

*Living Faith: James 2:14-26*  
 Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church  
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William Wilberforce was an important politician in Britain in the late 1700s and early 1800s. He was passionate about the cause of abolishing the slave trade and abolishing slavery. He persevered in that cause for decades, and eventually he was able to see it come to pass, that slavery became illegal in Britain, in 1833 just a few days before he died.

When Wilberforce began his political career, he was not yet a Christian. God used a long-time friend of his, Isaac Milner, to teach Wilberforce about the truths of the Bible, the truth of the Gospel. And it's interesting to see how this progressed in his mind and heart. After some time, Wilberforce came to a mental assent of Christian teaching. After hanging out with Milner long enough, Wilberforce came to an intellectual agreement with the tenets of the Christian faith. But he was still not yet a Christian. His life was unchanged. He knew in his head about sin and punishment and Jesus' death and resurrection, but it did not impact the way he was conducting his life at that time. He had a realization that if he were to die, he would go to hell. But then he just headed to his next party, his next social event, just kept doing what he was doing. At that point in his life, Wilberforce was an example of faith without works.

I'll say some more about Wilberforce this morning, but what I just described leads us right into our first point.

### **I. Words without Works (verses 14-17)**

We'll look at this passage in three sections, and the first section is verses 14-17 where James illustrates words without works. He begins with two rhetorical questions in verse 14. First, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?" His point, of course, is to state that faith without works is of no use—it is no good. And notice how the question is stated: "if someone *says* he has faith . . ." James is already implying that there can be a *profession* of faith that is an empty profession. It's possible for individuals to *claim* to have faith, and yet it is a faith that is of no use. It is not a genuine, saving faith.

The second rhetorical question clarifies the severity of the issue. "Can that faith save him?" And clearly the expected response to that rhetorical question is, NO! No, that kind of faith cannot and will not save. He's referring back to the first statement about faith that is not accompanied by works, and he's saying "*that* faith cannot save"—the kind of faith that is just words, but no

works. We have to see that James refers to two kinds of faith in these verses. He refers to genuine faith in certain places, but he also refers to dead faith—faith that is a mere profession, faith that is by itself and does not have works. Words without works.

In verses 15-16 James gives us a simple, and very helpful, illustration. The letter of James contains some wonderful illustrations, and this is one of them. Here we find this very concrete example of empty words. This is an illustration of how people can speak empty words that are therefore useless. “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 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?” The point of the analogy is to show that when words are not accompanied with action, they are useless. The words, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” are utterly meaningless and useless to the person who needs clothes and food. The poor brother or sister goes away without being helped at all.

In a similar way, the statement, “I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior,” is utterly meaningless and useless if it stops there—if it is a mere profession without any action flowing from it. The person who makes this empty profession will not be saved (according to verse 14), because it is not a real faith but a dead faith.

Statements like these have to be backed up by actions. If you say to the person, “be warmed and filled,” and you then follow through by giving them a warm place to stay and a meal to eat, then those words have some meaning and validity. Likewise, if someone says, “I have faith,” and their life is characterized by godly and Christ-like actions that arise from that faith, then those words have some backbone and some foundation.

In verse 17 James states the point in a very straight-forward way. “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” This is not genuine saving faith that he’s talking about. He’s talking about a different kind of faith. A faith that is alone. A faith that is by itself. A faith that does not have works. It’s NOT living faith. Rather, it’s dead faith.

Think about how faith and obedience relate to each other when you go to see your doctor. Do you trust your doctor? If your doctor diagnoses a problem and tells you to take a certain medicine, or make a certain change to your diet or your activities, will you follow those instructions? There have been a couple times I’ve gone to physical therapy for sports injuries. And they gave me stretches to do and exercises to do. And I did those stretches and exercises regularly, and they helped. I trusted that the doctors and physical therapists knew what they were doing, and I trusted that they were looking out for my good, and I was

motivated to get better, because I wanted to get back to running and lifting weights. I wanted the injuries to heal so I could get back to doing those things that I enjoy.

