

A Faith That Works

Throughout its history the church has tended toward one of two extremes when it comes to the whole idea of being saved by faith through grace. The first extreme is to view God's grace with suspicion. We have doubts that God's gift of mercy is indeed sufficient by itself. Surely, I must do something to contribute to my own salvation. Faith is not enough. I must be good enough, do enough, deserve it enough. The apostle Paul wrote letters to the Romans and Galatians, in part, to correct this error.

On the other extreme, we presume upon the grace of God. Since salvation is free, we surmise, then it doesn't matter what I do. I can go on sinning that grace may abound. As long as I have faith, I can live however I want, do whatever I want, God will show his grace. I believe in Jesus, I said the sinner's prayer, I've been baptized, so it doesn't matter what I do now. The book of James was written, in part, to combat this error.

Some have felt that somehow James and Paul are in disagreement. Paul saying that we are saved by faith alone, while James declares that we are not saved by faith alone. In fact, the great reformer, Martin Luther, was so wary of James' letter that he called it "an epistle of straw." But Paul and James were fighting against two different errors. They were arriving at the same destination from two different directions.

Both extremes fail to see the whole of grace. They see only one part of grace and miss its full breadth and beauty. Grace is the free gift of God. We don't earn it. We don't deserve it. God simply gives it in love. At the same time though, receiving the gift changes us. To take hold of that which God has given, we have to let go of what we have. We cannot hold onto both.

It's like the man who fell over the edge of a cliff, and just before he plunged to his death he grabbed hold of a scraggly branch. As he clung for dear life, he began screaming for help. Finally, someone leaned over the edge and extended his hand. But to take hold of the hand, he has to let go of the branch. It's not enough to just believe the man can save him. He has to realize he can't save himself, and he has to act on his belief. His faith is not saving faith unless and until he acts on it.

What we see here in the second half of James 2 is that faith works. A saving faith that acts on what it believes. True faith transforms your life. Biblical faith will express itself from the inside out. Faith is not passive. It is dynamic and expressive.

If we were to look at the letter of James as a tree, James 2:14-26 would be its trunk. This is the heart of the letter. Everything up to this point has been the roots of the tree. Everything after is the

branches. This whole letter is about how your faith should work itself out in your life, how you should take your faith out of the box.

James doesn't tiptoe around the issue here. He's like a linebacker tackling it straight on. Look at verse 14, "*What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?*" In the Greek text, there is actually a negative article here. "Such a faith can't save him, can it? It is a question that expects a negative answer. Why does James think that a faith without works can't save? He makes three arguments to prove his point.

I. Faith Without Action is Lifeless – Argument from Common Sense

In this passage, James makes three different arguments for a faith that works, a faith that comes out of the box and is put into action. He makes an argument from common sense, an argument from theology, and an argument from Scripture. In his first argument, James uses common sense to show that faith without action is lifeless. It is a dead faith.

James gives a practical, everyday ministry example. Earlier in chapter 2 he talked about not showing favoritism, about not gauging the worth of person according to the same outwardly based value judgments of the world. Just because a person is poor doesn't mean they don't have great value in God's eyes. James draws from that same well for this example in verses 15 & 16

"¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and 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?"

In this case, there is a fellow Christian in need, and the church is made aware of their situation, and the only thing they receive from the church is platitudes— empty words. Nothing else is done. No help is given. There isn't even practical advice that might be useful. There are no good works, just good wishes. This is someone who doesn't put their money where their mouth is. Such faith is worthless in James' view. You can't just look at someone with a sympathetic smile, and take their hand and say, "May God bless you. I hope everything works out alright."

I read about a famous pastor who had been invited to speak at a World Day of Prayer gathering of more than a thousand ladies. Just before he was to get up and speak, the hostess read a letter from a missionary that needed \$5,000 to buy some medical equipment in order to carry out the mission. As she finished the letter she turned to the pastor and said, "Would you pray that God provides what this missionary needs?"

Shockingly, he said, “No, I won’t.” He then said, “But I’ll tell you what I will do.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out all the money he was carrying. “I’ll give all the money I have with me today. I’ll put it right up here. I’m going to ask you to do the same.”

She stood there a few moments, stunned by the turn of events. He repeated it even more emphatically, “I mean it, put all your cash up here, too.”

With some hesitation, she did. He then turned to the audience and asked them to do the same. “We’re going to give all the money we have here, and then if it isn’t enough...then we’ll ask God to write a check for the rest.” Slowly, reluctantly, people began to add their own cash to the pile. When they were done, they had more than \$7,000. The preacher then asked the group, “Why in the world would we ask God to do something that he’s already given to us the means to do?”

