
“Visible Faith”

JAMES 2:14-26

MAY 15TH, 2022

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BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

Works in no way contribute to a person’s salvation. We are saved by faith, not by works. However, saving faith will produce works.

In this week’s passage, we see why James and Paul were pitted against one another. Are we saved by faith alone as Paul said, or are we saved by faith along with works? The answer is that we are saved by faith alone, but there is no such thing as faith that is alone. In other words, real faith will always lead to life change in the believer. This passage concludes two chapters of tests of faith that James provided to his church. He very much wanted to ensure they had genuine faith! Do you have genuine faith? Do you have life-changing faith?

JAMES 2:14-26

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 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? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ¹⁸But 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. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! 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; ²³and 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. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Let’s jump in with **verse 14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?** Recall from my sermon on April 3rd that there is a saving faith and an unsaving faith. There’s a manner of life that reveals a person does not truly believe the Gospel. James says that anyone that claims to have faith but their life is not bearing the marks of that faith is deceived – they hear the Word but do not do the Word. My point was that we should examine our hearts like Paul prescribed in 2 Corinthians 13:5 and discern whether we are in the faith or not. *“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.”*

To be clear, the **work** that James describes here is not just being a good person. Lots of people are good. Most religions value good works. It's not just being good that demonstrates saving faith, but being changed. The works of faith do not save, but they do demonstrate the presence of saving faith.

DEAD CAR BATTERY

You've probably had a dead car battery before, right? It's very frustrating. I've had several dead batteries, including once here in the church parking lot on a Sunday afternoon. I walked out to my vehicle and clicked the unlock button on my remote. Nothing happened. I opened it with my key and hopped in only to confirm my suspicions – dead battery.

Now contrast that with every other time I walk out to my vehicle and click the unlock button. Boom, unlocked! Why, because the battery isn't dead. It's got power. Does unlocking my door cause my battery to have power? Of course not.

My door locks don't do anything to my battery except receive the power that flows from it. What causes my battery to have power is connection to the power source. However, unlocking my doors with the remote demonstrates, or makes visible, what is otherwise invisible – that my battery is not dead. In the same way, our lives, our lifestyles, demonstrate whether our faith is alive or dead.

Let's continue in **verses 15 and 16, If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,¹⁶ and 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?**

"Go in peace, be warmed and filled," was a traditional pious greeting. It comforted the speaker, made him feel good about himself, and impress others. Hey, he's a nice guy. He says kind things. I like his tone. The problem, James says, is this is worthless if it is not followed by action. If there is no activity that demonstrates compassion, words of compassion are empty.

John says something similar, *"But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."* 1 John 3:17-18 Notice a few things here as you process: 1. Having means to help others; 2. Seeing, being aware of others' needs; 3. Closing your heart, willful rejection. Someone who lives like that should ask themselves how does God's love abide in him?

EMPTY WORDS

But let's make sure we don't miss James' point. Compassion ministry is undeniably a necessary expression of genuine conversion. When you see a need and can meet it, if you habitually refuse, you should be concerned. However, that's not the main thrust of James' point here. James' point is that just like pious words of compassion to the needy are empty when they are not followed by action, so pious words of faith are dead, as James says in **verse 17. So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.**

James is illustrating that empty words, whether they be words of faith or words of compassion are useless. This is the main thrust of the passage. James is on a quest to help his people discern whether their faith is genuine or not. He supplies several tests for them to examine their faith. Empty pious words mean nothing when it really counts.

James is not saying that the way we know we have saving faith is that we feed and clothe people. That's an important means of showing compassion and compassion is part of the evidence of faith. However, there are tons of people who give their entire lives to feeding and clothing people but do not have saving faith.

Nevertheless, no one who claims to have faith but lives an unchanged life has a credible claim to salvation. To drive home his point, James appeals to several rhetorical devices. In verses 18-25 we're going to see diatribe, sarcasm, irony, hyperbole, insult, and illustration. In **verse 18** James introduces a diatribe – an argument with a hypothetical opponent, **But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works."** James presumes there will be a critic in the audience who will hear the argument and say, "Ah, one person has faith and another person has works, it's all good. Hey, the Holy Spirit gives some the gift of faith, others the gift of mercy."

James will not allow the church to fall into the trap that works are only for some Christians, though. So, he retorts, **Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.** There's some irony here if you think about it. How can someone show their faith apart from their works? How can something invisible be shown apart from visible manifestations? How could I show you my battery has power without some external demonstration of it?

The only way to show your faith is by making it a visible faith; and only works that flow from faith can make faith visible. He's not done yet, though. Now he's going to mess with the hypothetical "someone" in hopes of getting the attention of the actual audience.

NOT ALL RIGHT BELIEF INDICATES SAVING FAITH

Verse 19 says, **You believe that God is one; you do well.** James has highlighted the essential doctrine for religious Jews and Christians alike. It comes from Deuteronomy 6:4, *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."* The Shema, as this is called, was recited twice a day by religious Jews.

