

Some B.A.S.I.C.S for Life: Action — Dr. Todd J. Williams

Good morning, and as has already been said, welcome to you, guests on campus today, and I trust that you'll have a blessed and encouraging day, and for you as students, that the Lord would make His grace to shine upon you at the close of this week. I'd like to pray with you, and then we'll jump in.

Our great Father in Heaven, we thank you for the days that you give us. We thank you for your loving kindness and for your mercies, which are new every morning. We thank you for the way you care for us and meet our needs according to your good and perfect will, for the wisdom that you display in meeting them according to your ways and to your will, in ways that we cannot understand or even comprehend, that are apart from our circumstances. We thank you for the students who have gathered here today, that you've assembled at this university to study. We thank you for their individual gifts and abilities, for the trajectory of their lives, for their testimonies to your goodness and grace, and we pray that you would be at work in and through them as members of this intentional Christian community, that as we not only study but labor together, we might bless and encourage one another and spur one another on to love and good deeds. We pray for these students, that you would strengthen those that are physically struggling, comfort those who are feeling overwhelmed, draw those who are spiritually needy unto yourself, and pursue those that are running, who are wrestling with their willingness to yield themselves to you, to your word, and to your ways. Father, we thank you for these guests that you have brought here. We pray that you would grant them wisdom beyond themselves as they think about this important next step in life, that you would grant them grace during their time with us, make us an encouragement to them. We pray that you would order their steps, that you would have them be encouraged but also informed about the important decision that is in front of them and send them where you would have them to study. We thank you for the faculty and staff who are serving here, we know that so many are under the weather. We pray for grace and strength equal to their tasks, that you would enable their families friends, and their colleagues to bless and encourage them.

Father, we are mindful that this world is a place that is stricken by the implications of sin and the fall. We pray for the needs of the community around us, for the needs across the state, across the country, and around the world for those who are suffering, for those who are impoverished for those who are lost. We pray that you would embolden your church to carry the good news of Jesus and the good works of their faith into a world that so desperately needs a Christian presence and the gospel.

Father, we pray for our leaders in this nation and around the world in a time of such uncertainty and geopolitical unrest that you would grant wisdom, that you would grant peace if it is your will, that you would grant us the fortitude to right wrongs where they exist, to do the right things, to be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to bring about peace, to allow people to thrive, to live well. Father, we pray for this hour now as we look into your word that your spirit would be at work in us, make us mindful of the power of your word, the internal truth that it contains for its efficiency and effectiveness in teaching us and guiding us. We pray that your

spirit would convict us as well. You might give us insight into this passage and into our lives, particularly as it pertains to Christian action and living. We pray these things in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.

So I'm going to continue the second installment in this series on basics, and I did see the meme that trumpeted my ability to spell the word basics, beginning with a B, which means today is an A, so I'll be watching for the second installment later today.

But I want to deal with the word actions, particularly as it relates to our faith and what we talked about last time in the matter of belief. I want to connect those two things for you. I want to deal with this passage from James that I think speaks very profoundly to how we are to live our lives. And also I want to speak a little bit about what I think is going on in the world around us and the way it's influencing us with regard not only to action but to our understanding of the relationship between action and belief.

The book of James is an extremely practical book. It's included in our wisdom literature here. We look to James for wisdom in living the Christian life. We know this in the beginning of the book. James talks about considering trials joy, and that is a different way of thinking about life circumstances. James isn't saying that you should pretend that trials are a joy when he says consider it all joy when you encounter trials of various kinds. He isn't saying pretend they're a joy. He isn't even saying talk yourself into the fact that they're a joy. He's saying that you are calculating the problem wrongly if you look at trials as anything other than for your betterment. He's actually challenging you to change your perspective, to think with biblical and godly wisdom about the circumstances in life. And James does this not imparting some sort of ancient human tradition that comes out of his Jewish background. James isn't actually spouting off philosophical realities. This is James, the brother of Jesus, who had a miraculous transformation. This is James, the brother of Jesus, a member of Jesus' family, who actually said of their brother Jesus, the Lamb of God, God's only son, our Messiah, he's insane. James is converted. He comes to faith in his brother Jesus and a miraculous transformation takes place. Not just that James would say, oh my brother was telling the truth, but that James would actually commit his life to the service of the church and even be martyred in a brutal and violent way. That's the James that is writing to Jewish Christians dispersed across the region, encouraging them to hold fast their faith and to make good on it. In fact, when James who is often mistaken for confusing faith and works, what James is basically saying is this: If you truly believe in Jesus Christ, we should see it. He isn't saying you will prove you have faith by doing works. He's not even saying if you do works, that will actually help you earn the right to believe in God. What he's saying is it's completely inconsistent for you to believe in Jesus as Savior and do anything other than what Christians are supposed to do. That's why he so strongly says put away all these rampant wickedness and filthiness. It doesn't fit you as a Christian. And James would have been very aware of this personally. The personal transformation that takes place for him is spilling out in his words here to these Jewish Christians dispersed across the region.

