

“Faith That Works”
Week 4 - James 2:14-26
February 6, 2021

SERMON INTRODUCTION

Tim. Pastor. **James 2:14-26.**

This passage we’re about to get into tonight is one of the most controversial, difficult, tricky passages in the Bible. We’ve got to wade into the deep end a little bit tonight.

This is not just theological bible nerd time because I enjoy it...

Let me say this and I’m not exaggerating - if you misunderstand and wrongly interpret this passage you will miss the entire point of Christianity. The gospel is at stake with our understanding of James 2.

In fact, one of the arguments against the Bible that many folks will give is that the Bible is incongruent. It contradicts itself. And when they make that argument one of the first places they point to is to the book of James. That James, especially here in 2:14-26, seems to contradict much of the other parts of the New Testament.

So in order to be helpful and get this passage into our lives, we’re going to have to do some Bible study. I gotta make sure you understand what James is actually saying. I’m going to spend the majority of my time teaching tonight, and then I’ll do a little bit of preaching at the end.

Pray.

James’s Argument - 14, 17, 20, 26

Let’s start by looking at the big argument James is making in the text.

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

James starts out with a rhetorical question - What good is it, if someone claims to have faith, but has no works (that’s the Christian word for like good deeds, good Christian action), has no deeds that correspond with his self-proclaimed faith? What’s the implied answer? **No good.** It’s no good.

Can that faith save him? Again - what’s the implied answer? If someone claims to have faith but has no works that correspond with that faith, is that faith a saving faith, is it able to save? **No.**

Skip down to vs 17:

17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

No rhetorical question here, just a straightforward statement - if you have faith, but you don’t have works that go along with that faith - your faith is dead. It’s useless, it’s no good, it’s not a saving faith. It’s dead.

Skip down to v20:

20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

In case you want to start arguing with James here, he calls you foolish. His words, not mine - you foolish person, do you want to be shown that faith apart from, without, not accompanied by works is useless. That word there can also be translated as, you guessed it, **dead**. Do you want to be shown, you fool, that faith without works is, as I've been saying - dead.

Skip down to the end, v26:

26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

So what is James's big argument in 2:14-26? **Faith without works is dead.**

If you don't have works, you don't really have faith, because faith without works is dead. No works, no faith, no salvation. That simple for James.

Paul - Justification by Faith

Now, that makes me a little bit uncomfortable but nothing unreasonable, I kind of get it - but the crux of the passage, and where people get the most held up, is in verse 24. This is where folks get the most bent out of shape.

24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Ok, hold up. James just said you're justified by works, not by faith. That sounds really different from the gospel we've been preaching as a church right? If you've read your Bible you might have some warning signs going off. This sounds very contradictory to what a lot of the other parts of the NT say. This sounds different than what Jesus says.

This especially sounds really different than what the apostle Paul, who wrote so much of the NT, says.

James says in 2:24 - you're justified by works and not by faith alone.

But look at what Paul writes in Galatians 2:

Galatians 2:16 - 16 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.

Or consider **Ephesians 2:8-9 - 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.**

Paul's big point here, and in so many of his other writings is that we cannot save ourselves. We cannot justify - or make ourselves right before God - through any work of our own. That's the gospel he preached, that's the gospel we preach - that in the cross of Jesus we are accepted, welcomed, forgiven of our sins, declared righteous, and brought in to the family of God - not based on ourselves, we have nothing to offer God, it's all and only based on Jesus and Jesus alone - His life, death, and resurrection is what saves us.

You are made right with God through faith.

James vs. Paul

But then what do you do with James 2:24 - we're justified by works and not by faith alone?

How do you reconcile these two verses:

James 2:24 - 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Romans 3:28 - For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Which one is it?

Do you see how the gospel is at stake? How are we saved? Our eternity is in the balance. How are you made right with God? Faith? Or good works? We just said the gospel is that we are made right with God by faith, well then what do you do with James?

Just dismiss it? Say it doesn't matter? Laugh and ignore it? It's also the inspired, perfect and holy Word of God, can't just toss it out. So we have to reconcile Paul and James...how do you do that?