This is right doctrine, and especially proper in a pagan culture of plural deities. But there's sarcasm when he says, **you do well.** We get this because of what comes next in this verse. It feels like a corny, "Great job!" with a big thumbs up.

Listen to his hyperbole, **Even the demons believe—and shudder!** That's an audacious and frankly, shocking statement. Keep in mind he's still refuting the hypothetical critic. He's saying that someone who would separate faith and works has arrived at the belief level of demons. And it begs the question, does their belief even affect them as much as it does demons who **shudder?!** Demons know that God is One and it terrifies them!

There's a fear of God in them that is absent many people, including some of the people James wrote to. In other words, demons were closer to the truth than some of them in the church. Unfortunately, when it comes to salvation, close doesn't count. Mental assent, or knowing doctrine, while important, does not save. Here's a sober reality: not all right belief indicates saving faith.

Genuine saving faith is more than an intellectual thing. That's why Paul says in Romans 10:9-10, *"because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."*

Douglas Moo says, "Genuine faith must go beyond the intellect to the will; it must affect our attitudes and actions as well as our 'beliefs.'" Attitudes, actions, as well as beliefs. That's what James is getting at.

Works include compassion and mercy shown to others in need. It also includes attitudes toward the church, toward the family, toward the Word, toward worship. It includes actions like submission when it's appropriate and resistance when it's not, serving people selflessly, connecting to them meaningfully, declaring the Gospel boldly, speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves and so much more. **Works** for James were not just about acts of compassion. James was concerned with a total transformation of the head, the heart, and the will.

Verse 20 says, **Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?** Before we move further, **foolish** means "empty or shallow." It implies acting without wisdom from above. The book of proverbs, indeed much of scripture, is replete with the contrast between the wise and the fool. This was a major emphasis for James as well, widely considered the wisdom book of the New Testament.

James returns to the concept of faith without works and he's going to supply two examples to prove **that faith apart from works is useless.** There's a play on words here, another rhetorical device. **Useless** means "doesn't work." Thus, we read "faith without works doesn't work." That's sort of funny, but sort of deep, right?!

Recall the various tests James has issued to shepherd his people as they examine their faith: persevering in trials, relying on God's wisdom rather than one's own, hearing and doing the Word of God, bridling the

tongue, caring for orphans and widows, showing no partiality and now this, these tests of faith fill the first two chapters. James really, really wanted his audience to be sure about their salvation.

These are the works James had in mind. Now he's going to prove his case using two illustrations from the Old Testament in **verses 21 to 23**. First, Abraham, the patriarch.

PATRIARCH AND PROSTITUTE

²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 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.

Abraham was 75 years old when God promised him a child in Genesis 12. Ten years later in Genesis 15, God told the still childless Abraham to look at the stars of heaven and told him his offspring would be as numerous as them. *"And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness."* (Genesis 15:6) Abraham then waited another 14 years before Sarah gave birth to Isaac in Genesis 21; then several years later we come to Genesis 22 and read of the story James refers to here.

When James' audience read this, they would have understood the story of Abraham as a whole, but would have also understood the timing and sequence of events. It's important for us to make sure we do, too. The moment Abraham believed the Lord, it was counted to him as righteousness then and there. That was Genesis 15:6, almost thirty years prior to Genesis 22 when he offered up Isaac.

The point James is making is that Abraham's work of offering Isaac in sacrifice proved that Abraham really believed God. In the Genesis 22 narrative, it says, *"Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.'" (Genesis 22:5)*

What is spectacular is what was assumed. Abraham was convinced that God was going to keep His promise regarding Isaac one way or another. He'd be coming back with his son.

In the words of the author of Hebrews, *"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."* (Hebrews 11:17-19)

Notice the difference here: the "someone" believed true things *about* God... Abraham believed God. That's all the difference in the world. Abraham rested everything upon God's promise. This is what it means to put your faith in Him. Abraham put his faith in God when he believed what God said.

Then his faith was made visible at the altar. Offering Isaac up as a sacrifice proved that his faith was real. Abraham was not counted righteous because he offered Isaac. He offered Isaac because his faith, by which he was counted righteous, was real.

That's the point James is making. Abraham believed God would provide the sacrifice and he believed God would bless him and the nations through his son, Isaac. Why? Because God told him He would, and Abraham believed Him.

Saving faith trusts what God says. James appealed to Abraham's example to illustrate the heart of a person who truly believes God. Someone who **was called a friend of God**. We'll cover this more next week as we go to James 4:1-5 and contrast it with friendship with the world.

