

Does Your Faith Work? **James 2:14-26**

I heard a story about two brothers who went into the local unemployment office looking for a job. The oldest brother sat down first.

The unemployment officer asked, "Tell me sir, what kind of work do you do?"

"I pilot."

"Really, how long?"

"Nearly 20 years, I guess."

"Well sir, I'm sure we will have no problem finding a good job for you."

"What about my brother?"

"What does he do?"

"He's a wood cutter."

"A wood cutter?"

"Yes ma'am, he cuts it and I pile it."

Aside from the humor in that little illustration there is a simple but profound truth as well. Claiming to be something does not make it true. I could say that I am a pilot, but just saying so wouldn't make it so. You would be foolish to get in a plane with me in the cockpit. Likewise, saying you're a Christian doesn't mean that you truly are one.

The Bible teaches again and again that the authenticity of our faith in Christ is demonstrated more by what we do than by what we say. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "*You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them*" (Matt 7:16-20). In the context of this passage the Lord Jesus was specifically referring to false teachers. However, what Jesus said about teachers and preachers applies to all who profess to be Christians. "*By their fruits you will know them.*"

Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:10 that true believers are "*created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.*" The apostle John emphasized this same truth when he wrote, "*Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous*" (1 John 3:7).

Now it is extremely important to understand that no one can work their way to heaven. You can't earn salvation by what you do. Salvation is entirely "*by grace...through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast*" (Eph 2:8-9).

But it is also important to understand as James points out in chapter 2 verse 17 that, "*faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*" As the great theologian John Calvin said, "It is faith alone that justifies, but faith that justifies can never be alone."

Not all faith is saving faith. Not everyone who claims to be a Christian is one. In our text this morning James describes three types of faith. However, as we shall see, only one is the genuine article; only one is true, saving faith.

First of all there is...

1. Dead Faith

James provides two characteristics of dead faith in verses 14-17. First, dead faith is characterized by empty confession. Look at verse 14. *“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?”*

Notice that James does not say that this person actually has saving faith, but that he *“says he has faith.”* There is all the difference in the world between the two. You see folks it’s possible to profess faith and not really possess it. It is one thing to talk the talk of a true believer. It is quite another to walk the walk.

Here is a person who claims to have faith, who says he is a Christian, and yet there is no fruit in his life to give evidence of salvation. Verse fourteen says that he *“does not have works.”* James then asks this question: *“Can faith save him?”* A more accurate translation would be, *“Can that kind of faith save him?”*

What kind of faith is James referring to? He is describing a faith that produces no works, a faith that substitutes empty words for works of righteousness. It’s a dead faith, and dead faith never saved anyone.

Not only is dead faith characterized by empty confession, it is also characterized by false compassion. Verse 15 says, *“If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 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?”* (James 2:15-16)

Here James pictures a desperately poor man. He is *“naked”* James says, which literally means to be without sufficient clothing; and he is *“destitute of daily food.”* He isn’t necessarily starving to death, but he lacks sufficient nourishment for good health. Here is a man who is poor, cold, and hungry.

How does the man with dead faith respond? Instead of giving him warm clothes and nourishing food he offers him empty words instead. In pious tones he says to him, *“Depart in peace, be warmed and filled.”* He literally says to this poor man, “God bless you friend, go warm and feed yourself.” Isn’t that ridiculous? It’s also calloused and cruel. His words of compassion are empty because they are not accompanied by any corresponding acts of compassion.

James asks, *“What does it profit?”* Of what value, of what profit is a profession of faith that fails to produce corresponding works of faith? James answers his own question in verse 17. *“Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”*

James describes a second type of faith. There is ...

2. Deficient Faith

Dead faith is marked by empty confession and false compassion. Here we see that deficient faith is characterized by insufficient conviction. Look at verse 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. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe--and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?”* (James 2:18-20)

Did you know that demons have faith? James says, *“Even the demons believe.”* What do the demons believe? They believe in the existence of God.

