

James 2:14-26
Joshua 2
Psalm 113

“Faith and Works”

February 18, 2018

Think about what Rahab says:

“I know that the LORD has given you the land...
For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea...”
So she confesses her faith in the LORD, the God of Israel,
and she asks them to spare her and her family.

Plainly, Rahab believed God.

And the sign that they give her is the sign of the scarlet cord, to be tied in her window.

The early Fathers all took this as a sign of the blood of Christ.

And we have good reason to agree with them!

Because if you look forward to the end of chapter 5,
we hear that the last thing that Israel did before they attacked Jericho
was celebrate the Passover.

What does the Passover have to do with Rahab?

Well, in Egypt, the angel of death came to destroy the firstborn in all Egypt –
but it would pass over each house that had the blood of the lamb on its doorposts.

Now, Israel has become the angel of death –
they are commanded to strike down all the inhabitants of Jericho
as a sign of the coming last-days wrath of God against all the earth!

And they are told to pass by the house of Rahab –
when they see the house with a red cord tied in the window –
red, like the blood of the Passover lamb they had shed the week before.

Every Israelite who saw that red cord in her window
would have seen there a reminder of the Passover lamb.

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 113 –

a song that speaks of how God takes the barren woman
and makes her the joyful mother of children.

He did that for Rahab –

who, after the destruction of Jericho,
marries the son of one of the leaders of Judah,
and becomes the mother of Boaz,
and thus the great-great grandmother of David.

Sing Psalm 113

Read James 2:14-26

Words.

When you have a problem, very often we have a tendency to try to *talk* it through.

And words are important.

James 1 insists that the implanted word is able to save!
God has brought us forth “by the word of truth.”
We must be *quick* to hear.

But words must lead to action.

Many of you are struggling with anxiety and depression.

Words are important –
talking through things really helps.
But words will never suffice to “talk” you out of it.

Nothing is more maddening than to hear someone say:

“Go in peace, be warmed and filled.”
“go in peace, be happy and content!”

There is part of me that wondered *why* God wanted me to preach from James 2
when so many of you are wrestling through such darkness.

James challenges us to love and good deeds –

but so many of us are barely clinging to faith!
It can sort of feel like he is “piling on”!

But consider the examples that James uses:

Abraham and Rahab.

We often think of Abraham as such a hero of faith (and rightly so) –
but consider what God told him to do!
Leave your homeland – your family and friends –
and go to a land I will show you.
Oh, and by the way, you will never actually possess the land yourself!
You will be an alien and stranger – and it will only be 400 years from now
before your descendents inherit the land.

Okay, Lord, I’m here!
Now what do I do?

And Rahab?
She’s a prostitute!

While Abraham may seem so exalted that we cannot achieve his goodness –

Rahab reminds us that God frequently chooses the weak and foolish things of the world
to shame the wise and powerful.

So it doesn't really matter who or where you are.

Whether you are somebody or nobody, God calls you all to one and the same faith.

I want you to see what James is doing in verse 14.

This is the key to the whole passage!

1. Faith Without Works Is Dead: Empty Words (v14-17)

a. Can a Faith that Does Not Work Save? (v14)

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

“If someone says he has faith...”

James does *not* say,

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone has faith but does not have works?”

After all, the *whole point* of what James is saying
is that *genuine* faith *will* produce works.

The one who believes God will do what God says!

But we're getting ahead of ourselves!

James starts by asking a question.

What good is it, if someone *says* he has faith but does not have works?

What is the use of a faith that does not do what God says?

Can such faith save him?

Some people think that James is responding to a caricature of Paul's theology.

Paul teaches that we are justified by faith – and *not* by works of the law.

We know from Romans that some people had misunderstood Paul

and wound up saying that because Christ had freed us from the law,
therefore we can do whatever we want

(immortalized in the little ditty:

“free from the law, O blessed condition,

I can sin as I please, and still have remission!”)

But Paul, in Romans 6, sharply rebukes that approach!

And James here agrees with Paul –

saving faith will always be a faith that works by love.

And James gives us an example in verses 15-16:

b. Example: The Brother or Sister in Need (v15-16)

¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ 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^[b] is that?

Notice first that the person in the example is a fellow Christian – a “brother or sister.”

This is not some random person on the street

(although in the parable of the Good Samaritan,

Jesus suggests that even the random person on the street *is* my neighbor!)

But James takes it easy on us!

He uses an example that should be easy and obvious!

A member of your church – a part of the family of Jesus, the household of God –
a brother or sister –

is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food.

In the Lord’s prayer we pray, “give us this day our daily bread.”

It’s a different phrase – but it’s the same idea.

In Matthew 6, Jesus taught us not to be anxious about food or drink or clothing –

what we will eat, or what we will drink, or what we will wear,

but instead taught us to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.”

