

Our text is found in James 2:14-26. If you have tracked with us through the letter of James, you see that James says we are to be not just hearers but doers of the Word. He seems to attack hypocrisy at every turn. He is saying to us, "Don't be deceived, if Christ is really Lord, then marks of his lordship will appear in our lives." In James, we see first hand that the word of God is like a mirror in which we become undeceived because we are shown what we are really like. The reality of our lives lies beneath the words we speak.

I think every one of us wants to believe we have true faith. In this message, we find ourselves in a place where James gets to the essence of what Christianity is all about. It is the issue of faith. It is to find the answer to the question, "What is true saving faith?"

But as we approach this subject, be hopeful. Be encouraged! Remember what we learned last week. God is merciful. He doesn't hide the truth from us, waiting behind the scenes for us to fail so he can pounce on us in the Day of Judgment. He wants us to know the truth about ourselves now, so he can give us full and productive lives and make us more like Jesus.

So what is true saving faith? In verses 14-20, James starts negative, telling us what true saving faith is not. And in verses 21-25, James ends positive, telling us what true saving faith is by using helpful examples from Scripture to make his point.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? (James 2:14)

James begins by asking a question, "What good is it?" This was a common way to begin a dialogue, to present an argument with which the author disagreed. His question is, "Is faith without deeds saving faith? Is faith without deeds useful faith?" Probably someone in his church raised this question. This is the fifth time James has talked about faith, and we are only in chapter two. Faith is obviously a key concept.

James is saying someone can claim to have a true saving faith even when they do not. We know it is by faith alone that we are saved. Not by our efforts or our attempts to obey every law every time. But James is telling us it's a faith of a certain kind that saves us.

True Saving Faith is Accompanied by Good Deeds

The word translated as deeds means deeds of grace, or mercy, such as caring for the poor and not showing favoritism.

Or to put it another way, true faith by its nature is useful faith, a visible faith, a productive faith. Useful for what? Useful to save us. But how will we recognize if our faith is useful or not? Useful faith will include deeds. If faith is only what you say you believe, it's useless faith. True saving faith is a fully orb'd trust in Jesus Christ that behaves by producing good deeds. Here is James' illustration:

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. vv. 15-17

James is saying, you may tell someone "peace brother" or "You would look good in a better jacket," or "enjoy lots of turkey this thanksgiving." But if you then walk off without helping them and enjoy your warm clothes and good food, your faith is dead.

James is addressing a very significant danger in the church. It's called cheap faith. It's cheap faith to make a mental assent to the theological logic of our Christian faith, but not connect the commands our Lord Jesus places upon those who profess the Christian faith. James is arguing that the mental assent to right doctrines isn't true saving faith.

What is our true saving faith?

Our true saving faith is grounded the gospel. It's grounded in the belief that God loved us so much that He sent His Son Jesus to earth to establish His righteous kingdom. A kingdom that will eventually restore all things, redeem all things, and offer the gift of eternal life for all who by faith accept Jesus and give their lives to Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior.

The object of our true saving faith is Jesus Christ. It is through Jesus Christ that we know the love of God. It is Jesus Christ who poured out God's love on us when he left his place of glory in heaven, when he became Immanuel (God with us), lived a perfect life, died on a cross to save us from our sins, was resurrected from the dead after three days, ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of his heavenly Father. The blessing of true faith is God's love poured out on us. One of the greatest reminders of God's love poured out on us comes when we share in the ordinance of communion together.

And there is one more thing to true and saving faith. It's the evidence of showing others the love God has shown us. James

is saying, "You can't just show the love of God by speaking good words." True saving faith demonstrates God's love by showing loving actions to brothers and sisters in need.

We have been blessed by God to make our faith visible by living open-handed lives and to not be a slave to our possessions. James is saying that true saving faith is to be a conduit of blessing to those in need. True and saving faith doesn't rob the poor of God's blessing that God has chosen to be delivered by you! And true and saving faith doesn't rob you of the blessing meant for you as well.

Charles Spurgeon, a 19th Century preacher, offers his famous illustration of faith and our works. It's an illustration he shared in a sermon in 1861. It's a bit long but worth the read.

A tree has been planted out into the ground. Now the source of life to that tree is at the root, whether it has apples on it or not; the apples would not give it life, but the whole of the life of the tree will come from its root.

But if that tree stands in the orchard, and when the springtime comes there is no bud, and when the summer comes there is no leafing, and no fruit-bearing, but the next year, and the next, it stands there without bud or blossom, or leaf or fruit, you would say it is dead, and you are correct; it is dead. It is not that the leaves could have made it live, but that the absence of the leaves is a proof that it is dead.

So, too, is it with the professor (of the faith). If he has life, that life must give fruits; if not fruits, works; if his faith has a root, but if there be no works, then it would be correct to depend upon the inference that he is spiritually dead.

For the tree, the source of life is the root not the fruit, and the proof of the life in the root is then seen in the fruit. In the same way, for the believer, the source of life and salvation is Christ not our works, and the proof of life in Christ is then seen in our works.

