

How Can I Be Sure?

Series on the Book of James

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Bible Text: James 2:14-26

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Everyone wants to think that they have true faith. No one wants to think that they struggle with faith. And yet perhaps those struggles are more subtle and present than we would like to admit. We find ourselves in a place in James' discussion where he gets to the essence of what Christianity is about. It is that issue of faith. What is the nature of true faith?

About 18 months ago I got a new car. I thought that I have material things in their right place, but I got a new car. Strangely, I felt different in that car. I imagined that people were looking at me saying, "We wish we were that man." I would like to think it didn't have an effect on me, but it did.

Over Christmas we had my nephew and my niece visit for Christmas. The day after Christmas we took one of those Philadelphia Christmas experiences and drove all over doing various Christmas things. We nibbled all day long, as you would do. Troy is 11 years old. He nibbled heartily throughout that day. We ended the day at Starbucks. Troy ordered a big, tall, mint hot chocolate. I live in Mount Airy. To get from center city to Mount Airy you have to drive on Lincoln Drive. Some of you are anticipating. Troy got quiet. He didn't say much, but I heard him whimper the word sick. And what happened next I don't need to describe. It just kept on coming. And what I said next was not true. I said to Troy, "It is ok, Troy. I care about you more than I do my car."

Now maybe you would look at that story and you would say, "Paul, that doesn't have anything to do with the nature of faith." I would propose to you that has everything to do with the nature of true faith. And as James is laying out for us and in practical detail what this righteous life to which God has called us is about, it is inescapable that he would ask this question. What is the nature of true and saving faith?

And I think it is very important for us. Now as I prepared tonight I thought, this will probably be a sermon that will dissatisfy everybody in the room. If you are a theological person and you love theological precision, you have probably tolerated the first part of James with all of his street level practicality and you finally thought we are going to get to a highly theological portion. Well, this is probably the most intensely practical piece of James' writing right here. It probably won't satisfy you.

If you are a practical person and you are a pragmatist and you have loved the way that James is talking about this, maybe you have across this passage and say, “I will be able to take a break this week, because this is deeply theological.” Well, this is as practical as it could be.

If you don’t fit into either one of those categories, you are sort of neutral. You are maybe not sure why you are here tonight. This passage will not allow for neutrality. It calls us to commitment.

Look with me at the beginning of the passage. Here is the topic introduction by means of a question and then an example.

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.¹

Now here is what I think is our struggle with James 2:14-26. We read verses like that a person is justified by works, not just by faith alone and we think, oh, my goodness, this is a contradiction of the gospel. And I think we do that because our tendency is to read Romans into James. Now maybe you are sitting there thinking, Paul, what in the world are you talking about. Here it is. Paul in Romans and in Galatians is addressing a particular teaching that would propose that perhaps it was possible to achieve acceptance with God, justification by the keeping of the law. And in very powerful arguments, he decimates any hope of that, because if it is true that we are sinners and that sin reaches to every aspect of our personhood, it is impossible to be justified by our own performance. But that doesn’t happen to be what James is addressing. James is addressing a different danger, but it is a very significant danger. It is the danger of what I would call cheap faith. It is faith that sort of is theological assent to a doctrinal logic, but does not lay command to the life of the person who professes that faith. And James is here in this passage to argue that is not true faith.

Now I believe that that second danger is a danger for everyone in this room. It is a danger for us to want comfortable faith, easy faith, to pride ourselves, our biblical literacy and our theological knowledge and not to understand the radical claim that Christ would make on our lives. And, again, James is being quite pastoral here, speaking in to the issues of the people to whom he is ministering and to us in a secondary way.

Now notice the example here. It is of a person who is lacking in material things, is materially needy and you say to him, “Go in peace, be warm and filled,” without giving them things needed for the body. What good is that?

Now there is an analogy there. If it would make no sense just to confess niceties to a

¹ James 2:14-17.

person who I need because that doesn't actually address their need, then faith that is a confession, but doesn't lay claim to its life is dead faith. Now that is true. But I think there is something more profound in James' example. I think James is arguing—and we are going to see this in the rest of this passage. It is throughout James. It is other places in the New Testament, this, that true saving faith will always result in a life of love. You see, James understands something. He understands the nature of the gospel and the nature of the human heart. He understands the bright and golden promises of the gospel that are in the Old Testament. Here Ezekiel 36 beginning with verse 26.

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.
And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.²

Ezekiel 36 beginning with verse 26.

You see, here is what happens. True saving faith results always in a new heart. And that transformed heart now is moved and motivated by the Spirit of God with a whole new set of purposes, a whole new set of goals, a whole new set of values, a whole new set of loves, a whole new set of desires, a whole new set of thoughts, and, because of that, a transformed way of living life. Where once my life was controlled, as I have said to you before, by what my wants, my needs, my feelings, my life is now moved and motivated by love for God and by, because of my love for God, love for my neighbor. That is always the fruit of saving faith.

Jesus pointed to this in that wonderful example of a tree. A good tree bears good fruit. A bad tree bears bad fruit. A tree is recognized by its fruit. You know an apple tree by its apples, but you instinctively know that that tree is apple-istic all the way down to its roots. If there weren't apple-ism at its roots, it wouldn't produce apple as fruit. And Jesus is arguing for the organic consistency between what is in our heart and what is ... comes out in our words, choices, actions, behaviors.

