

Escaping Delusion

James 2:14-17

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This morning we continue on our series in the book of James in James's letter to the church as he seeks to prepare them for what it means to walk in faith during a season of trial, during a season of persecution. And so, we have titled this series Wisdom, Faith, and Practice. Over the last several months, we've looked at different kinds of wisdom literature. In the fall, we were looking together at Jesus's parables as well as looking at Proverbs. And now, we're looking at the letter in the New Testament, which is considered to be the wisdom book, if you will, of the New Testament.

This morning, we're going to be looking at James 2:14-17. And together as we consider this word, it has particular application during this season as we ask the question, what does it look like for me to live out my faith? And what difference does it make that I live out my faith? This morning, we consider James's words to the church in James 2:14-17. Hear now God's word.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 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? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me.

Father, we now ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit, which is a gift to your church, may you bring this word alive because your word is living and active. It is not merely ink on a page. But together with the powerful working of your Spirit, as your church is gathered around the world, and as we have gathered as your local church, we ask you, O Lord, by your Spirit to teach us, lead us, strengthen us, equip us, and give us wisdom beyond our years and even our experience that we might walk in faith and practice to glorify the name of the Lord. In Jesus's name, help the teacher. Amen.

I'm not sure where you might be joining us today. If you're joining us here in Maryland, you will know that the last several days have been greeted with great welcome because the weather has been warm. We've had the ability to go outside and take walks. And I've learned what it means to ride my bike again. And so, my training partner, who I've kept at a healthy distance this week, sent me a text trying to motivate me. And there is a series that he and I watch that is produced in England, and they went over what are called the six types of cyclists. They range in different forms. And those of you who are cyclists, you'll know exactly what I'm talking about. If you're not, I think it will be somewhat self-explanatory.

The first cyclist is the has-been cyclist, the cyclist who used to be something but now is nothing. They're just learning how to turn pedals. Number two is the fashion victim. You perhaps used to know how to dress as a cyclist, but now you are suddenly tragically unhip in what you wear when you ride a bike. There is the aero dork, the person who only cares about being in exactly the right position on their bike to get the most aerodynamic advantage. There's the retro grouch who only sees the value of riding a bike that is 25 years old and is not like the new fancy carbon fiber stuff. There is the virtual cyclist. Now, those of you who are virtual cyclists are thriving in this environment. You don't mind riding alone and riding virtually with other people. But you really feel like that's the real experience as a cyclist. You are riding around the world as we speak. And there's the sixth type, and that's the coffee shop hipster, the one who doesn't really ride except to the local coffee shop.

And my friend while reminding me of these six types of cyclists felt it necessary to point out that there is one cyclist which they did not describe. It is the cyclist which he believes describes me, and that is the cyclist who knows everything about cycling and training and theory and who is always up on the latest trends but has forgotten to actually go outside and ride his bike. Yes, it is very true that over the

last 8 to 12 weeks that I may or may not have gained weight. I may have watched cycling videos. I may have stayed up on the latest tech. But yes, before this week, the last time I had ridden a bike was January 1. And so, I am learning how to ride.

But this served as a good illustration as we consider what good is all the knowledge about fitness but actually never working out? In fact, that applies through all kinds of applications. What good is it that you know a lot about technology, but you actually don't use your computer? What good is it to know the latest about what is great in relationships and psychology, and yet you fail to actually practice that which you've learned? What it does is it makes our knowledge hollow. It becomes easily knocked over. It becomes valueless.

When we turn to this passage, in many ways what James wants us to do is to escape delusion. But before we actually get into the text, it's important to know that in that title for the sermon, I meant a couple of different things. Yes, I meant to describe that I think James is calling us to escape the delusion of an empty faith. But also, we need to escape the delusion of what this passage is actually talking about. For years, for decades, so much ink has been spilt to discuss does James really understand faith and grace? Is he saying it's all just about works? And many people try to pit James against Paul. But a closer look at this passage this morning, I hope for you to discover if you haven't already that that has nothing to do with what James is talking about. He's not pitting faith and works against one another. No. What he's contrasting in this passage is delusional faith and genuine faith. And so, James desires that we understand what genuine faith actually looks like.

Since he's not contrasting faith and works but instead is contrasting genuine faith versus delusional faith, let's look together then at this passage. And one thing you will note in the first section, verses 14 and 15, what James is unpacking is in fact delusional faith. What he describes as delusional faith is really picking back up on an argument and theme which he began at the beginning of chapter 2. James 2:1 says, "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." For James, a robust faith is described first not by works. It is works which proceeds from a robust faith in Jesus Christ.

And as he continues in this theme of understanding what faith actually is, James continues to talk about how this faith is used by God to implant the word of truth in our hearts. And this word of truth is actually able to save us. So, our works do not save us. Rather it is God's work in us as we have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ through whom God has implanted the word of truth in our hearts which is able to save us. It is the word of truth at work in our hearts that is able to save. This then leads to our doing and not just having an empty faith, or merely hearing, as he talks about. We're actually doing the words and not merely hearing the words. Therefore, faith without doing is not faith. It is not the genuine article.

