

THE ETERNAL DANGER OF DEAD FAITH

When Words Alone are not Enough

“A Journey Through James”

Sermon 8

Texts: *James 2:14–26; Titus 3:5; Matthew 7:16-20*

James 2:14–26

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and 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? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

¹⁸But 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. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! ²⁰Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³and 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. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵And 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?

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

Titus 3:5 He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,

Matthew 7:16–20 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

Introduction:

The thirteen verses we are looking at this morning comprise the most theologically important and spiritually significant paragraph in the book. Earlier in the chapter, James confronted his readers about the damage that a deficient faith does to the beauty and effectiveness of the gospel God called His servant-ambassadors to demonstrate and declare to those living in the little

kingdoms of the world that comprise the spiritual kingdom of darkness. The particular issue damaging the credibility of their faith was the sin of partiality or favoritism that showed up in how and why they served others.

James has been driving home the point that God's people have been called to live out an authentic genuine faith that is whole-hearted, single-focused, and fully trusting in God and His Word. Sinful service marked by partiality not only damaged the unity of Christ's body, it discredited the gospel itself because, the heart of the gospel message is that unworthy people polluted by the filth of sin, guilty of breaking the law, and condemned under the righteous wrath of God somehow found themselves clothed in righteousness, seated at the right hand of God, adopted into His family, and co-heirs/rulers over the kingdom God promised His Son, their Lord Jesus Christ.

This glorious change was based on two important truths about God: 1) He shows no partiality or favoritism – this amazing grace is available to anyone regardless of creed, deed, or ethnic standing; and 2) His mercy triumphed over the judgment demanded by the Law.

When believers who have experienced this amazing mercy selectively serve others based on what they might receive in return, they distort this amazing message, discredit its free offer, and damage its effectiveness.

James has a very pointed question for people who claim to have received mercy from God and believe they will be saved from the wrath of God on the day of judgment: “Will the kind of faith you actually have, really save you on that day (2:14b)?”

As in our day, the churches in James' day were filled with people who claimed to “have faith” in Jesus (2:14). They heard the message of the gospel, understood the facts about the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and believed He was the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of the World.

This morning, churches like ours are filled with people who claim to have “faith” in Jesus. And because they claim to have this faith, they believe they will be saved from the wrath of God on the day of judgment. But – when you examine their lives, the faith they claim is not producing any fruit or evidence in their lives.

James speaks very directly to such people with a very pointed message – “Claiming to have faith is not the same thing as having saving faith!” If faith is not working and producing faith-generated actions and deeds in your life; perhaps you don’t possess the kind of faith that saves because it isn’t living faith at all.

James is actually building on a warning that Jesus gave to his followers when he reminded them, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but the one who does the will of my father who is in Heaven.” (Matt 7.21)

Think of the jaw-dropping impact of Jesus’ words. Many will claim to be His followers and call Him their Lord. But not everyone who makes those claims will enter into His Kingdom. Some will and others won’t – but they are all saying the same words and making the same claims about Jesus. So, how will you tell if someone’s faith in Jesus is real?

Jesus points to an important fruit that will be present in the life of a person who has true faith that is wholehearted, single-focused, and fully trusting in Jesus. Their living faith will energize a specific kind of work or deed in their life – they will consistently do the will of God (Phil 2:13).

James is not contradicting the Biblical truth that salvation can’t earned by works of righteousness which we do; but comes as a gift of God’s mercy (Titus 3:5) to those who put their whole-hearted, single-focused, fully-trusting faith in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation (Eph 2:8-10).

However, claiming to believe the right things about Jesus is very different then actually putting your whole faith and trust in Him and this is the difficult truth that James wants to address with us this morning – *“Is the faith you claim to have in Jesus the kind of living faith that will save you? **Or** is the faith you claim a dead faith that is useless to deliver others in this life and your own soul in the next?”*

Put differently, James is asking “If salvation comes by faith alone (and it does), then what kind of faith saves and what is the necessary evidence that you have that kind of faith?”

