

James: The Practical Christian

Developing a Faith That Really Works!

James 2:14-26

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October 30, 2005

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Scripture

In research done by Darley and Batson at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1973, a group of theology students was told that they were to go across campus to deliver a sermon on the topic of the Good Samaritan. As part of the research, some of these students were told that they were late and needed to hurry up. Along their route across campus, Darley and Batson had hired an actor to play the role of a victim who was coughing and suffering.

Ninety percent of the “late” students ignored the needs of the suffering person in their haste to get across campus. As the study reports, “Indeed, on several occasions, a seminary student going to give his talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the victim as he hurried on his way!”¹

That is what James is addressing in today’s text. James wants us to know how to develop a faith that really works. He wants our actions to be consistent with our faith. So, with that in mind, let’s read James 2:14-26:

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ 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? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

²⁰ You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham consid-

¹ Marshall Goldsmith, “Goal 1, Mission 0,” in *Fast Company* (2004).

ered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ 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. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

²⁵ 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? ²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (James 2:14-26)

Introduction

One day Abraham Lincoln was trying to help a man see that he was fooling himself, so he asked the man, “How many legs does a cow have?”

The disgusted reply came back, “Four, of course.”

Lincoln then said, “That’s right. Now, suppose you were to call the cow’s tail a leg, how many legs would the cow have then?”

The man responded, “Why, five, of course.”

Lincoln then said, “Now that’s just where you’re wrong, my friend. For merely calling a cow’s tail a leg doesn’t make it a leg!”

The point Lincoln was trying to make was that it’s not enough to believe something sincerely or even to say that something is true. That doesn’t necessarily make it true. Calling a cow’s tail a leg doesn’t make it a leg!

It is the same point that James is making in James 2:14-26. He is saying that it is not enough for you to believe sincerely and say that you are a Christian. That doesn’t necessarily make it true. Saying that you have genuine faith doesn’t mean you really do!

It’s an uncomfortable thought but an extremely important one to understand, for the stakes are high. We’re talking here about the difference between having eternal life or eternal death. That is why I am devoting two full messages to the study of this section.

Review

A quick review of our last study is necessary before we can move on. Last time we discovered that James' fundamental thesis is that genuine faith will always lead to a changed life. And that the nature of true faith in Christ consists of three major elements:

1. Knowledge—knowing certain facts about Christ,
2. Assent—believing that those facts are really true, and
3. Trust—trusting in Christ alone as Savior and submitting yourself to him as Lord of your life.

We saw that such a faith is never a mere momentary act which somehow brings about your “right standing before God,” and then just lies dormant from that point on. But, if it's truly genuine, it will produce an ongoing transformation in your life.

In other words, if you are a true Christian, you won't just make a decision or pray a prayer to receive Christ, and then continue living your life as you always have. But you will become a true follower of Christ. Whenever Jesus calls you to himself, it's never a call for you merely to make a decision or pray a prayer, but it is always a call for you to follow him as Lord in a lifelong submission to his will. It's a call to follow him in complete obedience.

This does not mean that you will follow him perfectly, or that you are somehow declared right with God as a result of following him or by doing good works. The Bible clearly teaches that we are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But James' point is that if your faith does not eventually show itself in a changed life, your faith may very well not be the genuine article.

Lesson

To help you determine the authenticity of your faith, James gives you two spiritual litmus tests in James 2:14-26. James gives you two very practical and challenging marks of genuine faith:

1. Genuine faith will always show itself in love, and

2. Genuine faith is obedient to God even in the face of fear.

I. Genuine Faith Will Always Show itself in Love (2:15, 16)

First, genuine faith will always show itself in love.

In verse 15 James writes, **“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.”**

James describes a needy person who is a Christian. He calls this person **“a brother or a sister.”** And this Christian has a very genuine need; he is without clothes and food. The Scriptures tell us in 1 Timothy 6:8, **“But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.”** Well, this brother or sister has neither food nor clothing. So, this isn't greed or even mere want. It's a real need.

And this person's need is suddenly noticed by another professing Christian. And the response to this need of the professing Christian is nothing more than his saying in verse 16, **“Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?”**

Every one of you can identify with such a situation to one degree or another. Maybe you haven't had to go without clothing or food. But you do know what it's like to have a serious problem. It might be with your health or your finances or a broken relationship. And you've made yourself vulnerable and shared these deep hurts with others. But the response you needed was just not there. You were told, **“I'll pray for you.”** Or, **“Don't worry, it'll be all right.”** Or, **“Come on now, where is your faith?”** Or, **“Just trust God. He'll meet your need as you believe.”**

One of the avenues where genuine faith will always show itself is in real acts of genuine love. The apostle John makes this same point in 1 John 3:16-18 by saying, **“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how**

can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”

Both John and James are trying to drive home the point to us that real faith will always show itself in real acts of love.