And James uses an illustration. And some commentators debate this, but I think it's pretty clear because of what he's already said with regard to treatment of those who seem to have more wealth in their fellowship to give the person with the gold ring a place of prominence but then to make those who have little stand farther off. So, there seemed to be something going on within their fellowship as it related specifically to socioeconomic status. And so, he uses as an illustration of a delusional faith as one that says to the poor person who comes to you asking for help that you turn to them with glossy religious language, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled." He's using that as an absurdity but also peeking beneath our religious language.

Our religious language often has the veneer of righteousness but is actually hollow because we're not acting on it. I've been guilty of that. How many of us have not said to one another after someone has shared something that is important to them and they're asking us to pray, "I'll pray for you," but we really never pray? We've picked it up like a verbal habit, a verbal tick. And it happens within the Christian community. And I apologize to those of you who have not spent much time in the Christian community and have heard this same thing. We use religious language and biblical language to make ourselves look good on the outside while not necessarily having that intention. We perhaps have good intention. We

want to feel like we belong. We're using language which is very common to us. But really, it's just become a verbal habit which is not backed up by actual action.

And here, tragically, James says something to this fellowship. He says, if someone in your fellowship who "is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food" and they come to you asking for help and we simply give them religious language without ever taking the step to provide, it is right to say that's empty speech. It's empty language. It's an empty faith because at that point we're simply wearing our faith as something that may look good on us because we want to look good in front of other people. But in truth, on the inside we're disheveled. We're hollow.

You see, what works for collectables doesn't work for faith. What do I mean? Several weeks ago, a retired veteran decided that he would take his 1971 Rolex Oyster Cosmograph to an appraiser, Peter Planes, on the *Antiques Roadshow*. This man explained that he had purchased this silver Rolex watch when he was stationed in Thailand in the years of '73 to '75. After noticing that many airplane pilots were wearing them, he thought it might look good on him. But it wasn't until he was transferred to another base, as the story goes, that he said,

"I started scuba diving, and the man that I was learning from said that Rolex watches were good in water. And I decided to go through and take this opportunity to make a hefty purchase. So, in November of 1974, I ordered the Rolex through the military base exchange for \$345.97 with a ten percent discount."

He then explained that it was a lot of money at the time. And as most monthly salaries were somewhere between \$300 and \$400, "I found this particular watch where I could afford it, but I never wanted to use it." And so, he explained, "I looked at it and I said, this is really too nice to take down into salty water. And so, I just kept it."

Over the next 30 to 40 years, the man said he kept the watch inside a safe deposit box, only taking it out a few times to actually look at it, but that was about the extent of it. He managed to keep the warranty paper with a blank guarantee as well as the paperwork, all the receipts, and the original box. And taking that all into consideration, Planes turned to the man and said the watch was likely going to be worth somewhere in the neighborhood of \$400,000 due in part to its face having "Oyster" written on it and an extremely rare feature, he said, was a mark to dial. The man collapses on camera. Everybody around is like, what just happened? And so, the story went around the internet. It went and caught fire on every media platform and news program because it was just a good story. You felt great for this veteran who had kept this precious thing locked away in a box, never had a mark, never taken out into its intended use. It was really cool. You actually felt really good for this veteran.

But that has the absolute opposite effect on our faith. When we take our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and we step out in obedience to help others, to pray for others, to provide for others, as we seek to actually walk in dependence on Christ, something is going to happen to our faith. It's going to get dinged. It's going to get scratched. We're going to fall down, and we're going to require band-aids. And because we are sinners, we're going to hurt other people. That doesn't mean that we're called to somehow keep our faith locked up in a box in a safe deposit box never to be used. It's actually intended to be used, to be applied, because the opposite of a valuable watch kept in pristine condition, our faith will not grow in value. It will grow more cold, empty, and lifeless. We were intended to put our faith in action.

But even here, I want to be careful before we look at this final point because we need to consider that this is a necessary part of the faith, that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is living and active and in fact ought to be demonstrated in the production of fruit. I was reminded of this last week as I was considering the work of Reverend Bobby Flayhart out of Alabama when he came with this idea of the gospel waltz, a three-step understanding of the way to follow Jesus. It's belief, it's repentance, but it's also obedience.

One of my seminary colleagues Zack Eswine unpacks this a little bit more in his book *The Imperfect Pastor*. He describes the gospel waltz in these ways as he's describing how oftentimes it's applied in the church and how we as Christians live it out, and sometimes we get it wrong. In the first step, he says when we seek to confess, "Some are trying to confess and walk without actually receiving. We work hard, but we frown on the idea of grace, joy, and rest. And when others talk about grace, we get concerned about them."

But if that's not the issue, perhaps it's the second step.

"Some are trying to receive and walk without actually confessing and repenting. These folks, they stay strong. They frown on appearing needy for forgiveness or being imperfect. They find confessing difficult because of how it may make them look. So, when you talk to them about humility, about being vulnerable, about confessing or sharing their burdens or feeling emotions and trying to give up on appearances, they get concerned about you."