There are no atheists or agnostics among the demons. They know the reality of the one, true, living God. It is interesting to note that the Bible never attempts to prove the existence of God. There is the assumption that anyone with a sound mind will just naturally come to the conclusion that there must be a God.

The Bible says that the person who denies the existence of God is not in his right mind. Psalm 14:1 says, *“The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.”* The demons may be fiendish but they are not foolish; they believe in God.

The demons also believe that Jesus is the Son of God. They believe that Jesus was crucified, buried, raised again on the third day, and that He ascended to heaven and is now seated at the right hand of the Father.

James says in verse 19, *“You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe.”* Believing in God is good. In fact, it is the first step to salvation. Hebrews 11:6 says *“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”* The problem is, merely believing in God does not constitute saving faith. It’s not enough. Verse 19 says *“Even the demons believe--and tremble!”* The word translated *“tremble”* means to bristle up, to have the hair standing on end out of terror, what we commonly call goose bumps. You see, the demons not only believe; they believe and tremble. They are convinced intellectually of the reality of God and moved emotionally at the very thought of Him, but they are not saved.

It’s not enough to believe in God and tremble. You can believe in your mind and be stirred in your heart and still be lost forever. True saving faith involves something more, something that can be seen and recognized: a changed heart and a transformed life. James says in verse 18 *“Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”*

Not just any faith is saving faith. Dead faith won’t save you. Deficient faith won’t save you. What God requires is...

3. Dynamic Faith

What does dynamic faith look like? James uses two people to illustrate dynamic faith. The first is the great Patriarch Abraham. Look at verse 21. *“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect. 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.”* Now notice how James summarizes this great passage in verse 24. *“You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.”* (James 2:21-24).

The word *“justified,”* can have two different meanings, depending on the context. It can mean to be “declared righteous.” This is how Paul uses the word in Romans 3:24 when he says that we are *“justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,”* and in Romans 3:28, when he says we are *“justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law,”* and again in Romans 4:2-3 when he writes, *“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”*

When was Abraham justified, declared righteous, by God? The moment Abraham placed his faith in the one, true, living God. In Genesis 15 God made a promise to Abraham that his wife Sarah would bear him a son and from that son the Lord would raise up a great nation. Abraham knew that his wife was too old to have children.

He knew that what God promised was impossible humanly speaking, but he believed God. Abraham believed that God was able to do what seemed impossible. Genesis 15:6 says, “*And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.*” The moment Abraham believed he was justified, declared righteous by God.

The word “*justified*” can also mean to demonstrate righteousness. This is what James had in mind when he wrote here in verse 21, “*Was not Abraham our father justified by works.*”

When and how did Abraham demonstrate that his faith was genuine, saving faith? The bible tells us in Genesis 22 that God asked Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. I can’t imagine anything more difficult that God could ask of any man or woman than to take the life of his or her own child, can you? Yet Abraham was willing to obey God’s command. Abraham never actually offered Isaac as a sacrifice. God provided a substitute for his son, a ram caught in the bushes; but Abraham’s willingness to go all the way proved that his faith was real.

Because Abraham had faith that God would fulfill His promise to make of his seed a mighty nation, he was “*justified*” before God. Because Abraham was willing to obey God in sacrificing his son Isaac, the one through whom God’s promise was to be fulfilled, his faith was “*justified*” before men. Now don’t miss this. Abraham was **declared** righteous by God because of his faith; but he **demonstrated** his faith before men by his works.

The second person James uses to illustrate dynamic faith is Rahab. Look at verse 25. “*Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also*” (James 2:25-26).

We read about Rahab in chapter 2 of the Old Testament book of Joshua. Rahab stands in stark contrast with Abraham. Rahab was a Canaanite; Abraham was an Israelite. Rahab was a common citizen; Abraham was a revered leader. Rahab was at the bottom of the social and economic order; Abraham was at the top. Rahab was an immoral woman; Abraham was a moral man. And yet, Rahab the prostitute is listed with Abraham the patriarch in the “Hall of Fame of the Faithful” in Hebrews 11 and in the genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ in the gospel of Matthew.