James is saying that authentic faith doesn't rationalize or spiritualize when faced with a legitimate need. Instead it acts! It never tries to point people to God to meet a need that they know God has already equipped them to meet.

The story is told of Christian father trying to teach his daughter how important it was to learn to trust in God, to never fear because God was always there to watch over her. One night there was a terrible thunderstorm. The father was awakened to his daughter's crying and calling his name. The father went to his daughter's bedside, held her close, and wiped her tears. He then realized this was another opportunity to teach his daughter about faith. He said, “Don't you remember how I told you it's not necessary to be fearful. For God is always here with you.”

The little girl looked up at her dad and said, “Yes, I know, but when the lightning and thunder get this bad I want someone near me who has got skin on him.”

God is sufficient! That is true. But one of the ways God has chosen to comfort and love his people is through his people. That child needed the comfort that God meant to provide through the comfort of her father.

So we must all be very careful not to become armchair philanthropists, piously encouraging those in need around us to seek God's help when, all the while, we have it within our ability to provide exactly what they need.

If you know someone who really has a need, genuine love just cannot stay uninvolved. It has to give a call. It has to drop by. It has to write a note. It is compelled from something God has placed deep inside you that says, “I have to reach out to them—even if it is inconvenient and costly.”

So, first, genuine faith will always show itself in love.

II. **Genuine Faith Is Obedient to God even in the Face of Fear (2:20-26)**

And second, genuine faith is obedient to God even in the face of fear.

In verses 21-25 James refers to two very interesting examples of genuine faith. In verses 21-24 he refers to Abraham the patriarch. And in verse 25 he refers to Rahab the prostitute. What an interesting contrast.

Abraham, the father of the Jews. Rahab, a Gentile harlot.

Abraham, a man of great respect. Rahab, a woman of insignificance.

And yet both of them demonstrated the genuineness of their faith by their obedience in the face of a fearful test.

James mentions Abraham first. Verse 21 reads, **“Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?”** There is probably no more moving passage in all the Old Testament than the account of when Abraham was commanded by God to sacrifice the life of his favored son, Isaac—recorded in Genesis 22. When God commanded Abraham to offer up Isaac, Abraham knew that being obedient to God at that point might very well cost him everything that he truly loved and cherished. It was the ultimate test. But James tell us it was a test he passed.

In verses 22-24 James writes, **“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.”** The main point James is making is that as a result of Abraham’s obedience to God in offering up Isaac, Abraham’s faith was proven to be the genuine article.

Many people down through the ages have been troubled by the words James uses here to make this point. It does present us

with a difficult problem at first glance. Although the Bible clearly teaches that we are justified by faith alone, here James says that **“a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.”**

Is this not a clear contradiction? Even such a great theologian as Martin Luther was so confused by this passage that he called the book of James “a right strawy Epistle,” and even suggested that the book of James be taken out of the Bible.

But Luther and many others simply missed the point of James. For the key to resolving this problem is learning that since James and Paul are writing from two different perspectives, they will sometimes use the same words to convey different meanings. And this is true of such key words as **faith, works, and justification.**

When Paul speaks of being justified, he is referring to what is called *declarative justification*, that is, being declared forgiven in the sight of God at the very moment you come to faith in Christ.

But when James uses the word **justified** here, he is referring to what is called *demonstrative justification*, that is, the outward demonstration of that inward righteousness in the sight of men.

So there are two types of justification spoken of in the Bible.

That means Paul and James are not standing face to face fighting each other, but they are standing back to back fighting against opposite enemies. Paul was concerned primarily with the legalists—those who are seeking to be made right with God by doing good works.

James, on the other hand, was concerned primarily with the nominalists—those who were hoping to be declared right with God even though they had no good works.

Paul is fighting against those who are seeking to be justified by works without faith while James is fighting against those who are seeking to be justified by faith without works. Paul looks at the root of salvation while James looks at the fruit.

An old Scotsman operated a little rowboat for transporting passengers across a small lake. One day a passenger noticed that the good old man had carved on one oar the word “Faith” and on

the other oar the word “Works.” Curiosity led him to ask the meaning of this. The old man, being a well-balanced Christian, and having understood perfectly the nature of genuine faith that James is writing about, said, “I will show you.”

So he dropped one oar and just used the one called “Works,” and guess what happened. They just went around in circles. Then he dropped the oar called “Works” and just used the one called “Faith.” But they went around in circles again, just in the opposite direction. After this, the old man picked up both oars together, and using them in perfect partnership, sent straight and swiftly over the water.

