

BARREN FAITH, LIVING CHRIST

An exposition of James 2:14-17
at West Hills San Jose on May 22, 2022

INTRODUCTION: Let's pray: Holy, Immortal, Invisible, God of all creation, You have made all things and in you all things live move and have their being. In You we rejoice, because through Christ and the Spirit you have joined us to your eternal people, and through them have made us partakers of life everlasting and the very peace that flows down from heaven. Help us to worship this morning as those who drink deeply from the rivers of your holy grace.

We come to you in humility bearing the burdens of our world. There are so many people who are far from you, so many people who are hurting and alone, so many people apathetically passing through this life gratified with the lower things of this creation and who don't seek you. We ask you to come and rain down revival from on high. To come bring an overwhelming conviction of sin upon all people, that friends and enemies, families and strangers would come together at the foot of your cross. And would you begin with us. Would you fill us with zeal for your glory, for your name in our city and our region. And would you extend that over all the church in all the world...that we would burn with a passion to make you known, in our neighborhoods, in our cities, in our counties and throughout the world.

We also pray Lord that your gracious gospel would feed and stoke the fire of love within your church. Would you fill us with a deep burden to love one another as you have loved us. I pray that as we continue to live together as friends, we would see one another not only as people to hang out with, but as eternal souls worthy of our attention, our prayers, our love and our acts of sacrificial love. I pray that you would grant us joy and patience and kindness and gentleness amongst ourselves and with all those you bring through our doors.

We want to pray for our friends at Vertical church and their dispute with their denomination. We pray especially for Pastor Mike Thorburn as that situation becomes increasingly more serious for him as he seeks to honor you. Help Him Lord to glorify you in that situation as he strives to do what is right to the best of his abilities.

Finally Lord I pray for us and our time together. I pray that you would help us to internalize the Words of the Scripture, that you would impress them upon our hearts, and that we would turn and live for all our days as those who honor you with our whole lives. We don't want a dead faith...but a living One. And you alone can cause our faith to live...so come Holy Spirit and bring life out of barrenness that you might be glorified and that we might rejoice. I ask for this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

PROBLEM: Grace and peace and peace West Hills it is my great honor and privilege to get to open the Word with you again. This morning we are going to introduce a topic we will spend a few weeks on, that is extremely important for both every Christian and every Christian congregation. And that is the subject of living and dead faith. There is living faith that bears much fruit unto God, that feeds and sustains a worshipping life, and leads to the final salvation before Christ at the end of time. And there is something called dead faith, which bears no fruit, which feeds no true worship, does not bring one into a relationship with God and does not result in salvation at the end of time.

“Faith”, for every single person in this room, is either alive, or dead, genuine or insincere, true or phony, leading us to God or leaving us where we are. And James thinks it’s very important that every single one of us think, seriously, and soberly about this question for ourselves. Not to lead us primarily inwardly, where we are looking for assurance from ourselves. But to lead us inward insofar as to make sure that we are still looking outward, to God in love, and towards our neighbors as we have been commanded.

And it’s important to James as we will see in the weeks to come, because this is all about where you are ultimately headed...to either salvation or judgment, and for those who will listen and receive what James has to say about this, you will find yourself growing ever closer to the God who has saved, is saving, and will save us at the end of time. And for those who won’t there lies before you a terrifying judgment from which there can be no escape. And I hope you will listen today not only for yourself but also for the future. You are going to meet all different kinds of people in this life who will have all kinds of different motivations for saying that they are a christian. And James wants them to know this too, so that as many as possible can be saved. This brings me to my. main point today; here is what I believe James is trying to say to us in our text this morning

MAIN POINT: A dead faith even in the living Christ, cannot save you. So come to Him and live

SETTING THE CONTEXT: Please open your bibles to the book of James, we are going to pick up where I left off last week in chapter 2 verse 14. But give me a quick minute to recalibrate our minds and hearts to the context of the letter. The book of James was most likely written by James the brother of our Lord Jesus. He has had a long and fruitful ministry to the Jews living in Jerusalem, but now feels it is appropriate to send a letter to the Christian Jews scattered throughout the Roman empire. And His goal is to leave them with a clear sense of direction for what a life of faithful discipleship to Christ looks like. And so He began with shaping how we ought to think about trials. About our prayer life. And most critically for today, how important it is to hear, internalize and do the word of God. The perfect law, the law of freedom. And He has now begun unpacking several examples of what life lived in this freedom looks like.