I. A Piercing Question (2:14-17)

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have work? Can that faith save him? 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 is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

- James begins with a piercing question – “What good is a claim to faith that has no accompanying evidence to verify that it is a living faith as opposed to a dead faith?” “Can **that** faith save him?”
- In other words, James is pointing out a real danger that has come among his readers – the danger of believing that having the right creed is the same thing as having a genuine, living faith in Jesus.
- James is pointing out the difference between a “word-only faith” that is workless/deedless and therefore useless to anyone and a living faith that not only believes the right things but has verifying evidence of its life-giving presence.
- James points to a situation going on that revealed an appalling lack of mercy in those claiming to follow Jesus but whose lives and actions toward others were totally devoid of the very mercy they claimed to have received from Him.

A. A Faith-Revealing Circumstance

- Their response gives compelling evidence as to the true nature of the faith they claim to have – how will they respond to a believer they know who is in dire need?
- Earlier in the chapter James talked about a rich man and a poor brother who came into their midst, and they honored the rich man and dishonored the poor brother.
- James continues the story: *“This poor brother is not a stranger but a person you know. Furthermore, this brother or sister is in dire need – they have no*

daily food, and they are naked (lack appropriate or sufficient clothing). They are destitute and in danger of perishing – and they came to you for help.”

- *“However, when they come to you for help, you sent them away with words. You sent them away with a blessing (“go in peace”) and with a prayer (be warmed and filled).”*
- James has a question for them: *“What good did your pious prayers and good wishes do for your brother when you did not do anything to meet his dire physical need?”*
- Keep in mind, this was not a stranger that is in view – it was a believer who they knew well and who was in dire need of life sustaining basics like food and clothing.
- Pious prayers and religious words without accompanying acts of mercy are worthless to deliver that person from hunger and cold.

B. A Faith-Exposed Observation

- In the same way, a “word-only faith” is worthless and powerless to save you from a much greater need!
- Just as your words alone did nothing to deliver your brother from the death he faced from hunger or cold; your “words alone faith” however orthodox and pious, will not deliver you from the danger of eternal death that you are facing under the wrath of a righteous God.
- It isn’t that faith can’t save you – the problem is you have the wrong kind of faith! You have a lifeless, dead faith (2:17).

II. A Personal Challenge (2:18-20)

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. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

- You can imagine the shock waves that James’ statement created among believers in those early churches. So, to drive the point home more clearly, James confronts those who contend he was not in a position to challenge the usefulness of their personal claim to have faith in Jesus. He introduces a

hypothetical discussion between two people who both claim to have faith in God.

- One of them has only words that make his claim, and the other has verifying works produced by his faith to back up his claim.
- James states to the one person, “*Verify (prove) your faith without works and I will verify (prove) my faith by my works.*”
- James is talking to someone who claims to believe all the right things about Jesus, but his faith has not produced any verifying works of obedience in his life. And without verifying works, it is impossible to validate the saving capacity of his faith.
- James makes a stunning comparison – “*You believe the right things about God – He is One.*” This is the orthodox creed that God gave to Moses in the Shema of Israel (Dt. 6:4). “*You believe the right things about God – so far so good (you do well). However, you are in the company of another group who believe just like you believe about God – the demons!*”
- Demons know and acknowledge the truth about who God is and what He is like, and their belief produces something in them that it should produce in you – it terrifies them (they shudder) because they know that there is a true God who will one day condemn them to eternal punishment.
- On the other hand, you who share this kind of belief with them are not at all terrified – because you have put your confidence in a lifeless faith that is useless to save you from the God who will one day judge those who are disobedient to His law.
- James stops the illustration and turns the conversation back to the people to whom he writes – and describes those of them who are making the same argument he just described as a “foolish” person (2:20).
- The term “foolish” says three things about this individual: 1) his life is “empty” of any validating works produced by the faith he claims to have; 2) he does not possess the wisdom God has promised to those who have faith (1:5-8); and 3) he is morally apart from God and His Word. In other words, a person who claims to have this kind of “word-only” faith isn’t a true Christian at all.
- Because this is such a shocking and offensive statement, James sets out to prove his point – that a “creed-only” faith that does not produce any obedient works is powerless and useless to save a person from hell.

- And to make his point, James introduces his readers to a person that God clearly justified and named as His friend – Abraham.

