



**James 2:14-26**  
**Genuine Faith and Good Works**

**Summary:** Good works accompany the Christian's genuine faith.

This morning we are going to pick up where Pastor Stephen left off last Sunday and begin in James 2:14, and we're going to go through to the end of the chapter. If you've been with us for the past two weeks, then you have probably recognized that this epistle is very dynamic, the points are incredibly direct, and James doesn't shy away from being fiery and confrontational at times.

In our time together this morning, we're going to see that what a person does is just as critical as what he or she purports to believe. In fact, what you do, or don't do, shows what you actually believe.

I'm going to start with an illustration and then we're going to dive into our text. Imagine, if you will, a baseball enthusiast, a man who practically lives for the game. He knows all of the players' stats, he's followed the game from his youth, and he can even tell you the history of the game down to the minutia of all of the recent changes to the game.

On top of that, this man has even gone on some of the Big League Tours and visited virtually all of the most famous MLB stadiums across the nation. In short, this man may know more about the game, its history, and its rules than those who do it for a living.

We could rightly call this man a baseball expert. But despite his extensive knowledge about the game, we would **not** call this man a baseball player unless he also picked up a bat and mitt, and started practicing and playing the game. Being a baseball player means that you actually participate in the game. There are things you do which show that you are an athlete.

In fact, should this man claim to be a baseball player, we would have reason to doubt that claim if we never saw him swing a bat or practice at a local baseball field. In like manner, James is going to show us that good works and obedience to God are necessary marks of faith in a Christian.

Just as you would doubt a man's claim about being a baseball player if you never saw him play or practice – even if he knows a lot about the game – so too do we have reason to doubt someone's so-called faith, especially our own, if you never observe any good works or other evidence of saving faith.

One of the points that James will make is that good works **will** be present in the life of a genuine Christian and much of our text today is going to be directed against the idea that a person can have faith in Jesus, but never actually demonstrate that faith through good works. It's a contradiction in terms.

This wrong idea is also addressed elsewhere in the New Testament. For instance, in his first epistle, the apostle John says “If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.” (1 John 1:6).

What we do illustrates what we actually believe and as we’ll soon see, good works should accompany the genuine faith of a Christian. Turn with me to James 2 as we begin reading in verse 14.

### **James 2:14-26**

<sup>14</sup> What *does it* profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what *does it* profit? <sup>17</sup> Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

<sup>18</sup> But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. <sup>19</sup> You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! <sup>20</sup> But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? <sup>21</sup> Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? <sup>22</sup> Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? <sup>23</sup> And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. <sup>24</sup> You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

<sup>25</sup> Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent *them* out another way?

<sup>26</sup> For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

This is a weighty passage and it is probably the most controversial one in the entire epistle. Some have misunderstood this passage and assumed that James is saying that you need to do good works in order to be saved. But as we study this passage, we’ll see that that is not anything close to what James is arguing.

Instead, James is condemning what we could call a purely intellectual faith. If our faith doesn’t prompt us to obey God, to love others, and do good works, then we should wonder whether or not our faith is genuine. The main point is that for a genuine Christian, good works go hand in hand with real faith.

But before we study this passage and consider the role that works should play in our lives, I want us to first be reminded about what the Bible teaches about how we are saved. This is important because we need to know the basics before we go on to consider James’ perspective. In Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul writes the following:

<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not of works, lest anyone should boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

It is very important that we understand this. Paul tells us that we are saved by grace through faith. Our works do not save us and we are completely incapable of saving ourselves. God is the one who saves us through faith, and that is how we become Christians. We are saved when we place our faith in Jesus.

Now I've just said the same thing about three different ways so that this is crystal clear because for the rest of our time together we are going to be talking about works and tangible actions. What we must understand is that faith and belief in God comes first, and everything else that we read in James first assumes that you actually believe in Jesus.

Practically speaking, for anyone here who doesn't believe in Jesus, this means that the good works you do now won't save you when you are judged after your time in this life is complete. Good works apart from Jesus are dead and frankly very little of what we're going to read today applies to you if you do not first trust in Jesus.

With that said, let's turn our attention back to Ephesians 2:10 because this is where we start to see the point that James is making back in our main text. In verse 10, Paul tells us that once we are saved and reborn, we become His workmanship and as new creations in Christ, we are created **for good works**.

That means that if you have been saved by Jesus, one of the reasons for that is so that you might **do good works** and honor God with your life. The works themselves don't save you, and we need to be really clear on that point. But once you choose to follow Jesus, good works should and will be present in your life.

As we flip back to James, we are going to see that he comes at this from the other direction. What he is concerned about is the person who calls himself a Christian, but shows no actual evidence of faith in his life. The point that James drives at is that genuine faith will be accompanied by tangible actions.

