Legacy Church

James: Truth that Hurts · Sermon Six · Casey Ryon

Faith that Works

Grace, Conviction, and a Faith That Lives

James 2:14–26

Good evening! Tonight we continue our study in the book of James. This book is often called the Proverbs of the New Testament. Every line seems to hit hard and fast, bringing revelation, conviction, and truth that hurts. So let me take a moment to remind you of the context and the theme.

The context: James is writing to Jewish Christians who had been persecuted to the point that they had to flee their homes, families, and communities to keep their lives. In this hard season, when following Jesus has cost them so much, James writes a letter confronting them rather than comforting them. He understands that it is in trial and hardship that our faith and our walk are most likely to falter. The theme: James is calling them (and us) out for half-hearted devotion and double-mindedness. We all have areas where we believe one thing and live another. That is the gap James is addressing, and his goal is to close it, making Christians who walk the talk.

Last week, Robby kicked off chapter 2 and unpacked the danger and temptation of showing partiality. Tonight we wrap up James 2, but first we have to start in another passage.

i. Justified as a Gift

> For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.
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> Romans 3:23–28, ESV

Before we can understand James, we have to start with a right understanding of the gospel. You and I were by nature children of wrath. We were under condemnation not merely because Adam sinned, but because we sin. We don't just violate the law of God. We violate the very heart of God. Every time we lie, lust, gossip, slander, backbite, steal, covet, manipulate, or hate another person, we violate the very image of God. Every time we chose ourselves over God, we were storing up wrath for ourselves, because God hates sin and hates the destruction it causes to His creation.

> But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.
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> Ephesians 2:4–9, ESV

Our debt, if we can put it that way, was too high to ever get free. Then Jesus comes on the scene, and Romans 5 hits with its full reality: God, in Christ, dies for His enemies. He pays the debt and satisfies the wrath of God. But you have to understand, He does this as a gift. It is free. It isn't because of our merit, and our good works have nothing to do with it, because we could never do enough good to pay back the debt.

If salvation isn't free, no one has any hope of receiving it. We were so far gone that it took an extraordinary act of grace and mercy for the creditor to forgive a debt we could never repay. That is the gospel. The debt is paid, and we can now be in a covenant relationship with God as if we had never sinned against Him.

> We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.
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> Galatians 2:15–16, ESV

This is a gift, not a reward. It comes through an act of grace, not good works. We could never be good enough, or do good enough, to even remotely earn it, and the moment we try to earn the gift is the moment we invalidate it as a gift. According to everything we just read, this gift is received by faith. So here is the big question we are going to tackle tonight: What is faith?

ii.

Two Temptations

Open your Bibles to James 2:14–26. As we read this text, we are going to face two temptations. I want to state them plainly and ask you not to give in to either one. We are going to have to be comfortable living in a bit of tension.

The first temptation is to take James' words to mean that good works, in addition to your faith, save you. Everything we just read in Romans, Ephesians, and Galatians shuts that door. The second temptation is to reduce good works to mere external evidence that saving faith once occurred. That doesn't seem to be what James is saying either. In James, works seem to be more than outward evidence of an inward reality.

iii.

If Someone Says

> What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.
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> James 2:14–17, ESV

Focus on one word in verse 14: *says*. If someone *says* he has faith. James is dealing with a claim to faith that has no works backing it up, and he asks whether that kind of faith can save. The implied answer is no. It cannot.

Then he gives an analogy. In verse 14, someone says they have faith but has nothing to back it up. In verse 16, someone says, "Be warmed and filled," but does nothing to help. We would condemn that person immediately. We would tell them they are fooling themselves and their words have no substance.

This analogy hits hard because it feels scandalous. It is scandalous. Listen, as Christians we are called to be a light to the world. That means we meet needs and make a difference in our domain. Wherever we go, together or alone, should be better because we are there. We can't be the kind of people who claim faith and use wonderful spiritual language but don't help people in need.

iv.

Show Me Your Faith

> 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. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe —and shudder!
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> James 2:18–19, ESV

Some people seem to be saying, "I'm a faith kind of guy," or, "I'm a works kind of gal." The modern equivalent might be, "My part in the body is to have faith, and your part is to work." James won't allow it. You can't show me anything if all you have is faith, but I can show you my faith by looking at my works. Works are the proper evidence of a faith that saves.

Then James turns up the heat. He sets saving faith beside empty belief. You can believe the right things, but if you don't live out those beliefs, you resemble demons. They believe true things about God. They know God is one. But their works don't line up with their right belief.

There are two kinds of "Christians" we need to make sure we never become. The first checks all the right doctrinal boxes but lives contrary to them. The second has good works but bad doctrine, like the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses. We are called to a third category: right beliefs, a right walk, and a right heart.

James is telling us that faith without works is not only dead. It isn't saving faith at all. It's belief, and belief saves no one. You must have faith. The Greek word *pistis* (πίστις) has a broad range of meaning, but at its core it is a conviction of truth and trust in its implications. It is more than belief. It is a deep, gut-level conviction that something is true, and a life lived according to its implications.

Before You Turn the Page

Be honest. Where are you checking the right boxes while living contrary to them? Where do you say the right words and never lift a finger? Where is there a gap between what you believe and how you live? Don't measure your faith by how firmly you hold an opinion. Ask whether your conviction is actually moving you.

v.

Faith Completed by Works

> Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 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. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.
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> James 2:20–24, ESV

Here we pause and say, wait a second. What about Paul? I thought no one was justified by works. Hebrews helps us understand James here.

> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ... By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."
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> Hebrews 11:8–9, 17–18, ESV

Notice the pattern. By faith, Abraham did something. His faith compelled him to action, but ultimately the action found its home in his faith. Here is the big idea.

Saving faith is living faith.

James' language is so helpful here: faith was *completed* by his works. Faith isn't complete without works. It isn't saving faith if there is nothing to back it up.

vi.

The Body Without the Spirit

> 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? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.
>
> James 2:25–26, ESV

James ends with one more analogy. A body without the spirit has no life in it, and faith is the same way. Faith that never moves, never obeys, and never produces anything is dead. Living faith does something. And Paul understood and taught the same thing. Look at the verse right after the Ephesians passage we read.

> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.
>
> Ephesians 2:10, ESV

Works always accompany saving faith. You come to genuine faith, a deep conviction that Jesus is in fact God, and you live differently because of it, making war against your flesh. This should confront a version of Christianity many of us have encountered, where someone thinks, "I believed the right things, I prayed the prayer, so how I live afterward doesn't really matter." James leaves absolutely no room for that.

Ephesians 2:8–10

By Grace › Through Faith › For Good Works

If conviction doesn't propel you to live differently,
it isn't conviction. It's an opinion.

. . .

Soli Deo Gloria

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