A few weeks ago he pointed out that it looks like visiting the orphan and the widow in their distress. Last week he talked about resisting the temptation to show partiality towards possible converts based on what you think they can give you. And now today James wants to connect these examples back to what real faith is. And he is going to do that by beginning with a contrast with dead faith. Next week he will give us several examples of true living faith, but we begin with the foil, with the contrast for our instruction and edification. So let’s now humble our minds and open our hearts for the reading of the Word of the Lord.

READING: James 2:14–17 [14] What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? 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. (ESV)

PRAYER: Seal these words upon our hearts and lives forever and ever. Amen.

ROAD MAP: 1.) What is James talking about, 2.) What is dead faith, 3) How do we respond to these truths?

WHAT IS JAMES TALKING ABOUT?

1. So it's important that we start with this initial question because as you may or may not know, this text has lived at the center of catholic, protestant debates for hundreds of years. Not just this section but the rest of chapter 2 as well. And one of the reasons I wanted to slow down and focus on this first section of James 2 was to help establish the interpretive grid for the rest of James 2 in the coming week.
2. So let's begin with the most obvious issue and work backward towards the biblical texts. If you are a protestant, or aka someone whose religious convictions have been shaped by the religious reformation that took place in the 15th and 16th centuries whether you know it or not, than you have probably heard the statement: Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone.
 1. And if you have taken the time to deeply consider not only every noun of that sentence but every preposition, you might be tempted to over simplify what it is saying and create a false dichotomy between what protestants have championed about how God saves... and this verse in James.
 2. When Protestants crafted that sentence, they did so as a response to the idea that salvation is imparted and infused into us as we participate in various sacraments such as priestly confession and other things. They were trying to say no, its by God's gracious gift that we receive faith IN THE LORD JESUS and that alone is what saves us. The rest of that stuff is of spiritual benefit, but it is not the means or the grounds by which we inherit eternal life in God.
 3. And of course they said that because of the very clear statements of Paul in various epistles. One clear example being Ephesians 2:8-9 which says "For by grace you have been saved through faith, this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, NOT A RESULT of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. So we have always maintained a tight association between faith and good works, but we have tried to keep them ordered in their proper relationship. We are saved by faith for good works. Not saved by faith and works.
3. And this brings us to what I've always seen as the real crux of the issue...the apostle Paul said we are saved by faith only NOT by works. And James says in verse 17 so faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. Which sounds like he is saying salvation is NOT by faith alone. What is the deal here? So the big thing we HAVE to get our heads around with an issue like this is context. We can't read the NT as if it is a monolithic flat document. It's not that. It's a library of letters and literature. James and Paul were writing to totally different groups, at totally different times for totally different reasons. James is writing to a scattered group of monotheistic Jewish Christians whose Christian convictions will cost them dearly

not only in the public sphere of Rome and but within the smaller social sphere of their Jewish diaspora community.

1. The temptations facing those guys will be to assent to the idea that Christ is Lord but to compromise in living it out. That is what is facing them.
4. Paul most of the time is writing to congregations comprised primarily of gentiles who are used to dealing with a fundamentally different kind of God than YHWH. These people are used to serving gods that are served by human hands, that are fickle and must be appeased by sacrifices and offerings. Whose primary way of relating to these false gods from birth has been on the basis of works done by them. It doesn't take much thought to start to recognize that the kinds of things that each apostle needs to emphasize is going to be dramatically different based on the audience they are writing to.
 1. All that to say...we shouldn't read the bible like a flat text book full of raw decontextualized information. This is a library of literature full of depth and meaning and context and significance. The whole project of trying to pit Paul against James has in my opinion distorted our ability to read James accurately because we feel like he must fit into some kind of Pauline box. I want to suggest this morning that everything both of these guys wrote was completely true and they in no way contradict each other.
5. Let's look carefully at the text. Verse 14 what good is it my brothers, James asks, if someone SAYS he has faith but does not have works? Can that FAITH SAVE HIM? Full stop. I want to contend along with John Calvin and many other leaders of the reformation that what James is about to contrast is not FAITH VERSES WORKS...but two kinds of faith. A dead faith and a living faith.
 1. He asks in verse 14 If someone SAYS...if someone professes to have faith...but that profession is not accompanied by any obedience or repentance, or love, or joy, or worship or thanksgiving, or acts of mercy...if someone says I believe in Jesus but has none of that stuff can that kind of faith save him? And the question is rhetorical... because the answer is OBVIOUSLY no.
6. Am I faithful Christian because I say I'm a faithful Christian or am I faithful Christian because I follow Christ. We would all agree with the second one right? That's all James is saying. Real faith isn't simply knowing something...real faith is actually believing and acting on it. That's all James is trying to say and that's the error he is trying to prevent. Don't think that you are okay because YOU SAY you have faith. You have to actually have faith in you are going to be saved. Now let's be clear about what faith is.
 1. Historically, real Christian faith has been defined as possessing three aspects. Notitia, Assensus, Fiducia. Or to use English words...true Christian faith has knowledge, assent and trust.
 2. Let's take those in order: for faith to be saving it has to have knowledge. It can't be faith in the vague God out there somewhere. Christian faith has as it's object...the Lord Jesus. Ephesians 1:15 Paul says For this reason because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints...." In order for your faith to be a saving faith it has to be faith IN CHRIST.
 3. Second: you can't just know that Jesus is the Christ. James clarifies in verse 19 So you believe that God is one; you do well. But even the demons believe that...and it makes

