

Introduction

The phrase "wanted, dead or alive" is more than a fictitious idea for a western tv series. Mostly in the earlier days of our country, rewards were offered to encourage the capture of dangerous criminals by bounty hunters. "Dead or Alive" was not a license to just go find someone and kill them. Rather, if in the process of apprehension they resisted, having to kill them would not result in losing the reward. That being the case, a reward would be paid if you brought to the authorities the wanted person or their dead body. Assuming the assailant had been killed under justifiable circumstances, the reward would be given regardless of whether they were alive or dead.

The gospel is a an offer from God for the forgiveness of sin. The required response is faith. But will he be satisfied with just any faith? James shows us in our text this morning that "wanted, dead or alive" does not apply to God's call to faith. There is a faith that is dead and there is a faith that is alive. And while dead faith is futile, there is great encouragement for those whose faith is bonafide and alive.

[Read Text and Pray]

It is clear from our study of the book of James thus far that James, like Jesus, exhibits strong concern that people be warned of the possibility of thinking they are headed for the kingdom of heaven when in fact they are on the wide road that leads to destruction. Deception is one of Satan's specialties. Being deceived is one of humanity's great vulnerabilities. When Paul wrote the Corinthians, he expressed his own concern saying, "I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ." James first used the concept of deception back in chapter 1 verse 16 where he warned not to be deceived about where temptation comes from. Since that time, it is obvious that James' concern about deception is focused on those who mistakenly consider themselves "saved." He asserts that if you are a hearer but not a doer of the word, you deceive yourself. He adds if you think you are religious but do not bridle your tongue, you deceive your heart. Having led us to consider that partiality is one of those sins we must not overlook, James asserts that if you show no mercy, mercy will not be shown to you in the day of judgment. James next brings us to the culmination of these warnings against deception.

And yet while James is warning us that we be not deceived, he also provides encouragement for living out a lively faith in blessing. If all we did from this morning's text was to come away fearful and doubting or breathing a sigh of relief, James's purpose would not be achieved. James points us to two kinds of faith among human beings. There is a futile faith. It is dead. But there is also a bonafide, or true, faith. It is alive. Along with the negative implications of a futile faith there are blessed implications of a bonafide faith. My intent this morning is, therefore, to work our way through the text noting the failure of futile faith but also the blessing of the bonafide. Here are three contrasts between futile faith and bonafide faith. I am going to explain what James says in this text by letting his words answer three different questions.

I. Is it any Good?

A. This is the question posed by James himself in verse 14. "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?"

The someone about whom James is speaking is a fruitless professor. He professes that he believes, but there is nothing to show for it. There are no works. This is the person who is a hearer of the word but not a doer. This person thinks he is religious but does not bridle his tongue, does not minister to the needy, does not keep himself unstained from the world. Nevertheless, this person believes that he is saved. He believes he is on the way that leads to the kingdom of heaven. But in terms of faith, this person is like one who speaks to a brother or sister who is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body. They SAY something but they DO nothing. Hollow words do not clothe and hollow words do not feed. And, says James, hollow faith does not save.

"What good is it?" asks "of what value is it?" What is this faith worth? To be clear, James asks, "Can this faith save its professor?" No, says, James. This faith is no good. It is like salt that has lost its savor. And Jesus says that if salt has lost its savor it is good for nothing. Let it be thrown out and trampled under foot. Faith without works is dead.

My friends, the warning of James is one we must repeat loud and clear in our day. MANY are those who profess to believe but who do no works. There are even some in our day who firmly believe that faith and works do not have any necessary connection. If you expect to see works, they say, then you are making grace void. You are teaching salvation by works, they charge. But their error is grave. It first of all is wrong. It flies in the face of what James plainly says here. Faith that does not work does not save. But not only is it wrong, such erroneous teaching leads many false converts to be comfortable and complacent in the midst of their deception. They keep walking down the broad path that leads not to life but to destruction. And all the while they are being falsely assured that the path they are walking is the path of life. But the truth is that faith without works is dead and is no good. And those who have such a faith are not saved. And if they continue in such a faith, it will fail them in the final day when they give account to God.

B. What then of bonafide faith? What then of true faith? Well, in contrast to that which is dead, this faith works. It corresponds in living to the purpose for which we were saved. Think of Ephesians 2:8-10. "For by grace are you saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." We were saved to do the word, to visit orphans and widows in their distress and keep ourselves unstained from the world. We were saved by mercy to show mercy. We were saved to bear fruit. We were saved to let our light so shine before others so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. We were saved to bear and display the image of Christ in our actions.