There is a great lesson here. Dear folks, it doesn’t matter who you are, where you have come from, or what you may have done in this life. Every one of us stands equal before God. We are all equally sinful, equally lost, and equally in need of redemption. In Romans 1:16 we read, “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.*” Abraham and Rahab were as different from one another as any two people could possibly be but they were both saved the very same way, by God’s grace through faith.

James says in verse 25 that Rahab the harlot was “*justified by works.*” How was Rahab justified by her works? Rahab did a number of things to demonstrate that her faith in God was genuine. She received the Israelite spies into her own home, hid them from her own people, and then told them how to leave the city without being detected. By risking her life and the lives of her loved ones in hiding those Jewish spies and helping them to escape Rahab demonstrated her faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was real, dynamic, saving faith. She was justified before God by her faith, but her faith in God was justified before men by her good works.

How are we to tell the difference then between dead faith, deficient faith, and dynamic faith? What is it that authenticates genuine saving faith? It’s not our words beloved, it’s our works!

Let me say again, we are saved by God's grace alone through faith in Christ alone. However, if we have faith alone, that is to say, if the faith we profess does not produce good works, according to the Word of God it is not true, saving faith. True saving faith produces a changed heart, a renewed mind and a transformed life, a life that is characterized by righteousness.

Let me share this illustration with you and then I will close. Suppose three or four weeks from now you go to a plant nursery to purchase an apple tree. The salesman tells you about the various types of apple trees they have for sale, and then you choose the variety you want. The salesman calls for an employee to bring up one apple tree. To your surprise and dismay, when the salesman presents you with the tree you just purchased it looks more like a dead stick than a living tree. It bears no resemblance to an apple tree at this point. The only indication you have of what kind of tree it is, is found on a label which declares that it is an apple tree. So you take your tree home, find an appropriate place in your back yard, dig a hole and plant it in the ground. When spring finally arrives you notice that stick you planted has begun to show signs of life. A few buds appear here and there, and then the buds become leaves. Still, you really can't tell for certain that what you have is an apple tree. About four or five years after you plant your little tree it becomes mature enough to produce fruit. At long last there are apples on your apple tree. Now you know for certain. The label said that it was an apple tree, but it was the fruit that proved it.

Beloved, it is essential that each of us who profess faith in Jesus Christ make sure that we possess true saving faith. Not dead faith. Not deficient faith, but dynamic faith. The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 13:5, "*Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.*"

I want to give you some questions so that you can earnestly examine yourself this morning. I am not going to ask you to raise your hands or answer out loud; this is between you and the Lord. Just search your heart and be honest with God as you answer.

1. Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died for your sins and rose again, and that He is your only hope for salvation?
2. Has there been a specific time in your life when you realized you were a sinner, sincerely repented of your sins and trusted Christ and Christ alone for your salvation?
3. Has there been a significant change in your life since you trusted Jesus as your Savior?
4. Do you have a desire to pray and study the bible? Or do you spend more time reading the Wall Street Journal than the Word of God?
5. Do you have a desire to tell others about Jesus or are you ashamed of Him? Are you more concerned about the direction of the Stock Market than the eternal destiny of your family, friends, and neighbors?
6. Do you find pleasure in worship? Is gathering with other believers in God's House on Sunday morning a delight to your soul, or is it something you do merely out of sense of duty?
7. Do you really care about the needs of "widows and orphans" as the bible says? When you see the homeless on your way to work in Kansas City or hear about the suffering in Sudan or the hurting in Haiti does it tug at your heart?
8. Do you love your brothers and sisters in Christ?
9. Do you long to be more and more like Jesus? Are you more concerned about being hip than holy?
10. Are you ready for and looking forward to the Lord's return?

The Psalmist said, "*Search me, O God, and know my heart*" (Psalm 139:23). How is it with your heart this morning? How is it with your soul today?