

SERIES: Walk the Talk

SERMON: *Faith Without Works Doesn't Work!*

SCRIPTURE: James 2:14-26

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This is such a special Sunday that I purposely limited my preaching time to 25 minutes. Some of you don't think I can do it. You're probably right, but I'll try. It has been so good to honor Trudy Burkholder this morning on the occasion of her retirement after forty years as our choir director. Pastor Tom Macy, Steve Blasdel, and I have had the privilege of working with Trudy for a combined 42 years (some overlap there, of course), and she has immeasurably enriched each of our ministries. I so appreciate Tom and Steve coming to celebrate with us.

As most of you know, this summer we are teaching through one of the most practical books of the Bible. My message today is not directly related to Trudy's retirement except in this important way: This is a lady whose faith has been consistently demonstrated in her works. Thank you, Trudy, for the example you have set.

Faith is a very popular but fuzzy commodity in today's world. Preachers, of course, talk about faith all the time. But so do politicians, generals at war with one another, and lottery ticket purchasers. That same fuzziness was apparent also in the first century, for the Apostle James goes to some length in today's passage to distinguish between saving faith and useless faith.

In all religions faith is a key factor in "getting right" with God, but they differ greatly in what they understand as the appropriate object of that faith. Some put their faith in dead prophets, some in departed spirits, some in religious and philosophical systems, some in the worshiper's own works, and some just seem to encourage faith in faith. But faith can't be any better than its object, and only biblical Christianity has as the object of its faith the perfect Son of God who died in our place, provides forgiveness from our sin, and opens the way for us to have a personal relationship with almighty God.

It is possible, however, (and this is the burden of our Scripture text today), for one to have the object of his faith straight and still not be right with God, because that faith may never go beyond the mind or the emotions to the point that it affects the will. In other words, while it is fatal to believe in the wrong person or thing, it can also be fatal to believe incompletely in the right person.

James is deeply troubled by an attitude that sees faith as mere verbal profession. He exposes phony faith for what it is and calls us to return genuine faith to its rightful place as *the* channel through which sinful men are put right with God. Let's read James 2:14-26:

*What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If 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? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not*

*accompanied by action, is dead.*

*But 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.*

*You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that and shudder.*

*You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.*

*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.*

Let's begin by making sure that we understand the problem being addressed here in both its practical and theological aspects.

## **The Problem**

**The practical problem** for James is that there are too many people in the church whose lives don't match their profession. They've raised their hand, walked an aisle, prayed at the altar, and professed to believe in God and in His Son Jesus Christ, but nothing has changed. They still have worldly priorities and still lead selfish lives. If they weren't seen walking into church no one would know they were professing Christians. They seem to view "faith" as a Sunday morning pill that hopefully will inoculate them against the worst trials the world has to offer until it's convenient to visit again.

The incongruity between what we say and how we act is the practical problem, as we saw two Sundays ago. But there is also a theological problem present here in James 2, and it can be expressed this way: how is a person made right with God anyway? Is it by faith or is it by works?

**The theological problem.** James says in verse 24, "You see that a person is justified by what he does and *not* by faith alone." Yet our new Free Church Statement of Faith, approved overwhelmingly last Thursday at the National Conference in St. Louis, reads that salvation is "by faith alone in Christ alone." And isn't that what Paul says in Romans 3:28? "We maintain that a man is justified by faith *apart from* the works of the Law." Then a few verses later at the beginning of Romans 4 we read,

*"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God (or had faith in God), and it (i.e. his faith) was credited to him as righteousness.'"*

Paul continues the same theme in Galatians 3:6:

*"Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."*

The Reformers, especially Martin Luther, latched on to Paul's teaching and established as the foundation of their theology the fact that salvation is *sola fidei*, or by faith alone. In fact, Martin Luther was so upset with James' *apparent* contradiction of Paul that he wondered out loud whether the epistle of James even belonged in the NT!

So which is it? Was Abraham justified by faith alone, as Paul says, or was he justified by works and not by faith alone, as James affirms? If Paul contradicts James, which one shall we believe? On the other hand, if they don't contradict one another, how do we reconcile these apparently contradictory statements?