It's somewhat in our relationship with God. If we trust Him, knowing that He is all-wise, and knowing that He has our very best interest in mind. The instructions and commands He gives us are for our eternal good. Trusting Him will result in obeying Him. And not merely out of duty. Certainly not because we're trying to earn His favor. Not even because we're trying to repay Him for the good He's done for us. But very simply, if we believe He is good and His commands are for our good, then we want to obey. As new creatures in Christ, born again with new desires, as those who have living faith, our lives will be characterized by a desire to obey our good and gracious God.

The point here is that real biblical faith changes people. It produces fruit in one's life, it produces obedience to God, it fights the fight of faith, it causes us to love Jesus and submit to Him. Real faith is always accompanied by works.

What a glorious thing this is! God doesn't only forgive our sins (that's glorious in and of itself!), but He does even more than that. When He causes us to be born again, He makes us new creatures with new desires. And the faith that He puts in our hearts, that faith is what connects us with Christ, it's by this faith that we are credited with the righteousness of Christ, and it's this faith that causes us to walk through life differently than we did before. Prior to our conversion, prior to being regenerated, we did not walk by faith. We walked according to sight, according to the flesh, according to worldly desires. But now we really see! We have spiritual eyes to see how miserable we would be if we continued down the path of sinful pleasures. And we have eyes to see the joy, the reward, the peace and comfort of walking with the Lord. We truly desire to obey Him. Not because we're trying to earn His favor. We could never do that. But we want to obey Him because we really do know that we will be happiest when we're walking most closely with Him.

A couple application points to consider here. The first is very personal, for each of us to consider about ourselves. And the question is simply this: Is your profession of faith merely words? Do you fall into the "words without works" category? If so, this passage is meant to warn you and rebuke you. Don't assume you're saved just because you say so. There needs to be deep repentance happening in your life, grieving over your sin, and looking to Jesus to forgive you.

Here's another application point to consider. If there's a family member of yours—maybe a son or daughter, or an aunt or uncle, or a parent—and that person professes to be a Christian.

And this can be complicated by the fact that, of course, you really want to be assured that this loved one is a Christian. But how should you think about this if the person who professes to be a Christian is not living a life that gives evidence of actually knowing and loving the Lord?

This passage is really important in showing us that we can't just assume that a person's profession of faith means they are actually saved. And it may take some courage on our part to lovingly point that out to a family member or a friend who may very well have a false assurance of salvation. For the person who says, "Yeah, I'm a Christian, because I said a prayer 10 years ago and got baptized." But this person doesn't read the Bible or pray or go to church, and they live like the world. You may need to gently share with them the warnings of this passage.

Now, I have to say, on the other hand, we don't want to be overly suspicious. I think we can be in danger of that. We don't want to be always assuming that professing believers are not true believers. Just because they're not adhering to the same exact theological positions as me. Or there's a besetting sin in their life and we think, how could they really be a Christian and still be stumbling into that! We want to give grace, and be charitable, and recognize that God's still working on each one of us.

So, in light of what I've said so far, I think one of the works (as James puts it), one of the evidences of God's grace, that is important to look for, in ourselves and others, is repentance. To have a faith that produces works, to have a living faith, doesn't mean we're perfect. We're not going to see perfection until we go to be with the Lord. But to have a living faith does mean we will be striving for holiness, and there will be repentance as we journey through this life, continuing to fight against sin, lamenting the fact that we are still tempted and that we still sin. But a living faith is yearning for more of Jesus. We want to know Him better. We want to walk more closely with Him.

Wilberforce referred to his conversion as "the Great Change." He had come to an intellectual understanding of biblical truth, and he was convinced of the truth of it. But for some time, it had not sunk down into his heart. But then, by God's grace, it did sink down into his heart and produced a great change in him. One of the ways this impacted him was a deep remorse over his sin. He writes, "It was not so much the fear of punishment by which I was affected, as a sense of my great sinfulness in having so long neglected the unspeakable mercies of my God and Saviour." (Metaxas, 53)

A deep knowledge of his sin brought repentance and change. Two specific things he felt especially convicted of—the way he had spent his money, and the way he had spent his time.

