

We're continuing in our series, "Pure Religion," on the letter from James. We're going to see James describe what it means to be religious. When I was 13 years old, I first said yes to Jesus. I was at a summer camp. On the last night of summer camp, someone presented the story of Jesus. Jesus died for me, and if I say yes to Jesus, I could start a new life. I said yes, and it was a life-changing moment. But it also opened up questions - particularly, what does it mean to live out that commitment? What does it mean to be a religious person?

Maybe you have those questions. Maybe you think about a religious person as someone confined to a specific context. They wear a certain outfit or work in a certain place. When I first moved to Europe for ministry, I was a worship leader. I remember walking down the street to an event one time with my guitar. I stopped at a bakery. I had my guitar with me, and the guy behind the counter asked what I was doing. I explained that I worked for a church. He gave me a strange look. In his mind, a religious person is confined to the Catholic cathedral down the street. They don't play guitar, and they certainly don't look or dress like me.

Or maybe for you, a religious person is someone who has made an incredible act of sacrifice in their life. They are someone who sold everything and moved to a faraway place in the world to help people in need. You admire that and support that, but you realize that you could never do that. There is a gap between what they do and what you do every day. Or maybe a religious person is someone who has an incredible depth of knowledge. They can quote any verse in the Bible, and answer every question. And you think that there's no way that you could ever learn what they know.

Or perhaps, when you think about a religious person, you think of someone who has hurt or disappointed you. Maybe it's not even someone you know, but someone you followed, read, or listened to from a distance. They acted in such a way that turned your opinion of them. So even thinking about or talking about a religious person turns you off. Whatever your idea of a religious person, James has something different for us. In our passage for this message, James is going to reset our understanding of what it means to be religious.

For James, a religious person operates with this motto: Who God is, drives how they act in the world. So, this is not confined to a certain context, nor to people who can only make incredible

sacrifices, nor to people smarter than everyone else. And it's certainly not limited to people who have failed to be the very thing that they taught. For James, who God is, drives how they act in the world.

### **The Problem of Faith**

**What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 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. 14-17**

James begins with an issue in the church community of his audience. The issue is this: People who speak of having faith but don't act. Is that good? Does that have any eternal value? He gives a situation. Imagine someone is in need - they need some food or clothing. And imagine that someone in your church community goes up to the person in need and says something spiritual. They quote a Bible verse, wow them with wonderful theology, but they don't act in a way that the person needs. What good is that?

The answer to the rhetorical question is that it doesn't do much good. What's the problem in that scenario? The problem is "faith by itself" (v.17). For James, faith is deeply connected to action. Faith and works work together. Let's be clear; he is not advocating for works instead of faith (as if in place of), nor works over faith (as if greater than), nor works or faith (as if these are two options from which to choose). Rather, faith and works work together. They are connected.

So, from these opening verses, we see that James understands that faith and works work together. You can't separate what you say or believe from what you do. These two things are deeply connected. Next, James imagines an argument, an opponent to his view.

### **The Opposing View**

**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. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? vv. 18-20**

It was a common practice in that day to state your opinion and anticipate how an opponent may argue. Paul does this at several points in his letter to the church in Rome. James does it here. There are two positions in this anticipated argument. One side (James) argues that faith and works are yoked together. The other side (the opponent) claims that faith and works are separate.

Let's imagine this opposing position for a moment. Imagine, James says, you have a perfectly orthodox belief. You believe that there is one God. This was a core tenant of Jewish belief called the Shema. It was prayed twice a day, "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one..." That's good. But even demons believe that. We see in the Gospel of Mark 1 and 5 that demons acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God. Even the demons believe, but they don't do the right thing. The demons are perfectly orthodox, but they are also perfectly lost. You can't divorce belief and action. James summarizes his point in verse 20 that faith without deeds is useless. That English word, useless, in the Greek, means workless. It's a play on words; faith without works doesn't work. What James is calling them to see is that what they believe about God and what God has done for them in Jesus should start to change how they act in their world.

James has given us the problem of faith. He's given us an opposing view, and then what he does next is he provides two examples of people in Jewish history whose faith was expressed in how they acted.

## **Two Examples - Faith and Works**

**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. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. 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? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. vv. 21-26**

The first example is the example that you would expect him to give: Abraham. In ancient Jewish thinking, he was the epitome of a righteous person. It's like, when we say today, "That person has the character of Mother Theresa." Abraham is the standard of faith. Not only that, but James picks the most faith-driven event in Abraham's life. In Genesis chapter 22, Abraham is called by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac. This was a big deal because God had promised Abraham that Abraham would lead an entire nation - a nation that would come through his son, Isaac. So,

Genesis 22 is about the question is Abraham willing to believe God will remain faithful even though obedience means seemingly removing the pathway for God to carry out his promises. It's a huge event. And James says it is in this scene that faith and works are working together.

Working together is the Greek word from which we get the English word, synergy. Faith and works partner together in labor. The Message version paraphrases this phrase, "the seamless unity of believing and doing." Not only that, but James says Abraham's faith was made complete. In other words, it was fulfilled. Faith was brought to its intended goal. Faith was not merely a mental reorientation or a one-time verbal profession. The intended goal of faith is to lead to action in the way of God. Abraham acted because he believed God. And as a result, Abraham received the privileged status of righteous and a friend of God.