In other words, Jesus taught us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him –
trusting that *he* will provide our daily bread.

This doesn’t mean that we should be irresponsible in our use of what God has given us.

Rather we should use all that we have and all that we are in the service of Christ,
trusting that God will take care of his children.

But *how* will God take care of his children?

Well, James answers this question!

How will God take care of his children?

Through his children!

When your fellow believer is in need, *you* are to be the one who helps him or her!

When you see your brother or sister in need,

do not simply say, “Shalom, be warmed and filled!”

Shalom – *go in peace* – was the Hebrew expression for “may it be well with you!”

Don’t *say* “Shalom” when in fact you don’t mean “Shalom”!

If what you mean is, “I don’t really care, you can go die!”

then don’t say Shalom!

Your actions need to be consistent with your words.

If you say “I wish you well” – then you need to act accordingly!

And just a comment here:

back in 2008 – the great recession – we had a chance to put this into practice.

Back then we had a number of men with jobs in the construction and building trades.

They *all* lost their jobs.

We had a congregational unemployment rate of nearly 15%.

There was *no way* that the deacons' fund could possibly handle all the need!
So we encouraged the congregation to hire these men for home improvement projects.
Over the next year, members of the congregation spent tens of thousands of dollars
paying their brothers for home improvement tasks –
thereby keeping 4-5 families afloat until the economy began to recover.

Because it's not just the deacons' job to care for those in need.

You see your brother or sister in need,
and you can simply help them – bring them a meal – give them a place to stay.
If you are the sort to use a strict budget,
I would encourage you to add a new category:
“helping those in need.”

It's fascinating what happened when Ginger and I added that category.

Before that, I tended to think,

“Oh, there's a need, I should go talk to the deacons...”

After that, I always have started with,

“Can we help them ourselves, or do we need the deacons...”

Because James tells us that *we* are the ones who need to provide
for one another's bodily needs.

Why?

Because Jesus has come to establish a new community – a new family –
a new Kingdom.

And his household takes care of each other!

If we believe that, then we need to act on it.

As James says in verse 17:

c. Answer: No, Dead Faith Cannot Save (v17)

¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Think about the imagery in verse 17.

Faith – by itself – if it does not have works, is dead.

Consider the analogy:

What is a dead man?

A corpse.

Is it still a man?

Sort of.

But something essential to what made him a man is missing
(namely, life – the soul!).

In the same way, *dead faith* can still be called faith *in some sense* –
but it is missing something essential to what made it *faith!*

Push the analogy a step further.

What does a dead man do?

Nothing.

What does a dead faith do?

Nothing.

Living faith hears the word – believes the word – and thus obeys the word.

You can also see here another place in which James and Paul agree.

Neither James nor Paul expects Christians to be perfect (James 3:2 – “we all stumble in many ways”).

Dead faith does nothing.

The question is *not* “do you *always* do what God says?”

The question is “do you *ever* do what God says?!”

As we go through verses 18-25,

I want you to remember this!

In his examples, James never suggests that Abraham and Rahab were sinless.

(Rahab was a prostitute, after all – and James calls her “Rahab the prostitute”!)

Rather, James highlights the way in which their faith led to action!

And so we turn in verses 18-25 to the relation between faith and works.

2. The Relation Between Faith and Works (v18-25)

a. Works as Necessary Subsequent Conditions (v18-19)

¹⁸ *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.*

Verse 18 is designed to show that faith and works cannot be divorced from each other.

It’s not that *some people* approach God by faith, while *others* draw near by works.

You can only *demonstrate* your faith in one way:

doing it!

The Westminster Confession defines saving faith very much like James does:

“By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true

whatsoever is revealed in the Word,

for the authority of God himself speaking therein;

and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth;

yielding obedience to the commands,

trembling at the threatenings,

and embracing the promises of God for this life,

and that which is to come.

But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone

for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace. (14.2)

By this faith, a Christian *believes* and *acts*.

Sometimes we can reduce faith to simple “belief.”

But James points out that such a definition fails catastrophically!

¹⁹ *You believe that God is one; you do well [heavy irony!!]. Even the demons believe—and shudder!*

James is referring back to the Shema – from Deuteronomy 6 –

“Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one –
and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your strength...”

For generations, the Jews had repeated the Shema every day.

Hear Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one!

Now James says, *So what!?*

The demons believe that God is one!

Satan undoubtedly has a better understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity than any of us!

After all, *he has personally stood in the heavenly court room!*

Satan *believes* Christian theology.

You are not saved by *believing* Christian doctrine.

J. I. Packer once said that we are *not* justified

by believing in the doctrine of justification by faith alone –
rather, we are justified by *faith*.

That’s what James is saying here.

You are not justified by believing in Christian doctrine.

Demons have *that* sort of faith.

