

“Real Faith Works”
Real Faith
Part V

Text: James 2.14-26

CIT: Theoretical or verbal affirmation of the Christian gospel without active obedience is vacuous, dangerous, and dead.

Purpose: To confront professing Christians at Calvary with the urgency of practical obedience by contemplating three features of James’ challenge.

Read Text

Pray

Introduction

If you haven’t already, let me invite you to open your Bibles to James 2.14-26. The last couple of weeks we’ve taken a pause on our Real Faith series to hear testimony from our students on how God used their experiences at summer camp at Snowbird this year. We heard from two of your young ladies on how God used them to serve younger kids as counselors at Pickett Lake. And, of course, Matthew Cruce delivered a wonderful message on the triumphal Christ from Colossians 2.

Last week Pastor Ramazan shared his journey from Islam to atheism to becoming a Christian believer and pastor of a church in an overwhelmingly Muslim country. If you missed that I’d encourage you to go watch that message on our website at calvarybcp.com.

But today we return to our Real Faith series. James 2 has provoked no small amount of controversy among Christians especially ever since the Reformation on the relationship between faith and works. And we’ll get into that later. But the whole passage is simply telling us that a

theoretical, a purely doctrinal, a merely verbal affirmation of the Christian gospel without active obedience to Christ in our daily life is vacuous...it is empty. It is vacuous, it is dangerous, because it is dead, lifeless, and fruitless. And what that means is that it simply is not a saving faith at all.

The central contention, the big idea, the take home truth for God's people at Calvary today is that Real Faith Works. Real faith is fruitful. Real faith follows. Real faith changes us from the inside out. Real faith makes a difference in our lives and, through us, it makes a difference in the world around us.

So my prayer for all of us in this room today is that God will use James's words here to confront professing Christians at Calvary, especially complacent Christians, indifferent Christians, with the urgency of passionate devotion and practical obedience. There is a fundamental urgency because failure here exposes a false faith, a dead faith, a deceiving faith that will damn us to hell forever. And we see this in three central features of James's argument.

Beginning with...

1. **A Fundamental Question** (v. 14)

He begins with a fundamental question. And you'll notice that James uses a series of questions, examples, and counterexamples in this paragraph. He is using all the tools of persuasion and rhetoric to get people to realize the utter absurdity of a faith that does not manifest itself in deeds of mercy, acts of compassion, obedience holiness and sacrifice.

So he begins with a question. “What use is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but has no works? Can that faith save him?”

And the obvious answer should be “No.” No, it cannot save him. It is a show. It is a sham. It is a pretense. And in verses 15-16 **he offers a very practical illustration** to make this obvious point.

And I think this is a carefully worded and carefully chosen illustration. If someone doesn’t have clothing or what? Daily food. And that sounds a lot like what James’s half-brother, Jesus, once said. In the Lord’s Prayer, as He was teaching His disciples how to pray, what did He say? Give us this day our what? Our daily bread!

Now, what the person says to the needy suggests that he both *understands* the need...“be warm and be filled” but also completely *ignores* the need. The point is that there is no excuse for a Christian believer to do such a thing. And the primary context James is addressing is within the church. If we know that there are brothers and sisters in the same local church who are without the basic necessities of life, we have a clear duty to help. But even beyond that, we have a duty to brothers and sisters around the world that we may be aware of and have the means to reach. We are culpable and answerable for how we treat other brothers and sisters that are destitute.

And the illustration makes it clear and obvious that it is pointless to wish someone peace, warmth and wellness if we won’t help provide peace, warmth and wellness. To wish someone peace is to wish their wholeness. And this is the key...we have to be willing to be the means of fulfilling our own prayers for others, making others whole. Otherwise, our wishes are empty, vacuous, dishonest, and dangerous. They are empty because they don’t change a thing. They are dishonest insofar as we suggest that we are concerned when we really aren’t. And

they are dangerous insofar as it shows that our faith is not a fruitful faith.

It is dangerous insofar as it shows that despite our words, we are not even saved. And the way this verse is written, it isn't so much a wish for someone's wellbeing, but almost like a blessing, a benediction, an implicit prayer to God for that person's wellbeing. So it is really just a religious cover for our failure to act. That person's words of wellbeing are as empty and useless as his profession of Christian faith.

The point is, when we are confronted with actual needs, words don't help. Facebook and Instagram posts, likes, and shares won't help fill someone's empty, aching belly. Retweeting won't provide someone shelter or sanctuary. It won't pay off the debts of brickyard families whose daughters are vulnerable to sex traffickers. It won't get medicine to people whose eyeballs are falling out and faces caving in because they don't have access to simple antibiotics that would have stopped that destroying infection.

