

It's good to be with you this morning, would you open your bibles to the book of James chapter 2, we're going to pick up this morning with verse fourteen and work through the end of the chapter. Over the last several weeks, we've been in a series called Faith that works, in which we're working almost verse by verse through the book of James. So that's what we'll be doing this morning.

James is a pretty direct book, or letter, in which James the brother of Jesus lays out not so much what we need to believe about Jesus, but what it looks like to live faithfully as a follower of Jesus. I'll be the first to admit, some of God's word can be kind of hard to understand at times. Particularly certain passages in the writings of Paul, or the Apocalyptic literature like Daniel or Revelation. Not James. I think this is what a lot of us like so much about James. He keeps it pretty practical and direct...Almost everywhere but today's passage.

On the face of it, it seems fairly simple. But if you've been around Christian circles for some time and have studied God's word you might recognize that this passage is one of the more argued about and debated passages in all the New Testament. The reason is because what James says about the relationship between faith and works appears to stand in direct contradiction to something the Apostle Paul says about them in his letters. Or flip it around, what the Apostle Paul says is in direct contradiction to James. Regardless of who gets placed first, this is a big deal, because we're not just reading and revering the letters of dead men. We believe this is God's word. Ultimately God is the author behind the authors. If the bible contradicts itself that's a problem. Because surely God wouldn't contradict God's self. Would he? Making sense of this is the task is what we're going to work on, and then we'll wrap up with..ok so what?

The section begins *"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? (Maybe a better way of phrasing it is "Can this type of faith save?"*

He is asking his audience a hypothetical question that sets the stage for this section. It's a hypothetical question, but I think there's more than just theory behind it. Remember what we said in week #1 of this series: James was the pastor of *the* church in Jerusalem, and he's writing this letter those he had pastored, who as it says in chapter one, verse one, had been scattered, likely as a result the persecution following Stephen's martyrdom. I think that James had heard that there were certain of his flock and perhaps some others who were beginning to live and teach, a workless faith. So in verse fourteen, he poses the question, can a faith that is not accompanied works save?

I want draw out few things from verse fourteen that are going to help us understand the passage as we work through it. First of all, James isn't granting that this hypothetical individual has faith. He's not conceding that point. He doesn't say "If a man has faith without works," does he? He's talking about someone who *"says"* they have faith and no works. You might want to underline the word says. That word is key to understanding this passage. James is only granting that someone *"claims"* something about their faith. We know from the teaching of Jesus, in

Matthew chapter 7 especially, simply claiming allegiance to Christ, doesn't make that claim true.

The second word in verse 14 we need to drill down on is the word faith. The type of faith James is talking about in verse 14 is not the saving faith that Paul speaks of throughout his letters. When Paul talks about saving faith it's a faith that leads to obedience. It leads to action. At the open and close of his letter to the Romans, the charter document for our understanding of salvation by grace through faith, you know what he talks about. Romans 1:5 "Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake." The same phrase is there again at the close of the letter. Thus, he bookends his treatise on salvation by faith, talking about the life of obedience that faith yields. In Galatians 5:6, Paul says "*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing (which is actually the word working) itself through love.*" For Paul faith always leads one to do something.

What we discover in reading James up to this point in chapter two is that James isn't down on faith, on the contrary, he's got a remarkably high view of it. Here's a list of some indicators of true faith in James: it's persevering, refined by trials, we looked at that in the first week of our series. The Faithful person isn't tossed about by doubt but holds to God's promises in prayer, faith doesn't give up on them. It leads to compassionate care for the most vulnerable... that comes from James' description of religion that's true and faith leads to love of neighbor, which is the fulfillment of the Royal law, which is Jesus, the Messiah's teaching. There is a type of faith that James and Paul are in complete agreement upon, and it is a saving faith. James is contrasting this type of faith, true faith...with a workless faith.

