

“FAITH THAT WORKS.”

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Scripture Text: James 2:14-26

Introduction.

How would you like to have a job where every week you had to do something foolish? It was part of your job description. In fact if you didn't do something foolish every week you would be fired. Would you want a job like that?

That's my life. Every Sunday I am required to stand before you and do something foolish. Paul refers to preaching as folly. It's bad enough that I have to do something foolish every week, you are foolish enough to show up every week and listen to more folly.

The only reason this works is because the foolishness of God is better than all the wisdom of the world and the Spirit demonstrates His power and presence by taking weak things and showing His power and wisdom through them.

The key to hearing what the Spirit is saying is to come prepared, come ready to receive, come expecting the Spirit to give you something, come hungry and thirsty for the Spirit to feed you and give you drink. Is your heart open to God this morning?

James 2.

In church history James has been a controversial book with much debate as to whether it should be included in the Bible. It was disputed by a number of early scholars and even *Martin Luther* called James a “strawy (weak) epistle in comparison with Paul and John.”

Many people over the centuries have believed the James contradicted Paul. Paul wrote that salvation is by faith and James wrote salvation is by works. So which is it?

Let's establish some ground work before answering the question. What do we know to be true about the Bible? It's the very Word of God written. It's breathed out by God and therefore it must be true, unchanging and eternal. It cannot teach anything false and it cannot contradict itself.

So when you hear someone says they have found a contradiction in the Bible you can know with confidence that's impossible. God cannot lie, God cannot contradict Himself.

Now that doesn't mean that everything in the Bible is immediately clear and understandable. There are conundrums, paradoxes, mysteries, things that are hard to understand, that challenge

our intellect or require a great deal of study and work to figure out. We should expect that, this is the Word of God after all and we are human and finite.

So what about this apparent contradiction that we have here in chapter two of James?

Most of us should know our salvation is not based on our works or efforts or goodness, but purely on God's grace given to those who put their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. Nothing we can do can earn for us God's favor. While we were yet sinners God loved us and Christ died for us.

Salvation is by grace through faith alone. This single theological truth separates Christianity from every other religion and every other gospel.

And we all know the well-known verses that teach this:

Ephesians 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Romans 3:28 We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

But James seems to contradict this when he writes:

James 2:21, 24 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? 24 You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

What is James really saying? James is correcting an abuse of Paul's teaching. How are we justified with God? Faith. But what kind of faith? Loveless faith, deedless faith, dead faith, demonic faith? No, that's counterfeit faith. We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone, it is accompanied and proved by love and good deeds.

James is talking about the quality and character and nature of our faith. Those who think these verses are talking about being justified by works are completely misunderstanding James. (Like those who misunderstand when Paul saying preaching is foolishness.)

His intention is only to say that faith without fruit is not faith. Faith works.

James shows that there are *two kinds of counterfeit faith*, dead faith, and demonic faith.

First, Dead Faith, 2:14-17.

Notice James doesn't say, "if a man has faith ..." James says, "if a man *says* he has faith ..."

The issue is not faith but a false profession of faith, a profession without evidence or backbone.

James is speaking to hypocrites, to people who make empty boasts. An apple tree in the spring boasts with all its blossoms that it's an apple tree, but if there are no apples its boast is worthless.

Faith in the living God of the universe cannot be indifferent and formal, it cannot be unmoved, unsympathetic, uncaring, uninterested, unconcerned, unresponsive, unfeeling.

A Christian is a person who has been saved by God, forgiven by Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit and adopted into the Body of Christ. If that doesn't dramatically changed one's life then it isn't real. Paul says the same thing:

Titus 1:16 They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

To send a hungry man away with only words is compared to saying only words to God. Faith *by itself* without good deeds/works is comatose, dead. Loveless faith isn't faith at all. It's like the seed among the rocks or weeds. It doesn't produce fruit, it doesn't do any good. This faith is useless, ineffective, vain, empty.

James could have been from Missouri, the Show Me state. He could have done that old MacDonald's commercial, "Where's the beef?"

Second, Demonic Faith, 2:18-19.

James makes a powerful point by asking what do demons believe? There are no atheist demons.

All demons have a kind of faith, they have a knowledge of God. They are monotheistic and Trinitarian. They know God has absolute power and authority. They know Jesus is the Son of God come down from heaven. They know there are a heaven and a hell.

They have all this faith and yet they will still spend eternity in hell.

They believe and they tremble but it doesn't do them any good, it's worthless, it doesn't save.

There will be monotheistic, Trinitarian people with orthodox beliefs in hell.

