

James: Faith Always Bears Fruit

James 2:14-26

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If you have your Bibles I would invite you to turn with me to James, chapter two, as we continue our way through this great little book together. The first week we were in James we looked at the first verse and the words of greetings and we said, even then, that the very language that James used in his greetings, language which recalls the Old Testament pilgrimage of Israel in the wilderness, prepared us to think about the trials of the Christian life. And sure enough, as we studied James:1, verses 2 through 18, we saw his focus on how the Christian ought to respond to trials.

Then in James, chapter 1, verses 19 through 27, James seemed to change the topic a bit. He expressed concern about the possibility that a person could profess faith in Christ, could claim to be a Christian and yet not, in fact, be a Christian; to outwardly look like a Christian, at least in the manner of one's profession, but not to look like a Christian in one's living. And so, he spoke about 'hearers' of the word and 'doers' of the word, those who claim to hear the word of God and follow it, but who do not, in fact, do the word of God, and those who are both hearers and doers — those who hear the word of God and obey it. And we said, when we studied James 1:19 through 27, that this is a theme that continues at least to the end of James, chapter two. And indeed, as we studied James, chapter 2, verses 1 through 13 last week, we saw James give us a tangible example of how people can make a profession of Christ, and yet in the way they live, in relation with their neighbors, they contradict that relationship.

And, it was the issue of favoritism that James deals with in James 2, verse 1 through 13. We are the assembly of the unworthy in the Christian Church. Nobody has earned his way into the assembly of the Lord. By grace we are brought into this assembly. By the mercy of God, we, though we are unworthy, are invited into this assembly. And so James is saying to show favoritism or bias from the assembly of the unworthy is like saying to someone "you are unworthy to be a member of the assembly of the unworthy." that's right. It doesn't make any sense. It's a contradiction of God's grace to us. Showing no mercy to people in the assembly of mercy is a contradiction in terms. Despising some in the assembly of grace is a contradiction of the profession. And so in James 2, verses

1 through 13, he gives a practical, tangible example about how we can deny the faith without ever standing up and renouncing it in words. We can deny it in our actions by showing favoritism towards some or against others. And so, James continues that theme in the passage that we study today. Let's hear God's holy, inspired and inerrant word in James, chapter 2, verse 14:

What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled" and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham, our father, justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works faith was perfected; And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. You see that man is justified by works, and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not Rahab, the harlot, also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord, and our God, we ask that by the Spirit You would teach us from Your word, that You would help us to understand a passage which is hard, not because it is difficult to understand, but because it reveals to us something that is difficult to do, and easy not to do. O Lord, teach us, then. In Jesus' name, amen.

James is very concerned that someone may profess to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus without actually being a disciple of the Lord Jesus. And so he is very concerned in this book, and especially from chapter 1, verse 19 all the way down to chapter 2, verse 26, though he will continue on in this, he is very concerned to diagnose that problem, to diagnose that malady, and to give you tools to see it in yourself, if its there; and then to correct or remedy it.

But before we get to James' concern, we have got to deal with a problem. There's a pressing matter that we need to deal with, and it is the alleged contradiction between what James says here, and what Paul says in Romans, chapter three. Now, keep your finger on James, chapter 2, verse 24, and then turn back to Romans, chapter 3, verse 28. We often hear it asserted that Paul,

and James, are contradictory in their teaching about justification. And at first glance that may seem to be so. Paul says, in Romans 3:28, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith, apart from works of the law." And then, James says, in James 2:24, "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone."

Now, how do we explain that? Well, you explain it by the context. Paul is talking about how a man is accepted before God. He is attempting to establish the universal need of the gospel. Both Jews and Gentiles need the gospel of grace because they do not measure up to the standards of God's holiness. And Paul argues that the way the gospel is received rules out any kind of boasting on our part. And in that context he speaks of justification as God's act of declaring us righteousness because of Christ, because of what He has done. And so justification, as Paul uses it, is a judicial pronouncement about your standing before God. It is God declaring you to be accepted and to be right with Him.