Let me prove to you these are not contradictory, that James and Paul agree to each other. Maybe you've read ahead and you've been concerned about this, maybe someone you know who's wrestling with Christianity has asked you this question and you'd like some tools on how to answer.

Let me help you answer it and show you a couple of proofs they agree:

1. James and Paul are gospel partners

Galatians 2:1-2

Then after fourteen years I [Paul] went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. 2 I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain.

So Paul's been doing ministry for 14 years, traveling around preaching the gospel. And it says he goes up to Jerusalem to tell the church leaders at Jerusalem - this is the gospel I've been preaching, I want to make sure that I wasn't doing something wrong. I want to make sure I'm not preaching, running, doing ministry in vain.

Is this gospel I've been preaching - justification by faith - that you're saved not by works but only by the faith in Christ and the grace of God - is that true?

Skip down to verse 9 - **9 and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.**

So Paul goes to James. Says - "I'm preaching this gospel that you're saved by faith alone. Is that good?" And they give him a high five. That's the scholarly translation of "right hand of fellowship". They hash it out - yep, theological high-five, keep it up. *So we know they don't disagree.*

James and Paul are gospel partners

2. James is writing to religious lazy people, and Paul to lost people.

Look at that last part of Gal 2:9 - **they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.**

They are ministering + writing to two different groups with two different needs.

James is writing primarily to Jewish converts who have put their faith in Jesus. They have received this new gospel - of justification by faith alone. They are coming out of this big system of legalism and rules to earn favor with God, and they're in a new system of grace. But they've started abusing it. It's cheap grace - grace that makes me shrug my shoulders and go - "well I'm forgiven now, so why does it matter how I live?" I live however I want, do whatever I want, treat people however I want, spend my money however I want - but it doesn't matter because I'm saved by grace! James says - no way. That's not how grace works. Faith without works is dead.

Paul is writing primarily to Gentiles. People who were outside of the Jewish covenant people of God. And they're all terrified and afraid - "Am I going to hell? Do I need to follow these Jewish feasts? Do I need to offer sacrifices? Do I need to be circumcised? Speak in tongues? How much money do I need to give?" PAUL HELP US. And Paul's saying - "no, no, no - you are forgiven, and washed clean, and made right with God not based on what you do but based on the finished work of Jesus. Jesus and Jesus alone saves you, you can't do anything."

Doctor + 2 patients. Imagine you're sitting in a doctor's office waiting room. It's a small waiting room so you're within earshot of the patients rooms. And as you're sitting there you see a doctor walk into one room and you hear him say to the patient → "Alright, you need to start jogging. You need to take up running or some other exercise. Get moving." Doctor walks out, walks into the other room, and you hear him say → "You need to sit down. Stop running. Stop being active. You need to sit and rest."

Contradiction? No, different patients.

The first person is having heart trouble. They're overweight and need to start exercising and moving to help increase their lung capacity and help restore their heart. The second just broke his leg. So this guy needs to run, this guy needs to sit down. It's not a contradiction when you consider the patient - then the diagnosis makes sense.

Two different audiences = two different diagnoses.

3. James argues for proof of salvation, Paul for means of salvation.

"Bat". Silly example - if I said to you - "hey when you come over to my house later, bring me a bat." What I have in mind is a wooden stick used to hit a ball, but you show up 30 minutes later with a black nocturnal flying animal. Same word, two different meanings.

James and Paul use two different meanings for the same word - **justified**. In the Greek New Testament, the word translated as justified has two different meanings.

- **"To make right"** - This is how Paul uses it in Galatians 2 and Romans 3-4. You are made right by faith. You can't do anything to make yourself right with God. The moment you profess faith in Christ, trust in Him - you are made right with God. Christ takes your sin, gives you His righteousness. You are made right and declared right before God, no works. You can't do anything to add to it, change it, modify it, increase it.
- **"Proven right"** - The second meaning is not to make right, but proven right. Jesus uses it this way in Luke 7:35 - "Wisdom is justified by her children." Meaning - if you give someone advice, it will be proven wise if it ends up working.

ABRAHAM:

The clearest way to see this is how they both use **Abraham** being justified to talk about two different things.