Conversely, the **lack** of works in one's life indicates that that person's faith is not genuine and that it can never save. True faith must have a practical outworking as we'll now read. Please turn back with me to James 2 as we begin in verse 14.

In this passage, James presents three illustrative examples. We'll read the first one now and later in the passage he'll also mention the historical examples of Abraham and Rahab. But starting in verse 14 we read:

<sup>14</sup> What *does it* profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what *does it* profit? <sup>17</sup> Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

In this hypothetical example, James imagines a fellow Christian who has a clear and urgent need. For instance, we could imagine a believer in our own day who is going through a very difficult time. Perhaps she no longer has a place to live, a number of her possessions were either lost or stolen, money is mostly gone, she only has a few clothes left, and it's winter.

Now imagine that you are in a position to help this Christian, this sister in Christ. But instead of doing anything tangible or expending even a small amount of effort to assist, you simply say "I hope you feel better!" "good luck!" or best of all, "I'll pray for you!"

Now to be clear, sometimes prayer is the best and maybe the only response that we can have in certain situations. But God help us if we ever feel tempted to use prayer as an excuse for inaction. When we have the capacity to act, we can see that those are useless responses and they evidence a useless faith.

That's the picture that James presents us with and it's meant to show us just how ridiculous and almost laughable it is for anyone to say that Jesus is their Lord, and yet to fail to act and live as Jesus and the apostles and the prophets have both commanded and modeled for us. As some might say, the proof is in the pudding.

In verse 14, James asks whether that faith – the type which fails to produce good works – can save anyone. And the answer is no. The reason is because genuine faith changes you and will produce in you the desire and capacity to do that which is pleasing to God.

We believe that this happens through the filling of the Holy Spirit who takes up residence in us when we believe. So, conversely, if you are not changed and spurred onto good works, then you owe it to yourself to consider if your faith is actually genuine.

There's really nothing complicated about this – Your works, either good or bad, tell a story and they spring out of what you truly believe. The works of a righteous man or a righteous woman, however imperfect, will accompany and validate their faith in Jesus. Similarly, the works of an unbeliever will eventually validate his or her unbelief and lack of faith in Jesus.

In speaking of false prophets, Jesus said that we will know them by their fruit. The question that you should wrestle with is "what story do your works tell?" "What fruit is your life producing?" Do they spring out of a love for God in tangible ways, or are they dead and useless?

Let's continue reading in verse 18:

**18** But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. **19** You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! **20** But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?

We begin with a challenge: How can you demonstrate or prove your faith apart from your actions? The point is that you can't! No, the validity of your faith will be proved by what you do.

Christianity does not have two paths – one of faith and one of works. You can't just have faith and leave works for someone else to do. Likewise, you also can't have works and leave faith for someone else to believe. Faith in Jesus and works that are pleasing to Him are inseparable; you can't have one without the other.

The problem with the person who says they believe but doesn't have works is that there is simply no proof. Anyone can claim to have faith in Jesus and there are many who do. But faith by itself is invisible and as we'll see next, simply knowing the truth about Jesus is not sufficient.

Verse 19 says [You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!](#) Now it's important for us to recognize that demons are real. They were once angels before they sinned and fell. They now follow Satan and they know the truth.

They know that Jesus is the Son of God, they know that He is in heaven right now, and they further know that He will one day return to rule on earth. They also know that their judgment is certain and that one day all of them will be cast into the lake of fire.

That's worth emphasizing – the demons know the truth and it's not a stretch to say that they even know it better than many Christians. They are not confused about who Jesus is. In fact, we read in the gospels when Jesus would cast demons out of people, that many of them would loudly proclaim in terror that Jesus is in fact the Son of God. They have no doubt as to who He is.

This should grab our attention because it shows that you can have perfect, or at least adequate knowledge about Jesus and not be saved. You can hear the best sermons, read the best commentaries, and do Bible study after Bible study.

You can know all about God and the ministry of Jesus and still come up short. You can even go to seminary and fully satisfy your intellectual curiosity and be convinced that Jesus is who He says He is, and yet not actually be a friend of God.

Knowledge is important. If you are a Christian, you should take time to learn about the Christian faith. But we need to acknowledge that we can't learn our way into heaven. Salvation comes through faith in Jesus only.

The question to ask yourself is: do I actually believe and trust in Jesus or is my knowledge actually no better than that which the demons possess? A good way to begin answering this question is to honestly consider whether or not you see evidence of genuine good works in your life.

When we come to faith in Jesus we believe that we are born again (John 3:3, 1 Peter 1:23). We are made spiritually alive and are given a new nature. Just two weeks ago we read in James 1:18 (NLT) that God "[chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession.](#)"

Genuine faith in God will transform you and make you different than who you were before. This is part of what we mean when we speak of being born again. The proof of that transformation is

what James is concerned about, and it is found in the good works which you do after you are converted.

