

The Righteous Prostitute • James 2:25-26

In March 1994 *LIFE* magazine featured “The Power of Prayer” as the cover story. The article is a series of photos and quotes from a variety of Americans explaining their beliefs and practices about praying to God. On page 59 was a quote from Geraldine Scott, age 24:

I don’t talk about my feelings a lot. Instead I lie in my bed and think onto Him. I meditate because sometimes my words don’t come out right. But He can find me. He can find what’s inside of me just by listening to my thoughts. I ask Him to help and keep me going.

What caught my attention was not the quote but that Geraldine Scott was a prostitute. It struck me as strange, inappropriate and embarrassing to have her take up almost an entire page of *LIFE* magazine to talk about her prayer life.

It’s interesting that the Bible does the same thing with a woman named Rahab. In James 2:25 she is represented as an example of great faith in God that results in righteous acts. That also seems a little strange, inappropriate and embarrassing. It is another one of the Bible’s real life stories that should be rated at least PG-13 if not R. Here is what it says in James 2:25-26:

In 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?

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Do you know the famous story of Rahab the prostitute? It begins 40 years after the nation of Israel has been set free after generations of slavery in Egypt. They are ready to invade the Promised Land of Canaan to establish their new homeland. The first place to conquer is the city of Jericho. (Today Jericho is considered to be the oldest city in the world.) Let’s take a look at the story in Joshua 2:1-16:

Joshua, the son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. “Go look over the land,”

he said, “especially Jericho.” So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.

The King of Jericho was told, “Look! Some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land.” So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: “Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land.”

But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, “Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, the men left. I don’t know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up to them. (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, “I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and

what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone’s courage failed because

of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sis-

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ters, and all who belong to them, and that you will save us from death.

“Our lives for your lives!” the men assured her. “If you don’t tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the Lord gives us the land.”

So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. Now she said to them, “Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return and then go on your way.”

And the men did what she said.

Remember that the story of Rahab was written to a largely Jewish audience in ancient history. Their customs and traditions were different from ours. She was a Gentile, a non-Jew, and Jews then really had nothing to do with Gentiles. In fact, at the time of Rahab they were planning to kill all Gentiles. She was also a woman in a time and place in history where women were considered to be the lowest people in society. That was typical of most ancient societies. Rahab was a pagan, a religion as contrary to Judaism as could be. They worshiped with idols, rituals and sacrifices that were totally opposite and alien to the Jewish religion. Some pagan religions even had human sacrifices, including sacrifices of children. It was ugly, violent and crude—and Rahab was a pagan. And she was a prostitute. Prostitution was a capital offense under Jewish law meaning that she was subject to execution by stoning.

It must have been unimaginable for an ancient Jew to think of Rahab as a good or righteous person. I love God’s sense of humor. He picks some of the most unusual examples and tells some of the most outrageous stories to get our attention and prove his teachings. He seems to love doing it his way when it upsets our usual way of thinking.

God loves, accepts and blesses all kinds of people. Some are like Abraham who was a great guy, respectable, rich, generous, humble and very religious. Some are like Rahab—on the fringes of society and looked down on by the mainstream. In fact, the Bible is full of examples of liars, cheats, adulterers, murderers, heretics and people who were social outcasts because of their race, their gender, the jobs they had or diseases and handicaps. These are people God loves and includes. They are the raw material he uses for the church today and for heaven tomorrow.

The good news is that regardless of our history or our problems God loves us and delights in changing us into his very best. Nothing is too embarrassing for God to handle. Whoever we are, from Abraham to Rahab, God is interested, more than interested, in us and he is committed to do something great in our lives!

Rahab’s story is an amazing story. Scouts from the Israeli army showed up in her city of Jericho looking for a place to stay. Some students of the Bible say the Hebrew word may indicate she was not just a prostitute but also an innkeeper, so her home may have been the hotel where people would stay who were visiting from outside Jericho. Whatever the case, they lodged at the home of a known prostitute.

When she figured out who they were she told them secrets that amounted to treason, for she told to them that her people were scared to death of the nation of Israel and their military threat. Then, with little or no teaching, this pagan woman declared her faith in Israel’s God when she said in Joshua 2:11, “*The Lord your God is God of heaven above and on the earth below.*” This was a renunciation of her religion and an unpatriotic act of treason since ancient people believed that every nation had its own gods. She was switching allegiance from Jericho’s gods to Israel’s God. She also concluded that Israel’s God was the one true God over all of heaven and earth. This was a monotheistic belief that was most unusual for people of her time.

Rahab experienced a conversion. Conversion is a total change in the way a person sees things and believes. She converted from the religion of her birth to faith in the God of heaven and earth. Her conversion changed everything about the way she lived her life. It changed her loyalties, her relationships, her politics and her priorities. She was willing to learn a new language, live with a new people, take a new job and give up everything she previously had.

Conversion is the same for us today. When a person becomes a Christian it is far more than adding a religious piece to a life that otherwise stays the same. Conversion means giving up old religious beliefs, seeing everything from a Christian perspective, altering relationships, acquiring different speech patterns, having new priorities and changing our attitudes toward money and everything else.

It is true that Rahab didn’t get all the implica-

tions of her new faith right away. She didn't know right off that her new Lord gave high value to truthfulness. She didn't understand that she could trust him to work out difficult situations without her use of deception. She would learn this later on. What she did know was that her heart had changed. She had a heart for God. She wanted to serve him as best she could. She wanted to align with his people. She wanted his side to win. And she was willing to lose everything for the God to whom she had converted.