I believe the solution to these practical and theological problems comes in the form of three ideas inherent in our Scripture passage.

### **The Solution**

**1. Faith that involves *only* the intellect is a dead faith. (14-18)** "What good is it, my brothers, if a man *claims* to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" In other words, can a faith that consists entirely of claims, words, ideas save anyone? There are many today, I fear, who have just such a faith. In their intellect they assent to a body of truth about God, about man, about the world, and about the future. If you ask them, "Do you believe in God?" they say, "Sure." If you ask, "Do you believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God?" the answer is, "Yes." You can even ask, "Was He crucified and resurrected?" and get an answer like one of my philosophy professors in graduate school, "Yes, I'm inclined to believe that may have happened." Or they might go even further and claim, "I firmly believe all that the Bible says."

But if it never goes beyond the head, contends James, if it remains only a claim the person makes, and if it never changes his life, then that faith is deader than a doornail. You see, profession of faith does not equal possession of faith. Some people are professional professors. They can say all the right words and convince anyone that they are on the Lord's side in the spiritual battle. But when it comes right down to it they may be fooling everyone *but* Him.<sup>i</sup>

James uses a simple illustration at this point to show that mere profession doesn't cut it. "Suppose a brother or sister is without the necessities of life. If you say to him, 'God bless you, friend. Stay warm and eat hearty!' but you give him no clothes or food, what good is that?" He can't eat your words. As Eugene Peterson puts it, "Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?"<sup>ii</sup> And just as generous words unaccompanied by generous deeds profit nothing, so faith that involves only the intellect is a dead faith.

Now in verse 18 James argues with an imaginary objector. The Greek is difficult and various

English versions read differently. But here is how I understand the argument. The objector says, "One person has the gift of faith, another has the gift of works. Both come from God, but not everyone can expect to have both. You take care of the works department; my specialty is faith." James replies, in effect, "False analogy! This has nothing to do with spiritual gifts. *Every* believer must have faith and *every* believer must have works. In fact, the only way to prove that faith is even present is by the change it produces in a person's life."

Friends, before we go on, I want to make sure you do not misunderstand this first point. James is not anti-intellectual. He is not claiming that faith is a leap in the dark. It must be rooted in the mind. Faith is not, as one wag put it, "believing what you know ain't true." On the contrary, true Christian faith is logical, historical, and eminently reasonable. But if our faith goes no further than our minds, it is valueless.<sup>iii</sup>

So what else is needed? Well, most of us would immediately respond, "faith must also reach the heart, the emotions." Of course! I have heard it said that if you could combine the biblical teaching and doctrine of the evangelical church with the worship and emotional intimacy of the charismatic church you would have a truly balanced faith. I agree that both groups might be better off than they are now, but, you know, something might still be missing. True, you would have two key elements of faith instead of just one, but you might *still* have a phony faith. Why?

**Faith that involves *only* the intellect *and* the emotions is still a useless faith.** Look at verse 19: "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." Demons, says James, have both an intellectual faith and an emotional faith. They know there is a God. They also know that Jesus is the Son of God (Mark 3:11,12). And they know He is one day coming again to judge the wicked and consign them to a place of punishment (Mark 5:1-13, Luke 8:31). They believe all the facts of the Bible. They have an intellectual faith that is probably second to none. But there is also an emotional dimension to their faith. When they think about God they shudder, they tremble.

The verse exudes irony, as James, in effect, prods his readers with an implied question:

*"When is the last time you trembled at the thought of God's holiness? When is the last time your faith touched a deeply emotional response in your heart? When is the last time you were overcome with the amazing truth that the God who created the entire universe loves you, a tiny speck of protoplasm on a tiny planet in a tiny solar system in a tiny galaxy?"*

One of my favorite verses of Scripture is Isaiah 66:2, where God says, "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word." Think about that! Do you tremble at God's Word?