That is why James tells us that faith without works is dead. It is why we are called to not be merely hearers of God's word, but are instead called to be doers of it as well.

As we continue on into verse 21, James is now going to shift to the historical example of Abraham. The point James is going to make is that Abraham's faith was proven and completed when he obeyed.

<sup>21</sup> Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? <sup>22</sup> Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? <sup>23</sup> And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. <sup>24</sup> You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

In the book of Genesis, we read that God called Abraham and promised that He would make Abraham into a great nation. The problem was that Abraham's wife, Sarah, was barren and unable to have children.

There was no natural way to explain how God would bring about a great nation from Abraham when his wife couldn't conceive. But despite his circumstances, Abraham trusted in God's promise and believed that God would do what He said He would do.

And so we read in verse 23 that "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Abraham had faith and several years later, God gave him a son named Isaac through his wife Sarah. But a number of years after Isaac was born, God then told Abraham to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him on a mountain.

Now there is much that we could say about that account and what it means and how it prefigured Jesus' sacrifice on the cross thousands of years later. But here are the two things we need to understand to make sense of what James is saying for us.

The first point is that Abraham's faith in God came first. In fact, Abraham's declaration of faith where he believed God and had it accounted to him for righteousness, that probably took place at least 30 years before God told Abraham to offer his son Isaac. Decades passed between when Abraham believed and when that belief was then put to the test. The point is that Abraham's faith came first before his works.

The second point is this and it's very important: Abraham's faith was proved when he was faced with the choice to either trust God or disobey His command. Let me say that once more – Abraham's faith was proved when he was faced with the choice to either trust God or disobey His command. The application for us is that genuine faith in God will lead you to make different, God-honoring decisions than you would otherwise have made.

As verse 22 tells us, we see that Abraham's "faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect" in him. Another way of putting this would be to say that Abraham's works completed his faith, it made it whole. It is one thing to say that we believe in God, but the proof of it is whether or not we back up our belief with tangible actions, especially when it could cost us something.

As we move onto the final historical example in this passage, we'll see that the expectation of faith and good works is not restricted to nor excluded from any class in society. Abraham was a wealthy, respected, and influential man. We even read in Genesis that he was able to field a small military force that was drawn from men who had been born exclusively from his own camp (Genesis 14:14). He was an important man in his day.

On the other the other end of the spectrum, Rahab, whom we read about next, was a pagan prostitute in the pagan city of Jericho. There's really nothing to romanticize about Rahab's background and employment. But despite her unremarkable background and the fact that her employment was based on sin, she exhibited genuine faith in God which was then validated by her actions.

As an aside, Rahab's story shows that we should never assume that anyone is ever too far away to come to the Lord and be changed. A pagan prostitute would probably not be at the top of anyone's list for most likely to surrender to God, yet the Bible and the rest of history is filled with examples such as hers.

Our God goes out of His way to seek and save the most unlikely sinners. If you feel like you're too far gone, you need to know that you haven't and there is still hope for you. Rahab's example should also spur us on to persistently pray for those people in our lives whom we assume would never turn to Christ. If there is one thing we all do it is underestimating God's capacity to save. Let's continue on to verse 25.

<sup>25</sup> Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent *them* out another way?

<sup>26</sup> For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Before Israel conquered the land of Canaan and drove out the wicked inhabitants who were there beforehand, Joshua sent in two spies to surveil the land. When they arrived in Jericho, they lodged at Rahab's inn. The king of Jericho got word of the spies and tried to capture them, but Rahab hid them and enabled them to escape.

Rahab and her countrymen in Jericho had heard about the Israelites and their God. They had heard how God had delivered the Israelites from Egypt and given them victory over other Gentile kings. With that as the background, here's what she told the spies in Joshua 2:11:

<sup>11</sup> And as soon as we heard *these things*, our hearts melted; neither did there remain any more courage in anyone because of you, for the Lord your God, He *is* God in heaven above and on earth beneath.



We see the beginnings of faith when Rahab said “for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath.”

Rahab’s story is especially compelling because, according to her, everyone she knew was terrified of the Israelites and of the one God. She knew that the land of Canaan was doomed (Joshua 2:9) and it seems like everyone else did as well. Yet it was only Rahab who actually acted on this belief, and in doing so, she proved her faith to be genuine.

There is a parallel between Rahab’s story and the fact that the demons believe, yet fail to produce good works as a result. The pagan, unbelieving inhabitants of ancient Canaan were terrified of the Israelites and the judgment which was coming upon them. And they were right to be afraid because in the end most of them were annihilated. It’s a picture of the judgment which will come upon all sin.

