

FAITH, WORKS, AND WISDOM

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It's a new thing, I guess, to think about needing a security force at a church. At the church where I serve as pastor, we've had some security problems, but what's scarier is the number of news stories that tell us very clearly that churches can no longer be considered safe places. Churches have been the site of shootings, robberies, assaults, abductions, and many more crimes that we'd never expect to see happen at a place of worship.

Certainly, we **MUST** protect our congregations. But security issues at a church also present a dilemma – a problem that churches deal with daily, not just on Sundays. Put simply, the question is – how do you tell the good guys from the bad guys? How do you tell when someone really needs help and means no harm? And how do you tell, at first glance, when someone is up to no good, and possibly even dangerous?

James 2 tells us **NOT** to show favoritism based on appearance. If a poor person in dirty clothes comes into the church, we're not to treat him or her any differently from the person in gold rings and fine clothes. If we treat a poor person who's not well-dressed with less love than we treat a rich person, we're saying something important. We're saying that we consider ourselves one of the better ones, well-dressed, a little above the poor person. We're also saying that only "well-dressed" people are welcome here – people like us. When actually, when Jesus says ... "whosoever will" ... I think he means it.

God sees things differently than we do. In God's eyes, we're all poor people with dirty clothes. **NO ONE** of us is better than any other one. No one of us deserves a warmer welcome or a better seat than any other one. But the biggest difference is, God looks at us – poor as we are – with compassion and mercy. He offers us a Savior, forgiveness, freedom; if we receive his gift, he sees us through Jesus, and our dirty clothes and our poverty are made clean and rich. We didn't have to "clean up our act" or try to look good. Jesus has taken care of it all. Our Savior is all about grace. We, in turn, are to offer grace to others.

In God's eyes, faith in Jesus is the only difference between us and anybody else. It's a level playing field. And our job is to look at those around us the same way God looks at us, with compassion and mercy, even if they seem poor, or strange, or different.

James says adamantly, "Faith without works is dead." **ANYBODY** can say, "Sure, I believe in God." But true faith is more than that – it's repentance, it's God's forgiveness and grace, it's our gratitude for that grace. And genuine gratitude will always produce good works.

James says, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Yes, we're in a dilemma here! We want to help those who need it, **AND** we want to be good stewards of our limited resources and help only those who need it, not those who are here to scam us. We want to welcome **EVERYONE** with equal love and enthusiasm ... and we want to protect the congregation from those whose intentions are underhanded or even evil.

I served a church in midtown Atlanta for seven years, and I'm way too jaded. At this point, I have a hard time believing anyone's on the up-and-up! And that's where we need each other. We need God's wisdom, and we need the caring and wisdom of the church. We need balance. This isn't easy, and we'll make lots of mistakes along the way as we struggle with right

and wrong. And, as always ... sometimes we just need to trust. We need to trust the Spirit, commit ourselves and our church to God ... and trust.

But no matter what, good works, done out of gratitude for God's mercy, compel us to treat others with compassion and mercy. And by the way, what do you think our good works get us? They lead us to deeper faith, a closer walk with God, stronger friendships with each other, God's love for "whosoever will," and a chance to use the gifts God's given us – in a word, JOY. Bless all of you for welcoming the stranger, protecting those around you, and giving as freely as you do, and may each of you find God's joy in this ministry of compassion.