And what good is such faith? Well, it is saving faith. This is the faith that corresponds to salvation. It is not that the works save those who do them. But it is that those who trust in Christ, abide in Christ and produce fruit. The fruit is the works. And the testimony of the works is that those who work in this way as an outflow of their faith in Jesus are saved. They are assured that they are on the narrow road that leads to life. Their hope is well-founded. Their confidence is strengthened, and their readiness to serve is made to flourish. And they are blessed in their doing.

Works in the life of the believer bear witness to a work of God in them. Recall what Jesus says in John 15 about abiding in him: "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit for apart from me you can do nothing." He went on to

say that by bearing much fruit you prove to be his disciples. Works through you are evidence of you in Christ and Christ in you. One of the things which God uses to strengthen our assurance is the evidence of God-honoring fruit which he produces in us, thus demonstrating the genuineness of our faith. When the genuineness of your faith is strengthened, your calling and election are made sure. And Peter says that when you do that, there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

While you may be sorrowed for what you do not see in terms of fruit in your heart and life, do not neglect to take notice of what IS there by God's grace. Allow the evidence to propel you further and further forward in assurance and more and more works to the glory of God.

II. Must it be Seen?

In other words we ask whether faith must be observable to be proven as true. James responds by giving us this image of two individuals. Both assert they have faith. The challenge, however, is issued, "Show me your faith apart from your works." The challenger says, "I will show you my faith by my works." The point of James is clear. There is no way to show faith apart from works. Faith is unobservable by itself. But where true faith is, it will be shown by its works. Must it be seen? The faith itself cannot be seen. But faith, true and living faith, is evident in actions.

A. What does a non-evidenced or invisible faith look like? It looks like that of the demons. It gives assent to certain facts or propositions. But it does not result in a change of behavior. If you can say you believe but there is no outward evidence to substantiate that faith, you can be sure that it is no better than that of the demons whose eternal abode is hell. As James tells us, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!" You may believe truths to be true. The demons believe truths, too. They believe that there is only one God. They even believe the truth that they are bound to an eternity in hell, . . . but they do not repent. They believe in the one true God, but they have no peace with God. They believe God is one, but they do not love him. Rather they shudder knowing their condemnation is fixed. They live for themselves to do their own will. Their assent does not produce works. Their lack of works proves that their faith is not adequate to save. James' point is that if your faith is not visible through works, it is no better than that of the demons. This point, says James, demonstrates that faith apart from works is useless.

The New Testament is abundantly clear that true faith is a repentant faith. It grieves its former hostility to Christ and with gladness resolves to obey, to deny oneself and to take up one's cross and follow Christ and bear fruit. If you think you are saved, but you have not repented of your sin with an earnest intent to deny yourself and follow Christ, your faith is no better than that of the demons. It is useless. Now would be a good time to abandon such faith and throw yourself on the mercy of Jesus.

B. Let's look now to the positive side of an evidenced faith. Faith that manifests itself is completely distinguishable from the faith of demons. It is not merely convinced that God is one, that Jesus is the Christ, and that he died to save sinners; it is not merely convinced that Jesus rose from the dead. But this faith is compelled to serve the crucified and risen Savior. There is a changed heart at the root of such a desire—one that gladly abandons self for the Master. Flowing out of such faith, actions put living and saving faith on display.

Hebrews 11 is known as the faith chapter. Here faith is defined. The writer teaches that faith "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." He notes that by it the people of old received their commendation. Then he proceeds to name names. Person by person we are

directed to believers whose faith was manifest in an act of trust in God. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice. By faith Noah constructed an ark. By faith Abraham obeyed; by faith he offered up Isaac. By faith Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. By faith the people crossed the Red Sea. Finally the author reaches a crescendo: "And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight." And so on. Faith that is bonafide is faith that acts.

James centers in on one of the examples from Hebrews 11—Abraham and the offering of Isaac. Before Isaac ever came along, God made Abraham the promise that he would have a son AND through him his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness. In the years that followed, Abraham's faith was quite shaky at times. He attempted to produce his heir through his wife's maidservant, Hagar. That was a disaster. For the second time, Abraham lied about Sarah being his wife. He was afraid the people of the Negeb would kill him in order to have her. Yes, people of true faith have their moments of shame. They are not perfect. But the time came when Isaac was born. And the time came when the Lord put Abraham to the test. He instructed him to take his one and only legitimate son and offer him as a burnt offering. By faith Abraham informed his servants that he AND Isaac would return after worshiping. When Isaac and Abraham came to the place, Abraham built the altar and laid the wood upon it. He then bound Isaac upon the wood and raised the knife to slaughter his son. But a voice came from heaven. "Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son from me." God had already counted Abraham righteous, but NOW he says he KNOWS that Abraham's faith is genuine. NOW it has been demonstrated.