The second example that James uses faith and works working together is the example of Rahab. Rahab lived in the ancient city of Jericho. Jewish scholars are fascinated by Rahab's faith because she was an outsider who believed. She was a Gentile (an outsider to the people of God), and she was a prostitute (lifestyle outside of the purpose of God). But even though she's an outsider by nationality, and even though she's an outsider by her life, something happens in her when she hears about the God of Israel. She confesses and believes this is the world's true God (Joshua 2.11). And because she believes God, she acts in ways that supported God's purposes.

It's an interesting contrast with Abraham. Where Abraham is a supreme figure, Rahab is scandalous. Where Abraham is the father of the faith, Rahab is an outsider. Where Abraham is a patriarch, Rahab is a prostitute. It's as if James says that if you want to go to the greatest or the least of examples - wherever you look through the history of faith, people have acted in response to what they believe about God. For James, faith is not simply a mental reorientation, but faith starts to change your world through you because you start to act in ways that God is calling you to act. Who God is, drives how you act in the world.

Now we jump back to verse 24. Verse 24 sums up James' argument.

### **The bottom line.**

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

Abraham was justified not merely because he had a mental reorientation, but because he acted on what he believed. And this is where people have a problem with James. This is probably one of the hardest verses in the New Testament. For some people - stretching back to Martin Luther in the 16th century - they read a contradiction between the teaching of James and the teaching of Paul. You can see this by comparing the key verse in Paul's teaching (Romans 3:28) with the key verse of James

(James 2:24). Are they talking about two different means of justification (being declared right with God)? Are Paul and James in contradiction, or is there a way to understand both statements in complement?

There are two important aspects of their teachings that can help resolve the tension. First, Paul and James are teaching about two different topics. Paul is writing to the church in Rome about the inclusion of outsiders (Gentiles) to have right standing with God. Some of Paul's audience believed that Gentiles needed to follow the ritual law of the Old Testament, specifically circumcision. Paul argues that being made right with God requires believing in Jesus, and ritual practices are not required. The only way that happens is people saying yes to Jesus in faith. So when I was 13 and said yes, I believed in Jesus and received what He had done for me. Everything changed at that moment. That's what Paul is talking about in Romans.

That's not what James is talking about. James is not talking about how outsiders become insiders. Rather, James is concerned about how insiders live as a result of their proclamation of faith. Where Paul is looking at the start of new life in Jesus, James is looking from the end of the story back to that moment of change. If we could go to the end of my life and look back at that moment in camp at age 13, would the life I lived sync up with the decision of faith that I made? That's what James is talking about.

The second important aspect to understand in contrasting Paul and James is that they use the word "works" differently. When Paul talks about works in relationship to being made right with God, the phrase is "works of the law." Paul is specific in what type of action he is against (i.e., ritual practices). For James, "works" refers to acts of love, good deeds done for other people. You can see these two contrasting aspects - different topics and different uses of works - by simply contrasting the end of each sentence from Paul and James. Paul says that being made right with God is not by practicing ritual commands. James would agree. And he would add, that this right relationship with God does not take shape by mental reorientation alone. Faith leads the way along the path of obedience with God.

You can see this at the end of the phrase in James 2.24, "faith alone." In other words, you can't separate what you believe and what you do. You can't believe alone (apart) from how you act. You can't claim to believe in forgiveness and not forgive. You can't claim to stand up for justice and not support a victim. You can't claim to believe in comfort and not comfort those in pain.

Let me give you an example. My wife, Hilary, and I were married eleven and a half years ago. Like many people, we said vows to one another on our wedding day. Vows are a nice moment in a wedding ceremony as the bride and groom tearfully express their commitment to one another. But what is the purpose of the vow? The purpose of the vow is that you do what you say.

The purpose of the vow isn't to have a nice moment in a wedding ceremony. The purpose of the vow is what happens next. That's what James is talking about here. What you believe and what you do is deeply connected. He is calling his community to act in new ways in the world that exemplify the very thing they believe.

Jesus said similar things throughout his teaching. In the gospel of John, Jesus said,

**"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. For this is my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourself to be my disciples." John 15:7-8**

He desires that you remain in Him. And here's the glory of God; how God gets put on display: When you live your abiding relationship. The deep passion and desire of Jesus for you is that you would abide in Him and live in ways that transform the places you work and live.

### **Past, Present, Future**

I want to give you three areas of experience for you to consider this week, where God may be calling you to live what you believe. First, are your past experiences. Maybe there are things about your past that you're holding onto. Maybe there are things about your past that you've been holding onto because you don't trust God to do anything with them. Maybe faith for you this week is releasing those things to your loving Father.

Second, think about your present. Maybe there are things right now that God has put on your heart for a reason. The Old Testament prophets wrote about having a burden. I love that idea. What is the burden that God has put on your heart? Faith for you may be to act.

Third, maybe you need to look at your future. Maybe things are holding you back from decisions that you need to make. Faith for you could be taking a courageous step out of the safety of the known into the wide horizon of the unknown. You can do that because you go with the foundation of the promise of God that you're accepted in the person of Jesus.

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

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