He confronts things like favoritism and prejudice. He confronts things like apathy and indifference. He confronts things like a preoccupation with comfort and ease. And in this

passage that Dean Gordon read for us, James speaks with some power about the issue of what it means to be a Christian, a consistent and intentional Christian with regard to your actions

I want to talk about this this morning in a way that what does it mean for us as Christians, to act as Christians, to act, to have an active Christian life, to take Christian action, to do what we should be doing as Christians. But also, I think it expands to talk about more than that. Just like last time I said, well, the issue of belief is certainly our faith in God, He exists, that his son Jesus is our Savior, that his word is true and reliable. But also that we should work about, be about the work of establishing what we believe to be true about any number of things, from how money should be used and managed to how relationships should be tended to and what we think and believe to be true about marriage and human sexuality. We need to build our belief system carefully and intentionally.

And so in that first installment where we talked about this issue of belief, it wasn't just belief in God, but extrapolating to the way in which we think about life in this world and ourselves. I want to do the same thing with action. This issue that James is addressing is this issue of Christian action, but I think it expands to think about other areas of our life where we might be indifferent or apathetic, less than people of action.

Winston Churchill said, "I don't worry so much about action, but I'm very concerned about inaction." And you know, the famous saying that "actions speak louder than words." Of course, Mark Twain amended that, "Actions speak louder than words, but not nearly as often". The reality is we need to be people of action because that's who we are as Christians. We don't just have this good news that we keep sealed in a jar, but we take it into the world. And people should know that we are Christians, not just by our fruits, but by our deeds. And you should be people of action in general in life. Because if you read the book of Proverbs, you'll find difficulty justifying slothfulness, slacking off, or laziness.

James here does a really powerful thing. He says after the exhortation to put away filthiness and wickedness, but instead receive the word. He says, "but be doers of the word, not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word, not a doer. It's like a man who looks intently at his natural face in the mirror. He looks at himself, goes away, and at once forgets what he was like." Like so much of the wisdom in the Bible, an important truth and principle is illustrated in something very much a part of life. James is saying, look, if you're simply going to be a hearer, if you're just going to sort of listen to Christian things and purport to be a Christian, and you're going to sort of hang out in the Christian community, and even state Christian things. But when you walk away from those moments, you're behaving in a way that's completely inconsistent with being a Christian. Well, that's what he says, unnatural in a sense. He's making the case that when you look at yourself in the mirror, if you turn away and forget what you look like, how often does that happen? I would venture to say, unless you have some sort of medical issue, never. None of us forget what we look like. As you get older, you forget what you looked like when you were younger. But that's a good thing, Or you'd be depressed all the time.

The issue is, but it's unnatural for us. It's unnatural for us to look at ourselves in the mirror, walk away and forget what we look like. James is basically saying, it's unnatural for you, Christian, to be a hearer of the word and not a doer. It's completely unnatural. It doesn't fit you. There's a flip side to that, though. It isn't just that it's unnatural. It's that if you're experiencing that, something is wrong that you should examine. Because the other should be easier than you think. The issue is, as James outlines here, our will gets in the way. "He looks at himself and once goes away and forgets what he looks like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing."