James has stated his opinion that true saving faith is accompanied by good deeds. And it was a common practice to state your opinion and anticipate how an opponent may argue against it. But there was an opponent, maybe a guy in James church, who attempted to separate faith and works.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. v. 18

James is answering this attempt to separate faith and works by saying, "Imagine that you have perfect orthodox belief, that you believe there is one God." There was a core Jewish belief called the Shema. It was prayed twice a day, and it went like this: "*Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one...*" You believe that. I believe that. James was setting up his opponents with four arguments

for why true saving faith is accompanied by good deeds. The first argument, I will call the demon argument.

The Demon Argument

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. v. 19

There is not a demon in the universe who is an atheist. But James is telling us that demons are monotheists; they believe God is one; they are trinitarian. They believe the Apostles Creed is true. They believe God is the maker, and Jesus is his virgin-born Son. Demons have intellectual theology and can intellectually affirm correct doctrine.

Is James arguing that intellectual theology is unimportant? No, what he is arguing is that intellectual ascent to an orthodox theological belief is not in and of itself true and saving faith. He is arguing that having intellectual faith alone doesn't produce apples on your tree in your orchard.

As I pondered this demon argument, I came to this conclusion: If my theology does not result in a radical change in the way I live my life, it's actually no good theology. I'm afraid that we are all too similar to James' original audience. We are all too comfortable with the distance between what we say we believe and how we actually live our lives. We are all too comfortable not obeying God and all too comfortable, not seeking a life of loving God and loving others. If there was ever an example of someone who radically lived out his faith, it's Father Abraham. To James' audience, Abraham was the epitome of a righteous person.

The Abraham Argument

There is even a song about Abraham. "Father Abraham has many sons. Many sons has Father Abraham. I'm one of them, and so are you. Let's just praise the Lord!" If you are my age and didn't go to Sunday School, you are probably lost right now. Here is what James says about the faith of Abraham.

You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. vv. 20-23

To fully understand what James is saying, we must look back at one of the most important events in the Old Testament. In Genesis 15, Abraham was at a low point. Even though he had won a great battle, he was discouraged because he had been in the land where God had sent him for ten years, and yet he was still childless, and so he was afraid that his vast estate would go to his servant Eliezer. At this low point, God called him to look at the stars, and he said to Abraham, "your own descendants

shall be as numerous as the stars you see." And then in Genesis 15:6, it says, "*Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord credited it to him as righteousness.*" That word believed was the first use of the word "believe" in the Bible. Abraham trusted God. He rested everything on God's word and kept resting in faith. Abraham was declared righteous through faith, not his works, not through circumcision, or through law, which didn't even exist in Abraham's day.

With Genesis 15:6 in mind, we jump to Genesis 22, a full 30 years later. God had kept his promise. Abraham was given a beautiful son. Abraham was over 100 years old when God appeared to him and said, "*Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and to Moriah and sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will tell you about.*" This has to be the most shocking command ever given to a human being by God. Imagine the horror Abraham felt. But he saddled a donkey and split wood and began their terrible journey. How could he do it, we wonder? When he arrives, Abraham takes Isaac and the wood up to the summit. Isaac asks, "*Father, where is the ram to sacrifice?*" Abraham says to his son, "*God will provide, my son.*" It says that Abraham laid out the wood, and he bound Isaac and laid him on the wood. I can only imagine the sobbing, the tears, as Abraham reached for the blade. Utter darkness and nausea over the thought that the last face his son would see would be his father's as his son died by his own hands. The darkness, the future death convulsions of his son were only the tip of the emotions he felt as he raised the blade, and finally, when it was evident that Abraham was going to obey God, the Angel from heaven called out, "*Abraham! Abraham!*" And we know the rest of the redemptive story.

Abraham's genuine faith resulted in obedient works. His faith was made complete by his obedience. You don't see any more of the foolishness that characterized Abraham's early life after Genesis 22. His faith was now robust. His faith and works worked together. Abraham was God's friend.

I must ask you and myself this morning, "What does it mean to you today to lay the most precious thing in your life on God's altar? What precious Isaac in your life are you holding on to?" True and saving faith will compel you to offer the precious thing in your life to God for this simple reason. Are you ready for this? Because you love Him!

The James Argument

You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. v. 24

Really? Wait a minute, James. Didn't Paul say the opposite of this about being made righteous? Doesn't the apostle Paul say in Romans 3:28, "*For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.*"

There is an apparent contradiction between Paul and James when they talk about the role of works. But actually, it is a

beautiful complementation. Paul used the word "works" to talk about works of the Law. Paul is saying, we may try to "obey the Law," but we will continually fail. Our sin runs too deep. The law can't save us. Paul is saying, forget about trying to obey the law as a means to be justified by God. We are justified by faith in God and his Son, Jesus. We are made right with God through the righteousness of Jesus when we believe and place our faith in Jesus. Only through faith in Jesus can we enter into the kingdom of God.