Faith without action is lifeless. It doesn’t move. It doesn’t act. There is no life to it. It’s just empty words. Form without substance. It’s also lifeless because it doesn’t make a difference in anyone’s life. Both parties in James’ example walk away from this encounter with their lives exactly the same as before. The one who could have helped remains unmoved by the need. They have not put their faith into action to help. They’ve only said some Christian sounding stuff. The one who needs help walks away still needing as much help as they did before. They needed someone with a faith full of life, but all they found was a dead, lifeless faith.

I think many have walked away from the church for this very reason. At that point in time where they need someone with a faith full of life, all they find is a dead lifeless thing. Oh, they find the right words. They find the right doctrine. They find sound theology. But the belief is never put into practice.

We can say all the right churchy sounding stuff. “I pray God gives you victory in this. Just trust in God’s leading. God is good, He will provide,” but if there is no action, if no life is given to the words, it doesn’t do any good. To proclaim God’s blessings without being God’s blessing is a lifeless act.

A faith that only thinks the right thing and says the right thing doesn’t accomplish anything. It doesn’t do anybody any good. It is lifeless. It is dead. As James says in verse 17, “*So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*” The word he uses here is *nekros*. Does that sound familiar? We get words from it like necromancy, necrophilia, or for you video game fans necromorphs. It refers to all things dead and lifeless. This is a lifeless faith. It is a faith that has no life and can give no life.

Now we need to keep in mind here that James is not attacking true, biblical, saving faith here. He is arguing against a supposed faith. This is a faith that someone professes. As James sets it up in verse 14, “*What good is it, my brothers, if someone SAYS he has faith...*” He is not saying this person truly

has faith, but they say they do. Churches are full of such people. This is a faith claimed. James is not contrasting faith and works at all, but true, saving, living faith with a dead, lifeless faith.

I think James would have a lot to say about this to the modern church. We have watered down faith. We have diluted it to make it easy to believe and easy to swallow. We have drained it of its blood and breath leaving it a lifeless shell. It can't change a life let alone change the world. It lets you live life as you want while numbing your fear of all judgment to come. Like a well-prepared cadaver, American evangelical faith is becoming an exquisite corpse that looks good but is good for nothing.

James shows us the difference between true faith and false faith. True faith works. True faith takes what it believes out of the box and puts it into action. Faith works. Saving faith has hands and feet. It makes a difference. It doesn't just believe in the right things. It doesn't just profess the right things. It does the right thing.

A faith that works is life-giving. It gives life both to the person with faith and those around her.

II. **Faith Without Action is insufficient – Argument from Theology**

James started off with a question, "a faith without works can't save, can it?" He makes his first point from common sense and he shows that faith without action is lifeless. It neither has life nor gives life. It makes no practical difference. James now makes an argument from theology to show that faith without action is insufficient. It is insufficient to save.

It's not enough to just believe the right things. It's not sufficient to merely agree with the correct points of doctrine. You can believe the right stuff, but if that belief is never put into action, it is not sufficient to save. And James makes a very pointed theological argument to make his point.

¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

If all it takes to be saved is belief in the right things, well the demons not only believe it, they know it, but they are still bound for hell. In Matthew 8:29 we see a group of demons who recognize Jesus as the Son of God. In Mark 5 we see demons who acknowledge the existence and authority of Christ. They believe. They know, but knowing these things doesn't mean they're saved.

Demons know the truth, but that has not led to the right action on their parts. They still live in open rebellion against God. Correct belief is not saving faith. Mental agreement with the truth is not enough. True faith demonstrates itself in action. Faith cannot stay in the box.

Sadly, in our effort to make Christianity sound more likable, to make it easier for people to come to Christ, or, more selfishly, to inflate our numbers at altar calls; to make it sound like we reached far more people than we actually impacted, we have watered down faith to make it as comfortable and

convenient as possible. After all, preachers and evangelists love to brag about how many decisions were made, how many were saved, but what are we really counting when we say that? We're counting how many people raised their hand, filled out a card, prayed a prayer, or came forward to an altar call. But have we really been counting faith in action. We're no different than a diet pill company that says, "take our pill and lose all your unwanted pounds and still eat what you want."

We have made Jesus too easy to believe in. We've watered down faith. One popular author says faith is, "the inward conviction that what God says to us in the gospel is true. That and that alone is saving faith." Another writes, "A person only needs to trust the Lord, not dedicate their life to Him."

I really like what David Platt has to say in his book *Radical* about how inadequate our contemporary evangelism sales pitch seems in the light of Scripture:

Ask Jesus to come into your heart. Invite Jesus to come into your life. Pray this prayer, sign this card, walk down this aisle, and accept Jesus as your personal Savior. Our attempt to reduce this gospel to a shrink-wrapped presentation that persuades someone to say or pray the right things back to us no longer seems appropriate.