In **Romans 4:1-3**, just a few verses after he says we're justified by faith alone, Paul uses the example of Abraham to show how we are made right with God by faith.

Look at this - **1 "What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."**

What Paul is referring to is a scene in the life of Abraham from Genesis 15. God comes to Abraham and makes him a promise - that he would have a son, and that son would have sons who would have sons and Father Abraham would have many sons (you've heard the song) - and that God would make Abraham into a great nation and that Abraham's descendants would be God's people, set apart to worship Him.

Abraham puts faith and trust in God, and he gets credit as if he's a righteous person even though he was not - as proven right before this scene and right after. And at that very moment, though Abraham hasn't done anything but believed, he is declared righteous through his faith and trust in God. Paul says clearly - "if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about...but he wasn't he believed in God, and that's why he was justified."

James also talks about Abraham. Look at this, back in James 2.

21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 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 this? James is referencing a completely different event in the life of Abraham.
Gen 22 - story.

Paul says Abraham believes (Gen 15) and is declared righteous before God. But then James references a part of Abraham's life, 30 years and 7 chapters later, where his faith, James says, was **fulfilled, or completed, or proven** to be true when he was willing to walk out that faith and sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22).

Abraham is justified (made right) by faith alone, but then he is justified (proven right) through his faith filled works.

We know Abraham had a saving, living faith because after he believed, he walked in ongoing obedience as his life was being ongoingly changed.

James' big point - living faith vs dead faith

You are made right before God by faith, but then, and this is James' big point of 2:14-26 - **works validate or prove that your faith is genuine.**

Therefore you need to understand - there's two types of faith, a dead faith and a living faith.

Dead faith has no change, no works, no deeds and proves to not be real faith.
But a living, genuine, real faith - that living faith moves within us and leads to works.

Living Faith Works.

James is not saying you need works to be saved, he is saying if you are saved then works will flow out of that.

Calvin - You are justified by faith alone, but a justifying faith is never alone, it's always accompanied by works.

The living faith of Abraham, where he is made right, 30 years later produces works and obedience in his life.

Faith is proven to be living and real based on someone's changed life.

Jesus says the same thing in Matthew 12:33 - A good tree has good fruit, a bad tree has bad fruit. A dead faith has no works, no effect, no deeds. It doesn't change someone. A living faith slowly but surely over time produces change and is proven to be living by good works, a changed life, good deeds.

The Bible does not have a category for someone who claims to be a Christian but does not have good works.

What James is saying is - **real faith has an effect on your life. Real, living faith produces works.**

It has a gradual, slow, up and down, but ongoing changing effect on our character. No effect? It's not real. If it's not producing something it's phony, dead faith.

So what James can say boldly - **If you say it's faith, and there's no effect/no works, it's not real, it's not useful, and it's not saving faith.**

Four Evidences of a Dead Faith

So here's how I want to end. When I say end, I still have like 10 minutes so don't get too excited. Let's get preachy. Did my teaching, let's do some preaching. Faith without works is dead. It's not real. It can't save.

In the passage James is going to give us four descriptions of a dead faith. Four pieces of evidence that show us if we have a dead faith. And I want to use these as warning signs and a means of self-reflection with the Spirit that we would all check ourselves to see if they are true about us.

(They're not mine. They're from a friend of mine, I asked him for permission because I liked them so much)

Four evidences of a dead faith:

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

1. A Christian label without a changed life

Someone claims to have faith, but they do not have works. "I'm a Christian! But their life has zero evidence of change, repentance, Spirit-empowered obedience."

How dangerous is a Christian label without a changed life, particularly in the south? The Bible-belt. Flannery O'Connor once wrote - "While the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted."

Christianity, to too many, is a get-out-of-hell free card.

It is so easy to fall into the trap of - I grew up around church, I prayed a prayer one time, I was even baptized, so I would consider myself a Christian because it pacifies my conscience and guilt, but I'm going to live however I want.