The issue here is the perseverance. James says it's unnatural for you to not be a doer, to not be an active Christian, a Christian of action, where we should see that you are behaving Christianly. It's unnatural. And what's in the way is your unwillingness to persevere. You're actually unwilling to do something that is perfectly natural, which is not forget what you look like after gazing at yourself in the mirror, to not ignore the Word when you actually go to live life. Now, I want to tell you something that's a very tall order. I think that's why the wisdom literature of the Bible is so incisive and penetrating. Because if you let it, you actually submit yourself in the reading of the wisdom literature of all the Bible, but the wisdom literature, and you open your mind and heart to actually its teaching, you'll find it pierces you. It pierces you. Because when you read in Proverbs, for instance, that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, what you realize is, not only do I deal with the pride issue, that God opposes my being prideful, but in my refusal to be humble, I'm forfeiting His grace. How unnatural it is. If I want His grace, why would I forfeit it? All I have to do is humble myself. Yeah, but this is better. How is that better?

And the teaching of Proverbs in the Bible, where it speaks into your life, is very incisive and penetrating. And James does the same thing here. You don't really have the option, and it's not in your best interest, to look and live like a pretending Christian. Now here's the thing: We're not just talking about the way you hold to certain theological positions, and do you act in accordance with those implications. We're actually talking about the way you treat one another, the way you talk to one another. If you actually believed and heard the Word that says that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, you would not objectify members of the opposite sex in your language. You wouldn't do it, because that's not being a doer of the Word. The doer of the Word says, I will not do it. Well, so why do we do it? Well, everybody does it. If the Bible says, be slow to speak and slow to anger and quick to listen, and you know and believe that the Bible says that, and yet you walk around spouting off your anger in unfiltered ways, both verbally and on social media, well, that ought not to be done, because it's inconsistent with the Christian life. That's not how Christians act.

And there is so much cultural stuff out there right now. Don't let anyone judge you for how you act. Act how you want to act. Do what you want to do. Behave how you want to behave. Don't let anyone put upon you. But we're Christians. We've been put upon by the shed blood of Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Our lives and our actions should be consistent with the Word, with the Gospel, with the example and teaching of the Lord Jesus as we see him in the Bible. Not the way we make him up, but the way he is revealed to us in Scripture. We are not

just to be hearers, but doers of that Word. Followers of the living Word, the Son of God. And it should be borne out in your daily lives. And if you're not doing that, you are behaving in a way that is unnatural for a Christian, because you are unwilling to do the work of persevering.

In the social-psychological world where I come from academically, there are some conceptual things that we used to study quite a bit that we've sort of lost emphasis on. And one of them that we look at in that field is the relationship between belief and behavior, or belief and action. And the axiom goes like this, that people hold a set of beliefs and then act accordingly. Right? Well, I would that that were always true, that would be ideal. We believe this to be true about God, the Bible, ourselves, and life. We hold all these biblical teachings to be true, and our actions should follow. But you and I know that is not the case. Well, here's what we know, both in looking at the Bible and in all the research that's been done about human behavior and thinking for a long, long time, is that we would like to think that if we hold these beliefs, our actions will follow. So, sometimes we act in ways that are inconsistent with our beliefs. That would be one problem. Here's the big problem for you and I as Christians. Our actions actually reform our beliefs. We start behaving in a particular way, and all of a sudden we are altering our beliefs or building a belief structure that is counter to the one we should be holding to.

Do you follow what I'm saying? If you said, for instance, I believe that playing in traffic is fatal and you said, okay, I believe that's fatal. I've never experienced it, but someone told me it was true, so I refused to cross the street and I'm not going to play in traffic. Then I remember driving down the street one day, and see a bunch of kids playing in the street. I pulled over and said, didn't your parents tell you never to play in traffic? And they said, that's a lie. We play in traffic all the time. No one ever gets hurt

That's what happens. Think about the sins in your life and the things in your life that you do. You act in a certain way and all of a sudden you start to question these other biblical truths that are meant for your good. This is what happens to us. It isn't just that we don't do what we should do. It is that we actually start doing things that change the way we think and believe according to the word. That's the danger for you as Christians, particularly in the world in which we live because the culture is basically telling you shrug off all externally imposed standards on your thinking, feeling, and behaving. Only do what makes you happy. And what will happen is you will begin to change and alter your beliefs

Some of you are already down the path. You don't go to church. And so your beliefs about the church are being altered. Well, it didn't really mean we're supposed to get together like that. That's not really what the Bible meant. Church isn't really that important. Why? Because I've been doing it now for a while and I don't notice any difference. That's not the point. The point is the Scripture is clear that we are members of one body. We are not to forsake the assembly of ourselves together. If you say, well, I pray, but I prayed and nothing happened. Therefore, I don't think prayer matters. Again, you're amending your beliefs based upon your behavior. And you're actually saying, when I stopped praying, things didn't get worse. Worse, things might have gotten better and easier for me. Ergo, prayer isn't as important as the Bible says. Prayer is a

spiritual discipline. It's meant to align you with God, not him with you. And so we do it because the Bible says to do it, because it's what Christians do.

