

A Faith That Works: Putting Faith to Work

James 2:14-26

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on July 5, 2020

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're looking at what is undoubtedly the most controversial and confused passage in the book of James. What James writes in these verses has led to no little debate in church history. Martin Luther, in the preface to his first edition of his German NT, described the book of James as a "right strawy epistle".
 - By calling it a strawy epistle, Luther was drawing on the imagery of 1 Corinthians 3:12 where it talks about building your life or ministry on the foundation of Christ by using either straw or gold or precious stones. **So at least Luther acknowledges James' letter was built on the foundation of Christ, but he's suggesting James only used straw in contrast to the gold standard, which is Paul (in his mind).**
 - And that's largely because of v24, where James writes that a person is "*justified by works and not by faith alone.*" That clearly was not a favorite bible verse of the Reformer who championed the biblical teaching of justification by faith alone.

- ❖ **So we're going to tackle some theology and try to figure out how James and his teaching harmonizes with Paul's.** Because, on the surface, there appears to be a contradiction between the two. But even though we'll cover that, this is not going to be just a theology lesson. Not that I have anything against teaching you sound theology.
 - **But one of the main concerns in the book of James is that a sermon on a text like this might *only* result in refining your theological categories. That you'd walk away believing more good theology – but doing nothing with it.** If we keep eagerly listening to sermons, jotting down notes, and gathering in small groups to discuss what we've learned – we do well – but what are we doing with the biblical truth that we so love to listen to and talk about?

- ❖ That's been the question James has been raising since chapter 1:22 when he commanded us to be "*doers of the word, and not hearers only, so deceiving yourselves.*" **He's concerned that our Christianity is all talk but no action – that our professions of faith are just empty words.** James goes on to say that if we think ourselves to be religious, but our hurtful words go unchecked; or we have no concern for widows and orphans in their distress; or we tolerate the worldly stain of sin – then we're deceiving ourselves (1:26-27). **We're fooling ourselves to think we have real faith.**
 - Then, he goes on in chapter 2:1 to call out the inconsistency of claiming to "*hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory*" and yet show partiality (favoritism) towards the rich over the poor (or really any group over another). Again, the concern is that our professions of faith may be empty words.

- ❖ We know the two greatest commandments in the Law are to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. We've heard sermons on that. We've done a bible study on those verses. We do well. But are we doing those words? Are we living them out? **Do our professions of Christian faith translate into works of Christian obedience?**

- ❖ Church, we're living in a unique time during this pandemic. It's a first for us. **But it's not the first time the Church has been forced to live out her faith in the face of a deadly virus.** In the third-century, a devastating plague swept across the ancient world. And while droves of people fled crowded cities, it was Christians who remained to care for the sick at the risk of contracting the plague. That kind of faith in action stood in stark contrast to their pagan neighbors, who threw infected members of their own family out on the streets.
 - **Church, in those difficult days the Christian faith went to work and showed itself to be real and really loving and compassionate.** Non-Christians in the ancient world couldn't deny it and couldn't ignore it. And large numbers came to embrace the faith for themselves.

- ❖ We should ask ourselves: **In light of the times we're in, what will our non-Christian neighbors see today?** Will they see our faith at work in visible acts of sacrificial love and compassion? Or will they see Christians huddled together over a book, filling ourselves with empty words? That, my friends, is the burden of this passage and of today's sermon.
 - **James's concern is that some people in the church have narrowly redefined faith to merely saying the right words.** As long as you profess this formulaic statement or pray this prayer, then like a magical incantation – you're saved! Sadly, that view of faith has persisted over the centuries and pervades the church today. To that rather myopic and cerebral definition of faith, there are three responses we can make based on James's teaching.

Not All Faith is the Kind That Saves

- ❖ The first response to all those who profess to have faith in Jesus is an uncomfortable reminder that **not all faith is the kind that saves.** There is a form of faith – a kind of believing in Jesus – that doesn't work. It's a sobering thought. **You could be convinced that you believe in Jesus, but not with the kind of faith that saves you.**
 - That's what James gets at here in vv14-17. *"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?"* See, there's a kind of faith that doesn't save. In v17, James describes it as a dead kind of faith. He'll reiterate that in v26, *"faith apart from works is dead."* **Unless we have that category – a kind of faith that doesn't save – then we can't make sense of this passage.**

- ❖ Let me give you an example. Turn with me to **John 2:23-25**. Listen to this passage about Jesus and the crowds. *"Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man."*
 - Notice it says, *"many believed in his name"*, and yet *"Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them."* So here we have many believing in Jesus, but he didn't believe them. Many trusted in Jesus, but he didn't trust their faith. It says he *"knew what was in man."* **Jesus knew these people were still spiritually dead, and all they could produce was dead faith.**