Kids Ministry. Because, I wish I was joking, but this is what churches will do in their kids ministries. I grew up in this guys, I'm an insider on this stuff. They'll take all the kids into the gym. And they'll put them all in the middle. And they'll say - "if you want to go spend eternity in hell, separated from your mom and dad and your friends, run to this side of the gym. BUT if you want to spend eternity in heaven with Jesus and your parents and you want a lollipop right now, run to this side of the room."

And of course, all the kids are like - ""AHHH LOLLIPOP. Grace has never tasted so sweet." And the church declares over them - you're a Christian, good job. But then they latch on this for the rest of their lives - well yeah, I mean I'm a Christian. I ran to the right side of the gym. I prayed the prayer. I walked the aisle.

Listen, I'm not against altar calls. I'm not against inviting someone to respond immediately to the gospel. I think the Lord can use those moments to initiate real, genuine, life-transforming faith.

The problem is when someone has no changed life at all, no evidence of fruit, no evidence of a walk with Jesus and yet clings to that prayer they made, or their "conversion experience" as their only proof of salvation.

I think one of the scariest things spiritually is to be deceived. To think that you are good because you prayed a prayer, but your life bears no fruit. Just because someone claims to have faith doesn't mean they do - if there's no slow character change that expresses itself into love, mission, care, confession, repentance, generosity. In the words of Jesus - if the fruit is dead, the tree is dead.

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.

2. Compassionate words without compassionate actions

Drew. James sets up a hypothetical scenario. Let me put it in modern day. Drew Dunn's right here, Drew can I use you for my hypothetical? Thanks. Let's say that this morning, Drew's house had a gas leak, caught on fire, and burned down. At the same time, Drew's identity got stolen by a hacker. And all of this happened while Drew was out for a jog. So all he has are running shoes, shorts and a t-shirt. Drew shows up to the gathering, he's standing outside - cold, hungry, out of money.

And every single one of us as we passed by Drew on our way into the Gathering, because we're good people, stopped and made sure Drew knew how much we cared - "That's tough man. I hope that tomorrow goes better for you. Good luck. Peace be with you."

Have we actually helped Drew? Obviously, no.

James uses that example to say - "in the same way, faith that doesn't have a changing effect, isn't helpful." It's empty words.

In fact, if it's possible for you to **consistently** walk with no action of compassion, empathy toward your brothers and sisters in need - James says there's no reason you should think you have living faith or are a follower of Jesus.

Because, and this is what Garrison addressed last week - If you understand that in front of God you are spiritually and morally destitute, have nothing and God welcomes you, you can't help but love and care for those who are a physical representation of what you were spiritually.

And that's easy to affirm at face value, but here's where it gets exposed - if you say you're saved by grace through faith - a desperate sinner without Jesus, but you actually think you're pretty moral, manage your life pretty well, and make good decisions...then anytime you see someone who checks in lower on the life management scale than you do, you'll either be indifferent or condescending towards them.

And what you'll think, you're probably smart enough to not say it, but what you'll think is - well if they would just get their crap together they wouldn't be in this situation. It's their fault, they made terrible decisions, if they would just do better (like me) they wouldn't have this problem anymore.

James says that's evidence of dead faith.

The last two are both from vs 19.

19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

3. Right doctrine without love for God

Correct doctrine does not save you.

James says → You believe the right things about God, good job. Even the demons believe that.

Here's what floored me as I was thinking about this the past few weeks → Demons know a lot of theology. I know, it makes me a little uncomfortable too. Demons know a lot of doctrine. In fact, I'll say it this way - demons know more doctrine about God than any Christian you know or look up to or read.

Demons have correct theology about God...but demons don't become Christians.

So we would be foolish to equate a lot of knowledge about God with a love for God. Just because you know a lot about God, doesn't mean you actually know God or love Him.

Knowing the right things and loving God as evidenced by your works are two totally different categories.

This is everything we talked about two weeks ago with hearing **and** obeying God's Word → knowledge accumulation is a good thing. Knowing the right doctrine about God is a good thing. You should want to grow in your knowledge of God.

Don't be that person who's like I'm just not a reader, I'm not into theology - you should want to learn about the God who loves you and created you... but if it doesn't translate into love of God and submission to God it doesn't matter. Because it's one thing to know the right stuff, it's another thing to actually then let that knowledge translate into love for God.

