduation ceremony WAS in violation of the constitution of the United States. The court ruled that because state money funded the school, the state had no business promoting religion of any kind, even a simple generic blessing at a graduation ceremony. --The practical implications of this ruling was that public prayer was eliminated from Public School graduation ceremonies across the nation. But the other effect of the ruling was also another step in our culture in the minds and hearts of the American people. It further and again, underscored the generally held belief that “one’s religion was a private matter” and that as such, it was not proper to share that religion in the public sphere.

You see, today’s sermon in our *Summer Sermon Series on things Christians Disagree On*, is about whether the practice of our faith should be public or private. And within the United States, the thinking about this, about how it is appropriate for a person to publically demonstrate their faith, is I believe, somewhat clouded by our commitment to the constitution and it’s separation of church and state clauses. A simple Google search about public faith will bring up lots of articles about this establishment clause in the constitution. In common American jargon, we talk about “a wall” of separation between church and state.

©All Rights Reserved

We talk about public and private “spheres” and where religion CAN be practiced in the private sphere and CANNOT be practiced in the public sphere. But whenever these two spheres touch, wherever the wall is broken down, on these issues, Christians of all different types agree and disagree. Some Christians believe in prayer in public schools and other Christians do not. Some believe that only private personal prayers should be allowed in publically funded places, while other believe that a simple generic prayer at a public school ceremonies or at a sporting events is ok.

But while all of these metaphors of walls and spheres and separations are useful for us to delineate what can be done by the **government** regarding the taxpayers funding of religion, I would argue that they are not helpful categories for a Christian trying to figure out how they should live into the public and also the private practice of their faith. These categories, --which actually are only categories for government funded activities, have found their way into common Christian thinking and because of that, the practice of Christianity in public has been greatly neutralized. NT Wright in his book *Simply Christian* describes it this way:

“...we will arrange for ‘religion’ to become a small sub department of ordinary life; it will be quite safe — harmless, in fact — with church life carefully separated off

©All Rights Reserved

from everything else in the world, whether politics, art, sex, economics, or whatever. Those who want it can have enough to keep them going. Those who don't want their life, and their way of life, disrupted by anything "religious" can Live as if the rumor of God had never existed! We are, after all, in charge of our own fate! We are the captains of our own souls (whatever they may be)! That is the philosophy which has dominated our culture. From this point of view, spirituality is a private hobby, an up-market version of daydreaming for those who like that kind of thing." (NT Wright Simply Christian, 19)

With all of the public presence removed from Christianity, the faith of our fathers and mothers has been reduced from a force for change in this world to become a private hobby that we feed once a week on Sundays with bits of scripture like a sprinkling of fish food. Instead of Christianity making a difference and becoming the sole and driving purpose to our lives, it becomes something that we ignore unless it is convenient and fits into our schedule.

My friends this sort of private faith is not Biblical Christianity! This is not the faith which led thousands of first century Christians become martyrs for the public practice of their faith! Our first scripture passage today from James 2 says it best. **Our faith, without works is dead.** While faith must begin in our own

©All Rights Reserved

personal heart and minds, our faith cannot simply stay there, or it is not true

faith. For when you truly understand and believe in God's love for you and for

everyone else in the world that sort of faith motivates you to action. A faith that

is simply believed and not lived is not a faith worth having. It is like a dried up

plant that is simply taking up space, it isn't any use to anyone. Your faith, when

truly put into action, **should matter to others**. Whether it is the kids in their

Sunday School class looking up to you as their leader, or a lonely senior who

appreciates your visit or your telephone call. Whether it is the blessing of your

voice raised in song, or your expertise and calm and sound judgment working on a

project or a committee; if you are not practicing your faith in some a public

manner, you may call it faith, but it isn't the Christian faith.