them shudder.” It can’t just be bare knowledge...it has to be knowledge joined by a true assent. Demons hear that Jesus is Lord and they resist. Christian faith hears that Jesus is Lord and we affirm and take refuge in it. I don’t just know it, I believe it with all my heart and agree with God that it is good.

4. And finally third, and I think this is James’ big beef with folks in the diaspora. True faith isn’t just right content...and the affirmation of its truth and goodness...but it involves ACTUAL trust and confidence in it’s truth and goodness which involves right response. So if God tells me I’m a sinner and that salvation is only in Christ...fiducia involves me trusting that that is true and doing what he tells me to do about it...namely to confess and repent of my sins and to entrust myself to Jesus to save me. It’s not my response that saves me. It’s that my response is a profession of true faith in the living Christ.
7. So true faith has been distinguished as possessing three aspects...notitia, assensus and fiducia, it is faith in the true object, Jesus, it is faith that assents, or affirms as good the truth and goodness of this information...and it involves trust or confidence about the truth and goodness of the object. That is what Christian faith is. And James here wants to be really clear if you are missing one of those aspects...if you try to separate knowledge and assent from trust...you end up with a dead faith. You end up with a faith that cannot save.
8. The kind of faith that justifies is the faith that possesses all three aspects as he will demonstrate throughout this chapter. But this is what I wanted to make exceptionally clear... James is concerned about living faith and dead faith. NOT faith vs. works. And this is the conceptual framework he expects us to take into the rest of the chapter as we will see next week. So let’s now focus a little more in depth on the text before us and ask our next question what is dead faith:

WHAT IS DEAD FAITH?

1. James’ first question is WHAT GOOD IS IT my brothers, to SAY you have faith but have no works. We then find a parallel statement in verses 15 and 16 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and 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?
2. And the unstated answer is...it is no good. That kind of faith...the kind of faith that knows what is true, that knows what is good...that verbally affirms the truth but never acts on it...is no good. Coming back to verse 14. The kind of faith does not save. And it’s really important...that all of us hear and understand that.
 1. Hear what I mean when I say this...there is a way of being “Christian” while never doing what Christ says. There is a way of knowing the right things to say, knowing the right way to present yourself in public...but never doing the things that God requires of you.
 2. James feels the need to deal with this fact all the way back in the first century, it shouldn’t surprise you that we still encounter that phenomenon today. People who say, I agree that Christ is Lord, I’m a Christian, but when it comes time to actually serve Jesus, to help our church family, to pray, to give, to sacrifice your time and energy on thankless task...all you ever say is good for you guys, hope that goes well. Do you think that kind of faith is going to save you? That’s our contemporary analog to what James is saying.