There is a faith that doesn't save.

Dynamic Faith, 2:21-26.

After exposing two kinds of counterfeit faith, James describes dynamic faith with two examples.

Abraham.

Both Paul and James use Abraham to make their case. Paul says in Romans 4-5 God imputed Abraham's righteousness by his faith, not his works. James says the faith that justified Abraham was not dead, or demonic, but dynamic, active, vibrant, alive, obedient faith.

James reverses the chronological order of two events in Abraham's life. God told Abraham in Genesis 15 that he would be the father of a great nation even though he had no children and his wife was barren and past the age of bearing children. Abraham's response to this promise was:

Genesis 15:6 Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Fifteen years later Abraham demonstrates his faith by an act of obedience. God tested the integrity and vitality of Abraham's faith on the mountain with Isaac.

James and Paul are agreed. Faith is the only thing that justifies us, the only thing that unites us to Christ, but that faith is never alone, it bears fruit, it does good deeds. Otherwise it's dead and dead faith cannot justify us.

Rahab.

What a strange choice for a second illustration. Why not a more noble character? Why a harlot?

Rahab believed the God of Israel to be the true God. She demonstrated her faith by risking her life to hide the spies. If Rahab had not had faith, she never would have done what she did. She is listed in the Hall of Fame of faith in Hebrews 11:

Hebrews 11:31 By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

Anyone no matter their rank, station, class, or condition is saved by faith and saving faith bears fruit. No matter who you are, it's the same. We show our character and faith through our actions and deeds.

Good works add nothing to our salvation, but they are a necessary consequence of our salvation.

Just as a good fruit tree necessarily produces fruit.

Scripture is clear. Salvation is only by faith alone, and salvation is by a faith that is never alone. There is only one kind of faith, living faith that grows up into living, breathing works.

James 1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

I John 3:17-18 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

Ephesians 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Application and Conclusion.

Faith without works is of no benefit to you, for it will not save you.

Faith without works is of no benefit to others, since it is loveless, it doesn't help.

Faith without works has no evidence of being real.

Faith without works is no better than the demons.

But faith with works has some dangers of its own.

First, we always have to fight against a performance mentality and that we are earning something from God or that now God will be in our debt. There can be no self-righteousness.

Second, we must guard against having the appearance of faith through our good works but not a genuine faith in Jesus. We aren't out to impress others, we are out show the fruit of a real relationship with Jesus. We want our deeds to match up with real faith. Not only is there such a thing as dead faith, but there is such a thing as dead works, works apart from faith.

Third, we must guard our own expectations. Dynamic faith is a growing faith, and that means we will grow in good works. It will always be a few steps forward and a few back. Everyone in the Hall of Fame of faith had times of doubt and failure, times when they were faithful and times when they weren't. Peter stumbled many times on his journey of faith.

Tonight in Revelation I will be speaking about the church in Thyatira who's latter works exceed their first.

Philippians 1:6 I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Fourth, remember what we have already been taught in James, God will test our faith, He will press us, He will call for sacrifices that we won't think we can make, perhaps none as severe as the one Abraham faced with his son Isaac, but sacrifices nevertheless. There will be times when we don't feel like doing or helping or serving. It may make us sweaty and dirty. It may put us behind schedule. Endeavor to persevere for God is with us and His strength is made strong in our weakness.

At Alice Hoekema's funeral last Monday I asked, "If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" In Alice's case her rap sheet was a mile long.

It's an amazing story. Joe and Alice took in 47 children into their home over a 60 year time span for from 2 weeks to 4 years. When a friend, neighbor or relative had a need, a mom in surgery, a family going through hard times, they opened the door.

Is your faith real, alive, active, dynamic, put into practice? Are there examples of charity and generosity in your life?

When is the last time you served someone else? When was the last time did you set your agenda or needs aside and helped someone else? Change a diaper, do the dishes, help a neighbor, even a stranger, lend a helping hand, open your wallet, open your home, serve in the nursery, made a meal for someone else, say yes to someone's request of help, or better yet see a need and volunteered without being asked.

Parents, help your children with this. As a family you can start a project or a tradition that puts your family's faith in action. Sponsor a ministry or missionary. Visit the care home. Help at the food bank on a Saturday. Join those who pray at Planned Parenthood the third Sunday afternoon of each month. Collect coins for a good work.

What we don't want is for our children to stand up here and make a profession of faith that has no fruit and does them no good. Teach them that the Christian life is a life of active growing obedience and works of love.

Hebrews 6:10-12 For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. 11 And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.