

James: sermon #5
Faith that works
(James 2:14-26)

Introduction

Scripture tells us that we are saved through faith (Eph. 2:8–9); that we live by faith (2 Cor. 5:7); that without faith we do not please God (Heb. 11:6); and that everything that does not come from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). Clearly, faith is important, it is not optional. But what is it—what defines true faith? James tells us that it's far more than intellectual belief. Rather, it's an active *trust* and *reliance* on God expressed in good deeds. This is living faith—a *faith that works*. In this passage, James contrasts this true faith with two counterfeits: dead faith and demonic faith.

1. Dead faith (2:14–17)

14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? 15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Some claim to have faith, but their deeds or lack of deeds say otherwise. Jesus warned, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). People with dead faith substitute *words* for *works*. They *talk the talk* but don't *walk the walk*. Their professed faith is no faith at all. It is dead faith.

James illustrates: A poor believer came into church without proper clothing and in need of food. The person with dead faith noticed the visitor and saw his need, but did nothing to meet the need. All they did was say a few pious words: "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed" (2:16). The visitor went away hungry and naked.

Those who are alive to Jesus actively participate in his faith—a faith that meets people's needs, no matter who they may be. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus told of a priest and a Levite who each had "religious faith," yet neither paused to assist the dying man (Luke 10:25–37). Each would, no doubt, *defend* his faith, yet neither *demonstrated* that faith in deeds of love. Their faith was dead.

Paul stressed the importance of faith that works: "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10). For Paul, such deeds are "faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6). And this living, loving, active faith is in stark contrast to "works of the law," which are mere religious formalisms devoid of love.

John also emphasized faith that works: "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear

children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:17–18).

And so the testimony of Jesus and his apostles is clear: Faith that does not produce deeds of love is no faith at all. It’s not sharing in Jesus’ faith. It’s dead faith. And so James asks: “Can that [kind of] faith save him?” (James 2:14). His implied answer is a resounding, “No!” The kind of faith that is expressive of salvation (our union with Jesus) produces good deeds. In contrast, the person with *dead faith* has only an intellectual experience. They may know the doctrine of salvation, but they do not share actively in the love and life of the Savior. Their faith is thus useless and dead:

- “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead (2:17)
- “Faith without deeds is useless” (2:20)
- “Faith without deeds is dead” (2:26)

A person can no more come alive to the life they have in Jesus and remain the same, any more than they can come into contact with a 220-volt wire and remain the same. “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12). Life (of the Jesus kind) produces life. But dead faith tragically leads away from Jesus’ life and the faith-filled, love-expressing “dance of life” that comes with it.

2. Demonic faith (2:18–19)

18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that-- and shudder.

James makes his point that faith that doesn’t produce good deeds is dead faith by giving the example of demons. Demons believe—though that belief does them no good. What do they believe? For one thing, they believe God exists; they are neither atheists nor agnostics. They also believe in the deity of Jesus. Whenever they met Jesus when he was on earth, they bore witness to his divine sonship (Mark 3:11–12). They also believe in the existence of a place of punishment (Luke 8:31); and they recognize Jesus as the judge (Mark 5:1–13). They also submit to the power of his word.

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut. 6:4) was the daily faith confession of a godly Jew. But such a confession can be empty: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19). The faith confession of a man with dead faith may be nothing but intellectual agreement. But demons both agree and have an emotional engagement—they believe and tremble. Yet their faith is still counterfeit—it is useless and dead.

And it can be that way for people. A person can be enlightened in the mind and stirred in the heart and yet not have living faith. Living faith—the faith of Jesus—transforms; it changes you from the inside out: “Show me your faith without deeds,” challenged James, “and I will show you my faith by what I do” (2:18).

How could a person demonstrate faith except by pointing to the Christ-like deeds it engenders? Indeed, “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). Jesus followers trust their Savior and live for him—they share actively in the union they have with Jesus. Faith that is barren is no faith at all—it’s no better than the faith of demons.

So far, James has told us about two kinds of faith: dead faith (intellectual belief only), and demonic faith (a kind of intellectual and emotional belief). But both of these are counterfeits for the real thing—the *living faith*, which he now describes.

3. Living faith (or *faith that works*) (2:20–26)

20 You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

Dead faith and demonic faith are devoid of deeds (works) and are thus “useless” (James 2:20). In contrast, living faith has great value because it produces good things, including a changed life in the believer and blessings for those who come in contact with the believer.

Where do these good deeds come from? They spring from God’s word—the same word that gave us new birth (James 1:18). This living and active word, embraced through faith, brings life transformation. It touches the whole person: mind (intellect), heart (emotions) and will. The mind understands the word, the heart desires it, and the will acts upon it. That is the transformation that comes as we, in faith, share the love and life of God’s Living Word, Jesus.

In contrast, dead faith and demonic faith do not come from God’s life. Dead faith touches only the intellect and demonic faith touches only the intellect and the emotions. Neither touches the will and thus both fail to produce good deeds. These counterfeit faiths are useless.

The men and women of living faith named in Hebrews 11 were people of action: God spoke his word to them and, in faith, they obeyed, despite the consequences. James offers his own examples of such living faith, namely Abraham and Rahab.

