

*Faith and Works: James 2:14-26*  
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In our study of James, we come this morning to a very significant passage of Scripture. We come to a text in God's Word that teaches us about the relationship between faith and works. The passage is James 2:14-26, and it's so important for us to look into these verses very carefully and thoroughly. It's crucial that we let these words shape our understanding of the Christian life.

As we look back at the verses we've already studied in James, we remember that James exhorts us very strongly to be doers of the word and not hearers only. That command is found in 1:22. And then in 1:26 it says, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." Also, in the discussion of partiality, which we looked at the past 2 weeks, there is a warning that we must speak and act "as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty" (2:12). And James then concludes that section with the warning, "For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (2:13). As I explained last week, James is referring to the fact that we will all one day be judged according to our works. The fruit of our lives will demonstrate very clearly whether or not we are trusting in Christ.

So we see that James has already touched on the topic of works in the Christian life. This entire letter is filled with exhortations. It is about action. It's about calling us not only to think differently, but to BE different—to live and act according to the word. To receive with meekness the implanted word, to be doers of the word.

And now, beginning in verse 14 of chapter 2, James tackles this subject directly. He addresses the question: what is genuine, saving faith, and what is the relationship between faith and works? These are such important question! We have to get this right. We have to understand what God's Word teaches about this, and the passage before us this morning is one of the most important passages addressing these question. So please, be attentive to these verses and to this sermon. And because of the significance of this passage, I plan to spend at least one more week on it, possibly two—we'll see what I'm able to cover this morning and next week. But I don't want us to move too quickly. I want us to look deeply into these verses. This morning we'll work our way through the passage, looking first of all at Dead Faith, then Demon Faith, and finally Active Faith. Next week I'll devote the entire sermon to the question, "Does James Contradict Paul?" And then I may spend

one more Sunday further explaining the necessity of works in the Christian life.

This passage addresses the question: What is faith? What is genuine, Christian faith, and what is the relationship between faith and works? There's a lot of talk about faith these days. A lot of people claim to have faith. But what is real faith? What is biblical faith? For much of our culture faith has become totally meaningless. People may use the word "faith," but it is completely devoid of any biblical meaning. It's just some kind of warm fuzzy feeling about spirituality. But it has no backbone. It has no foundation. It's the faith of postmodernism and pluralism, a faith that considers Jesus to be merely an inspiring role model and a good teacher and considers Christianity to be simply one of many legitimate ways to God. It's a kind of salad bar approach to spirituality. I'll take a little bit of this, and little bit of that, a little Islam, and a little Christianity, and some New Age spirituality, and some pop-psychology, and I'll create a belief system that suits my tastes. This is the problem of pluralism in our culture, the belief that all the religions are basically the same, and no set of beliefs is any better than another set of beliefs—no "faith" is better than any other "faith."

As Christians, though, who look to the Bible as the revelation of God's absolute Truth (with a capital "T"), we believe that salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ. Biblical faith is faith in a Person. And not just any person—not just any religious leader. It is faith in the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who came to earth, lived a perfect life, died on the cross in the place of sinners, and rose again on the third day. When we look into the Bible, faith has substance. It has a foundation. It is not just an abstract feeling. It is a deep-seated trust in a Person.

Even in evangelical churches, though, there exists a distorted understanding of faith. Even among those of us who hold that Jesus is the only answer, faith is often understood in a very shallow way. Sometimes faith is presented as just agreeing mentally with the truth that Jesus lived, died, and rose again. And sometimes the invitation to make a decision for Christ sounds like a sales pitch to buy fire insurance to keep you out of hell rather than being a call to give up your life for Christ and the Gospel. Faith, even when we're talking about faith in the One Savior, Jesus Christ, can become trivial. It can become something that's shallow. It can become something that a person agrees to intellectually, but it doesn't reach down into their hearts. It doesn't radically change their lives.

The issue that's at stake here is the relationship between faith and works, because understanding the relationship between faith and works will help us understand the nature of true saving

faith. A misunderstanding of this relationship can lead us into all kinds of confusion and theological error. On the one hand, we must maintain the truth that we are saved by faith alone apart from works. This is one fundamental point to understand about the relationship between faith and works. We cannot work for God in order to earn salvation. It's not as though faith plus works equals salvation. We are saved by faith alone. *Sola Fide*. This is one of the great themes that was emphasized in the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s. Martin Luther stood up against the prevailing church leaders of the time, and said, You cannot work your way into heaven. You cannot buy your way into heaven. Salvation is a free gift of God that is received by faith. All you have to do is trust in Jesus!

This is the shocking truth of the Gospel. This is what makes Christianity entirely unique. This is what should make our jaws drop each and every day—that Jesus Christ died for sinners, and He offers forgiveness, not to those who work in order to earn forgiveness, but to those who simply trust in Him! We are saved by faith alone.

This is such a clear teaching in the Bible, and yet it is so often misunderstood. Some people become legalistic by thinking that it is faith plus works that saves. Or, on the other end of the spectrum, the teaching of salvation by faith alone becomes a license to sin. Both in Luther's day and in our own the truth that we are saved by faith alone is turned into an excuse for living in sin.

People reason to themselves, "I prayed a prayer to receive Christ, and I walked down an aisle, and I was baptized. Therefore, if I'm saved by faith alone, and all I have to do is believe, then I've done that and I can now live however I want. I can live like hell, and when I die I'll still go to heaven." This kind of thinking, which I fear is widespread in American evangelical churches, is a horrible distortion of what the Bible teaches about faith and works.