Why? Because faith without works is dead. Faith that stops at empty words or empty doctrine, and doesn't work its way into our lives is a dead faith.

19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

4. Fearful shuddering without real repentance

The word shudder is like a physical reaction, your hair kind of stands up, get some fear goosebumps. It's like Lion King when they're like - Mufasa and all the hyenas go "ooooh". That's shuddering.

You know when someone wrongs you and they're not actually sorry, don't actually want a restored relationship, don't actually feel repentant - they just want to get out from under the consequences or don't want you to be mad.

That's what dead faith does with God.

Here's what I mean - fearful shuddering comes from this - I have a correct view of God that he is holy, and that I am not. That He is powerful, mighty, awesome - and I can't dwell with him - He has righteous wrath for sin and sinners. But that's where it stops for me.

So my every move is made out of fear of Him - is he going to smite me down, I just don't want him to punish me or make my life bad.

So it looks like repentance - I'm going to express sorrow for my sin - but it's not driven out of a deep desire where Jesus is better and I want to run to Him and live with Him and for Him - What the Bible would call real or genuine repentance which says - He is better than sin. He is better than these broken cisterns. He is better than these idols I go after. We turn from sin and move towards God in relationship.

You see that? So not only might you know some things about God, but you could be driven out of fear to actually do some religious activity. Maybe you do some church stuff, do some certain things or not do certain things because you don't want God to be mad at you and you think he'll reward or at least not punish you.

James says the demons know some true things about God and it has some effect on them - we see this throughout the gospels - when Jesus enters into a scene where there's some demons they're almost always cowering in fear or have some sort of physical response.

You can do some religious things with some shuddering, and it not be real genuine repentance based on living faith. Could actually be dead faith.

Conclusion

Living faith has an effect. Living faith works.

James says it over and over again in this whole book and in this passage. Living faith is proven by a changed life, slowly, little bit by little bit over time. It's proven by an active love for others, a love for God, a driven desire to repent not to escape punishment but to run to Jesus.

Dead faith does none of those. Dead faith is not active, it doesn't move or change or give shape.

Let me say it slightly differently than James...

When someone professes faith in Jesus, the Bible says they are given the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit's job is to fill them and change them. To shape them more and more to look like Jesus. It's slow, it's full of ups and downs, but there's still real change.

So if someone claims to have faith and has not or is not being changed, there's two options:

- Either, the Holy Spirit isn't doing his job. (which is ridiculous to consider)

- OR, they don't have saving, real, living faith.

That's the two options. Either God is failing or they're not actually a Christian.

So here's how we're going to end tonight. Before we go into communion.

The band's going to come back up and play a little bit, not to try to get some emotional response out of you just to eliminate some distractions of silence. I'm going to put these **4 evidences back on the screen**. And I want you to take some time, you and the Lord to wrestle with these 4 things. What do you see in your life? Living faith or dead faith?

And there's two options:

1. **I'm not a follower of Jesus.** My life doesn't have any evidence of change. I claim to have faith, I have the label, I have doctrine, I have fear - but I have no change - this is a chance for you to believe in Jesus. To put your faith and trust in Him for forgiveness of sins, for salvation, for life forever with God. I'm even going to invite you and that's you - if this is your first time, or you're a member, there's no shame either way - I'm going to invite you to head to the back and get some prayer with our prayer team. Tell them that - they will lead you to pray and receive Jesus.
2. **Second option - you know, I see evidence of change.** Not perfect, far from it. Slower than I want. Slower than it should be. Full of ups and downs. But I can look at my life and see - I'm not where I was before I met Jesus, I'm not where I was 6 months ago, there's change happening. Then it's an opportunity for you to rejoice. To thank God for His saving grace, and to ask Him to continue to shape you and change you to be more and more like Christ.

Community - Maybe after wrestling for a little bit you can settle on one, maybe you won't be able to - if you say you know I really don't know - I would challenge you this week to go to your community. A trusted Christian friend, engage the heart time in your group, and ask them to help you discern. You may need some outside perspective to help you objectively see whether there has been fruit in your life.

I'll come back up in a little bit to lead us into communion.