When James drives this point home on the issue of perseverance, I think it's really powerful. And again, another thing from this social psychological world. There are two different constructs in the world. I'm not the first one to talk about this. But I did talk about it a lot with my own children and with anyone who will listen. There is a profound distinction to be made between motivation and discipline. We have to be very careful not to conflate those two things. There's a beauty that exists in the world when motivation and discipline cross. When you say, I like doing this, therefore I will do it more. And the more I do it, the better I get. So that's beautiful. But if we conflate motivation and discipline, we will buy into a very problematic paradigm. Which is, I will only do the things I feel like doing. And James says, that's unnatural for you, Christian. That's pretty profound coming from a man who would be brutally martyred. By one account, he's stoned. By another account, he's thrown off a tower and then clubbed to death on the ground

When James talks about perseverance, it's real. Because the distinction must be made between motivation and discipline. Of course we all want to do the things that we like to do. Some of you in the room, for one reason or another like math, or foreign languages, or chemistry. And you have fellow students who think that you're absolutely insane. And you might actually not like history. Guess what? You're university students. You've got to do it all. And if you only do the things that you're motivated to do, the things you like to do, the things that you enjoy getting up for in the morning, you'll be missing out on a significant amount of your education. Some of you have no personal motivation to read the scripture or study theology. Others of you, it's the first thing you think about when you wake up and the last thing you think about before you go to bed. I don't care. All I care about is we all study the Bible and theology. That's why we're here. If you attempt to go through your life as a husband or a wife or a parent only doing the things you feel like doing rather than the things you must do, everybody around you will suffer.

In your work, in your careers, in your professions, in your services, your ministries, if you only do the things you are motivated to do you will do more harm than good. James says, the one who does is the one who perseveres to action and is blessed for it. Remember, the Lord Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before Him. The example of our Lord is that. His anguish is so great that on the cross, He cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And yet, by an act of His own will, says, it is finished. He gives His life. It is not taken from Him. Because He is doing what He was supposed to do.

What James is saying to Christians here, what I think we need to think about with regard to this life of action, is that we should be very careful not to get swept along by the tides of our context that say only do what you have fun doing. Because it won't just be that you'll enjoy yourself more. You'll find yourself altering your beliefs. And it will lead you astray.

If you think across the spectrum of your life, all the different areas of your life and activities, and you think about those areas where you've kind of given up, it's probably, in many cases, a result that you stopped doing. Anybody who's done music knows if you hit a sloth, or you don't feel like

practicing, eventually, you lose your love for it. You stop caring about it. Shadows fall across your life and things get dark. And as a musician, the people in your life who also are music people know this, The only way out is to pick it up and start again. Athletes. Artists. In almost every profession, in almost everything that you do, you will find that inaction is to your detriment.

I think what James is bringing is a very joyful message. I mean, he starts by saying you should count all your trials as joys. And then says that you should actually do things according to your faith because it's consistent with being a Christian whether you feel like it or not. That's a pretty heavy burden for the brother of Jesus to drop on these dispersed Christians.

But remember what he said, in it is a blessing for you. That's real joy. Joy should not be conflated with fun any more than motivation should be conflated with discipline. Let's pray

Father in heaven, we do thank you for your goodness and grace to us. The way you order our steps and guide our lives. We do pray that you would give us a desire to be more than hearers only but doers. That our lives would be marked by action consistent with our faith in you consistent with the gospel, the teaching and example of Jesus. Father, give us the grace and strength to persevere. May your spirit be at work in each one of us. To draw us closer to yourself and to draw us to a life of discipline that brings you glory and honor and is for our betterment, the betterment of those around us, that is a blessing to us and will bring us joy. We pray these things in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.