He had quite a bit of both. He was very wealthy. And he had a lot of time on his hands as a single man serving in parliament. There were long breaks they would have between sessions, and it had been his custom to spend those months in leisure, because he could.

Listen to how Eric Metaxas describes this, in his book entitled *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery*. Metaxas writes, “Before ‘the Great Change,’ Wilberforce had reckoned his money and time his own, to do with as he pleased, and had lived accordingly. But suddenly he knew that this could no longer be the case. The Scriptures were plain and could not be gainsaid [opposed] on this most basic point: all that was his—his wealth, his talents, his time—was not really his. It all belonged to God and had been given to him to use for God’s purposes and according to God’s will. God had blessed him so that he, in turn, might bless others, especially those less fortunate than himself.” (page 64)

The great change in Wilberforce’s life involved deep repentance, and it resulted in radical and tangible changes in the way he lived his life.

## **II. Knowledge without Love (verses 18-19)**

We see this in verses 18-19, which we’ll only look at briefly. It’s the same kind of dead, useless faith that was described in verses 14-17, but here James shows us another dimension of what this can be like. “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. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!”

His point in verse 18 is that faith and works always go together, and works are the evidence of faith. He says, “Show me your faith.” But if it’s a faith without works, then there’s nothing to show. It’s only empty words.

Then verse 19 describes a kind of faith that involves mental assent to truths about God, but it is very different than saving faith. The demons possess this kind of empty faith. They have great knowledge and understanding of God, but they have no delight in Him. It’s knowledge without love. This is a shocking thing to think about. The demons know more about God than we do. They know the Scriptures. But they shudder. They hate God! They believe all the truths of the Gospel—that God is One, and that He is Three-in-One. They believe that Jesus Christ is God’s Son, that He came to earth to die on a cross and rose on the third day for the sins of all who will trust in Him. The demons(!) know all this, but rather than delighting in these truths, they tremble with fear and shake with anger.

The implications of this are huge! This means that theological knowledge does not equal salvation. A person may know the Bible from cover-to-cover and be able to discuss all kinds of theological points and talk about the history of the Christian church, and yet it's possible for that person to have a mind filled with knowledge while still having a heart that is unchanged. There's plenty of head knowledge, but no love in their heart for God. We cannot equate a profession of faith with real faith. We cannot equate biblical knowledge with saving faith. A person may claim to believe all these things about the Gospel (just like the demons believe them) and yet not be saved.

This is why it's important as we interview prospective members of our church, or as you talk to your children about the Gospel, or as you examine your own heart, that we not only look for an accurate understanding of the historical facts of the Gospel, but we must also look for fruit. How has the Gospel changed your life? How is the Gospel changing your life today? These are good questions for all of us to ask ourselves, to see if our faith is an empty, dead, demon faith, or if it is a genuine, living, saving faith.

### **III. Examples of Living Faith (verses 20-26)**

In verses 20-26, James gives us two examples of living faith. The first example he uses is Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people, and the second is a prostitute, Rahab. James introduces these examples by asking, "Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?"

He first refers to Abraham to show how his faith in God worked itself out in his willingness to sacrifice his own son, as God commanded him to do. "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?" In Genesis 22:2 God told Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." And Abraham obeyed. And what motivated his obedience was his faith in God's promises. Back in Genesis 12:1-3 God promised, among other things, to make Abraham into a great nation. Then, in Genesis 21:12 God promised Abraham that it would be through Isaac (not Ishmael) that his offspring would become a great nation. So then, when God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham kept trusting in God's promises. He reasoned that God would have to raise Isaac from the dead in order to keep His promises. That's what it says in Hebrews 11:19, "[Abraham] considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."