Really dead faith.

This is why Francis Turretin referred to good works

as *necessary subsequent conditions* for our justification.

It’s not that you need to have good works *before* you can be justified.

After all, James is really clear that faith *does* save us.

The question is *what sort of faith* saves us!

A faith that works by love!

If you say you have faith –

but your faith never *does* anything.

Then it’s a dead faith.

It’s not a living faith.

So good works *must necessarily follow* faith.

They are necessary for justification

because if there are no good works, then there is no faith.

And if there is no faith, then there is no justification!

You might think that this would be sufficient.

But James tells us a couple of stories to illustrate his point:

b. Two Examples of Justification by Works (v20-25)

²⁰ *Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?*

James uses a couple of wordplays here that get lost in translation.

The word translated “foolish” also means “empty”

The one who says he has faith – but has no works – is an “empty” person.

Just like the body without the spirit is empty –

just like faith without works is empty –

so also is the *person* who thinks that faith can exist without works!

So it might be better to say, “do you want to be shown, you empty-headed person that faith apart from works is useless?”

And – here’s my favorite!

The word translated “useless” is the word “arge” –

which is formed by taking the word for “works” (ergos) and adding an “alpha” at the beginning

(just like in English, the “a” at the beginning of a word often negates the meaning:

so we have the theist who believes in God,

and the a-theist does not believe in God).

But notice what happens here:

faith apart from ergos is arge –

we can actually translate the wordplay here:

“faith without works doesn’t work.”

Do you want to see this?

Well, then, look at Abraham:

i. Abraham and the Sacrifice of Isaac (v20-24)

²¹ *Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?*

²² *You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works;*

²³ *and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God.*

This is a fascinating example.

Abraham is a fantastic illustration of what James is saying.

After all, what would have happened if God had come to Abram

and said, “Leave your father’s house and go to the land I will show you,”

and then Abram said, “Yes, Lord, I believe!”

and then stayed in Ur of the Chaldees?

Well, at the very least, we never would have heard the story of Abraham!

If you want to understand what James is doing,

then we need to remember the outline of Abraham's life.
And there are four key episodes that are necessary for understanding our story.

Genesis 12 – when God called Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldees,
and in Genesis 12, God promised Abraham three things,
“the land, the seed, and the blessing to the nations.”

Then, in Genesis 15, God made a covenant with Abraham –
promising him the land and the seed,
and we are told that Abraham believed God,
and he counted it to him as righteousness.” (Gen 15:6)
And Paul will refer to Genesis 15 as the “justification” of Abraham.

Then, in Genesis 17, God gives to Abraham the covenant sign of circumcision
as a sign of the righteousness that he had by faith back in Gen 15 (cf. Romans 4).

And then, finally, in Genesis 22, God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his son.
But just before Abraham goes through with it,
the LORD provides a ram for the sacrifice instead,
and the LORD renews his covenant and promise,
including the land and the seed and the blessing to the nations.

So Genesis 12 – God's call and promise.

Genesis 15 – God's covenant and Abraham's justification.

Genesis 17 – circumcision as the sign of God's covenant and Abraham's justification.

But James highlights Genesis 22.

James *could have used* Genesis 12!

Abraham's faith was tested in Genesis 12,
when God told him to leave his father's house!

And by faith, Abraham *obeyed!*

You could talk about Abraham's works as early as Genesis 12.

But James doesn't.

Why not?

Because he wants to prove that works *complete* faith.

And he wants to quote from Genesis 15 – “Abraham believed God
and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

So he needs a clear example of obedience from *after* Genesis 15.

In other words, James is utterly convinced that we are justified by faith.

Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

But Abraham was not justified by a bare and empty faith.

If Abraham had a bare and empty faith,
he would never have gone to Canaan,

he would never have left Ur,
and he most certainly would never have offered his son!

Abraham's faith *worked*.
Because that's what genuine faith does!!

And so

²⁴ *You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*

The word 'to justify' can either mean
to *declare righteous* (to render a verdict of "innocent") – to vindicate or acquit;
or to *prove or demonstrate* that someone is righteous – or in the right.

Some think that James is using the demonstrative sense here.
In other words, that Abraham proved himself righteous by what he did.

But James asked in verse 14,
"can such faith save him?"
If justification is being used in the demonstrative sense,
then the fact that Abraham proved himself just is nice –
but it has nothing to do with being *saved*.

So it would be better to say that James is using the term justification
in the same sense as Paul – "to be declared righteous."
After all, James quoted Genesis 15:6 –
"Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."
This is the passage that is at the heart of Paul's treatment of justification
in Romans 3-4 and Galatians 3.

So if Abraham was justified in Genesis 15,
then how can James say that Abraham is justified in Genesis 22?
Isn't justification once for all?