James is in good company. John argues the same thing in 1 John. He says these radical words. The one who is born of God... can you finish it? Loves. He who does not love, does not know God. And so true faith, true saving faith always results in a transformed living. And the epicenter of that living is an allegiance to and a living out of the two great commands. I love God above all else, because there is new life bubbling in my heart. The Spirit lives within me. I love my Lord. And because I love my Lord, I am becoming a more sympathetic, a more gentle, a more merciful, a more compassionate person. Those are the fruit of faith. And James, as he should not, has no place for faith that is somehow a theological assent, but does not lay claim to the way that you live your life. That is what James is discussing.

² Ezekiel 36:26-27.

Now here is what happens in the rest of this passage. James will lay before us three arguments in support of this perspective on the nature of true faith: the demon argument, the Abraham argument and the Rahab argument. Look with me. Verse 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.”³

Again, that true faith is demonstrated by fruit. It is the fruit in my life, the fruit of a transformed life that assures me of God’s justifying grace. And then he says this. This is James being as provocative as he can be. He wants you to be provoked. It is good for you.

“You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!”⁴

The epicenter of our faith is believing in the fact that there is but one God. And the hope of the universe is found in this one God. That is the center of everything we believe. And then James says, shockingly, demons believe that.

Now what is he arguing, that that theological belief is unimportant? No. What he is arguing is that that belief in and of itself is not enough. He is arguing against the inadequacy of technical, theological assent again that doesn’t produce fruit in the life.

Brothers and sisters, hear this. Good theology is not an end in itself. Good theology is a means to an end. If good theology does not result in radical changes in the way that you live your life, it is actually bad theology. But I am afraid we are quite killed at making a separation between our confessional theology and our functional theology. I am afraid that it is possible for us to get comfortable with a distance between what we say we believe and what we actually live out in our daily lives.

Oh, wow. This is embarrassing to say. That is what is happening to me on Lincoln Drive. I love to sing, “Jesus, priceless treasure...” Oh. But things rise in my life and I hold tightly on to the physical treasures of this world. And I want to say to that little boy, are you crazy? You can’t do this to my car. I know you are sick. Hold on to it. Do something. And, listen, sadly, that exposes a continuing struggle of faith that is still in the heart of the sinner.

And then there is the Abraham argument.

Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?⁵

³ James 2:18.

⁴ James 2:19.

⁵ James 2:20-21.

Now you say, what is... Paul, isn't he saying it there? Isn't he saying he was justified by works? Well, this is a place where you must let Scripture interpret Scripture. Here is what he means. Look at the next verse.

“You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works.”⁶

That is what he is talking about. That is, faith demonstrated itself to be justifying faith, because it was accompanied by the sure testimony of a transformed way of living. Now here is an awesome demonstration of love for God, if faith results in a remarkable allegiance to the divine, if faith results in true living, practical affection for the Lord. It can not be demonstrated more powerfully than in the life of Abraham.

I shudder as a dad every time I read this passage. I think. What would I have done? If God would have asked of me this son so long waited for. Here is what true faith will do. It will cause you to offer the most precious thing in your life to God for the simple reason—are you ready for this—that you love him. Not because it is logical, not because it is practical, not because it is efficient, not because it is easy. You lay on his altar the most precious thing in your life. You say, “Content to let the world go by, I give it all to you.”

I can't, as you pastor, help but ask you this evening what precious Isaac in your life are you holding on to.

Then there is the Rahab argument.

“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?”⁷

You could understand what James is discussing here. What was it that Rahab did? She endangered her own life out of love for others. Isn't it very interesting that as James argues for the living fruitful reality of true saving faith, having pointed to the inadequacy of just theological assent, his two examples are wonderful examples of the first and the second great commandment. Faith will always produce a life changing love for God. Faith will always produce a life structuring love of others. That is the nature of true faith. In changing your heart, it transforms your life.

And then James ends:

“For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”⁸

Faith that is not animated by love for God and love of neighbor is dead faith.

⁶ James 2:22.

⁷ James 2:25.

⁸ James 2:26.

Now what would God want us to do with this passage this evening? Well, I would say three things. First, if you are God's child, receive the encouragement of this passage.

Maybe you say, "Paul, I don't feel very encouraged right now. I feel quite convicted."

Well, listen. If you are God's child, if you have exercised that true faith in him and him alone, there is already fruit in your life, the fruit of love for him. Perhaps you wouldn't be here this evening without that. There is already evidence in your life, the fruit of love for others, words, actions, choices, deeds that you would not be doing if it were not for the operation of his saving grace in your heart. Receive the assurance.

There is in this passage not only encouragement, but a warning. Perhaps there is somebody in this room and your faith is what James would call a counterfeit faith. You have given your mind to a system of belief, but you have held tightly on to your heart and your life... you live your life as if your life belongs to you. And James would say you need to confess that that faith is not faith and seek God in forgiveness and trust him as you have never trusted him before.

For all of us, this passage is a call. Where would God call you to a greater and deeper and fuller fruitfulness? Where do there need to be more practical and consistent and perseverant expressions of love for God? Where is God calling you to willing self sacrifice for the good of your neighbor? Where is God wanting to build zeal in you that every theological thing you would believe would live in the details of your life?

Receive the encouragement. Hear the warning. Follow the call. May God help us.

Let's pray.

Lord, how fickle our hearts can be, how much we can be attracted to an easy faith that lays no claim on our lives, how thankful we are for this passage that encourages us as we see your grace operating in our lives, but calls us to a deeper and fuller and more practical and more consistent life of faith. May we find joy in expressions of love for you. May we find joy in expressions of love for others. Thank you that you have chosen us to be your children. In Jesus' name. Amen.