If you truly believe God, if you rest everything on Him, you're going to respond to God with your life. This is why James, turning back to the whole audience and away from the hypothetical "someone," says in **verse 24** **You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.**

REAL FAITH WORKS

This is where James and Paul are pitted against one another. Paul said in Romans 3:28, *“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”* But James isn’t saying we’re justified by works of the Law. James is saying *real faith works*. And it’s only this kind of faith, faith that works, that will save. This is justifying faith.

Justifying faith is faith that produces works, or change in your life. When we really trust the Lord, our lives are going to be changed. We’re going to express that trust in obedience. Moo’s explanation is helpful, “Paul and James were making complementary, not contradictory points. James is not claiming that works were involved in Abraham’s being *declared* righteous, but that they were necessary to *demonstrate* that he was, in fact, righteous.”

We need to remember to whom James wrote. He wrote to religious people who took pride in their doctrinal knowledge and their family heritage. They thought these were all they needed to curry God’s favor. They weren’t interested in a changed heart, only that they check the blocks to go to Heaven.

Dorani puts it in modern-day terms, “James wrote for the person who, today, might tell a pastor, ‘Don’t bother me, I’m already a Christian. I’ve been baptized, catechized, and sanitized from most major sins. Leave me alone; my faith is my private affair.’” What a sad state this person’s heart is in. They think that because they believe right things *about* God that they have the kind of faith Abraham had. That wasn’t the case in James’ day and it’s not the case today.

But Abraham wasn’t the only exemplar of the faith. Some might even see Abraham as a bridge too far. He’s too lofty, the patriarch of all three major world religions – Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. He stands out as a towering figure of faith. “Who could measure up to that,” one might ask. So, James comes at us with a completely different scenario – a prostitute.

Abraham was moral, she was immoral. He was the first Jew, she was Gentile. He was the Patriarch, she was a woman. Opposite in every respect. Don’t lose this, though: prostitute and patriarch, both declared righteous by faith which was made visible by their works.

Verse 25 And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? Her hiding the spies and assisting in their escape clearly demonstrated that she believed that the God of Israel would enable Israel to conquer her Canaanite city.

She recognized the truth about God, saying *“...for the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.”* (Joshua 2:11) and then she acted on that belief. Notice the demons and **someone** (v. 18) believe something similar to Rahab. The difference is what she did with that belief. She put her own life at risk by hiding the spies and misdirecting her king because she knew she was going to be destroyed by God and His people.

She feared God more than man. Her belief about God resulted in actions that affirmed her faith. And because of that we read in Hebrews 11:31, *“By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.”* Rahab knew that if she didn’t side with God, specifically by hiding His messengers, she was doomed.

Brother and sister, this is the message of the Gospel. Every single one of us is or was doomed. We deserve the wrath of God because we’ve chosen to sin against Him. Jesus said we’re condemned already. We’re already as good as dead; so was Rahab and everyone else in her city of Jericho.

She could sense it. She believed it. And she did what was necessary to be spared. She didn’t try to make her own way. Instead she believed God.

A MORBID IMAGE

James concludes this two-chapter section on saving faith with somewhat morbid imagery. **Verse 26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.** There’s something repulsive about dead bodies, which is why we go to such great lengths to present the dead as lifelike as

possible when we have an open-casket funeral. If you've never seen an unprepared dead body before, it's quite unsettling. Not only that but in James' day contact with a dead body made a person ceremonially unclean; this would have been an especially repugnant image to James' audience.

Now listen to me, how much more repugnant should we find dead religion?

Imagine your kids playing with a **body apart from the spirit**, a dead body. Imagine them kicking it around. Flopping the arms. Pulling it over to their play fort. Now I want you to imagine raising your children to be informed and moral people without a change of heart; **faith apart from works**, playing with dead religion.

Imagine trusting in a dead body, setting it up as a guard on a watch tower. Putting it in uniform and giving it a weapon and night vision goggles. Now I want you to imagine trusting your eternal security to a dead faith.

Imagine introducing someone to a dead body with glee, "Hey, I'd love you to meet my Uncle Bernie." Now imagine greeting the Lord Jesus Christ and pointing to your dead faith.

Is this uncomfortable? You bet it's uncomfortable. It's uncomfortable to hear and it's uncomfortable to preach. But it ought to be uncomfortable. We're talking about eternal life and death. James didn't tip-toe around it, and neither should we. He pulled out half a dozen rhetorical devices in these 13 verses to rouse his people from their religious slumber.

I love you, church! I want you to have complete assurance of your salvation. I want you relying on neither sentiment nor presumption. I want for you what I believe James wanted for his church: a confidence that you have saving faith, a faith that is made visible by the conduct of your life. Your faith is a faith that works. It's a visible faith. Amen?

If it's not, now is the time to repent and truly believe the Gospel. Not just right things about Jesus and the Father but believe Jesus and the Father. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost, Paul said. Do you believe the same thing?

By His grace, for His glory! Amen!

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