Correspondingly, James says Abraham was justified by works. He cannot mean that Abraham's works made him right with God. Clearly what he does mean is that Abraham's works which grew out of his faith validated that faith as genuine. See the ongoing emphasis on faith. "Faith was active along with [Abraham's] works, and faith was completed by his works. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham BELIEVED God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'" Works do not supercede faith, but they are a part of true faith. Alec Motyer puts it this way: Faith cooperates with works. They work together with faith as the senior partner and works as the junior.

And here is the blessing of such working faith. God counted Abraham righteous by it. Faith itself is not a work but a reception of the gift of justification from the heart of God. God offers justification, redemption, adoption, forgiveness of sins through the work of Christ Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection. The gift is received by faith. Whoever believes will have eternal life. Those who work are those who do the will of God. These possess a heart to obey the word of God. They are justified by their works in that their obedience demonstrates the validity of their faith. This is a faith unlike that of the demons who tremble. These have peace with God. They look to the future with the hope of heaven not hell. And in the present they have the joy of communing with God.

Look. James would have us know that those who possess a faith that works have the privilege like Abraham of being justified but also being called a friend of God. A friend is the opposite of an enemy. A friend is someone you want to be near and whose company you enjoy. Friends do each other well. Here is, you see, reason not to be disillusioned but hopeful and happy in the Lord. Whenever we examine ourselves, we will always find stuff about which to be disheartened. So did

Abraham. However, the glimmers of obedience are demonstrations of the genuineness of our faith and assurances that in Christ, those who believe are made right with him and become his friends! Indulge in the hope and indulge in the friendship. No one ever had a better friend than the Lord! He is the one who truly sticks closer than a brother.

It is an important response to hear of the faithful and not be discouraged. Should we be sorrowful for what we have not done? Should we lament our sluggishness and short-falls? Absolutely. This past week I was at the East Coast Ministers' Conference put on by the Banner of Truth. Being among studious men who love the word and are serious about theology and learning from reading great books leaves me with a double sensation. On the one hand I feel bad for my own slothfulness, but on the other hand, I am also encouraged. I am challenged to exert myself more diligently than I have. It is good to have that kind of exposure and challenge. And so it should be when we consider our works against the backdrop of men and women of bonafide faith. Don't let yourself be disillusioned because you feel how far you are from where others are. Rather, understand that they are just ordinary folks who truly believed. Such is not out of your reach either, if you too will truly believe.

III. Is it Alive?

James closes out this section with a summary statement. "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead." It is like a body without breath. It is like a statue of a mighty man. He has the appearance of strength but that is all it is. It can do nothing. James shows us lifeless faith in this text. It tells the poor to be warmed and filled but does nothing. It believes God is one but trembles in fear. This faith is dead. It is hopeless. Do not be deceived. If you profess faith but lack works that justify the faith you profess, know that your faith is no good. But do not be disillusioned. While you have physical breath you have the opportunity to repent and to truly trust God.

Faith that is alive is active. It performs according to its conviction. And people of true faith come in all kinds of human packages. James has already shown us Abraham, the father of the Jews and of believers. Along his side, James now puts our attention on Rahab, a woman. Rahab was an outsider, a Canaanite, a woman of disrepute. She is comparably minor in the scriptures. However, she evidences true and living faith herself. It is demonstrated by action. She confessed with her mouth that the Lord the God of Israel is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. But she also hid the spies and protected them from the harm of her own people. She cared for the needy and demonstrated kindness in the fear of the Lord. She shows us a faith that is alive.

It does not matter who you are or where you come from. True faith will change your life. It will be life within you. And you will not be able to keep it in the closet. Rightly does Motyer assert, "The life of faith is more than a private . . . transaction of the heart with God. It is the life of active consecration seen in the obedience which holds nothing back from God" (105). So don't just sit there trembling for what is lacking in you. Get up, and with your eyes on Jesus work out your faith in obedience and in love for him who died for you.

Conclusion

Faith that does not work is dead faith. It is lifeless, worthless, and useless. It is of no help in attaining right standing with God. It cannot save. But faith that does work is alive. Peter says that if you supplement your faith with works, it makes you effective and fruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. So do not be deceived, but do not be disillusioned. Believe God; trust in him; serve him with heart and soul; do his will; pursue his face. Like Abraham, be fully convinced that God is able to do what he has promised, and obey him even at the highest cost to yourself. For that gives glory to God.