- ❖ **Now if you look back at James 2, he's saying that that kind of dead faith is characterized by a lack of works.** And, in this context, works are referring to any act of Christian obedience to God's law. What we typically call good works. James is asking: What good is it if you claim to have faith but don't have any good works to back it up?
 - Then he goes on in vv15-16 to offer an illustration of the interconnectedness of faith and good works. **He's going to prove that faith without works is a false faith by giving an example of false love.** *"¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and 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?"*
- ❖ It's obviously no good. **Call it Christian love, but it's not the kind that works.** It amounts to a bunch of empty pious words. James's point is that you really don't love your brother or sister if you only profess love without *showing love* by your actions – through good works. **In the same way, you don't have real faith in Jesus if you only profess faith without showing faith by your actions – through good works.**
- ❖ Look at v17, *"So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."* **He's saying that some faith is merely dead faith.** It can be a theologically-informed faith, a biblically-knowledgeable faith – but, in the end, still a dead faith.
 - **If you keep reading in v19, James goes so far to say that some faith is merely demonic faith.** *"You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe-and shudder!"* Think about that. If your Christian faith amounts to just knowing the right answers when someone asks, "What is the gospel or who is Jesus or why did he die on the cross?" – then you do well to know the biblical answer. **But don't celebrate just yet. You've merely attained to the same faith as the demons.**
- ❖ **Do you realize demons have good theology? They probably have better theology than us.** They know who Jesus is. They believe he's the Son of the Most High God (Mk 5:7). The Gospel accounts tell us that the unclean spirits would scream and shudder at his presence.
 - So think about it: Demons are terrified of God's judgment. They don't want to go to hell either. And they can say they believe Jesus is the Son of God who died on the cross and rose from the dead and he's coming back again. They can affirm all of that. But they're still demons. They're still not saved. They're still going to hell. **They believe all those truths about Jesus and his gospel – but they hate those truths and haven't staked their lives on those truths.**
- ❖ What then does that mean for us? **It means we can't settle for a faith that's been narrowly redefined to just having the right theology and saying the right words.** This is where I think the Protestant Reformers have helped the Church tremendously over the years by identifying three essential components to true saving faith.

- ❖ The Reformers would argue that saving faith requires: (1) **knowledge** – you understand the basic content of the Christian faith and (2) **assent** – you agree to and willingly affirm the truthfulness of the Christian faith. Now that’s often where we stop. We settle there and call that faith. Believing in Jesus amounts to having a right knowledge of the gospel and a mental assent – and often a verbal affirmation – that it’s true. We do well to reach that point, but so have the demons. What the demons lack – and what is the third essential component to saving faith – is (3) **trust** – you wholeheartedly trust your life into the hands of Jesus, the central object of our Christian faith.

- ❖ It might help to give you the well-known **chair illustration** that an evangelist will often turn to. Imagine before you is an object with four legs, a seat, and high-back. Now you can believe in this chair – in the sense that you have **knowledge** that such an object, constructed in this way, is called a chair and is designed for sitting.
 - Now you can go further in your belief – in that you can **assent** to the fact that this chair can actually hold the weight of a person who sits on it. You can affirm that theoretically it could hold *your* weight.
 - But up to that point, that’s all it is. It’s a theory. Until you go further and you believe in that chair – in the sense that you sit down on it, lean back, and **trust** your backside to the truth that this chair was meant for sitting and can keep you from falling.

- ❖ **What this means is that there could be those in the church today who believe in Jesus – but not with the kind of belief that saves.** They know who Jesus is. They affirm all the right truths about him. But it’s all theoretical. They’ve gone as far as the demons have. They’re missing that last essential component. They have yet to trust their lives into the hands of the Savior.
 - **In other words, you haven’t believed in Jesus – in the fullest (saving) sense – if you haven’t staked your life on Christ.** Meaning if he doesn’t pull through with all of his promises – you would be, of all people, most to be pitied because you would’ve wasted your life on a false Savior (1 Cor 15:19). That’s what it means to wholeheartedly trust in Jesus. Lean back and put all your weight into his hands.

- ❖ Friends, have you trusted in Jesus? I’m not asking if you believe in him – in the same way a demon does. I’m asking do you trust in him? Have you put your whole life in his hands? Don’t settle for a mere intellectual, theoretical faith. Don’t be satisfied with just saying the right words. That kind of faith is dead faith, and it’s not going to save you.