3. James says that that kind of faith is dead in verse 17. He means dead in the sense that it is not vital or dynamic. It doesn't motivate or influence your heart or your behaviors. This kind of dead faith does not attain to the purpose for which God creates it, your salvation in v 14.
 1. The example he gives in verses 15-16 is really telling. You are encountered with an opportunity for Christian mercy, you encounter an opportunity to express the kind of love that we have received in the gospel...and you do literally nothing with it. Someone is literally lacking basic life provision. They are shivering because they lack cloths. They are losing weight because they are lacking in daily food...they literally don't have enough to eat...you see that...and say to them...wow sorry hope that works out for you. As you go back to eating your large meal.
 2. It's really hard to imagine any of us doing something like that...but I suppose I shouldn't put that beyond any of us. James isn't talking about when you see a homeless guy on the side of the road, he says in verse 15 if you see a brother or a sister in this plight.
4. James is saying if one of the members of West Hills lost their job, and got evicted from their house, and was living in their car and didn't have enough to eat, and your response to them was wow that's rough, hope you get that figured out...we should not be confident that we have a saving faith. That kind of faith is dead.
 1. And I want to just be really really clear and direct about this. I've been kind of theoretical, I want to be as concrete and clear as James is being. If you can hear that you were conceived into a sin cursed world, and that your very nature is bent towards evil because of the fall of man. And that as you have grown up, you were not only the victim of the evils of this world but you have actively participated in the evils of this world by thought, word and deed. And having participated, you are under the same righteous judgement by God for the deeds you have done in the body. And there are no loopholes, there are no bail outs, there are no exceptions because you are special. God is going to deal with you fairly for the sins that you have committed and you like the rest of us are guilty. And no matter how good you are at hiding it...all of it will be brought into the light for everyone to see...especially the all knowing eye of God who sees all the way through you.
 2. And rather than leaving you in that condition, and dealing with you fairly and justly, He chose to set his love upon you from before the foundation of the world. And having set His eternal love on us...He sent His Son into this broken and fallen world to rescue us from the consequences of our sins. And He didn't come to hand out get out of jail free cards...He came to actually suffer in His body on the tree for the sins that we committed on earth. And it wasn't easy because He was God...He became fully man, just like you and just like me. And He went willingly, as an act of utter mercy and grace. And because He died for us, and was raised in power on the third day...our sins are not only forgiven but we have become participants in His everlasting life and our future is secure in the world to come.
 3. And no matter what happens in this world...all of it is only light momentary affliction which is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison for we will reign with the Son in glory forever and ever in the life giving presence of the immortal and eternal Lover of our souls.

4. If you can hear that, and feel no hatred for your sin, no love for God, no desire to share that grace that you have received, no sympathy for people in need...than you don't have a living faith in the gospel. Even if you say that you think its true. Faith in the gospel is alive...it reorders your life...it motivates and influences your behaviors. It orients you toward the God of eternity...even as you pray your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
5. I think James wants us to conceive of our faith in terms of relationship and priorities. If we have a relationship with the living Christ it will shape our priorities. If we are members of the New Covenant with Him...which is another way of describing our relationship...that will shape our life. James isn't tell us that we need to add works to our faith. He is describing the kind of works that inevitably flow from true saving faith.
 1. If your faith in Christ is dead...and you try to add works to it, that won't help. What will heal and give life to your faith is that you actually begin to live in relationship with God and let that shape your priorities.
6. Faith in Christ is like being married. Those are two covenant relationships meant to dramatically impact your life. In a faithful godly marriage...you don't need to see a marriage certificate or a wedding ring to figure out if spouses are married to each other. You can watch where they sleep every night. You can just watch and pay attention to how they spend their time, how they spend their money, who they are excited to include in what they are doing. You can look at who and what they prioritize and it very quickly becomes obvious if they are married or not. You can see what they love by what they prioritize.
7. So let me put that question to YOU...what are you prioritizing in your life? If pastor Josh could follow you around tomorrow, would it be obvious by the end of the day that you are a man or a woman who lives in a covenant relationship with Jesus?
 1. Now I know that some of you who have really sensitive consciences are going to hear that question and hear me asking if you have a perfect marriage? That's not what I'm asking. Of course every single one of us has aspects of our relationship to God that we feel could be better, including me.
 2. I'm not asking if you have a perfect marriage. I'm asking are you married? Is your faith living. Does it affect your priorities and how you live? I'm not asking do you live a sinless life. Does your faith shape your priorities. If the answer is no, than it's likely that your faith is dead...and you need to come to Christ for life. If the answer is yes but it could be better...than praise God...join the club. This question isn't about are you working hard enough...this question is about whether or not you are entrusting yourself...and living in relationship with Jesus.
8. So what have we seen so far? We have seen that this text is not about faith vs. works but about living faith vs. dead faith. We have seen that true faith has three aspects, truth, assent and trust. Second we have seen that dead faith is a faith that fails to affect how you live. It's a faith that doesn't respond to the glory of the gospel for whatever reason, and it fails to bring life into the heart. Let's now close with our last question...how should you respond to these truths?

HOW DO WE RESPOND TO THESE TRUTHS?