Before we go any further, let's talk about what the word *works* means. This is another word that looks like James and Paul are at odds over. In Greek, the word is ἔργον. If you're looking at an NIV translation, you're probably a little confused. The NIV uses the word deeds rather than works. That's okay, just know that we're talking about ἔργον or works. James and Paul often use this same word, but they use it to refer to different things. Most of the time when the Apostle Paul uses works or ἔργον, he's not just talking about works, but it shows up in a phrase "works of the law." Which often, not always, but often refers to things like circumcision, keeping the sabbath, or specific food laws. These were the boundary markers for Judaism. In several of his letters where this theme comes up Paul was writing to mostly gentile communities who had placed their faith in Jesus but were being encouraged to convert to Judaism in order to follow Jesus. And Paul was saying, no these works of the law aren't what saves you, faith in Christ's death and resurrection for the forgiveness of your sins is what saves you. When James uses the word works, as we're going to see he's mainly talking about acts of mercy and obedience that arise as an outward expression of faith. They're referring to totally different things. This is why Paul's view of works or works of the law can seem so negative, and James' perspective seems so positive.

To substantiate his case, James moves on to an illustration:

*<sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup> So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

The brother or sister in this illustration implies someone within their own small church community. This is another follower of Jesus living amongst them. Someone they rub elbows

with and worship and open God's word with. This isn't just the person that we pass at the on or off-ramp to the highway, this is someone we say hello to on Sunday morning.

Suppose this person is naked and lacks daily food, and we respond, keep warm be well fed. What are we doing? We're addressing their need with at best well wishes. "Man, that sounds hard. I really hope things turn around for you." If there is nothing behind the words, the words themselves are hollow and useless. What's the connection with verse fourteen? He begins with the question "what good is workless faith?" Now he's illustrating it verse fifteen. In the same way that words without actions are useless, so in the same way he says a faith without works, he doesn't just say useless it's dead.

In a number of places throughout James, and particularly here, it's as if James is writing with an imaginary dialogue partner in his head. In the beginning of the next chapter he gives warns those who want to be teachers, and I think perhaps it's one of these teachers that he's got in mind and responding to:

<sup>18</sup> *But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." That is, someone will say the way to salvation for some is by faith, and for others it's by their works. That's the imaginary dialogue partner. To which James responds. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.* The point he's making is that you can't separate the two. You can't pull faith and works apart, they're bound together. If you think you've got faith with no works, what you've got isn't biblical faith.

He goes back to addressing his imaginary dialogue partner *"You believe that God is one; you do well.* It sounds like an echo of Deuteronomy 6:4 "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." You believe that, congratulations. *"Even the demons believe—and shudder."* Isn't that the one of the best lines in all of scripture? Great job you guys your faith is really quite something. In fact it's astonishing. I'll put it right up there with let's see, umm...how about the demons. Pastor Rick mentioned this in his a few weeks ago, demons are orthodox in their belief. There's no question in the minds of the devil or his minions that God is the creator of all and Jesus is the son who died for the sins of the world. The gospels testify: no-one was clearer on who Jesus was than Satan and his minions. Notice that even their belief surpasses that of the one holding workless faith, because at least they tremble. At least there is some response.

<sup>20</sup> *Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?* A workless faith is barren. The word barren means an inability to produce. This passage reminds me of Jesus cursing the fig tree in Matthew 21. Jesus went to the fig tree and saw there was no fruit on it, do you remember what he did? He caused it to wither and die. Why? Because it wasn't producing what it was intended. Faith without works is just as barren, just as useless, and equally susceptible to judgement.

<sup>21</sup> *Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?*

He shifts from a more hypothetical and philosophical argument to a biblical one. He was writing to a primarily Jewish Christian audience, so appealing to Abraham is kind of the trump card. This isn't just a case study amongst many, he's ascribing to the founder of their faith to make his point.

<sup>22</sup> *You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.*

Read it carefully. He's suggesting Abraham's faith was incomplete apart from works. Faith without works is incomplete. What does that mean? Does that mean that when we say a

prayer, accepting Jesus into our heart, that faith gets us most of the way there, but we still have to finish it? There are still some boxes for us to check. Is that what he means in saying works complete faith? No. Let's take a look at what John says in his first letter, *"No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."* Here's the word "complete" again. Clearly, God's love is not deficient. His love requires nothing on our part to fill it up and complete it. Rather when we love one another we put the love of God love that resides in us to its intended effect. The sense in which you and I complete God's love is only in the way we direct and channel it to its intended purpose. In the same way faith is made complete when it receives it's shape and fulfills its purpose in works.