On the other hand, James is talking about a very different thing; James is writing in the context of dealing with hypocrisy in the church. There are some people who claim to believe, but their lives do not bear out what they are claiming with their lips. How do you sort that out? How do you tell the difference between real faith and false faith, living faith, and dead faith? That's the issue that James is getting at. How do you know whether a person really believes? What demonstrates their Christianity? Faith with holiness, he says. For James, to be justified means to be vindicated in your faith; to demonstrate the reality of your faith.

And if you look at James, chapter 2 - and I'd invite you to focus your attention on verse 14 for a moment, we will look at some other verses as well - you will actually notice that James uses terminology differently. And he does several things that clue you into the fact that he is not contradicting Paul. First of all, just in passing, James uses the word "justification" differently than Paul uses it. James' use of the word "works" is not to be equated with Paul's use of the phrase "works of the law". And James even lets you know that he is not talking in this passage about real faith. His concern is not about a real faith, which has no work attached to it. He is concerned about - and he uses the term twice - a "dead faith".

Now, having said that as background, let's look at four things that tip you off that Paul is not contradicting James and James is not contradicting Paul. First, James is dealing with the sin of hypocrisy. He is not dealing with the issue of how you are made right before God. And he tips you off in verse 14: "What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith and has no works." He's talking about a claimed faith which shows no reality. He's dealing with the sin of hypocrisy.

Secondly, James does not ask the question, "Can faith save you?" He doesn't ask the question, "Can real faith save you?" Look at what he asks; in verse 14:

"Can that faith save you?" What's the "that" for? He's just described the kind of faith he's talking about in the previous sentence. What does he say? "Says he has faith". Ah! James is asking the question, can "Says you have faith" save you? Can claimed faith save you? Can a profession of faith that has no substance or reality save you? James isn't asking the question, "Can real faith save?" He's asking, "Can claimed faith, apart from the evidence of holiness, save you?" And he tips you off on this, both with the phrase "Says he has faith" and "Can that kind of faith", in verse 14.

Thirdly, James is clearly concerned in this passage, not about real faith that is unaccompanied by works, James doesn't think that that exists, and by the way, it doesn't; James is concerned about dead faith masquerading as real faith which is not accompanied by works. Let me prove it to you. Look at verse 17 and verse 26. Twice he speaks of dead faith; that is, claimed faith that is empty. It is hollow. It is without living reality. So, James and Paul present us a little bit of apples and oranges here. They are not talking about the same subject, even using the same language, in some cases.

One last thing. James' argument from the life of Abraham actually, definitively, proves that he does not contradict Paul. One of Paul's favorite verses about Abraham is Genesis 15:6. It is a passage which says, "And Abraham believed God, and He (God) reckoned it to him as righteousness." That is the passage, above all other passages, that Paul will base his doctrine of justification on. He says Abraham was justified. He was reckoned righteous. He was declared righteous by faith. Well, isn't it interesting that James quotes that very verse in chapter 2, verse 23. But, look at what he does. He says that that Scripture in Genesis 15:6 was fulfilled when? Look at the previous verse, verse 21: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac, his son, on the altar?" Now, when did that happen? It didn't happen in Genesis 15. It didn't happen before Genesis 15. It happened seven chapters, and many years, after Genesis 15:6. Now, James is no dummy. He knows his Bible. He knows that Genesis 15 comes before Genesis 22. I know they didn't have the chapters then, but he knew that passage came before the other passage. And he also knows that his readers are no dummies either, and they know that the Genesis 15 passage comes before that passage about Isaac, too.

So why does he say it? Because the story of Isaac demonstrates the trueness of the faith that Abraham had expressed so many years before and had been reckoned righteous according to. So, James and Paul are not contradicting themselves. Now, if you are still struggling with that issue, and it's an important one, please see me. See one of the other ministers. See one of our elders, and talk that through until you are comfortable in understanding that James and Paul are not contradicting one another. In fact, I'm going to show you another passage in just a few moments right out of the mouth of the apostle Paul that will show you again that they don't contradict. But if you are still struggling with that, speak with someone.