Faith Alone Saves But the Kind of Faith that Saves is Never Alone

- ❖ So what kind of faith will save you? It’s the kind of faith that’s accompanied by works. Here’s the second response for those operating with a narrow definition of faith. **We would say that faith alone saves but the kind of faith that saves is never alone.** It’s always accompanied by good works. That’s based on a John Calvin quote, and it fits to describe James’s argument in vv18-23.

- ❖ But before we look at chapter 2:18, we need to go back to **chapter 1:18** and show that James would affirm that salvation is imparted to us by grace alone, through faith alone. That verse is about our new birth – about how we became new creations in Christ – and how it was all God’s doing. *“Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”*
 - So James is implying that salvation begins as an act of sheer grace where God brings us forth to new life; by the word of truth (the gospel); of his own sovereign will. So let that be clear: **According to James, we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone – but that kind of faith is never alone – without accompanying good works.**

- ❖ Now we’re ready to look at chapter 2:18. Well, it’s a bit of a challenge to interpret because there are no quotation marks in the original, so translators have to decide where they think this hypothetical objector ends his quote. We can’t go into all the options, but I think the ESV has it right. Look at v18, *“But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”*
 - So the objector – the one who has a narrow view of faith – is saying, “You have faith and I have works.” Now that’s still a bit confusing because you would think he would say, “I have faith and *you* (James) have works.” But that’s only if we’re imagining an actual conversation between James and this imaginary person. **Instead, just think of this hypothetical objector as trying to disconnect faith and works.** Arguing that one person has faith and another has works. Making them two disconnected issues.

- ❖ **There have always been, from the early years of the church, those who have tried to separate faith and works into two different categories.** Faith is related to salvation; while works is related to Christian living. Faith is what gets you saved. But works – works just determine how good of a Christian you are.
 - **So if you don’t have any works to show for your faith, if your life is largely unchanged after claiming to become a Christian – then it means you’re just very weak or immature in the faith.** No one is going to commend that. But at least you have faith, so at least you’re saved. Don’t worry, you’re still going to heaven. So faith and works are in two different categories. And when it comes to the category of salvation, faith is all that matters.

- ❖ But James would say you can only do that if you’ve already redefined faith so narrowly. He’s going to argue that biblical faith – the kind that saves – is inseparable from works. **You’ll never find true saving faith that’s not accompanied by works.** That’s why James says, *“Show me your faith apart from your works,”* – implying that you can’t – *“and I will show you my faith by my works.”*
 - He’s suggesting that our faith – which is an invisible quality – can only be shown to be real or seen by others *by our visible works*. So to claim to have faith apart from works is unverifiable and ultimately useless.

- ❖ **That's what James goes on to prove in v20.** He does this by using Abraham as a test case. He points to that episode in Genesis 22 where God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Let's read starting in v20, *"²⁰Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works."*
- ❖ So you see, a faith like Abraham's – that's not dead but active – that kind of faith works along with good works. They go together. And not only that, but our faith is *completed* (some translations say *perfected*) by our works.
 - Now don't let that language confuse you. It's not suggesting that our faith is incomplete or imperfect – unable to save us – unless we add works. **No, what James means by works completing (or perfecting) faith is that our good works complete the intended purpose of our faith.** The whole point of having faith is so that you live a life of obedience to God, especially when he calls you to sacrifice precious things and do hard things. It's in those moments when true faith is activated and shows itself in faithful obedience.
- ❖ Now let's keep reading in 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."* That's a reference back to **Genesis 15:6** – back when God made a promise to Abraham to give him a child when he and his wife were well past the age for children. **That was the moment in Abraham's life when he was justified – counted as righteous in the eyes of God.** He was accepted by God and called a friend – because he believed in God's promises. That's where you would say Abraham was justified by faith alone.
 - **Now what James is arguing is that the events of Genesis 22 fulfilled the promise of Genesis 15.** In Genesis 15, Abraham is counted righteous by God before he's done any good works. It's only by faith. Then later, in Genesis 22, we see Abraham behaving righteously. Doing a very good work. He's willing to do the hardest thing by sacrificing the most precious thing to him – all out of obedience to God.
- ❖ **Abraham's actions in Genesis 22 validate God's declaration about him back in Genesis 15 – when he declared Abraham righteous and called him a friend.** That's what James is arguing – that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone – but the kind of faith that saves is never alone. **It always shows itself through visible good works.**
 - And those works complete the intended purpose of our faith, which, on one hand, is to love others through those acts of mercy. But ultimately, our works are meant to glorify God by validating and vindicating him – by proving he was right all along when declared us to be as his righteous ones, his holy children, his friends.