So as I said, on the one hand, we must maintain the biblical truth that we are saved by faith alone. But on the other hand, we must also realize that true saving faith will always produce good works. We have to get this right! We can't put works before salvation, saying that we somehow earn salvation by our works. But neither can we eliminate works from the equation altogether. Luther wrote, "If (good) works and love do not blossom forth (from faith), it is not genuine faith, the gospel has not yet gained a foothold, and Christ is not yet rightly known." He also wrote, "It is impossible, indeed, to separate works from faith, just as it is impossible to separate heat and light from fire." Works are so tightly connected to saving faith, that if a so-called faith stands by itself without works, it is not saving faith.

Here's how our church's statement of faith summarizes these points: "Faith thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet it is not alone in the person justified, but ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love" (1689 London Baptist Confession). The same truth is communicated in this phrase, which I'll repeat several times in this sermon; "We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone." That is, saving faith will never be without good works.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer made a similar statement. He was a German pastor who lost his life in a Nazi concentration camp, and in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, he writes, "only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes." There is a necessary connection between faith and works, between belief and obedience. And it is so important for us to have a biblical understanding of what that connection is. So now let's look at what God has to teach us about faith and works through this portion of His Word.

### I. Dead Faith (verses 14-17)

We'll look at this passage in three sections, and the first section is verses 14-17 in which James talks about Dead Faith. James begins his teaching on faith and works by asking two rhetorical questions in verse 14. He first says, "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. It's important to be clear that James is not saying that *faith* does 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. And the devastating reality of what he's saying is that dead faith does not save.

Some people try to get around this by saying that "save" in this verse does not refer to eternal salvation, but rather it just refers

to being saved physically from an untimely death (see Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*). But almost everywhere in the NT this word refers to eternal salvation. And when we look at the context, we go back to 1:21, which describes the implanted word as “able to save your souls.” We also see that the judgment is referred to in 2:13-14, justification is discussed in verses 21-25, and then judgment is mentioned again in 3:1. It’s abundantly clear that when James says that dead faith cannot save, he means it cannot save your soul from eternal damnation. That’s why this is so important to understand. James is not talking about D-minus Christianity versus A-plus Christianity. He’s not comparing the faith of an immature believer with the faith of a mature believer. That’s not what this discussion is about. Let’s be clear. The distinction is between an *unbeliever* and a believer. The person who says he has faith but does not have works is in a very scary position, because it’s not as though he’s just going to receive less rewards in heaven. No! The person who claims faith but does not have works is not saved. That person will not go to heaven, but will rather be punished in hell forever. So please, recognize the weightiness of this passage, because heaven and hell are at stake here.

In verses 15-16 James gives us an illustration of dead faith. The letter of James contains some wonderful illustrations, and this is one of them. I’m so grateful that God inspired these kinds of illustrations, because they are so helpful to us. They help us understand spiritual truths, and they help us apply them to our lives. 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 the same 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 works. 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 this are backed up by the actions that accompany them. If you say to the person, “be warmed and filled,” and you give 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.” Again, 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, and is therefore dead.

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.

We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. True saving faith is not a dead faith, but a faith that produces works.

## **II. Demon Faith (verses 18-19)**

Next, in verses 18-19, we see demon faith. 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 it 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!”

Verse 18 is difficult to interpret. In the original Greek there aren’t quotation marks, so it’s hard to know for sure whether the whole verse is a quotation, or just part of it. It seems, though, to make the best sense if we take only the first phrase as the quotation. “You have faith and I have works.” In other words, James is quoting an objection that says faith and works can be separated, and that faith can be present in a person without being accompanied by works. And then James responds to this objection by saying, “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” His point 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 in verse 19 James shows that there is 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. This is a shocking thing to think about. The demons are more orthodox in their theology than any of us in this room! They know God, they know His Word, and 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. They know all this, but rather than delighting in it they tremble with fear.

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. 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 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, saving faith.

We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. Saving faith is not simply agreeing with the truths of the Gospel, but it is a love for God that changes your life and produces deeds of obedience.

### **III. Active Faith (verses 20-26)**

Finally, in verses 20-26, James gives us two examples of Active 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 still has in mind the objection of verse 18, and he is condemning the foolishness of thinking that faith and works can be separated.

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, which Paul also quotes in Romans 4. And James uses it in the same way Paul uses it, namely, to show that Abraham was saved by faith and not by works. But James is also showing that 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. 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. I'll say more about these verses next week as we look at what James means by justification compared to what Paul teaches about justification and as we ask the question, "Does James contradict Paul?"

The second example given is Rahab, the prostitute. The story of Rahab is found in Joshua 2 in the Old Testament. Rahab lived in Jericho. And when Joshua sent 2 men to spy out the city, Rahab gave those men a place to hide and helped 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 was from Jericho, she had heard of God's great works, and she recognized His power and authority. And because of her faith in Israel's God, she was willing to risk her life to hide the Hebrew spies. And when God gave Jericho into Israel's hands, the only family that survived was Rahab's. 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. Abraham and Rahab. A patriarch and a prostitute. The famous father of Israel, and an obscure immoral Gentile. I think the implication here is that God can grant genuine faith to whomever He pleases. If you’ve made a mess of your life and you don’t think there’s any hope for you, then consider Rahab. Consider the prostitute whom God graciously and miraculously saved. 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 Rahab, you will be saved. And, like Rahab, 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!

Let me close with this quote from Martin Luther, from his preface to Romans. Ironically, Luther did not like this passage in James, which I’ll say more about next week. But he certainly understood the truth that James is teaching, that saving faith is active faith. He understood that we are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. And these words capture what we ought to be looking for in our own hearts.

He writes, “O it is a living, busy active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.”