And before I come off as on some sort of moral high ground, I have to make a confession. As I was sitting in my office writing these words, God suddenly gripped my heart about the tragedies we've been witnessing this last week globally. I don't know what we can do right now about what's happening in Afghanistan. Maybe not much beyond praying for the people there. But as I was thinking about James's contrast between mere wishing for good fortune and actually being the means by which those wishes are met, I realized that I hadn't done anything to help the people of Haiti beyond pray for them since the most recent earthquake.

So I stopped in the middle writing and went to **the Samaritan's Purse website** and made a donation to help the relief efforts they already have on the ground. They've already airlifted an emergency field

hospital to the affected area. They've sent two DC-8 airlifts with supplies for shelters and water-filtration. They are doing the actual on-the-ground work, and providing emergency supplies, trauma units, medical personnel that are so urgently needed.

And your donation to that ministry will help them provide the urgently-needed food, water, shelter, and medical care these desperately poor and devastated people need. So that's one way you can help Haitians today. That's how you and I can clothe the naked and feed the hungry today. And we have the website on the screen if you want to donate right now on your phone. In addition to that, Bro. Dwayne has already mentioned the needs of brothers and sisters in Uganda. So let's be a people who love sacrificially, who give sacrificially, who are not mere hearers of the word only, but doers thereof.

So this practical illustration sets up **the initial conclusion of verse 17.**

This verse simply summarizes the previous two verses, and it offers an initial answer to the question of verse 14. What use is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but has no works? None. None at all. Can that faith save him? No. No it cannot. It is vacuous, dangerous, and deceptive. Faith without works is dead. For James, faith includes action, works, deeds of mercy and kindness and charity. So a faith without works doesn't even make sense to James. It is incomplete at best and it is dangerously deceptive about the state of that person's salvation at worst.

But that takes from the critical question now, to verses 18-24 where we encounter...

2. **The Actual Situation** (vv. 18-24)

It take it that this may well have been the actual situation in the church or churches to which James is writing. There may have been people saying, as James suggests in verse 18..."But someone may well say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Now, there are a couple of ways to understand this. But I think that what he means is that someone is suggesting that their faith is as good as or as theologically sound as the works James is urging. You say tomAto, I say tomato.

But James's point is that **verbal affirmation is inadequate**. This is not a matter of opinion. It is a matter of truth that changes us. You show me your faith without the works. It's fine. I'll wait.

No. You can't. That's the whole point. Real faith is fruitful faith. It is observable. It is demonstrable. Show me your faith without works and I'll show you my faith, my inner devotion to Christ, by my works for the glory of Christ. Verbal affirmation is inadequate. Which is why I am reluctant to endorse sinner's-prayer salvation. Too many people have said a prayer but it never changed their lives.

They think they're saved because they said the prayer. Verbal affirmation, according to James, is inadequate. **Active participation is urgent**. I'm not saying that we are saved by the good deeds we do. Let me be clear about that. We are not saved by good works. We are saved by God's grace. But saving grace is evident by the life of good works that follow. Saving faith is following faith. Saving faith is fruitful faith.

So now James is going to hammer this point with a whole series of arguments. And the first argument is that right belief and pristine doctrines aren't enough. You can have all the right doctrines. You can be as orthodox in your beliefs as you can be. But if those beliefs do not impact how you live...if it doesn't drive you to desperate devotion and active involvement, then it isn't doing a bit of good.

To illustrate this, he invokes what we might call, **The central Jewish declaration**.

Ever since ancient times, Jewish people have prayed what is called the Shema. It is a passage from Dt. 6 that confesses the core belief of Judaism. Covenantal Monotheism. It was central in ancient Israel. It was central in the time of Jesus. And it is central to devout Jews today. “Hear, O Israel, YHWH is our God, YHWH is One! You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. There is one God. And we, His covenant people are to love and serve Him supremely.

In Matthew 22, Jesus told His questioners that this was the greatest commandment. To love God with all your heart, soul, and mind.

So this is the great truth given by God, mediated by Moses, affirmed by Jesus. But even this, says James, is not enough. And, by the way, so did Jesus. Because to that great commandment he also added that the second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself. And in Luke 10 Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan to explain that the one who is being a neighbor is the one who does something about the desperate needs of others.

So fine. Yes. You believe that God is one. Great. And this is where James raises a counterexample. If intellectual assent or even verbal affirmation were sufficient for saving faith, even the demons would be saved. But they’re not. They know that God is. They know Jesus is king. Look at how the demons responded to Jesus during His earthly ministry. Mark 1 they cry out in fear when Jesus confronts them, saying, “What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth, Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!”

