



# Central Peninsula Church

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James 2:14-26

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## Proof of Faith

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We live in a day and age where most people make claims to some form of spiritual insight and understanding. We are surrounded by those who use spiritual, even biblical language, to talk with confidence about the way to God. How important it is that we properly evaluate what is genuine and what is not. How do we sift through the various claims around us? How can we know what is authentic faith when belief is such a personal thing? Now some might say, "Sure, we believe in God!" when all it may amount to is wishful thinking. And we can see evidence of this because their walk doesn't match their talk. And yet, in some way, we have all found ourselves saying that we believe in something, only to prove by our actions that we really don't. So how do we know especially when it comes to saving faith - the kind that puts one in relationship with the living God?

The Scripture is clear about this and tells us, in no uncertain terms, what saving faith is. And James confronts this issue of faith in the second chapter of his epistle. James recognized that being human means that we all have a tendency to hear God's Word and yet not apply it to our actions. So his goal was simple and direct - to get his audience to face up to the truth and start acting on what they claimed to believe. James challenged them to consider the fact that just because they may be serious about their faith is no guarantee they are in a relationship that God calls for.

So this morning we are going to look at James chapter 2, verses 14-26. And, essentially this passage breaks down into two simple sections: verses 14-20 address what faith is not, then verses 21-26 tells us what faith is.

In verse 14, James gives his thesis statement which comes in the form of two questions: "**What use is it, my brothers,**" he says, "**if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?**" James, in his gun slinging style, begins by exposing the fact that it is possible to be committed to and involved in spiritual activities and yet not be in an authentic relationship with God. That's a pretty bold statement. "How arrogant!" we may think. "Is not God the only one who is able to judge matters of the heart? Is James playing God here?" No! He's just raising the question - if a person professes faith and yet there is no visible evidence of it, is it the real deal?

We live in a culture that changes its spiritual beliefs as often as an infant changes diapers. We are hemmed in by new age trends with all of its expressions - worshipers giving themselves over to nature or crystals, astrology or angels, self-actualization - all of which promise encouragement for the spirit of man. And the prevailing view is that it really doesn't matter what one is involved in just so long as it works. And then, when it stops working, it can be traded in for another convenient set of practices, like an alcoholic changes his brand of whiskey.

But Scripture is clear in rejecting this error. Through His word, God has specifically revealed how we can relate to Him; that He sent His Son to be the only sacrifice for our sin. And there is no other way to Him but through the forgiveness that Jesus offers on the cross. You see, one can possess all kinds of faith in many things but that doesn't mean it is a faith that is authentic in God's eyes. This applies to not only false practices but also to those in the church. It is just as possible to be involved in an evangelical church, confess belief in the God of the Scriptures and not be in an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ. You see, what James says in verse 14 is that, "**if a person says he has faith but no works, that faith is useless.**" It has no benefit, it's worthless. The whole key, according to James, is our actions. What we do will always reflect our inner truth. And in the rest of this passage James gives us the signs that characterize the person who knows Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. That person will have a life marked by sacrificial works. It will be peppered with acts of grace. We will live in such a way that we will care for other people. This is simply the fruit of the life within.

Now you may be thinking, "Wait a minute Aurell, we're not saved by works but by faith alone. If we could earn our way to God we wouldn't need a Savior." And that would be true! We have been saved by grace - period. There is nothing we can add to it. Our salvation is a free gift. All we can do is receive it. But having been saved (past tense), we are then called to reflect God's character through our deeds in the present. These are the twin truths of the Christian life. They don't contradict but rather complement each other. And James' point is, if there are no good works, no loving acts, if there is no evidence of Christ-like activity, then Christ is not inside. If we truly have faith in Christ then it will affect our behavior. We're not saved by the behavior, but if Christ is in our hearts then our actions will reflect that.

In verses 15-17, James gives an illustration of this: "**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 be 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.**" James is saying that if someone has a need and we respond with, "Hey, I'm with you brother," and yet there is no willingness to meet that need then our faith is worthless. And we can imply conversely that when we give to relieve the suffering of the needy our faith is validated. This act demonstrates that the Lord's Spirit is inside of us because that is how He would respond.

For many of us, giving to the needy is a struggle. Part of this is due to our cultural expectations, for we have been indoctrinated by a puritan work ethic; that America is the land of "milk n' honey" for anyone willing to work hard enough

to get ahead. And I would just say that many of those who think this way may have never experienced the ghetto, or the terrible grip of generational poverty or alcoholism, or the humiliation of trying to apply for a job with nothing more than a prison resumé or mental disability. But regardless of how we may justify our position here, in the Scripture there is no such complexity. We are simply called to be givers. In fact, James tells us earlier in this letter that "pure and undefiled religion in the sight of God" consists of reaching out to those in distress. Our love for God cannot be separated from our love of others.