James has an entirely different meaning when he says, "righteous by what they do." "By what they do," James is referring to acts of love - loving God. He also means loving people no matter how imperfect that may look in your life. In Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul explains the place of our faith and the place of our works so well in the life of a follower of Jesus. Check this out:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2: 8-10

Francis Gench explains it this way.

"Paul is dealing with obstetrics, with how new life begins; James, however, is dealing with pediatrics and geriatrics, with how Christian life grows and matures and ages."

The Rahab Argument

James defends true saving faith with Abraham and does it again with Rahab. I love that he goes from the greatest to the least of examples. Abraham was the consummate insider. Rahab was the consummate outsider. Abraham was a supreme figure. Rahab was scandalous. Abraham, a patriarch, living inside the purposes of God. Rahab was a prostitute living outside the purposes of God. No little girl dreams of growing up and becoming a prostitute. She was a prostitute because some evil and wicked things happened to her. She was an object, a commodity; travelers would visit her home and buy her, and yet she had some longing in her heart. And even though she was the ultimate outsider, a Gentile, she was brought into the family of God and found herself in the lineage of Jesus.

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? v. 25

Rahab lived in Jericho. In Joshua, we learn she got wind that the spies for Joshua were in the city, and she helped the spies. She hid them. She put her faith in God that God was bringing something new. In her faith, she redirected the spies to safety and eventual victory for Joshua and the people of Israel. Rahab had no list of things to follow to be saved. She had true saving

faith. She believed and put her faith in action. And now we can turn to Hebrews 11 and see Rahab has been enshrined alongside Abraham in the Hall of Faith.

James concludes:

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. vv. 25-26

It's a simple analogy. The life of the body is the spirit – that is, the breath. In the same way, the life of faith is the deeds of faith. Without the spirit, the body would be lifeless, and without deeds, faith is no more alive than a corpse. Faith that is not animated by love for God and love for our neighbors is a dead faith. So what would God want us to do with this passage? For me, it's three things.

Receive Encouragement

Maybe if you are like me, you are feeling convicted not encouraged right now. But if you are God's child, if you have exercised true and saving faith in Jesus Christ and him alone, there is already fruit in your life, the fruit of love for him.

There is evidence in your life, the fruit of love for God and others, through your words, actions, and choices that you would not be doing if it were not for the His saving grace in your heart. And don't worry about how imperfectly you are executing that love. You are not playing religious. You are not practicing intellectual faith. You are authentic. Be encouraged today. You are being transformed and are looking more and more like Christ. It's real. And you know it. Receive that assurance, and thank God for it.

Heed the Warning

For others of us, this feels more like a warning. Perhaps there are some reading this, and you realize your faith is what James would call a counterfeit faith, a dead faith, a useless faith. You are playing a religious part. Your faith is intellectual.

You have given your mind to a system of belief that your life belongs to you. And James would say, "You need to confess that your version of faith is not faith." Identify this false belief you have about faith and confess it. Seek God's forgiveness, and turn from this false belief and trust God. Faith trusts God, and it obeys God. Embrace this new meaning of good deeds found in James. There are no lists to follow to get approved by God. Put the lists away, that's legalism. Instead, cultivate your love for God and your love for others. And remember He loves you, he delights in you, and he likes being with you.

Hear the Call

For all of us, this passage is a call. Where would God call you to a greater, deeper, and fuller fruitfulness? Where does there need to be a more practical and consistent expression of love for God?

When my youngest daughter was six, she was terrified of water. We took Holly to swimming lessons. She laid on her stomach on the pool deck, facing away from the pool with her legs dangling over the edge and yelled, "I'm drowning." But you know what? One day she trusted. One day she took that courageous step of faith. Holding the edge, she lowered herself into the water. Soon after, she held her breath and ducked her head. Then she took a deep breath and put her face in the water and floated. Then she pushed herself off the side began to kick with a board. And finally, she swam. It wasn't perfect, but it progressed. Eventually, her faith became more robust. She was diving off the side and swimming until her lips turned blue.

When Holly was six, I had to threaten her to get into the water. When she was ten, I had to threaten her to get out of the water. When she was in High School, she was winning swimming medals. When Holly trusted, she surrendered her fears. When Holly trusted, she surrendered control. And when Holly trusted, she fell in love with swimming and her life was changed forever. In the same way,

True Saving Faith will always Produce a Transformed Life

When we trust Jesus, we are surrendering our fears and control. From this place of submission, we feel and know God in a way that leads to delight. When we practice true and saving faith, we will progress from clinging to the side, to eventually floating, and then to swimming. And it won't always look right. We may flap our arms and make big unnecessary splashes, but loving others is not about perfection, it's about progress. And many of us have made that deep dive into loving God and loving others. And some of us find such delight in loving others, and we spend so much time doing it, our lips turn blue because we know the joy of living out our true and saving faith. We celebrate that true, and saving faith that brings about a transformed life. What is your next practical step to practice the good deeds that accompany true and saving faith?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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