Abraham went to the place God instructed, prepared the place to make a sacrifice, tied up his son, took the knife in his hand, and then at the last moment the angel of the Lord stopped him. “Abraham, Abraham! . . . Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Genesis 22:11-12). Abraham’s faith was no dead faith. It was a living faith. It was an active faith. He trusted in God, and therefore he obeyed God’s commands. His deep trust in God’s promises worked itself out in very clear acts of obedience. His faith was accompanied by works.

James goes on in verse 23 to quote Genesis 15:6, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” That verse shows that Abraham was saved by faith, and by faith alone. Works played no role in Abraham entering a right relationship with God. That was all of God’s initiative and God’s grace. And then what James is unpacking for us here is that Abraham’s salvation by faith alone was fulfilled, was demonstrated in the obedience of Genesis 22.

The spiritual reality of Genesis 15:6 became visible in the obedience of Genesis 22. The spiritual reality that Abraham was saved by faith alone became visible in his clear obedience to God’s command in Genesis 22. And I believe this is how we are to understand James’ language here in verse 21 and 24 of being justified by works. If you’re familiar with the writings of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament, then you read these verses and you may scratch your head, wondering how these add up. Paul writes in Romans 3:28 that “one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” Then we come to James, who says here in verse 24, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” Sounds like a contradiction. But it’s not, when we understand that the word justify can be used in a couple distinct ways. Paul is using it in the theological sense of being declared righteous in God’s sight. That happens by faith, and by faith alone. Our works, our deeds, play no role in getting us into a right relationship with God.

James, however, is using the term differently. He’s not talking about becoming a Christian, but rather the evidence that shows a person really is a Christian. A person is shown to have genuine faith by their works. We use the word justify in this sense. A person might say, “Justify your actions,” meaning “show your actions to be right or appropriate.” Or, if a person is accused of a crime, but then the evidence proves that the person is innocent, we would say that the person was “justified” (or vindicated), meaning the person was shown to be innocent. The word is also used this way in the Bible. For instance, Matthew 11:19 “Yet wisdom is

justified by her deeds,” meaning that a person’s deeds will demonstrate whether or not the person is wise. If wisdom is present, it will become evident in the person’s actions. This is exactly how I think James is using the word.

So there’s not a contradiction here between James and Paul. Rather, they are emphasizing different points, complementary points. Many pastors and theologians have summarized these points this ways, We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. That is, saving faith will always produce good works.

Abraham was saved by his faith in God, and then his willingness to obey God was evidence that he truly had faith. He did not have a dead faith, but an active and obedient faith.

The second example given is Rahab, the prostitute. The story of Rahab is found in Joshua 2 in the Old Testament. Rahab is living in Jericho at the time God is bringing His people into the Promised Land. God is going to give His people victory over Jericho. Joshua sends 2 men to spy out the city, and Rahab gives these men a place to hide and helps them to escape. In Joshua 2:11 Rahab says to the Israelite spies, “the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.” Even though she’s from Jericho, she’s heard of God’s great works, and she recognizes His power and authority. And because of her faith in Israel’s God, she’s willing to risk her life to hide the Hebrew spies. Then when God gives Jericho into Israel’s hands, the only family that survives is Rahab’s family. It says in Joshua 6:25, “But Rahab the prostitute and her father’s household and all who belonged to her, Joshua saved alive. And she has lived in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.” The New Testament book of Hebrews also testifies of Rahab’s faith, “By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies” (Hebrews 11:31).

I think it’s a beautiful thing that James gives us these two examples. Two examples that are so drastically different in many ways and yet are the same in that both were graciously chosen by God. God can grant genuine faith to whomever He pleases. He can do that for you. No matter how sinful and wicked your life has been up to this point, God can change you. Come to Him. Trust in Him. Repent of your sins, and put your faith in Jesus Christ. And like Abraham and Rahab, you will be saved. And your faith will become evident in risk-taking acts of obedience.

The last verse in the passage summarizes again the main point, that faith apart from works is dead. James closes with the illustration of the body and the spirit. A body without a spirit is a dead body. In the same way, a faith that is not accompanied by works is a dead faith. It is empty, useless, worthless. It is the kind



of faith that the demons have. It is mere words—mere profession. And it cannot save!