I. A claimed faith without tangible love for the brethren is useless.

Now, we're going to set that aside, and we're going to get back to James' main point. And James' main point is very simple. It is vital to see that James' point is not "faith plus works equals justification". That is not James' point in James, chapter two. His point is not "faith plus holiness equals salvation", in James, chapter two. His point is that real faith always manifests itself in active, practical, Christian love in relationships. Real faith always manifests itself in active, practical Christian love in relationships. And he gives it - that one point, that one issue, that one proposition - three ways in this passage. Let me show you those ways.

First, if you look at verses 14 through 17, James deals with the situation of someone who claims to have faith, but who does not have practical love. Then, in verses 18 through 20, he deals with the situation of someone who has right notions about God, but does not have practical love. And then, in verse 21 through 26, he gives you three illustrations, two of them positive, one of them negative, all of them designed to press home this point - that those who truly believe live as if they believe what they say they believe.

Let's look at each of these three things. First, verses 14 through 17. Here is a situation of a claimed faith without practical love. And James is elaborating on the problem that he had already mentioned in chapter 1, verse 19 through 27. The difference between hearers of the word, and hearers and doers of the word on the other hand. And James is teaching us in verses 14 through 17 that a claimed faith, without tangible love for the brethren, is useless. His concern is for a merely 'claimed' faith. Look at his language: "if someone says he has faith, but he has no works...". James doesn't say, "What if a person has faith but doesn't have works". He doesn't even raise the issue. What if he says, "He has faith, but he has no works"? James is concerned about people who claim to be Christians, but who are not. James is concerned about people who have made a decision, or prayed a prayer, or signed a card, or walked an aisle, or gone through a communicant's class, or joined a church, or answered the questions of membership, or declared themselves to be Christians, but whose lives do not show the marks of real faith. He looks at the life; he says, "I see no consistent, visible evidence of an outflow of the life of faith in this person." And as far as James is concerned that person is not a Christian. James bluntly questions that person's salvation.

And then he gives a concrete example. Look at verses 15 and 16. It's a concrete example about showing tangible love and care and concern for a Christian brother or sister in distress, in need. Let's say your brother or sister comes along, and he's distressed, he's in need, he's in need of food and clothing, and you say, "I'll pray for you, brother," and you do nothing to help him. He says, "You know what that is? "It's useless." he says, "That's just like a claimer which doesn't live

as if you really believe the faith is true." It's useless. Faith must be lived out. It must be acted out. It must be embodied. It must not be merely talked about, or asserted or professed. It must be lived out.

A friend of mine sent me an article in the last couple of days, from Reuter's News Service. It has a provocative title to the article; it's, "Adult Bad Behavior May Encourage Teen Sex". Its a study done by some sociologists and psychologists about the effect of parents who engage in risky behavior themselves, and then tell their children not to behave in bad ways, and their children go ahead and do those things anyway. And one of the most provocative sentences in this study is this one: "Experts have long told parents that children will act on what they see their parents do, not what they are told, when their parents' actions contradict their words." Well, as Gomer Pyle would say, "Surprise, surprise, surprise"! Of course! Because, what our children see us do is they know is really real to us. We do what we believe, and so if we say one thing and do another, you know what they'll do? They'll follow what we do and not what we say. That's just what James is getting at here. You see, the reality of what a person believes by what they do. A lived out faith is what he's after, not a claimed faith; a lived out faith.

II. An orthodox faith without works is just demonic.

Here's the second thing I want you to see. In verses 18 through 20, he deals with the situation of right thinking without practical love. Practical love is the invariable fruit of real faith. And he is saying to us in verses 18 through 20 that an orthodox faith, a correct belief system, without works, is just demonic. James handles an objection here. In verse 18, someone says to him, "I have faith, James; I really do". I really do believe, James. I believe the truth. I believe the claims. I believe Christ is Lord. And James, in response, says in effect, "Show me. Don't tell me." Show me that you believe that Christ is Lord. And in verse 19, he teaches us that you can know some true things, and you can believe some true things, and you can even know and believe some important and true things, and you can even know and believe some important and true things about God and the Bible and salvation, and still not be a Christian. Because, there is a difference between knowing notions and knowing God. There's a difference between assenting to those truths and embracing those truths. We do what we believe. We act on what we believe. Jesus said that our actions are a reflection of our hearts. And so, if our lives do not manifest the faith that we claim, then the faith is not there.