- ❖ Look, I know this is getting dense, so let me make this as straightforward as I can. **It all depends on how you understand the point of salvation.** If you were saved simply to get you into heaven when you die, then sure, within that framework, you wouldn't need works. You'd be fine with faith apart from works.
 - **But if the point of Christian salvation is about – not less than going to heaven – but much more, then you're going to need a faith that produces works.** If salvation is about converting you into the kind of person who can't look at a brother or sister going hungry and just offer empty words – who can't see a person who is sick because of the pandemic or hurting because of racial injustice and just turn a blind eye – **if salvation is meant to enable you to fulfill the royal law of loving your neighbor as yourself, then you'll need a faith that's accompanied by works.**
 - And if salvation is ultimately about glorifying God and proving him true when, at our new birth, he called us righteous and precious in his sight, then you're going to need some works to go along with your alleged faith.

- ❖ **Perhaps the reason why we can be so settled with a faith that's so cerebral is because our view of salvation can be so self-centered and individualistic.** But if salvation is about glorifying God and loving others, then it makes sense that the only faith that saves is the kind that shows itself in good works.

God's Acceptance is Based on Faith But Validated by Works

- ❖ Now we're ready to look at the hardest verse in the passage – the one that seems to show a contradiction with Paul. **And it's only going to make sense if you understand that idea of God's declarations over us – which are based on our faith – being validated (proven true) by our works.** Once you get that, it all fits together. So first let me give you the third response to those with a truncated view of faith and salvation: **We'd say that God's acceptance of us is based on faith but validated by works.**
 - Let's read v24, which is a summary of James's entire argument. *“You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”* Okay, consider that statement in light of what the Apostle Paul states in places like **Romans 3:28**, *“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”* (cf. Gal 2:16). So Paul is saying you're justified *apart* from works. James is saying you're justified *by* works.

- ❖ On the surface, it looks like a contradiction. But plenty of commentators have offered plenty of explanations. **I think the best is to affirm that James and Paul are using the same terms with the same basic definitions – but they're addressing two different concerns.**
 - Among Paul's audience, the big concern was how you enter into a relationship with God. For God to accept you – to forgive your sins and declare you righteous in his eyes – what role does faith and works play?

- ❖ Paul's audience assumed both were conditions. **They saw their works, along with their faith, as the basis of their acceptance before God.** So how do you get into a relationship with God? They would say by faith plus works.

- But Paul labors in his letters (like Romans and Galatians) to show that works are *not* the basis of our justification but rather the results. **Works are not the root but the fruit.** So that means a sinner can be accepted by faith alone – justified apart from works. That’s Paul’s emphasis because that’s what he was dealing with.

- ❖ James, you have to understand, was dealing with a different set of concerns. **While Paul was speaking to those who insisted on obedience as a condition for their justification – James was addressing those who assumed they were justified and dismissed the importance of obedience altogether.**
 - So unlike Paul, James’s concern is not with how you get into a relationship with God apart from works. **No, his concern is with those who claim to already be in a relationship with God – but with no works to show for.**

- ❖ So when James speaks of justification – he’s not focused on that initial declaration of God’s acceptance when you first believe (that’s Paul). **James is focused on that final day when your faith is finally tested.** When you stand before the throne of God, will there be fruit to validate the genuineness of your faith? To prove that you had the kind of faith that saves – the kind that justifies. **Or will that day prove that you were dead at the roots all along?** That all along your faith was merely theoretical and cerebral. A dead faith. A demonic faith.
 - Friends, there will be a final day of testing. But I don’t advise you waiting until then to start testing yourself – to see what kind of faith you have. Right now we are living in times of trial and tribulation. And like we saw back in chapter 1, every trial we face is a test of faith. **Don’t allow this unique season of testing to pass you by without testing yourself – to see how you’ll respond to the great needs around you.**

- ❖ **But I just want to say a final word of encouragement to those discouraged right now because you’re looking at your life and you’re not sure if there are enough good works to prove anything.** And you’re thinking about other people you know at church who are so much godlier than you. Like Abraham, they’ve got some pretty good works to prove that their faith is real. But what about you?

- ❖ This is why I appreciate how James includes Rahab as a final example in v25. She’s the prostitute who helped two Hebrew spies escape capture in Jericho. It seems kind of strange that he would mention her. Abraham was a sufficient illustration, and if he just wanted to include a woman, there were plenty of other more godly examples to choose from.
 - But I think it’s intentional. **James points to a patriarch and a prostitute – to prove that anyone can be justified and accepted by God.** You don’t need to add any works to your faith for that to happen. But you do need the right kind of faith – the kind that works. And as we said, that kind of faith includes wholehearted trust. So lean back and put your whole life into his saving hands.