Again, our friend Francis Turretin comes in handy.
Yes – from God's perspective!
There is only *one* justification.
Justification is an *act* [singular] of God's free grace,
wherein he pardons all our sins
and accepts us as righteous in his sight,
only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us,
and received by faith alone.

From God's perspective, there are no *parts* to our justification.
It is a single act.

But again, think back to the story of Abraham's justification.

Genesis 15:6 tells us that Abraham believed God,
and it was counted to him as righteousness.

So does that mean that Abraham was *not justified* back in Genesis 12?

Was Abraham an unregenerate man – still in rebellion against God?

No!!

Hebrews 11 says that *by faith* Abraham went to the land of promise!

That means that Abraham believed God (and was justified) back in Genesis 12!

And then James tells us that Abraham was justified by works in Genesis 22,
when he offered Isaac on the altar.

But these are not three different justifications!

There is only *one* justification!

Think of it this way:

yes, from *God's perspective* justification is a singular act.

But in *our experience*, we experience justification daily.

After all, justification consists in the forgiveness of sins
and the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

Every time that God forgives your sins,

he is applying your justification to you.

It's why we have a declaration of pardon every week!

Every week, we have a reminder of our justification before God –

that our standing before God depends on Jesus, and what *he did for us!*

But if you ever start to think that it's enough to "just believe" –

then you need to hear what the Westminster Confession says about justifying faith!

"Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness,
is the alone instrument of justification:

yet is it not alone in the person justified,

but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces,

and is no dead faith, but worketh by love." (11.2)

Faith is the only way that we can receive Christ and his righteousness –
but faith can *never* be alone in the person justified!

Faith will *always* be a living and active faith that works by love!

Or to use James's language,

"You see that faith worked together with his works,
and faith was completed by his works."

So when James says that Abraham was justified by works
and not by faith alone,

he is simply saying that justifying faith is *always* a faith that works.

Because a faith that doesn't work – doesn't work!

He is *not* saying that works are a *second way* of receiving justification!

Remember verse 18 –

Someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.”

James rejected the idea that you can pull apart faith and works.

ii. Rahab and the Messengers (v25)

²⁵ *And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?*

And so we come back to Rahab!

The prostitute.

It's almost like James chose his two examples intentionally.

He starts with Abraham, the most exalted hero of faith –

Abraham our father – Abraham the friend of God –

No one would ever claim to be as good as Abraham!

But in the *same way* was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works?

Do you think that you could be as good as a prostitute?

Abraham always seems to be in the right place at the right time.

But Rahab is the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time.

She is a Canaanite – in Jericho – at the time when God is about to destroy the city!

She is a prostitute – a point that James highlights here –

in order to remind us that *no one* is ever too low – too dirty – too far gone

to be outside of the scope of the saving power of God!

But even Rahab the prostitute was justified by works

when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way.

If we apply the paradigm of Abraham to her case,

we see that Rahab *believed* what God had said.

She had heard of the coming of the Israelites –

and the mighty deeds that God had wrought in Egypt and in the wilderness.

And she believed in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

But again, I must ask, what would have happened,

if Rahab had heard the knock on the door

and said, “Hey, I believe in your God,

but the king is too powerful –

sorry, guys...”

Well, we never would have heard of Rahab!

She would have perished in the destruction of Jericho!

Rahab was a child of wrath – an outsider – morally corrupt and engaged in a profession that was forbidden to the people of God!
But she believed God – and thus she acted on her faith –
and her faith worked together with her works;
her faith was completed by her works –
and she wound up marrying a guy from Judah,
and becoming a foremother of our Lord Jesus Christ!

And so James concludes:

3. Conclusion: Faith Apart from Works Is Dead (v26)

²⁶ *For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.*

A human body without spirit is a corpse.
In the same way, a faith that has no works is a corpse – it is a dead faith.
And a faith that doesn't work – doesn't work!

I hope you see that James is not saying this to “guilt” you into doing what's right.
Instead, James wants you to see what genuine faith looks like!
Faith believes God – and so *does* what God says!

And this brings us back to the opening example:
If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,
what should you do?
Well, love your neighbor as yourself!

Rahab provided for the spies –
she protected them, because she believed that the LORD was God.
She sought first the kingdom of God and *his righteousness* –
and all these things (even a husband and children)
were added to her.
She was willing to lose everything for the sake of the gospel –
and God provided for her.

Of course, she still had all the memories of her years as a prostitute.
And add to that, the trauma of watching her whole city be utterly destroyed –
and *all* her neighbors killed!

When you take the time to think about the *lived experience* of the heroes of the faith,
you start to realize that they endured a whole lot of stuff.

And then you realize that what God requires of us is very simple:
believe God and do what he says –
and what he says is: love the LORD your God with all your heart –
love your neighbor as yourself –
and when you fail – repent and believe the gospel!