You see, James is not saying we need to add works to our faith if we want to get saved. He's saying that true faith is the engine of life, and life reflects whether or not we really have that true faith. In our choices, in our priorities, in our actions, in our relationships, and especially our relationships in the Christian community, will we show whether or not we really do have true faith. You see, you can believe right things about God and still be a pagan, because saving faith involves more than just correct notions about God.

III. Abraham and Rahab are examples of how real faith and tangible works go together.

Now, James illustrates his point. In verses 21 through 26, he gives you three illustrations. Two of them are positive. Interestingly, one of them is about a Jew and one is about a Gentile. Both of them are held up as examples to us of what James wants us to do. Then, there's a negative illustration, a warning, and its a story about a corpse. And in this passage, James basically shows us that Abraham and Rahab are examples of how real faith and tangible works, go together.

In verses 21 through 23, he gives the first illustration. This is the story of Abraham showing how real faith acts and works - and lives. Abraham had trusted in God. He believed when God told him, "I will make you a great nation. I will make you a father of nations. You will have as many descendants as the stars in the sky, and the sand on the sea shore." Abraham really believed that, and God reckoned it to him as righteousness. And then there came a day, in Genesis 22, when God told him, "Now, Abraham, take the heir that I have identified to you as the heir of the promise, and sacrifice him to Me." And Abraham said, "Yes, Lord." And the author of Hebrews tells us that Abraham so believed the promise of God that he believed that God would have raised Isaac from the dead, if necessary, to fulfill his promise to him.

What had happened? His faith had acted. His life reflected the reality of the faith that he had in God. His actions flowed from the realness of the faith which he had in God. In fact, we could render verse 21 of James, chapter two this way: "Our father, Abraham's faith in God was vindicated by his loving obedience to God when he offered up Isaac." You see, its not that Abraham was made righteous by doing a work of sacrificing Isaac. It is not that Abraham was made righteous by joining his faith to the work of offering Isaac. It is that Abraham had been declared to be righteous by God, by faith, and that he had been shown to be, proven to be, demonstrated to be, vindicated as a man after God's own heart, as a friend of God, as a believer of God, by acting on that faith.

Then in verse 25, James tells the story of Rahab, a Gentile prostitute. She gives us a picture of a woman whose actions were in accordance with her faith. She believed the spies' promise. The spies said "Shelter us, protect us, and we will spare you and your family." She believed that and what did she do? She acted on it. She risked her life based on what she believed. And James says, "That's what faith does." "It acts on what we believe."

And then there is the negative illustration, in verse 26. It's the illustration of a body. You look around in the pews and there is a breathing body, I hope! But without that life force that body is dead and lifeless, a corpse, a cadaver. James

says that is what worthless faith is like. It shows you that there is no life force to it. There is really no faith.

What is James' point? Saving faith is always accompanied by a life that acts in accordance with saving faith. Our life must show that we mean what we say when we say we believe. Our life must show that we mean what we say when we say we believe. Do you love and live the word of God? Do you act in light of the fear of God? Does your mercy to others reflect the grace of God to you? Do your relationships reflect the love of God to you? Does your life reflect the desires of God? James says, "Christian, your life must show that you mean what you say when you say you believe."

May God grant that to be true of every Christian here; and for those who are not Christian, may He open their eyes to run to Him for newness of life. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God. There is nothing hard to understand about this passage, but when one is in denial, when one is self-deluded, when one has fooled oneself into thinking that one is a Christian, and yet there are no signs of life, it is easy to ignore, and even to misunderstand, the clear teaching of this passage. Shake us awake from the sleep of death, to see the truth. For those here today who are professing Christians, and yet do not truly love and follow and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, use this word to bring them to saving faith in Jesus. For those Christians here today who are in significant quadrants of their lives, not living in accordance with the standards of this calling, shake them; shake them, and cause them to pursue after growth in grace by Your Holy Spirit as they have never done so before. And in all these things, glorify Yourself. Amen

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