I must confess there have been times when a homeless person has confronted me with their hands out and I have just walked by without giving them more than a second thought. And in reflecting on this, I have been forced to admit that my normal response is not to give unless there is a self-serving reason to. That's wrong! The Scripture calls us to be givers, to reach out with hospitality and charity, unless there is some explicit reason not to. There is no guarantee that our gift won't buy some crack cocaine, but that's not our business. We are simply told to be givers because we have received so much from God. And James asks the question, "if we are unwilling to give, what use is that?" If we have a faith that does not issue forth in acts of grace, then our faith is dead. If our faith and our confession stands alone and doesn't express itself in changed behavior, then there is no life.

In verses 18-20, James anticipates an objection to what he is saying. **"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.'" And James responds to this by saying, "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?"** Notice the hint of sarcasm here. James anticipates someone saying, "Wait a minute! Why does my faith have to be like yours? If you're into faith, cool! But not me, I'm into works." And the point is that each of us have our own way and style of operating and it's wrong to expect someone else to be measured by the same standard we have chosen for ourselves. So we have the armchair theologians on one side of the debate and the taskmasters on the other. This is certainly an area of division we would see today. "You do your thing and I'll do mine. Whatever works! But don't put it on me." It's unpopular to challenge the validity of another person's faith. And the underlying assumption is that as long as one is a spiritual seeker no one has the right to make judgments.

But James is saying, "that's philosophical nonsense. God is a person, let Him be what He is. You may not like it. You may reject Him and that is your right and responsibility. But whatever you do, do not recreate God in a form you find most palatable." And this is what many of us do today. What is suggested in the Scriptures as a blueprint for mankind may not quite suit our understanding so we pretend it says something different. We convolute it or simply deny it altogether so the message becomes distorted in the translation. Now, we may have a problem with application but we must let God

be what He is. It's okay to reject the process, but we must let it stand on its own merit. And James is saying that simple acknowledgment of God's existence without obedience to His will is worthless. So the real issue, in this passage, is not whether or not we believe in God - even the demons believe He exists - but whether or not we've handed over the controls to Him. God is sovereign, and as such, He asks us to obey regardless of whether or not it suits us philosophically.

So faith without action, or works, is useless. C.H. Spurgeon, the great preacher of old, explains this with an analogy from nature: "If a tree stands in the orchard and when the springtime comes there is no bud, and when the summer comes there is no leafing or fruit bearing, but the next year and the next it stands there without bud or blossom or fruit, you would say it would be dead and you would be correct. It's not that the leaves could have made it live, but the absence of the leaves is proof that it is dead. So to, is one who professes faith: if he has life that life must give fruit." I believe that sums it up well.

Well, that's what faith is not. In verses 21-26, James shows us what faith is by offering two illustrations, the first of which is in verses 21-24. James says, **"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 a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone."** James offers Abraham - the "father of faith" - as exhibit "A." Makes sense! Abraham is a huge figure in the Old Testament. But James is saying specifically that Abraham's faith was justified, or proved, by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac on the altar.

Most of us are familiar with this story. God called Abraham from out of a nomadic lifestyle and promised that he would become the father of a great nation. The problem was that Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were childless. They had long lost their hopes for children, for Abraham was 75 years old, Sarah 10 years younger and barren. And Abraham knew that the fulfillment of God's promise required a physical heir. What a dilemma! But Abraham believed God. He trusted that, despite the physical evidence, his wife would bear him a son. Finally after 25 years they had a son named Isaac. Can you imagine 25 years? Some of us grow weary of trusting God after 25 minutes! We live in a fast food society. We're accustomed to getting our needs met at the drop of a dime. Waiting, for us, is perhaps the most aggressive thing we can do. Now, this doesn't mean that Abraham was perfect. There were times that he strayed like all of us. He deceived others. He manipulated and attempted to work God's promises in his own way. And if you know your history, the long term results of one of these blunders is the present day hostility between the Arabs and Jews. Yet in the decisive moment of Abraham's life, he listened to God and obeyed. He was willing to sacrifice anything, even his only son, for God.