But there is a third step to the gospel waltz, and that's obedience. And sometimes it looks like this. "Some are trying to confess and receive but without walking. These folks, they want to relax. They frown on even the idea of obedience. When you talk about change and the direction that Jesus's grace actually makes on our actions and our way of life, we get concerned about them." And I think even some without our own tradition have fallen into this trap.

Ironically, it was even Martin Luther who questioned whether or not James actually understood grace as he saw the debate of faith and works, and yet he quoted it all the time. And sometimes that's led to a confusion about what James is actually talking about. And what he's talking about is we are called to confess. We're called to receive grace. But we're also calling upon the very one whose grace will make an indelible mark on our lives and change the way we live. And that is what genuine faith looks like. It is faith in action.

In verse 17, James says this. "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." What is James pointing out to us here? What James is pointing out is the inextricable reality of the Christian faith, that when Christ who is our salvation is at work in our hearts by the Holy Spirit through the word which is implanted in our hearts and brings out life, that it will change how we speak. It will change how we live. It changes how we relate and act and treat one another. It cannot help but produce fruit. But if we begin to deny that being in a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ does not bring about change, even though that change might be slow in coming over a lifetime, if we deny that it actually brings change, then we make the Christian faith hollow.

But for James, the Christian faith that is genuine is understanding it in its full beauty, that Jesus Christ in His work for us has meant that we become a reflection of His grace in one another's lives. You see, what happens is we become confronted with the righteousness of God who became man to die for our sins that we might be forgiven. But thanks be to God, we are more than forgiven. We are equipped. We are strengthened to be a part of what God is doing not only in us but in those around us. We become instruments in our redeemer's hands. We become tools in His hands to bless others, to love others, to serve others. We are in essence those who are called to not only be confronted with God's righteousness but those who by His grace reflect it, although imperfectly. There is always going to be the already and the not yet. We will fail. We will skin our knees. But today is a day where we can be renewed by God's grace, reminded of His word, and we can begin to ask the question, how am I to then live with my family, in my community, and in the world?

But I want to be careful in saying this. We are reminded of the full nature of the gospel. God has created all things by the word of His power. Creation. But in our first parents, Adam and Eve, we have all fallen and fallen short of the glory of God. We have all sinned against His glory, so we have fallen. But by God's grace, He has redeemed us. But He is also restoring us. Creation, fall, redemption, restoration. But

the answer is not first and foremost how I can change the world. It's an opportunity where we can begin to say, Lord, by your grace, by the word of truth that brings life and change and fruit, help me to love just one other person today. And it can be quietly. It can be with a simple act of a reminder, a note, a prayer, a word of encouragement.

And during this time where we're not all to be gathering in more than ten people, we're practicing the social distancing, we actually have an opportunity now to find different ways and more creative ways of connecting with one another. Perhaps we as a church can lean into our community being led by our deacons and being led by our opportunities. Instead of hoarding up more and more stuff for ourselves, we can actually partner with the Howard County Food Bank and say, Lord, how can we partner with the Howard County Food Bank to give to those in need because their needs have ramped up? And maybe no one will ever know of our contribution nor do they need to. But it's an opportunity to say, Lord, how can I give and love because you have first loved me?

This weekend, I invited our church, as many who wanted, to watch the film *A Hidden Life*. I encourage you if you haven't seen it to take an opportunity to rent it wherever you stream movies. It is a beautiful movie set in World War II Austria about deep suffering and difficulty. It talks about a young couple who are learning what it means to be faithful at a hidden life while also being persecuted. Terrence Malick, the director, took his inspiration not only for how he told the film but also how he titled it. He took it from George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*. George Eliot uses this to describe a character as she describes her life in this way. She says,

“But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive, for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs.”

You and I do not know how long in this life we will live and breathe. We might be buried some day in the future in graves unmarked. And our actions may never be detailed on Wikipedia or make the news or even be exchanged on social media. But what matters is that by the simple work of the powerful grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, empowered by His Spirit through the word that issues forth fruit, we can make one choice to love one other person, to show mercy, to do justice, and an act of kindness not for our attention but for the glory of His name. It may not change that person's life, but it is nonetheless an act of a genuine faith that shows grace in action because it first changed us that it might glorify His name in impacting and changing someone else.

May the Lord bless you today. May the words of His word and may the words of my mouth be an encouragement to you. Columbia Presbyterian Church, we are praying for you. We love you. I miss you. And may we pray for one another that the glory of Jesus Christ would reign in this time, that the Lord would have mercy upon our world to rid from us the scourge of this illness. But while we wait for His answer, may He glorify His name through you. Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for your mercy and grace. We thank you for working in us your powerful grace, the grace of the gospel. Now, we ask you, O Lord, to send us forth loving our families, loving our neighbors. Lord, we ask that you would produce in us genuine faith that asks you be your Spirit and word to bring forth fruit of a genuine faith to the glory of your name. In Jesus's name. Amen.