III. A Powerful Proof (2:21-24)

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

- James introduces the argument with a surprising statement that seems to go against the Scriptures that teach a person is saved by faith alone and not by works or righteousness. Here is the question James posits – “*Wasn’t Abraham justified by works when he offered up Isaac on the altar?*” So – what are we to do with this question?
- We need to factor in several important considerations as we seek to understand the point James is making with this question.
- **First**, the Scripture is a unified message from God so one part, properly interpreted, will never contradict another part. Whatever James is saying here can’t contradict what Paul taught when he stated that salvation is by faith and not by works.
- **Second**, the context in which a passage is set makes a huge difference in how we understand the point being made.
- Paul and James are asking and answering two very different questions. In Romans Paul explains how a man gets salvation and becomes righteous before God. And his answer is by faith alone – when a man puts his wholehearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith in Christ, God declares him righteous (Rom 4:1-5). James fully agrees with Paul on this point because he reminds us that Abraham believed God and his belief was the basis for his righteous standing before God (James 2:23; Gen 15:6).
- James is making a different point in this text. He is talking about the kind of faith that saves a living faith that produces verifying evidence. This kind of faith produces obedient works/actions to the Word and Will of God. That is what he means when he says, “*Abraham was justified by works.*” James uses the term “*justify*” in its sense of **validating** or **verifying**. Jesus used this term in this way when he said, “*Wisdom is justified by her children*” (Lk. 7.35). James stated it a bit more clearly when he said “*Who is wise and*

understanding among you? By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom” (3:13).

- So, what is James saying? Four important truths about the kind of faith that is acceptable to God and that saves a person who has it:
 1. ***Abraham was justified when He believed God*** (Gen 15:6). Note that God counted righteousness to Abraham many years before the test that James is talking about here (Gen 22).
 2. ***His faith in God was tested just like James said our faith would be tested*** (James 1:3). The point of the test was not to grant Abraham righteousness, but to reveal whether or not he possessed the kind of faith that God accepts when He credits righteousness to a person when they repent and believe.
 3. ***Our response to the test validates our standing before God by revealing whether our faith is true and genuine or whether it is lifeless and dead.*** At the end of the test in Gen 22, God made an announcement about Abraham – “*Now I know you fear God seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me*” (Gen 22:12). This was not new knowledge to God – Abraham had believed God many years earlier when God called him out of Ur (12:1) and made amazing supernatural promises to him (Gen 15:1-21). This is what James means when he reminds us that ***Abraham’s faith was active*** – it produced something when it encountered the Word of God or discovered the will of God – it responded with obedient deeds (2:22). In other words, James wants you to know that Abraham’s faith in God was such that ***he was a doer of the word and not just a hearer only*** (1:22-25). And as a result of his active faith that displayed itself in obedient deeds, Abraham was blessed by God (1:25; Gen 22:17) and called a “Friend of God” (Gen 18:17-18; 2 Chron 20:7; Isaiah 41:8). In other words, ***Abraham’s faith was faithful when tested*** and consequently, it was validated by Abraham’s deeds (Neh 9:7-8).
 4. ***Tests mature, develop, and strengthen our faith.*** This is what James means when he states that ***Abraham’s faith was “completed” or perfected by his obedient deeds*** (2:22) – a point he makes to all of us earlier in 1:3-4.

So, here is the staggering conclusion James makes from the testing of Abraham – **a person is justified only by a wholehearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith in God and His Word** – the kind of faith that so believes God that when put to the test, it is willing to trust and obey God in the darkest of places and in hardest of spaces in life. This is the only kind of faith that saves!

Question: Now that I know what kind of faith saves (living faith), and how to get that salvation (wholehearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith in God and His Word), how do I know I personally can receive it, and how do I know it will really save me from the wrath of God on the day I stand before him to be judged?

And to answer these massive questions, James turns to the OT and introduces us to another “friend of God” who, like Abraham, was counted righteous on account of her believing in God!

IV. A Proven Salvation (2:25)

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?