At this point you may be wondering about our second scripture today from

Matthew 6. Many people point to this scripture when they want to advocate

against praying aloud or practicing your faith in public. But typically they do not

read the entire passage. Matthew 6 is not actually advocating against practicing

your faith publically, what Matthew 6 is warning against is your **motivations** for

that very public practice. A person whose motivations for their public actions of

©All Rights Reserved

faith is to simply feed their own ego, or to build up their own pyramids of power

has, according to Matthew 6, already received their reward in the human acclaim.

In 1940, not too far from here in Muskegon, Michigan, in 1940, a boy named James Orson Bakker was born. The family were Christians of the Assembly of God variety and Jim Bakker felt God's call and went to a Bible College in Minneapolis. It was there that he met his beautiful wife Tammy Fay, and the two of them were married and left Bible College to become Evangelists. They soon jumped on the televangelism bandwagon, and helped the TV Preacher Pat Robertson grow his television ministry of his show the 700 Club. After about a decade of experience with the 700 Club, the Bakkers decided to launch their own television show called, *Praise the Lord* which merged into a show called the PTL Club. The PTL Club had a huge following. The show averaged 12 million viewers each time it aired. With such a huge market share, advertising dollars followed and soon the Bakkers had enough money to purchase their own television network, the PTL television network out of Charlotte, North Carolina. Following this, the money poured in. Jim and Tammy's tearful requests for funding resulted in over 1 million dollars in contributions a week from their viewers. That money

©All Rights Reserved

was used in the early 1980's to build the third most successful theme park in the country, the Christian themed, *Heritage USA*. The amusement park had residential living, a big water park, a 400 slot campground, a bible college, hotel, a tv studio, a shopping center and plans were underway to complete an amphitheater. In a brilliant marketing scheme, Bakker sold tens of thousands of lifetime memberships for \$1000. The memberships supposedly allowed the holder to stay at the hotel at Heritage USA for three nights a year for free. However with the contributions only one 500 room hotel was built, and there were many more exclusive memberships sold than could be accommodated.

Investigating into the finances of the huge organization, the local newspaper, the Charlotte Observer eventually led prosecutors to press charges against Jim Bakker, who they discovered had kept 3.4 million dollars of donations for himself and who maintained two sets of accounting books in order to hide his huge financial fraud. In 1988, Jim Bakker was convicted and was sentenced to 45 years in prison and a \$500,000 fine. A divorce from his wife Tammy Faye soon followed.

©All Rights Reserved

It was while he was in prison that Jim Bakker finally read the Bible completely cover to cover and in his book, *I Was Wrong*, he wrote that he realized that he had badly taken some its passages out of context. He said,

...the prosperity message did not line up with the tenor of Scripture. My heart was crushed to think that I led so many people astray. I was appalled that I could have been so wrong, and I was deeply grateful that God had not struck me dead as a false prophet! (Bakker, 535)

After Jim Bakker's sentences were greatly reduced and he left prison, he married his second wife Lori Graham. Because he still owes the IRS back taxes of over \$6,000,000; other people have invested in a new television ministry for him called the *Jim Bakker Show* out of Branson, Missouri. Jim and his second wife Lori have adopted and become the guardians of 5 children from inner city Phoenix neighborhoods. They fund their new ministry in part by selling a diverse variety of survival items on their tv show including a \$1700 solar generator.

But while Jim Bakker personally now has lost all of his millions of dollars and has a huge debt to the IRS, I have to hope that perhaps he now has had a change of heart. For no matter how much money he used to have and how many billions of dollars he raised for his PTL ministries, if he did all of that out of greed

©All Rights Reserved

or a love of power, all of it, the entire fortune is worth absolutely nothing in comparison to his soul. Because what our God is looking for is not a check for a million dollars from you. That is worthless compared to you, your heart, your mind and your soul. God wants your love. Both to Godself, and to others and also to yourself. That love is the most precious thing in the universe. That love is what motivates the volunteers to do all of the thankless and anonymous tasks in this world and the silent caretaking of others. That love that will change you from the inside out and transform you so that you are willing to stand up and to care for the world. May we all be bearers of that love to the world. Amen.

Copyright Rev. Karen Fitz La Barge. All Rights Reserved