Then he explained: “It is the same way in the Christian life. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Dead works without faith are useless. But faith without works is not biblical faith, and it will also get you nowhere. Genuine faith results in deeds, both pulling together and will always make for safety, progress and blessing.”

The main point James is making here is that Abraham’s faith was proven to be authentic when he offered up his son Isaac. The Bible teaches that Abraham had actually been declared righteous by God, the way Paul talks about justification, some thirty years earlier when he first believed. That event is recorded in Genesis 15:6 and is referred to by James in verse 23. But it was not until some thirty years later that Abraham’s *declared righteousness* was clearly demonstrated as being the real thing. When Abraham responded in obedience to God’s command to offer up his son, that showed the authenticity of his faith.

So the main point James wants you to get is that Abraham’s declared righteousness was outwardly demonstrated by his obedience to God, even in the face of great fear.

James concludes this passage by reminding you of one other person who had the genuineness of her faith tested, namely Rahab the prostitute. He writes in verse 25, **“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?”

The story of Rahab revolves around two spies who were sent into the Promised Land by Joshua (Joshua 2). The two spies eventually found themselves in the home of Rahab. Rahab believed that God was really with the people of Israel and so she hid the spies and protected them from the soldiers of Jericho. Rahab understood that God was about to destroy Jericho and she believed in the God of Israel. It was undoubtedly a very stressful time for Rahab as she put her faith in the God of Israel rather than believe in the gods or powers of Jericho.

The point James is making is that this converted prostitute was faced with a very fearful test of her faith. Although she had openly professed her belief in the God of Israel, the question remained, “Was her newfound faith genuine or was it just a passing fad? How would she respond in the day of testing?” It was easy for her to say she had faith! But would that faith prove itself when tested?

Like Abraham, she also past the test! She validated her faith by her works. By being obedient to God in the face of extreme fear and great potential loss, she showed that her faith was the genuine article. She was willing to take the personal risks that were necessary in order to help the men of Israel who came to spy out the land. And in doing so, James is saying, her faith was shown to be the real thing.

In both of these examples—Abraham and Rahab—genuine faith is set forth as being obedient to God’s will even when the outcome of that obedience is wrapped in all kinds of uncertainty and fear. True faith will obey God even when it costs. Even when it means costing you those things or people or positions that are dear to you. Even when it means costing you things and people that you love and cherish.

James is saying that the authenticity of your faith will be shown in all the many tests of life. And believe me, those tests will come. And when they do, I want you to know that the genuineness

of your faith is being tested. For the test of the genuineness of your faith is not what you can say in public but by what you do in private.

It's not what you profess when things are easy, but what you practice when things are hard. It's not your talk when things are rosy, but your walk when you are under fire. And when choosing God's way requires sacrifice, the authenticity of your faith will show itself at such times.

Conclusion

The genuineness of your faith is shown by the way you respond to the real needs of those around you. It is shown by your choice to remain faithful to your spouse when the opportunity to be with someone else is so easy. It is shown when you are expected by your boss to compromise the truth in order to get the upper hand on the competition, and you don't do so. It means that you are even willing to lose your job and all your financial security rather than compromise your integrity and your commitment to live out your life in submission to God's will.

I don't know the exact timing or circumstances that will surround the testing of your faith. But I do know that your faith will be tested as was the faith of Abraham, Rahab, and every true child of God.

Some of you are in the middle of a test right now. Whether your test is now or later, let me encourage you to obey God even when it's tough. Even when it's fearful. Even when it doesn't make any sense. For it was the apostle Peter who said, "These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:7).

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

I am especially concerned today for those of you who have never come to know Jesus Christ personally. God promises that he will give you forgiveness for all your sin, and life out of death, light out of darkness, purpose out of mere existence, if you will turn from your sin today and trust in Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection as your only hope for pardon from sin and power for living the life of love you know God has called you to live.

Lord, I pray especially for all of those who think that religious activities and works cause by some strange process salvation. Help them to realize today their need to turn from their sin and self trust and turn to Christ to save them.

And for those whose faith is being tested now, O God, grant them your grace and power to obey your voice today. To follow the example of obedience set by Abraham and Rahab and not that of the mere professor. Cause the tests we face to refine our faith and prove it as genuine. All so that it may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

CHARGE:

A wise sage once said that genuine faith is a lot like calories! You cannot see them but you can certainly see the results. That's what God is saying to us through James. That although we are saved by faith alone, the faith that truly saves is never alone, for genuine faith will always show itself through an obedient life. And now, may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.