In Mark 5 the legion of demons says the same thing, confessing Jesus as the Son of the Most High God, and they beg Jesus for mercy. Every inmate at the county jail knows Jesus. Every homeless drug addict. Every upstanding but unchurched middle-class person in Perry will tell you that they know Jesus. But saving faith goes much deeper than just merely acknowledging that Jesus is Lord.

Acknowledging that Jesus is Lord is necessary, Paul makes that clear in Romans 10. But it isn't sufficient. You have to confess that Jesus is Lord and conduct your life in a way that reflects that reality. Demons don't do that. And neither do many professing and confessing Christians in America today, in Perry today, maybe even in this room today. James's whole point here is that such people simply are not saved at all.

So the central Jewish declaration isn't enough. Good doctrine is great. But unless it changes us it's useless. Now James gives us an **Old Testament illustration** (vv. 20-23; Gen. 22.1-18; Gen. 15.1-6). Actually, there will be a couple of them.

So he moves from hypothetical to historical. But he also asks a subtle question in verse 20. Do you really want to know? Because the position he's attacking is obviously foolish and hollow. The very fact that a person would try to defend and justify such a cheap view of saving faith suggests that they really don't want to know the truth because they are unwilling to live by it. It's not a head problem, it's a heart problem.

In the original, the wording is meant to be a pun. Faith that doesn't work, doesn't work. A faith that is idle and fruitless does not do for you, what you think it will. It won't save you at all. So let me say that again. A faith that doesn't work doesn't work. It's kind of like a workless faith is a worthless faith.

So he points to the example of Abraham. Abraham was the great patriarch. He was the one to whom the promise of blessing was given. Through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. In Romans 4 Paul said the promise was that Abraham would inherit the world. He would be given a global family that would transcend all ethnic divisions, racial divisions, political divisions.

In Genesis 15 God made a covenant with Abraham. In a moment when Abraham was struggling with old age and he didn't have a son of his own, God told him to go outside his tent. Lift his eyes to the heavens. Look at the uncountable stars. So shall your descendants be, Abram. And the Scripture says he believed God and it was reckoned or counted to him as righteousness. Where Adam failed to believe God, Abram did believe. And it is this kind of trust that Paul points to, a man whose body was old and withered that trusted God to give him what did not exist. He would give him a son and a family.

But even Abraham's faith was expressed by works of obedience. You remember the dramatic story of God giving Abraham a son through Sarah. His beloved son. His only son. And then, in Genesis 22, God commanded Abraham to take his son Isaac to Mt. Moriah and make of him a burnt offering sacrifice. It was an impossible command. How could God require such a thing? How could Abraham do such a thing? And yet, somehow, through the eyes of faith, Abraham trusted God's command in broken-hearted obedience.

So what we have is faith—what we believe to be true about God, ourselves, and the world—faith motivating actions that both demonstrate and, verse. 22, mature or complete our faith. You remember how, at the last moment, God stayed Abraham's hand and provided a ram for the sacrifice. By obeying God's command to sacrifice his son, Abraham found out that God was with him, and that God would make every provision for him.

I've spoken to many people through the years who struggle with their faith. They lack subjective assurance of their salvation. They are always in need of something to prop up their faith. But the reality is that those are almost always people who are not actively serving the Lord. They are not actively obeying the Lord. And because God uses obedience to grow our faith, some people remain spiritual infants, unstable and insecure, because they don't get the spiritual exercise that is required to grow in God's grace and experience His presence through the trials and struggles that come with faithfulness to Christ.

If you are struggling in your faith this morning, ask yourself this question, and be honest. What have you done to grow in Christ? I'm not talking about being in this group or that study. I'm asking you what have you done to put yourself out there in a way that is risky and potentially costly so that you would have to rely on God's grace and where you experience His power and presence in your life?

We pray for things and we say we're trusting God. But listen, lost people aspire to promotions at work every day. Lost people contemplate buying a new car every day. Lost people deliberate about buying a new house. I'm talking about kingdom work. What have you done *lately* that demanded and required the presence and grace of God for the glory and honor of Jesus?

Because the way verse 22 is written, Abraham's faith was working with his works and as a result of the works, faith was perfected and Scripture fulfilled...the way it's written it is to be an ongoing obedience, an ongoing sacrifice that God uses in our lives to grow us to a mature and stable faith.

So Abraham's faith matured. It became stable and strong, to the point that verse 22 declares that he was called the friend of God.

So from reflections on the central Jewish declaration to this important Old Testament illustration James is building a powerful argument **that leads to an unavoidable observation** in verse 24.