- James introduces us to a person who had absolutely no standing before God or in the eyes of men yet found grace and was counted righteous in the sight of God – Rahab.
- James reminds us of her past standing – she was a pagan idolatress living in the land of Canaan. She was part of a wicked society that God was about to judge whose wickedness was epitomized in the city of Jericho filled with immoral, idolatrous mockers of God. She was a woman. And she was herself at the bottom end of the moral scale – she was a prostitute.
- How did she end up being counted righteous in the sight of God? ***She received God’s messengers and believed their message.*** Elsewhere in the Scripture, these men are called “spies” (Heb 11:31); but here James identifies them as “***messengers***” who bore a message to those in Jericho warning them of the coming wrath of God for their sins.
- Rahab heard their message and because she believed the Word from God they announced, she received them and aligned herself with the true God of Heaven.

And the evidence of her belief and alignment with God was that she received and protected these messengers from her own countrymen and obeyed their instructions in faith that God would deliver her on the day He judged Jericho. The deeds and actions produced by her faith, validated the genuineness of her faith!

- So, did God keep his promise? Did Rahab’s faith in God deliver her from His judgment or was it useless? Not only did her faith deliver her and her family from God’s judgment on Jericho, her faith resulted in a new status as an honored “friend of God!”
- Rahab wasn’t just rescued and forgotten! Her wholehearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith in God and His Word radically transformed her standing before God and among His people.
- Rahab ended up marrying a man named Salmon who was from one of the greatest tribes in Israel, Judah. God blessed their marriage with a little boy named Boaz who grew up and married a woman named Ruth. Ruth and Boaz had a grandson named David who became the greatest king in Israel until the coming of another descendant from Rahab – a little boy who would grow up to rule the whole world – Jesus Christ!
- Not only did God keep His Word to deliver Rahab from destruction on the day of His judgment, He highly exalted and honored her! This is how God rewards those who persevere in wholehearted, single focused, fully trusting faith in Him and in His Word!

V. A Profound Conclusion (2:26)

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

- James has made some important points in this paragraph:
 1. A person is justified and counted righteous when he believes God the way that Abraham and Rahab believed.
 2. The presence of a kind of whole-hearted, single focused, fully trusting faith is validated in the life of a person by what it produces – faithfulness seen in deeds of obedience.
 3. This kind of faith perseveres in its faithful obedience when tested, and it is matured and strengthened in our lives by trials.

4. This kind of faith is the only kind of faith that is useful because only this kind of living faith is powerful enough to save.

- This is what James means with his final illustration – that of a physical body missing the animating life force (spirit). That body is dead, and a dead body is not only useless and powerless to do any deeds; in the Jewish culture, contact with a corpse resulted in ritual defilement which barred access to the presence of God to worship.
- James compares this lifeless and powerless body to the kind of faith that has no lif animating energy that results in a life of obedient actions and deeds of mercy – the mercy that God gave to us when we deserved His wrath – the mercy that should mark our lives and flow out to others.

Conclusion:

So, what do we do with a message like this one? We must take a serious look at our own claim to “have faith” and ask the same question James has asked – ***“Is the kind of faith I claim to have really the faith that I actually have? Do I possess a living, saving faith or is my faith lifeless in this life and useless on the day I will stand before God and face His judgment?”***

Put differently, ***“What evidence is there in my life that my faith is actually the kind of faith that saves? Do I truly possess a whole-hearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith in God and His Word?”*** And the only way to know the answer to that question is for God to validate your faith. And James has told you how he validates such faith – by testing it through the pressure of a trial. When your faith is tested by trials – do you believe God and do you continue to obey His word?

James has given us two examples of what this faith looks like when tested: ***1) Like Abraham faith, it fully believes the promises of God (Heb 11:8-12) and when tested, it faithfully obeys the Word of God (Heb 11:17-19). 2) Like Rahab’s faith, it faithfully aligns itself with the people of God and models the moral values of God (Heb 11:31).***

But there is one more example of a person who exercised and modeled the kind of faith that pleases God and that does not waver at the stunning promises God has made to deliver a person from death and judgment.

Jesus believed God and trusted in His promise – the promise God made several centuries earlier that He would not permit the body of His Holy One to see physical corruption but would raise Him up from the dead.

And one Friday, that belief and trust was put to the ultimate test – would he believe God and allow himself to be crucified and his life to be taken from him, or would He use His power to save himself? On Sunday, God validated His faith! And because of His living faith we have been saved, transformed, and highly exalted in His kingdom forever!

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