

## What Good is Your Faith?

- James 2:14-18
- So far in our study of James, we have seen that God sends trials to build patience, not to make us squirm. He teaches us to “count it all joy” when we meet those trials of various kinds that He sends, and let steadfastness have its full effect so we can become complete. Lacking in nothing. We learned more about dealing with temptation, that it comes not from God but from our own desires. We were reminded that we are to be doers of the Word, not hearers only, and to pass the tests God sends our way. We looked at four tests: The test of the tongue. There is no disconnect between the truth of God’s Word and what comes out of our mouths (or fingers on a keyboard). The test of compassion. No disconnect between the truth of God’s Word and our practical care for those in need. The test of purity. No disconnect between the truth of God’s Word and our personal holiness. The test of love. No disconnect between the truth of God’s Word and how we love our neighbor. How are we doing in those tests? How are we growing?
- When Lucy returned to Narnia in CS Lewis’ book, *Prince Caspian*, she wanted to see Aslan again. When she finally did, she was somewhat surprised. “Aslan,” she said, “you’re bigger.” “That is because you are older, little one,” answered he. “Not because you are?” “I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.” To find God bigger. Isn’t that what we want and need for ourselves? It happens as we grow in our faith and obedience. We may try and fool ourselves by saying that if we only understood God more, then we would follow Him better. Then we would really obey Him. But, Lewis understood it correctly. God only gets bigger as we obey! Not the other way around. A friend once said to Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher, writer, and believer: “I wish I had your belief, so I might live your life.” To which Pascal was swift to reply: “If you lived my life you would soon have my belief.”
- **The Principle**
- Today we begin to look at the passage that provoked the title for this series: Genuine Faith Works. And James asks the question, “What good is your faith?” Of course, he is asking what good any faith is that does not result in works, and he even asks the provocative question, and I will make it more personal: “Can that faith save you?”
- Before we answer that question, let’s make it plain what James is talking about here when he refers to faith. Remember just a couple of years ago when we were working our way through the book of Acts? Paul was in prison and being trotted out to talk to different rulers, including Festus and Felix and even King Agrippa. And in the last encounter, in Acts 26, Paul was giving his testimony to Agrippa, while Festus listened as well. Paul was testifying to his faith in the Christ, who rose from the dead, and Festus interrupted him and said, “Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you insane.” And Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, and what I am speaking is true and reasonable; and what’s more, the king knows these things, and so I speak boldly to him. He knows these things because they were not done in a corner.” Then he says to the king, “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.” Then Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time, would you persuade me to be a Christian?” The king knew exactly what Paul was talking about. Faith in Jesus Christ. And Paul didn’t say, “Oh, you believe in the prophets? That’s good. I mean, as long as you believe in something, that’s all that matters. Some have faith in Jesus, others worship the sun, some bow to idols. It really doesn’t matter. Hey, maybe you could get a group of royals together who could share their faith journeys. Because it doesn’t matter how you go; every road of faith is as valid as the next, and we all end up in the same place!” He didn’t speak such nonsense. Why? Because it is only faith in Jesus that saves. All other ground is sinking sand. That’s why Paul said to Agrippa in response, “I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am –except for these chains.”
- So when James asks, “Can that faith save him,” he refers to faith in Jesus. Is James suggesting that faith in Jesus cannot save? If so, that would run directly counter to what the Apostle Paul believed,

as he wrote throughout his epistles that we are saved by faith. “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.” –Romans 3:28 This is why Martin Luther called James, “a right strawy epistle.” But there is no real contradiction, which is why James was included in the canon of Scripture! Douglass Moo points out that Paul and James are simply looking at two different times in the believer’s life: “Paul denies any efficacy to pre-conversion works, but James is pleading for the absolute necessity of post-conversion works.” Paul is looking at the root of faith, and James is looking at the fruit. Or to put it another way, some say Paul sees the fire in the fireplace, and James sees the smoke coming out of the chimney. RC Sproul said, “If a person claims to have faith yet brings no fruit of obedience whatsoever, it is proof positive that the claim to faith is a false claim. We are not justified by the fruit of our faith. We are justified by the fruit of Christ’s merit. We receive His merit only by faith. But it is only by true faith that we receive His merit. And all true faith yields true fruit. This is what is meant by the Reformation slogan, ‘Justification is by faith alone, and not by faith that is alone.’ That’s the principle. Now let’s look at...

- **The Illustration**

- James then gives an illustration to put a fine point on the principle. We come upon one of our brothers or sisters in Christ, suffering from the cold and hungry. They don’t have enough clothing to keep them warm, and there is no food in the pantry. What do we do when we see a brother or sister with genuine needs? Maybe we wrap our coat a little tighter and thank God silently for our full fridge and overflowing pantry while we smile and say, “Well, I will be praying for you. And I hope things get better for you soon!” James has one question for us: “What good is that?” Answer: none. No good. John says the same: “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? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.” (1 John 3:17-18)
- Kent Hughes tells the story of an English preacher who happened upon a friend whose horse had been accidentally killed. While the crowd of onlookers expressed empty words of sympathy, the preacher stepped forward and said to the loudest sympathizer, “I am sorry five pounds. How much are you sorry?” Then he passed the hat.
- Someone wrote a poem to express what we find much too often in the church:
- “I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger. I was imprisoned, and you crept off quietly to your chapel in the cellar and prayed for my release. I was naked, and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance. I was sick, and you knelt and thanked God for your health. I was homeless, and you preached to me about the spiritual shelter of the love of God. I was lonely, and you left me alone to go pray for me. You seem so holy, so close to God, but I’m still very hungry, and lonely, and cold.”
- James says that kind of faith, the kind that has no works, dead. What good is dead faith? None. The faith that God gives works through love, and love always works in obedience to the Father. That’s the illustration. Then we have...
- **The Objection**
- Someone says, “You have faith and I have works.” Or, “I’m OK, and you’re ok, so what’s the big deal?” First of all, I’m NOT Ok and neither are you! That’s the big deal. But some would say, Hey, you like theology and doctrine and reading your Bible and going to prayer meetings and listening to sermons and believing in Jesus. And I like practical things. Helping people. Feeding hungry people and helping the homeless. But both are in a dangerous place. Faith that is not accompanied by action is dead. And action that is not grounded in saving faith is pointless. No, James says. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.
- Faith in Jesus is the solid rock upon which we stand. If it’s real, that faith produces good fruit through our obedience. And we will have no fear of standing before the Lord one day and hearing Him say those terrifying words in Matthew 7:21. “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is IN heaven. On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast our demons in

your name, and do many mighty works in your name? And then I will declare to them, I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”

- Ask the Lord to produce good fruit in your life. He will do it. He IS doing it. I look around and see brothers and sisters who are filled with the Spirit, walking in obedience, loaded with good, spiritual fruit. And I am thankful. May it be so for each of us, all the days of our lives.