Consider one more biblical example of how faith produces radical and sacrificial obedience. I've quoted from Hebrews 11 already, about Abraham and about Rahab. Listen also to what it says about the faith of Moses in verses 24-28, "By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them."

Notice what Moses gave up. He gave up the ease and comfort and pleasure of being the son of Pharaoh's daughter. All kinds of earthly pleasures would have been available to him, but he rejected them. And instead, he accepted the hard lot of being identified with his people, the Israelites. He turned his back on all the things this world would consider desirable, and he chose a life of mistreatment and disgrace. And what is the explanation for this? Why did he do it?

Because of his faith! Because he had a profound hope in God, and he saw that the pleasure of following Christ is far greater than the fleeting pleasures of sin. Moses had before him two options. On the one hand, comfort, ease and worldly pleasure. On the other hand, persecution, trials and hardship. Through the eyes of unbelief one would surely be enticed by the pleasures of Egypt. But when you look at the choice through the eyes of faith and hope, the options appear differently. Because through the lens of faith, it becomes clear that the pleasure of sin lasts only for a very short time. But obedience to God leads to a treasure that all the gold in Egypt cannot even begin to compare to.

Do you see the connection between faith and obedience? When a person truly trusts in God, that person will see the pleasure of knowing God and obeying Him. We will recognize that there is far more joy to be found in living according to God's statutes than in living according to the world's ways. This is how saving faith necessarily produces good works. It's because saving faith is not just something that happens in our mind or in our will, but it also reaches down into our desires. And the person who has truly been changed by God and possesses a real faith in Him will *want* to obey, and therefore *will* obey.

## Conclusion

I'll conclude by telling you about 2 interesting and conflicting pieces of advice Wilberforce received very early in his Christian life. He was in his mid-20s. This "great change" had just taken place in his life, and he was trying to figure out what this meant for his life and career. Should he forsake a life in politics so he could give his life wholly to God, whatever that was supposed to look like? He was confused. He didn't know what to do.

On the one hand, there was his very good friend William Pitt. This means something to us here in Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh got its name from William Pitt the elder. This is his son, William Pitt the younger, who was close friends with Wilberforce. Pitt was also in his mid-20s, and somehow had already become Prime Minister. Here's what Pitt wrote in a letter to Wilberforce, "forgive me if I cannot help expressing my fear that you are . . . deluding yourself into principles which have too much tendency to counteract your own object, and to render your virtues and your talents useless both to yourself and mankind." (page 58) Pitt was concerned that Wilberforce's new evangelical enthusiasm was going to keep him from having a positive impact in the world. Pitt is telling his friend, don't become a religious fanatic. You have so much potential to make a difference through your position in Parliament. Don't squander this opportunity by getting all churchy on us.

But then Wilberforce went to visit John Newton, the former captain of a slave ship who had been converted and was now a well-known pastor in London. And he's still well-known today as the writer of that famous hymn, Amazing Grace. Newton didn't say what Wilberforce expected to hear. Newton didn't tell Wilberforce to leave politics. Instead he said, God is going to use you right where you're at. Afterwards Wilberforce wrote, "When I came away I found my mind in a calm, tranquil state, more humbled, and looking more devoutly up to God." (60) As we know, Wilberforce had a very influential career in Parliament and was able to do much good through his position there.

There's something wonderful for us to learn from this. The good works that the Lord produces in our lives will not all look the same. There's a not a cookie-cutter design for how each of us will serve the Lord and serve others. But there will be repentance, and there will be a yearning for holiness and a motivation to walk closely with our God and to obey Him and follow Him all of our days.

Brothers and sisters, let us live by faith. By God's grace, may we have a living and active faith. Wherever He puts us, in whatever career, whatever work He has for us to do, let's look to Him, rejoicing in Him, and eager for fruit in abundance. What a

joy it is to serve Him, to walk closely with Him, for the benefit of those all around us, and for the glory of His Name.