<sup>23</sup> *Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God.*

For scripture to be fulfilled, means that God's prior declaration of Abraham's righteousness was played out by what Abraham did.

<sup>24</sup> *You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*

Now we're really in the teeth of it. While James and Paul are in total agreement in verse twenty- three, it seems like in verse twenty-four James is making the exact opposite case of the one Paul makes in Romans chapter 3 and 4. In chapter 3, verse 28 Paul says "For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law." Here, let's put these passages up side by side. Then we get to Romans chapter 4, which I'm not going to put up here. Paul uses Abraham as his case study to demonstrate that Abraham was justified not by works, but by faith alone. Come on guys, couldn't you have at least chosen different examples? Let's all go home the bible contradicts itself. Just kidding.

Again we have the issue where Paul and James are using the same word, but mean different things by it. To be justified according to Paul, is to be declared to righteous. In Romans chapter 5 Paul says "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" According to Paul, we aren't justified – declared to be righteous as a result of something we've done, we are justified, and made right with God by what Christ has accomplished on our behalf and for the world. When James uses the word justified he's not talking about the process of our salvation, he's talking about the evidence of it. To be Justified, doesn't only mean you are declared righteous, it has another meaning which James uses "to show or demonstrate our righteousness." When James says that a person is justified by works and not faith by faith alone, he's not saying something in opposition to what Paul says, he's just making a different point. It's the same thing he's been saying throughout this section – not works are the source of our salvation, but they're the evidence that put our salvation on display. Paul never says it explicitly but I think he'd be in total agreement with that.

<sup>25</sup> *Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road?* This is Rahab the foreigner and prostitute, from the book of Joshua. She's also blessed to be recalled in the geneology of Jesus. Her heroic faith was in a God she barely knew compelled her to put her life on the line for Him. James is saying, she's no different than Abraham, she was justified, that is her righteousness was demonstrated through the merciful actions of giving shelter and hospitality to the Spies who needed it.

He sums up this section with the concluding line

<sup>26</sup> *For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead. A workless faith is a dead faith. Some of you are thinking, Andrew you made that point already. Well, if James considered it important enough to make the point twice. We should probably consider it well. I love how C.H Spurgeon put it:*

*“A tree has been planted in the ground. Now the source of life to that tree is at the root, whether it hath 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 springtime comes there is no leafing, and no fruit-bearing, but the next year, and the next, it stands without bud or blossom, or leaf or fruit, you would say its dead, and you are correct; it is dead. It is not that the leaves could have made it live, but the absence of the leaves is a proof that it is dead.”<sup>1</sup>* At the beginning of this section, in verse 14, James asked a question can faith without works save. And I think he makes his case well. It does not. Not because we are saved by our works, but the lack of any noticeable works is the clear evidence, that we are not saved. So when James talks about this death, we must understand he’s talking about a spiritual death an eternal death.

There is good news. First of all it’s that he’s given us this message. He doesn’t leave us without warnings. As you sit here listening, which of the two types of faith seems more reflective of your life? Is there any evidence of a living faith. If not, hearing this message is not bad news, it’s incredibly good news, because today, that can change for you. James says God gives us birth by the word of truth. You have heard the truth, and today you can receive new life. You can place your trust in Jesus, and you will be saved. Not because of anything you do for him. But you will be justified, declared righteous before God, entirely by his grace through faith in him. You will be accepted freely, fully and forever. This message is also good news to those of us who have already placed our trust in Christ. We don’t have to fear because true Faith creates works. As Spurgeon said, the life of the tree comes from its root. Our task, and it is a joyful one, is to stay connected to him, the root. Surrender to him and our lives will produce the fruit he’s looking for and produce it in abundance. Sometimes it’s going to take effort, and sacrifice. But let’s be honest, love takes effort and sacrifice.

For some of you this might be a season for you where you don’t see a lot of fruit, it might be winter. It might be a season of pruning, don’t hear this and despair. If you’re in Christ Spring will come. If you stay connected and surrendered to him, fruit, works, good deeds, whatever you want to call, it call it. He’ll bring you the opportunity, to put your faith on display and it will come.

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<sup>1</sup> C.H Spurgeon