

Text: James 2:14-26

¹⁴ *What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?*

¹⁵ *If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good^[b] is that?*

¹⁷ ***So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.***

¹⁸ *But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and **I will show you my faith by my works.** ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!*

²⁰ *Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?*

²¹ *Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God.*

²⁴ ***You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*** ²⁵ *And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?*

²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Pray

Main Point

Saving Faith is never alone

Introduction (300)

Hook

How can you know if what someone says is true?

A wannabe cook may boast about how great his lamb korma is, but until he makes that dish to prove himself, his boasting are mere words.

Sometimes I tell a friend that I don't believe they can cook that dish, in the hopes that they would prove themselves and make that meal. Sometimes it works.

We prove our words by our actions. Promises are empty if the actions don't follow.

This is no different with saving faith.

It is easy to say you believe, but do your actions prove your words?

Outline

This passage drives this point home. Yes you are saved by faith alone but Saving faith is never alone. Works will prove your faith.

To develop this idea James gives us four scenarios. The first two scenarios illustrate Dead Faith while the second two illustrate Live Faith.

That is how we will break up our passage:

1. Dead Faith (14-19)
2. Live Faith (20-26)

Part 1 – The Elephant in the Room

Exposition

Apparent contradiction

But before we look at our text in detail, we must give some time to address the elephant in the room.

First let us look at the elephant.

How is it that James can say:

²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

All of us cringe and twitch at those words. We are a protestant church. We draw our theology from the truths reclaimed in the Reformation. We cling tightly to the well-defended truth that a person is justified by faith alone!

Rom 3:28 makes it very clear:

²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

And also in Gal 2:16. Turn there with me if you would. You will see that three times in just one verse Paul restates the truth that a person is not justified by works.

¹⁶ yet we know that a person **is not justified^{la}** by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ,

*so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, **in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law,***

*because **by works of the law no one will be justified.***

So is James wrong? Is he confused? Does he hate Paul? Is Paul wrong?

And more importantly, does the Bible contradict itself?

At first glance, it seems these verses are saying opposite things.

But a second glance and with honest study will can see that there is no contradiction at all.

I love my cats - Illustration

Imagine for a moment, you have a pet cat, (for some that may be stretching the imagination). But imagine you have a pet cat and you wish to go on holiday, so you need someone to look after your cat, and so you put an advert in the paper.

Two people respond to your advert, and they both say "I love cats, I'll take care of your cat".

Now it seems they are saying the same thing, and it is a 50/50 choice.

But then you find out that one of the people responding is a hunter and poacher from exotic lands, his love for cats is to hunt them and sell the fur for a profit. And taking care of the cat means something completely different to feeding and nurturing your cat.

A cat lover and a big cat poacher can both truthly say "I love cats, I'll take care of your cat" but they mean completely different things.

Same words, but each word meaning completely different things, leading to completely different outcomes.

Two meanings of faith

And so it is with the use of certain key words that James and Paul use.

To start with, James has a different use of the word Faith to Paul.

When Paul uses the word Faith he has a very technical, precise use, which includes a number of facets. Saving faith, you will remember, has threefold components.

1. Content – Knowledge of the facts of the Gospel (Notitia)
2. Conviction – Intellectual assent that those facts are true (Ascensus)
3. Commitment – Trust and reliance (Fiducia)

This is a very full, very developed, very technical use of the word faith. This is the use we usually think of when we hear the word faith.

But James was not using the word faith in this technical way. He instead uses it to describe mere knowledge of the facts. Simply knowing certain propositions. A mere ability to articulate facts. No conviction. No commitment.

This is the “faith alone” that James is condemning.

Two meanings of work

And similarly Paul and James refer to different things when they speak of “works”.

Paul was talking about works that people do in the hope they will get into heaven. They hope to attain the

favour of God by their works. They work in order to be saved. We call this legalism right. Climbing the ladder one good work at time, which completely disregards the work of Christ on the cross.

But when James talks of works, he is not talking of merit gaining work. He talks of works that flow from a saving faith. People do these works because they are saved, not in order to be saved. We can call this faith-deeds. It is these faith deeds, these works that James is talking about.

And of course, Paul too talks of these faith deeds. These good works we are called to do once we are in Christ. In Eph 2:10 we read of this very thing. God himself prepared these good works for us to walk in.

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

Two uses of Justify

Now the third and final word we need to recognise a difference in use is the word Justify.

Paul uses it, again, in a very technical way. He is laying out the order of salvation for the believer.

Rom 8:30 we have the famous golden chain of salvation:

³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

To be justified is the once-off, legal declaration that you are no longer counted a sinner, due to the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ to your account and your condemnation imputed to Jesus. This is how Paul

develops the term and how Paul uses the term. Highly technical, highly specific.

James on the other hand, is not presenting an order of salvation. He has a different concern in mind.

James makes the point works show or demonstrate their faith to be true or untrue. He is using the term “Justify” to some degree as synonymous to “show” or “demonstrate”. Their works show their true faith.