What a bizarre command no matter how we look at it! How could God have requested something so terrible? What heartache Abraham must have gone through. How would he explain this to Sarah? And apart from the emotional trauma this request would have brought him, if Abraham sacrificed his only

son it also meant the death of God's promise! How confusing it must have seemed! Yet Abraham obeyed. There were no discrepancies between his believing and his doing. He didn't say "Yes, I believe You are sovereign, but in this one little area I know better." He took Isaac out and put him on the sacrificial altar. But, just as Abraham raised the knife, God intervened and said to him, **"Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you reverence God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."** So this act demonstrated that Abraham's faith was in God alone. He didn't know what God was up to but he believed that He was trustworthy.

How we need this quality of faith! At times God calls us to obey in some costly way and trust that somehow His hand will be upon us. So much of the time we resist because we just can't figure out how God will work it out. Abraham couldn't see the outcome. But in the Book of Hebrews the writer points out that Abraham "considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead." This tells us that it hadn't even occurred to Abraham that God would stop the sacrifice. He reasoned that God was capable of raising this child from the dead. What an incredible act of faith! But regardless of what God would do, Abraham's faith was in God alone. And he acted to obey, even in the sacrifice of his son.

Some of us this morning may be confused because our path has turned out so differently from what we had planned. We may be standing here looking at the death of our dreams. Perhaps we are in a season where we can't use the gifts that God Himself has given us. Maybe the relationships we thought were so committed in the "honeymoon phase" are beginning to show a different side. Our children may be "dancing with the devil." Our financial security slipping away. And we're wondering, "Why is this happening? How did we get here from there?" Let me just say that God is able to bring about whatever circumstances to cause us to stop trusting in ourselves but in Him, who raises the dead. Even God's gifts are of little value until we are willing to lose them so that He might reign without rival in our hearts.

Biblical faith is tough, it demands a constant commitment to hang on and believe God against all odds. And this is what Abraham models for us. We can know that Abraham believed God not because he said so, but because he acted on the belief. And in the same way, our commitment to God is never complete until steps have been taken to obey the truth. And if those steps are not taken the belief we profess is useless. This is what God wants, our faith expressed by our choices. So our first example of true faith comes from the long term obedience of Abraham. He continued to express his faith in God by choosing to trust Him throughout his lifetime.

Now, Exhibit "B" of faith, is in verse 25. James writes, **"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?"** James selects Rahab as the second example. What a curious choice! As a prostitute, Rahab lived on the edge of society. Her brothel, which was built right into the walls of Jericho, provided both lodging and favor to many a weary traveler. So when Joshua sent spies into this hostile city the Lord led

them to safety at Rahab's house of ill repute. And although helping these men was risky business for Rahab, she none-the-less turned away from the desperate security found in a world of prostitution and risked following the true God, of whom she knew little. She had heard stories of a God who had delivered a nation of slaves from out of bondage. "Surely the God who parted the seas could level the walls of Jericho," she must have reasoned. So, Rahab expressed faith in God by helping these foreigners, risking her life in belief of the God of Israel and so is held up as an example of saving faith.

Now this is a fascinating example for James to have chosen. In contrast to Abraham who was a "Hebrew of Hebrews" and the "father of faith," James chooses a prostitute. How this must have unnerved his readers to see these two linked together. We can almost picture them squirming in their pews! And yet, by her actions she expressed faith in God and so is held up as an example of what faith is in God's eyes.

How important it is for us to appreciate faith where we see it; regardless of people's mistakes or how unacceptable they may be in some circles. One of the great joys of recovery ministry has been in watching the great believers that come out of the darkest circumstances. Former addicts and convicts. Orphans and prostitutes. Many times, these are the ones who have experienced God's grace in such measure that they build their entire lives around trusting Him on a daily basis. It seems that the greatest role models of faith are the ones that come out of the worst experiences. God so delights in this! He uses the Davids of the world, the Apostle Pauls and Mary Magdalenes to demonstrate that He is a God of new beginnings. Do you ever wonder why God gathers such a motley crew around Him? Because they are such wonderful pictures of His grace. It's in the darkest of night that His light can be most clearly seen.

I also find it fascinating to consider that Rahab knew next to nothing about the God she was turning to. In her line of work I'm sure she heard countless stories. But something resonated within her heart and she responded. She put as much faith as she could muster in as much of God as she could understand. And regardless of how deficient or skewed her theology, Rahab trusted God and He was pleased. As a consequence God gave Rahab what she never dreamed possible, an opportunity to break from her past and resurrect a new life. But that's not all. Rahab gained a unique place in Jewish history. She and her family alone survived the battle of Jericho. Can you imagine? God had chosen this broken woman and made her an instrument of His grace. Eventually, Rahab got married and God blessed her with a son, Boaz. Boaz would become the great-grandfather of David, from whose line the Messiah would come. So James makes her, a woman of scarlet shame, an example of faith expressed in action. And while she and Abraham could not be more different, still their faith was the same; they both believed and they both acted. And James says that is true faith when it is expressed in works.