Yet even though they knew the truth, the Canaanites tried to stop God’s plan when they sought to apprehend the spies. Only Rahab acted in a way which demonstrated submission and obedience to God.

The point is that simply knowing the right things is not sufficient. It’s like our earlier baseball illustration – knowing about the game doesn’t make you an athlete. Instead, we as Christians are called to trust in God and then live that reality out through our actions. So with all of that said, why should we care about this and what does it mean for us? To answer this, I have four points for you to consider.

The first is to **watch out for dead faith**. You can assent to all of the Christian doctrines in your mind, but if you don’t actually trust and follow Jesus, then you’ve missed the main point. Our works tell a story, they reveal our priorities, and they indicate whether or not our lives have been transformed by Jesus.

This leads us to the question of how can you know whether or not you have true faith or dead faith? Well, part of the answer, as we’ve seen repeatedly this morning, is revealed by what you do and don’t do. Start by considering your motives – do you at least desire to do what God would have you do?

Do you at least want to be pleasing to Him? Before turning to Jesus, we are not naturally wired to do things that are pleasing to God. So if you can say ‘yes,’ then that indicates that there is health in your soul, that regeneration has taken place within you.

Consider your interactions with other Christians. Jesus said that one of the ways by which outsiders would know that we are Christians is if we have love for other believers (John 13:35). Jesus loves us and one of the marks of a Christian is a similar love for other believers.

So ask yourself – do you see any evidence of that in your own life? Do you possess an otherwise unexplained love, an unexplained care and concern for fellow believers in the church?



Consider your internal state after you sin. Do you have **any** remorse, **any** desire to confess and repent of your sin, and to seek restoration of your relationship with God? If you can say ‘yes,’ then that also indicates genuine, saving faith. We all sin, both Christians and non-Christians, but what is critical is what we do after we sin; that says a lot about us.

But if, on the other hand, you can sin repeatedly and legitimately not care and not even have a thought as to what God might have to say, then you need to recognize that your so-called “faith” may be dead.

In 1 John 3:10, the apostle John tells us the following: “**So now we can tell who are children of God and who are children of the devil. Anyone who does not live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to God** (NLT).”

Now this is not to say that true Christians never sin, because we frequently do. But what this is saying is that if you have no problem living in sin and no drive – even an imperfect one – to live righteously, then your faith is likely dead; and if your faith is dead, then you are not a child of God.

The good news is that if you see yourself in that description that I just gave, you don’t have to stay like that. It’s not complicated; the Bible says that “**Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved**” (Romans 10:13). If that is you, then your first step is to repent, confess your sin, and call upon Jesus, and trust that He will save you just as He has promised.

For those of us who do know and love and believe in Jesus, James reminds us that **obedience is difficult**. I think it’s noteworthy that in each example given by James in our text, all of them require something. In the example of helping someone who needs food or clothing, obedience would probably cost you time, effort, and a decent amount of money in order to meet those needs.

For Abraham, obedience meant spending three agonizing days as he journeyed with his son to the place where he was to sacrifice him (before God intervened). For Rahab, obedience meant placing her life at risk in order to save the lives of two strangers whom she had only just met.

Obedience to God and good works may be difficult and they may cost us something. I say this to point out that doing good is often hard and it is important that we recognize that.

But here’s where we as Christians need to be careful. It is possible for us to go too far and adopt a rigid, almost Stoic mindset where we just do the right thing because that’s our duty. Instead, the basis for our good works should be our love for Jesus.

This leads to the third point, which is that **good works spring out of our love for God**. Jesus said that “**If you love Me, keep My commandments**” (John 14:15) and “**If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word**” (John 14:23).

If you find yourself slipping into that mentality where you are doing good works only because it is the right thing to do, then I would strongly suggest to you that you take time to slow down,

seek the Lord through prayer and the reading of His word, and remember all that He has already done for you, and remind yourself how to delight yourself in Him again.

Keep running the race and remember Paul's words where he said "let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart" (Gal. 6:9).

This leads to my last point, which is that **God will reward us** for our good works. The Bible tells us that our salvation is a free gift from God; we can't earn it and we certainly don't deserve it. But apart from salvation, the Bible clearly teaches that Christians will either experience rewards or loss based on what we do with our lives.

In the last chapter of Revelation, Jesus Himself emphasizes this fact when He says "And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work" (Rev. 22:12).

I find this encouraging because it highlights the fact that nothing is hidden from God. As you live out your faith in the mundane events of everyday life, God sees what you do, even if others don't; He remembers all of it, even no one else does; and He will reward you for the good that you do in the end.

As we go from here, may we all grow in the practice of our faith. May we not just say the right things, but actually do what is right. May our faith be borne out in practical, tangible ways that honor God and bless those around us.

Let's pray.