That is why none of these man-made catch phrases are in the Bible. You will not find a verse in Scripture where people are told to "bow your heads, close your eyes, and repeat after me." You will not find a place where a superstitious sinner's prayer is even mentioned. And you will not find an emphasis on accepting Jesus. We have taken the infinitely glorious Son of God, who endured the infinitely terrible wrath of God and who now reigns as the infinitely worthy Lord of all, and we have reduced him to a poor, puny Savior who is just begging for us to accept him.

Accept him? Do we really think Jesus needs our acceptance? Don't we need him?

I invite you to consider with me a proper response to this gospel. Surely more than praying a prayer is involved. Surely more than religious attendance is warranted. Surely this gospel evokes unconditional surrender of all that we are and all that have to all that he is.

You and I desperately need to consider whether we have ever truly, authentically trusted in Christ for our salvation. – pgs. 37 & 38. Radical, David Platt

Jesus doesn't ask us to accept Him. He asks us to follow him. A faith that doesn't follow is not enough. There were huge crowds that showed up to accept Jesus. They were happy to accept his teaching. They were happy to accept his miracles. But they weren't willing to follow him. A gospel that turns faith into getting the right answer on a multiple choice test is insufficient. A dead faith is insufficient to save.

III. Faith Without Action is unscriptural – Argument from OT

James has made his argument from common sense. He has shown that faith without action is lifeless. He has made his point from theology showing that dead faith is insufficient. Now he makes his final pitch from the pages of Scripture. Remember, James was the leader of the Jerusalem church and he is writing to a primarily Jewish audience, and so he picks two characters from the Old Testament to show that faith without works is unscriptural.

The first character he picks is not a surprise. He picks Abraham. All Jews considered themselves children of Abraham. In Genesis 15 God makes an amazing promise to Abraham. Even though he is an old man, and Abraham has no children, and his wife is barren, God promises that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Vs. 16 simply says, *“Abram believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”*

However, James points out that this wasn't just an empty intellectual exercise for Abraham, for one day God calls Abraham to give up his and his wife's only natural born son. All the sudden, his faith required action. He had to take it out of the box. Would he really believe God?

James then pulls out a second example which may have come as a bit of a shocker to his Jewish readers. Abraham they understood and respected, but then he mentions Rahab. Rahab, the prostitute, displayed the same faith in action as Abraham. Her faith in God led her to protect the spies that had been sent to spy out Jericho.

James takes two examples from opposite ends of the spectrum. Abraham was the major player in God's story in the Old Testament; Rahab had only a bit role. Abraham was the father of the nation; Rahab was a foreigner. Abraham was a respected patriarch and leader; Rahab, the town whore. The contrast between them couldn't be greater and yet they displayed the exact same kind of faith, a faith that works.

You see, it doesn't matter who you are, where you're from, or what you've done. We all come to God on the same basis. A simple faith that is willing to act on what it believes. It may work in ways big and small. It doesn't really matter, as long as the faith comes out of the box.

Conclusion

So where does this leave us this morning? This whole series is about living your faith from the inside out, and each week we take something out of the box. What are we going to take out of the box today? (Pull out a tool belt with tools) Church, the bottom line is this. True faith works. It does something. It doesn't just believe the right thing and say the right thing. It does the right thing. It makes a difference. It changes you. No, it doesn't mean you're perfect, that you never sin again, but it will bear fruit in your life. You start doing things you never did before. You stop doing things you always have.

New patterns emerge. New habits develop even as old ones wither away. Your outlook changes from the temporary to the eternal. Your attitude is transformed from self-centered to God-centered. Your expectations shift from the earthly to the heavenly.

And the longer you're a Christian the gap between what you believe and what you do, should get smaller and smaller. If it doesn't, then you need to examine yourself. Ask yourself some serious questions. Am I really a Christian, after all? In light of what James says, do I really have a saving faith, or is it a dead faith? Did I just make a decision? Did I just go through the motions? Did I merely accept Jesus, but have never followed him? Am I sure that if I died today, that I would go to heaven?

Faith doesn't just do its work by changing you. It changes those around you too. When you see someone in need, you reach out to meet that need. You touch their heart and change their life. Your faith is no longer content to stay tucked away inside the box. It bursting to get out, to do something, to show itself in some way.

Chuck Swindoll says that faith is like calories. You can't see it, but you can sure see the results. Martin Luther once famously called James a letter of straw because of what he says here about faith and works, and yet, ironically, it is Luther who gave us one of the most vibrant definitions of true faith. And I will leave you with this.

"O it is a living, busy active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this, and is constantly doing them."