In verse 26 James concludes his argument by restating his central theme, **"For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."** James is saying that just as the body without its spirit, or "breath," is nothing more than a corpse, so faith without action

is dead. Lights are on, nobody is home! Few things are more dangerous than intellectual assent that doesn't touch the heart, or good intentions that die on the vine. So the implied warning in this passage is this - truth that is known but not acted on has the effect of turning the heart, so that it is less likely to act. Subsequently we begin to disbelieve the very truth we were once so committed to. Someone once said, "Good notions must take advantage of their first ripeness. We must not try the Spirit with our delays."

So what is saving faith? James says it's faith lived out through our actions. What about our Christian walk? Is it marked by the fruit of the Spirit? By our hospitality to others in need? By our willingness to risk all on a God who has resurrection life to give? Well, if we are acting on our faith then they are. And no matter how correct our theology, if we are not acting out our choices then those things are not true of us. "Every Bible," D.L. Moody once said, "ought to be bound in shoe leather."

As I have reflected on this passage, it occurs to me that James' choice of Abraham and Rahab serve as great points of application for us. Their experience represents certain points in the Christian life that we can relate to. First there is Abraham. He was a man of maturity, seasoned. He had been walking with God for many years and still was called to risk in a costly way. And although Abraham knew nothing of Easter or of Lazarus, so firm was his faith that he was willing to act on the belief that God would raise his son from the dead. I think many here would identify with Abraham - you've been believers for many years, certainly the newness of walking with the Lord has long worn off. You know what it means to live with the decision to trust God on a daily basis. And you've been around long enough to know that the spiritual life will always be marked by difficult challenges until the Lord takes you home. It may come in the form of a difficult marriage, or unfulfilled desires, or perhaps within the pain of chronic illness or futility of a life-threatening disease. How easy it would be to grow weary, discouraged and undisciplined in your prayer life or worship! How easy to begin living off of last year's victories! You still believe in God. You still love Him. But perhaps you have found yourself drifting away from making faithful choices your daily goal. Perhaps, even today, you see the need to turn away from a life of dead works, that it has been a long time since you have sought out others in need. And let me just encourage you. It's a simple thing to give up that pattern of relating, receive of God's grace and step out in His forgiveness and freedom. Our God is a God of resurrection. He will transform in a heartbeat the very thing we let go of and turn it into a blessing. This is the principle of the cross as it applies throughout our lives.

Then there is Rahab. She was in a totally different place than Abraham. Those of you who are new in your walk with the Lord are more likely to identify with her. And perhaps like Rahab you are just getting a sense of what it means to be in relationship with a God who is alive and powerful, One who resurrects the past and heals the heart's wounds. And it would be perfectly normal for you to be a little frightened. You may have questions that will take a lifetime to sort out. You may still be living with regrets, overwhelmed with guilt around the wreckage of your past. You may feel disconnected, like you don't quite fit in. That's okay! CPC is full of people who God rescued because they didn't fit in. So if you're feeling weak and lacking in worth, then remember Rahab. God knew who she was and yet He chose her. She responded in faith and God exalted her. She became like a diamond set against the darkness of her time. And part of this story is the wonderful way that God gradually changed Rahab, giving her hope and a place of honor in the history of His people. You can start the same process that Rahab entered into. But no one can choose but you. Rahab was faithful to whatever glimmers of truth she saw. It was the truth she acted on that moved and delivered and changed her. And if you are going to take the Lord seriously and follow Him, it will always mean making these kinds of choices - little baby steps in the beginning, but steps none the less. This is what James would call you to do.

Finally, there are the relationships between the Abrahams and Rahabs. Those of you who are young in the Lord need seasoned veterans to help you make healthy choices. You can't walk this path by yourself, but only in the confidence of those who have walked before you. And you Abrahams need the Rahabs of the world as desperately as they need you. There is an old saying in recovery that says, "You cannot keep what you have unless you give it away." I think Jesus echoed the same sentiment when He said, "He who finds his life will lose it, and He who loses his life for My sake will find it." We have been given new life from above. And if that life is going to bear fruit then it must be communicated through our interactions with those around us. Now, I don't know what that might mean for you but I know it's true. It is how we act out that truth that proves who we are, or are not, in God's sight.

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