The demons believe with their minds and with their emotions. But it still doesn't do them any good. Their faith doesn't save them or gain them a place in God's presence for all of eternity. By the same token there are some people, who in addition to believing the biblical facts about God and His Son, feel really warm toward Him, shed tears of sorrow over sin and rejoice over His goodness. They may even lift their hands and voices in emotional praise on occasion. But as

Warren Wiersbe puts it, “A person can be enlightened in his mind and even stirred in his heart and be lost forever.”<sup>iv</sup>

Well, what is that third element of genuine faith besides the intellectual and the emotional, without which it cannot be real? It is the volitional element. Faith must involve the will; it must result in action; it must make a difference in one's life.

**Faith that involves the intellect, emotions, and will is a genuine faith.** And to prove his point James gives two OT examples:

**1. The example of Abraham.** Look at verse 20: "You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he *did* when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?" And then in verse 25 he offers . . .

**2. The example of Rahab.** "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?"

Abraham and Rahab are two OT characters whose faith was sufficient to earn them a place in the Great Hall of Faith (Heb. 11). Abraham, the father of Judaism and Christianity, is renowned for his faith in trusting God so much that he was willing to sacrifice His son Isaac and actually proceeded to do so until God supernaturally stopped him. Rahab rescued the Israelite spies and enabled Joshua to conquer Jericho, and became the great-great-grandmother of King David and the ancestress of Jesus Himself. But here is James' point: if these two had merely professed faith in Jehovah God or merely felt warmly toward Him, but had never acted on that faith, their profession would have been empty and worthless.

Now think about these two examples for a moment, for they are just about as opposite as they could be.

Abraham was a man, Rahab a woman.

Abraham was a Jew, Rahab a Gentile.

Abraham was a patriarch, Rahab a prostitute.

Abraham was godly, Rahab thoroughly sinful.

Abraham was the friend of God, Rahab belonged to the enemies of God.

Yet both had a faith in God that went beyond the intellectual and the emotional *to* the volitional. They acted on what they professed to believe.

Now I want us to look at these two NT apostles—James and Paul—and see if we can discover some common ground. You see, I think the contradiction is only on the surface, not in the substance. I think they are actually teaching the same truth from different perspectives. Paul never suggests that merely intellectual faith saves or that merely emotional faith saves. The very word “faith” in his writings clearly implies a belief that moves the will. And that little word “alone” that James adds to “faith” in verse 24 shows that James has no intention of substituting works for faith in the process of justification; he just wants nothing to do with “cheap faith.”

Perhaps it will help to set the views of Paul and James next to one another this way:

Paul denies that works can bring us into relationship with God. James, on the other hand, insists that once that relationship is established, works are inevitable. No real contradiction there.

Paul affirms strongly that works cannot be substituted for faith. James, on the other hand, argues that genuine faith includes works by its very nature. No real contradiction there.

Paul claims that we are saved by genuine faith. James, on the other hand, argues that dead faith cannot save. No real contradiction there.

Paul stresses that faith is the only condition for the declaration of a right status with God (justification). James, on the other hand, stresses that works are a necessary condition for the demonstration of that right status (sanctification). No contradiction there.

Now here is James' conclusion:

**The Conclusion: Faith and works are inseparable. You can't have the first without the second. (26)**

It's possible, of course, to have good works without biblical faith. We all know cultists or even atheists who do admirable works of kindness for their fellow-man, but those works are totally valueless in helping them find God. In fact, such works are filthy rags in God's sight, says Isaiah, if they are not accompanied by true faith.

And there are people who think they have faith even though they produce no discernible works. They need to be put on notice that saving faith is more than mere profession. No doubt words are indispensable to true Christianity—words in sermons, prayers, confessions of faith, wise advice, encouragement. But words only have value when actions back them up. We must *walk the talk*. The bottom line, friends, is that biblical faith and godly works are inseparable. The first without the second is like a body without a spirit. It's lifeless, useless, and profits nothing.<sup>v</sup>

You know something, it's dangerous to look into a percolator to see how much coffee it contains while it is percolating! But the percolators out in the courtyard this morning have a tiny glass tube along the side which serves as a gauge. As the coffee stands in the tiny tube, so it stands in the pot. If there is no coffee in the tube, you can be confident there is none in the pot.