Comment: Do James and Paul disagree on the issue of faith and works? Paul clearly speaks against works (see Rom. 4 and Gal. 3–4). But note that the works he is against are “the works of the law” that some were advocating as a means of salvation. And so he notes in Gal. 2:16 that “a man is not justified by observing the law [*by works of the law*, KJV], but by faith in Jesus Christ.” What Paul is against is any attempt to procure salvation (justification) through obedience to the stipulations (“works”) of the Law of Moses. Paul’s point is that it is impossible for a person to make themselves right in God’s sight (be *justified*) through works of any kind. But James is addressing works (deeds) from another perspective, namely the works that spring out of living faith (Jesus life). His point is that where there is living faith you will find good works. Paul teaches the same thing (see for example 1 Cor. 6:9–10 and Gal. 5:19–21). For Paul and James

both, faith is not mere intellectual assent or an emotional feeling. It's living and active commitment to and trust in Jesus. And this trust and commitment always bring forth works (good deeds). It's *faith that works*. **Good deeds are thus the evidence that faith is genuine.** Such was the faith of Abraham and Rahab.

a. Abraham (2:21-24)

21 Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. 24 You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

God called Abraham out of Ur into Canaan to make out of him the nation of Israel and through Israel's seed (Jesus) to bless all humanity. Abraham's faith awakening is recorded in Genesis 15. God showed him the stars and gave him a promise, "So shall your offspring be!" How did Abraham respond? He "believed the Lord, and he credited it [Abraham's belief] to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:5-6). God declared Abraham righteous (right with God) on the basis of belief (faith), not on the basis of what Abraham had (or had not) done (his works). Thus Abraham was justified (made right with God) by faith—and this is Paul's point in Romans 4.

But wait a minute! James here (2:24) says a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. Do Paul and James disagree? No. Paul uses the term 'justified' to speak of God's declaration that a person has been acquitted (made right—righteous with God). James uses the term to speak of a person being found (observed) to be righteous. This observation, argues James, does not come about because of what is unseen in the person's heart, but because of what is seen in that person's deeds (works). Thus James' question is this: How can you tell if a person has been justified by faith? His answer: You'll see evidence of their justification in their behavior. The justified person has a changed life. Their faith is demonstrated in good deeds.

Abraham's life was a case in point. James reminds us of how Abraham, trusting God (exercising living faith), offered up his son Isaac (Gen. 22). Abraham was not justified by this action (or by any other action, including circumcision), but his obedience to God's command demonstrated that he *had been* justified. "You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did" (James 2:22). There is a dynamic relationship between faith and good deeds. Abraham was not saved by faith plus works, but by a faith that was expressed in active works.

How was it that Abraham was "considered righteous for what he did" (James 2:21) when he had been justified by faith? (Rom. 4). The answer is that by faith, Abraham was justified *before God* and his righteousness *declared*; and then by his deeds, Abraham was justified *before men* and his righteousness *demonstrated*. That Abraham was justified by faith alone was demonstrated by his good deeds (his works of faith).

Living faith is not about what *we* do; it's about sharing in what Jesus has done for us and how he lives in us. It's about sharing in Jesus' faith, his love and his life. And as we share in these, Jesus' life shines forth from us in good works. Sadly, some Christians are not experiencing and expressing the union we as believers have with Jesus through our adoption secured for us through Jesus' finished work. As Paul wrote, such people "claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him (Titus 1:16). Paul also writes, "This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good" (Titus 3:8a).

b. Rahab (2:25-26)

25 In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? 26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Israel was about to invade their Promised Land and take the city of Jericho. Joshua sent spies into the city to get the lay of the land. There they met Rahab, who was a gentile harlot, she protected them and affirmed that she believed in what God had said and what God was going to do. When the men departed, they promised to save her and her family when the city was taken; and this they did.

This story is one of the Bible's great examples of living faith (see Heb. 11:31). Rahab heard God's word and knew that her city was condemned. This truth affected her and her fellow citizens so that their hearts melted within them (Joshua 2:11). Rahab responded with her mind, emotions and will: *she acted on her belief*. She risked her life to protect the Jewish spies, and by sharing the good news of deliverance with members of her family. This gentile harlot who trusted God married into Israel and became an ancestor of Jesus. What grace!

When you realize the small amount of information Rahab had, you see how truly marvelous her faith was. Today we have the full revelation of God through his Son (the living word) and through Scripture (the written word). Moreover, Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to convict us by and to teach us God's word. Rahab's living faith is an indictment against the unbelief of many today.

Conclusion

James 2 emphasizes that a spiritually mature Christian lives what they believe. They do not merely hold intellectually to certain doctrines—they live those doctrines in everyday life. Their faith is not the dead faith of the intellectuals, or the demonic faith of the fallen spirits. It is the living faith of men like Abraham and women like Rahab, faith that changes lives; ***faith that produces good works.***

Hear the exhortation from Paul: "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test" (2

Cor. 13:5-6). Thank God that Jesus lives in us. Now let that life and the faith of Jesus shine forth in good works. Let us embrace and express the faith that works!

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