You see, that's the observation, you see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

But wait. Hold on just a second. Did we hear that right? A man is justified by works and not by faith alone? But what about Paul? What about what we've always heard preachers say. We can't earn our salvation. Ephesians 2:8-9 Paul says "For by grace you are saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast!"

In fact, in Romans 4 Paul himself point to Abraham to explain his doctrine of justification by faith. "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited to him as righteousness."

So this looks like a big problem. Paul seems to say exactly the opposite of what James is saying.

But people who've tried to make Paul and James into enemies on this issue are twisting what both men are saying. Paul never thought that saving faith was a faith without change. In fact, he starts and ends the whole book of Romans saying that the Christian gospel is about the obedience of the faith. In Galatians 5.6 he said that the only thing that matters is faith *working* through love. In Ephesians 2, right after he said

we aren't saved by works, in verse 10 he explains that saving faith makes us a new creation, God's workmanship created *for* good works that God prepared beforehand so that we should walk in them. This is exactly what James is saying. We aren't saved BY good works, but we are saved FOR good works and we are matured THROUGH good works!

When Paul says that we are not saved by works, he means the Works of the Law. Sabbath observance, circumcision, observing food laws and ceremonies. When James uses the word for works, he is talking about the works of love. He's talking about mercy, compassion, holiness. We are not saved by Works of the Law, but we are saved for the Works of Love.

This is the unavoidable observation.

But that brings us to verses 25-26 and...

3. **The Final Argumentation** (v. 25-26)

You might think that James has made his point. And he has. But, folks, the tendency in the human heart to cheapen God's grace and presume on His forgiveness, claiming that grace reigns in his life all the while sin is ruling his life is so strong that James hammers home with two brief but final thoughts.

He's already pointed to the Old Testament example of Abraham as one who had faith in God, but whose faith led him to pass the most horrific test of all. His faith was completed, matured by his obedience. But now he offers another Old Testament example, **a closing similarity**, in verse 25.

And don't miss this. Abraham was the father of God's chosen people and the original recipient of God's promise. He is the greatest of the

ancient patriarchs. He is the ultimate embodiment of God's plan to save the world through those who trust in Him.

But Rahab was about as outside the family of God as you can get. You remember the story when Israel first crossed the Jordan to possess the Promised Land. Joshua sent in spies to scope out the city of Jericho. Rahab lived in that city. She was a pagan. She was a prostitute. She was unclean. But she came to believe in the living God of Israel's promise and covenant. And that faith translated into action when she hid the Israelite spies in her house.

Rahab translated faith into action. She didn't turn away and claim that the spies' problem wasn't her problem. She didn't look at them with sympathy but refuse to offer her home and her assistance. She took responsibility for embodying and advancing God's plan and God's purpose even though it was risky for her personally. So from the greatest to the least, the highest to the lowest and everybody in between, saving faith is obedient faith that embodies God's purpose for the world. Because the faith she affirmed was the faith on which she acted, Rahab, the outsider pagan prostitute later married an Israelite man and became an ancestor of Israel's greatest King, David.

This is yet another example of saving faith as active faith. Saving faith is difference-making faith. Saving faith is real faith that does more than affirm the gospel from afar. It embodies the gospel each day. The faith that justifies, that demonstrates someone's place in God's forgiven family, in God's forever family, is a faith that is living, pulsing, active, and involved. It isn't a faith that stops by to hear the occasional sermon on Sunday only to reflect the values and vision of their morally upstanding but utterly lost neighbors on Monday. Rahab is not only justified, included in God's family, but even identified as a direct, genealogical ancestor of King Jesus Himself.

So James offers that closing similarity and, verse 26, **a concluding analogy**.

For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. James has argued about as forcefully for this reality as anyone can. He is issuing a clarion call to professing Christians in these verses. He uses every rhetorical strategy available to him to shock us, shake us, and wake us to the urgency of practical obedience as the unmistakable and unavoidable sign of justifying faith, of saving Christian faith.

You will have noticed that James doesn't argue that saving faith is evidenced by subjective feelings. He doesn't declare saving faith to be evidenced by emotional experience. Neither is saving faith evidenced by intellection assent or mere verbal affirmation. Saving faith, covenant-keeping, justifying, family-of-God faith is evidenced by our obedience to Christ in the fruit in our lives.

As we close, I challenge you to ask yourself some serious questions.

How does your life, right now, reflect the reality of your salvation?
Is your life materially different than the lives of your non-Christian family, friends, neighbors?

Do you really want to know the truth of where you stand today?

I urge you, ask God to help you take a sober look and be honest about what you see. Then run to Jesus. Repent of your sins, trust Him truly. Be washed by His blood and made holy. Submit to His authority, let His Spirit drive a life of joyful obedience to Kingdom service.

Let's Pray