Well, there is also a sight glass on the boiler that is our hearts and it is the gauge of good works. You can tell what's in the heart by looking at the gauge. The problem is we all like to check the sight glasses of other people's lives, but the Scriptures urge us to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith. How can we know for sure? Allow me to offer this very practical test. First, do you believe the Gospel intellectually? You must, for the Apostle Paul said,

*"By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.*

*Otherwise you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:2-4).*

Second, has the truth of the Gospel touched your emotions? I don't mean that you have to become a really emotional person, but is there genuine sorrow for sin, joy in worship, sympathy for those who suffer?

Third, and most importantly, has your profession of faith in Christ affected your will; has it made a difference in how you live? When you compare your life today with your life before you received Christ, are there positive changes that could not be accounted for by ordinary maturing or self-help strategies you have borrowed. Is there any clear evidence that God Himself has supernaturally impacted your life?

I want us to conclude our time in the Word this morning with a time of silent prayer. If you are not sure that your faith in Christ has ever gone beyond the intellectual and emotional to the volitional, I beg you right now, by an act of your will, to invite Jesus Christ to come into your life and change you.

If you aren't sure where you stand because the evidence is ambiguous I challenge you to express to God your desire that Jesus Christ become Lord of your life. Lord means Master—master of your priorities, goals, purposes, time, talent, family, everything.

And if you know your faith is real because you have seen God bring about supernatural changes in your attitudes, actions, and relationships, thank Him and ask Him to accelerate the process until Jesus comes.

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1. Judas is a paradigm example. He convinced everyone of his fellow Apostles that he was on a loyal follower of Jesus; they even elected him treasurer. And even after Jesus plainly told them that one of them would betray him, not one of the Apostles suspected Judas. Instead they asked, "Is it I, Lord?" Millions have walked the aisle at various Billy Graham Crusades to publicly proclaim their faith in Christ. And many of those have been delivered from lives of sin and self-centeredness. But many others have not, because nothing beyond profession ever happened.

ii. Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, 481.

iii. Unfortunately, the kind of faith that involves only the intellect is, in my opinion, very common, even in evangelical churches, and even perhaps among evangelical pastors. I grew up in a Christian home, I went four years to Bible College and four more to seminary, and when it

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was all over I must admit that the relationship I had with God was largely a cognitive one. I could analyze truth, outline it, do word studies on it, and teach it, but too often my faith was divorced from real life. It took many years for me to understand that while thinking right thoughts about God enabled me to know about Him, it didn't necessarily help me to know Him.

Years later I took a course at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School entitled, "Theology and the Spiritual Journey: The Path of the Heart." It was the first seminary course I had ever taken whose stated goal was to go beyond cognitive knowledge of God to what is called affective knowledge of God. In other words, the whole point of the course was that true knowledge of God must also touch the heart and emotions. I became convinced that there is an element of faith that I had seriously neglected to my own spiritual harm, and I don't think I'm alone.

iv. Warren Wiersbe, *Be Mature: How to break the mold of spiritual immaturity—and grow up in Christ*, 79.

v. I'm convinced that the Apostle James would be troubled by many of the testimonies offered in the church today. He would never be satisfied to hear someone say, "I was convicted of my sin in 1952. I came to the realization that Jesus died for my sin and I invited Him into my life." It used to be that was all I looked for in a testimony—a profession of repentance, an acknowledgment of Christ's sacrificial death, and an indication the person has responded to the offer of salvation.

I believe James would listen to that testimony and then ask a few questions:

What difference has your profession of faith made in your life?

If you were arrested for being a Christian would there be enough evidence from the last year to convict you?

Are you right now in love with the Savior?

Are you serving Christ faithfully?

Are you giving generously and proportionately of your resources to further the cause of Christ?

Do you spend time meditating on God's Word and in prayer?" is point would not be that by doing those things one achieves salvation. Rather his point would be that if your profession of faith has made no difference in your lifestyle, perhaps the reason is that it has never gone beyond the intellect or the emotions to the heart and will.