That's why Rahab was right even when she was wrong. And that's why God wants us to be like Rahab.

God doesn't want us to be sexually promiscuous like Rahab or to tell lies. He doesn't want us to be like Rahab in those ways. But, frankly, that's not what is most important about Rahab. Her occupation and her lying are minor and unimportant parts of who she was and what she did. What was most important about Rahab was her faith. She had a heart for God and she acted upon that faith.

God wants us to be men and women of faith. Not faith that is just tacked on to the rest of life but faith that controls everything we do. God wants us to be converted—radically changed. God wants us to believe in him 100% so that everything is seen from his perspective. God wants us to have faith that leaves behind old beliefs, faith that is convinced that he is the God of heaven above and earth below, faith that believes that God will win, faith that reaches from the big front page news stories to the smallest details of our lives with the conviction that God is the sovereign Lord over absolutely everything. And God wants us to have specific faith in Jesus Christ that he is the Son of God, that the Bible's claims about him are all true, that he is our only possible Savior from sin and that he is the best we can have.

To have a heart from God is the emotional and commitment side of faith. For Rahab faith was more than an intellectual agreement. Her heart was in it. She had a passion for God that flowed out of everything she said and did, even when she did things that were wrong. You could just sense that her heart was for the Lord.

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You know what I mean. You can see it in other people. I certainly can! They just love God—and you can tell. They enjoy talking about him. They want to please him. When they talk about the hard decisions in their lives at work and home and with neighbors they are not looking for some legalistic way to get what they want. They just want to please God. They say, "I'd give up everything I have in a minute if that's what God wants. I'd go anywhere and do anything to please the Lord. If I have to break up with somebody I love, I'll do it because I love God more."

Those who have a heart for God don't always do what is right. One of the most famous examples in the Bible is King David. I've never preached a sermon series on David because I've never particularly liked him. It has always irritated me that David committed adultery, lied and murdered to cover up what he had done; yet the Bible describes him as a man "after God's own heart." But lately I think I've figured it out. David had a heart for God that was greater than his sin. He wanted to do right, he wanted to please God and he was heartbroken and overwhelmed with sorrow when he failed the God

he loved. Even though he did terrible things God knew that David still had a heart for him. When David sinned he not only repented but he learned his lesson and didn't do it again.

Rahab had a heart for God, too. Do you? Hopefully God can look at you and say, "Now there's someone who

can be really dumb and really sinful but I know she really loves me! I know he has a heart for me in spite of anything else."

God wants us to be like Rahab in action. Not that we act wrongly, but that we act on our faith and our hearts. In other words, God wants us to do something. It's not enough to say we have faith if we do nothing about it. Action means that we change our loyalties, that we treat people differently, that we read the Bible and pray, that we handle our money for God and not ourselves. Action means that we avoid doing bad and go ahead and do good.

I want to say something here that has a high risk of being misunderstood. It may sound like I'm condoning and encouraging sin. But that is not what

I mean at all. What I want to say is that I would rather do something wrong with faith and a heart for God than to do what is right and have no faith and have no heart for God. I would rather be a Rahab who blurted out a well-meaning lie than someone who has no heart for God. I would rather do something wrong than be so cautious that I never do anything. I would rather take risks for God than do nothing at all.

Of course, it is best to have faith and a heart for God and act in non-sinful ways. As Christians grow and learn that should increasingly be the case. Veteran disciples of Jesus have no excuse for believing or behaving with the ignorance of a new believer. And there is no excuse for a veteran disciple to no longer have a zealous faith, a passionate heart and actions to match.

James 2:26 sums up the main point of this chapter: *“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”* Imagine if God had created Adam and Eve and never breathed life into them. They would be bodies without spirits, unable to do a thing. Obviously, a body that doesn’t do anything is dead and not much good. And the same goes for a person who has faith and never does anything about it. That’s ridiculous. It’s dead. It’s not much good.

Get the best! Get a body that has a spirit, a body that is alive and healthy. Have faith plus action. Believe in God with all your head and heart, but live it out or it doesn’t count.

Don’t let this teaching from the Bible slide by. Don’t take today’s topic as something to hear and forget. Don’t intellectually agree with it but do nothing about it. If you don’t have faith in Jesus Christ, decided today and tell God. If you already believe, take inventory of your actions and resolve that your actions will match your beliefs. Pick a specific part of your life that you are going to act on this week. Have faith that works.

We have talked a lot about Rahab who was an ancient illustration of this important truth about faith and action. Now let me tell you a modern example. African pygmies have been very difficult to reach with the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are nomadic and rarely connect with mainstream society. But a few years ago American missionaries from an organization called Every Home for Christ based in Colorado Springs reported more than 2,000 pygmies in central Africa converting to Christianity.

It all began when the missionaries traveled 11 days by canoe to the remote Ituri Rain Forest in Zaire. They came to a clearing and played a cassette that put the gospel message to music in the pygmy language. They also set out salt, a rare and valuable commodity for the pygmies. Eventually some courageous few came out of hiding.

The missionaries reported that when pygmies become Christians it is amazing to see the difference in their lives. The pygmies consider themselves inferior and never look into the eyes of non-pygmies. But when they hear about Jesus Christ and how they can have their sins forgiven and receive eternal life, they cry and they pray for Jesus to become their Savior and Lord. Then they “lift their eyes and look at you, and the biggest smile comes across their faces.”

That’s it! That’s faith that works. That’s belief in Jesus. That’s a heart for God. And the actions are the results.

As strange as it may sound, may we all become like Rahab the prostitute and may we all become like the pygmies—people who believe and act out our faith!

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