1. One of the first things that we need to do is to appreciate the fact that we all know that life is never this simple. James is speaking—as he does in this letter—in broad generalities. Are their reasons that someone might say I hope you are warmed and filled for reasons other than having a dead faith? Of course. Maybe you yourself have nothing. Maybe you've given all your money to someone else in need. Of course there are reasons.
2. But sometimes we need to hear things put this black and white to shake us out of complacency. Life may not be this simple for everyone...but maybe it's that simple for you. You're faith is dead...you are stuck, you are saying to yourself...that is me, what should I do? And the answer isn't do more works. The answer isn't go find someone to show generosity to, LIFE comes from God. You need to bring your apathy or your selfishness or whatever it is that's hindering your faith...and confess and repent and seek life from Him.
3. Don't live in your guilt anymore. Don't live in sin anymore come to Jesus and ask for life. And you might say to yourself...but I have so much sin. I see so many things in my recent past that God hates...how will he respond if I come to him in my current state...shouldn't I seek to make amends or do penance first.
 1. I will tell you what the prophet Jeremiah said as He was sitting in the guilt of all the sins of Israel...He said in Lamentations 3:21 But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning Great is Your faithfulness. The LORD is my portion says my soul, “therefore I will hope in Him. The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him.”
 2. If you seek Him you are not going to find someone who is angry with you...you are going to find an eager and a waiting father...whose eyes have been fixed on the horizon as he has waited for His prodigal to return home. He doesn't want to punish you for your sins, He wants to clothe you with the robe of Christ's righteousness, to cleanse you of all your sins...to fill you with living faith so that generosity is not a burden but an overflow of joy. Why would you keep your distance??? If you look at your faith and it feels dead...come to the one who offers life. Dead faith in a living Christ cannot save. But the living Christ can raise the dead. Go to Him.
4. There is another way that this text applies that's more subtle and requires a lot more nuance. If faith is dead apart from works...it's also true for WORKS to be dead apart from faith. What do I mean. James is saying that good works flow from living faith as a natural consequence. But good works can also flow from bad places in our hearts.
5. The Pharisees were super devoted to works...but inwardly were ravenous wolves.
 1. Some of us might be tempted to do good because of how it makes us look, not from a faithful desire to please the Lord. That is also a problem.
 2. Some of us might be tempted to do good works from a place of guilt...as if Christ saved you but the only way you are going to stay saved is if you work hard enough to keep yourself in God's grace.
 3. Some of us might be tempted to do good works because of an ungodly compulsion. There is both godly and ungodly compulsion. Paul can do hard things that his flesh doesn't want to do because the love of Christ compels Him. But Peter can tell elders not

to shepherd under compulsion, which is something like doing it because other people want you too, not because you believe God want's you too. I think

4. These are all example of dead works. Dead works flow from a place other than a response to God's grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. And this is NOT what God desires for His people. If you find yourself in this second category more than the first. It's not that your faith is dead and you are living in a perpetual state of ignoring the life and example of Jesus. It's that even though your faith is alive, you find yourself serving from a place of mixed, or maybe even wrong motives what should you??
6. The most obvious answer to me is in James 1:21 You need to put away all sin from your heart namely, where you see it confess it and then you need to receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. I think he primarily has in mind the gospel, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and all that that means for us as explained by the apostles. We need to come back to the living Christ, and receive the truth about Him into our hearts and as we receive it into the soil of our hearts we need to water those gospel seeds through prayer, meditation, practice, and love.
 1. And we don't do this to fix ourselves...we do it because we love God. Because of His gospel we are in covenant with Him...and we want that covenant relationship to shape our priorities, our lives and our eternal destinies.
7. James isn't about us trying hard and doing better. James is about us honestly assessing ourselves and what we do, and where we see a failure to love like Christ, to own it, repent of it, and to seek power from God to live in the ways that please Him. Not so that we will be saved...BECAUSE HE HAS SAVED US. That's the word meekly received. We aren't trying to accomplish something. We are trying to receive something that is power and capable of reordering our who life...the gospel of Jesus our risen and living Lord of all, who loves and redeems us in order to purify us and make us zealous for good works.
8. Salvation in the christian life is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Not a barren faith...but a living one.

Because a dead faith even in the living Christ, cannot save you. So come to Him and live

COMMUNION: Part of how we bring ourselves close to God in the Christian life is through the means that He has prescribed. He has given us fountains to drink from His grace that the gospel might be watered in our hearts. One of those fountains is the sacrament of communion. In it we are reminded of the sacrifice that has saved us, and the covenant by which we are kept. In communion we see that in our relationship with God...we do not offer Him sacrifices because He has been sacrificed FOR US. In communion we see that our relationship with God is not achieved by our faithfulness but by the shed blood of the risen Lamb. And it is through Him that we are reconciled, it is through Him we are maintained, and it is through Him that we will ultimately be saved. If you are a christian who has put their faith in Jesus and expressed that faith through baptism I would encourage you to come to the table and have your faith nourished and strengthened for the glory of God.