But he is also using it in a rhetorical sense.

He has an audience of religious hypocrites who need a bit of a shake. Who need to wake up and snap out of their self-deception. James is using the word Justify to make a point, not to develop a theology. He uses this strong language to get the attention and make sure he is heard.

Example of Jesus

In fact Jesus too uses the word “justify” for exactly the same effect with exactly the same audience. In Matt 12:36-37 we read:

*³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷ **for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.***”

Is Jesus saying you are justified by words? No, he is using this strong language to show that the religious façade of the Pharisees is useless if they do not have fruit. The

James is using the word justify in the same way here. To make a point. To be heard. To get his audience to listen.

Summary of two uses

So we can see, just like the poacher means something different by a “love for cats”, Paul and James have different uses of the words Faith, Works and Justify. Paul was talking to legalists while James, on the other hand, is talking to religious hypocrites.

Application

Trust Bible

So I hope, even from this brief overview, you can see that there is no contradiction between James and Paul. There is no embarrassment with these verses in James that we have to sweep under the carpet.

Ultimately, the bible has one author. God is the author. And God speaks only truth. And if there seems to be an inconsistency, it is not because the Bible is wrong. It is because we have understood it wrong. The problem is with us, not with God’s word.

It is foolish, arrogant, and blatantly wrong to pit James against Paul and Paul against Peter and all the other writings of the NT against Jesus himself, as if they had a different teachings. They are all coherent and we must hear them as they choose to speak, not impose our categories on them.

Let us study the Word, but let us study it with humility, recognising we have many flaws, many assumptions, many preconceived ideas that may need to be removed.

Not let controversies distract us

Now it is necessary to address this apparent inconsistency; we need to remove the fog because of

our vantage point. But let us do more than merely clear the fog.

James has a significant message for us in these verses, let us not miss his point even as we establish what he is NOT saying.

Link

So let us turn our attention to what he IS saying.

His point is simple enough: Do you have saving faith?

How can you know? Saving faith is never alone; there will always be works to show it.

Just like the want-to-be chef who **says** he can cook a killer korma, but has nothing to show for it, so is one who says they are a Christian, but has nothing to show for it.

Their faith is dead.

Which brings us to our text and our first point in the passage: Dead Faith

Part 2 – Dead Faith (14-19)

Exposition

Context

Now you will remember, in all of chapter 2 James is warning against false religion.

As we have said before, he is confronting the religious hypocrites. Those who think they are good people because they do “religious” actions, all the while continuing to sin.

And for their own sake, James wants them to see how wrong they are. Even committing a seemingly “small” sin, such as partiality, is worthy of judgment.

Application – What do religious hypocrites look like today?

For us, today, the religious hypocrites are not the Pharisees or the Sadducees wearing tassels and making prayers on the street corners.

Today, the religious hypocrites are found in churches, in our small groups, in our homes.

The religious hypocrites are the ones who sing of God’s goodness, but then are always complaining.

The religious hypocrites are the ones who serve at church, but then fail to serve their spouse and children at home.

The religious hypocrites are the ones who can articulate the biblical theology of pride and then show contempt to those who are less schooled in doctrine.

The religious hypocrites are the ones who have all the answers at bible study, but are the ones who answer back at their boss and their parents.

They are the ones who keep some of God’s law “perfectly”, which they believe then gives them a “right” to indulge in worldly lusts.

They are the ones who can say all the right things at church and reassure their church friends, but when in a different context, with other people around, their words and actions are no different from the world.

Friends, we are the ones in danger of being the religious hypocrites. It is to those with a church

background, those well-schooled in doctrine, that James is addressing.

Link to passage

Well-kept rules are worthless without Christ. James has been stressing this since the beginning of his letter. We, like the original listeners, need a real faith in God. We need to cling to Christ. Only the Gospel, the word of truth, can change hearts and make a person acceptable before God.

Last week the passage finished with this thought. *“Mercy triumphs over judgment”*.

James is saying that those who show mercy, those who do not show partiality, demonstrate that they have a new heart and they will escape the judgement. They have a true religion. They have a true faith, seen because they show mercy.

Scenario 1 – Analogy + example

Which brings us to verse 14 to 17, where we see our first scenario of a dead faith. Listen to James as he confronts the religious hypocrites.

*¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can **that** faith save him?*

¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good^[b] is that?

*¹⁷ **So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.***

Notice first of all how James himself distinguishes two kinds of faith. There is a real faith, that is cultivated through trials. And then there is a faith that does not produce anything. And in verse 14 he asks clearly “Can **that** faith save him?”.

The scenario we read of in verses 15 and 16 serves both as an analogy and as an illustration.

It is an analogy in the sense that just like words are useless by themselves to feed a hungry person, so also faith by itself is useless to save a person.

But it also serves as an illustration of what false faith looks like. It is an illustration of what religious hypocrisy looks like. It is very likely that this sort of scenario was happening in the church. A classic religious response, a mere platitude in the face of suffering.

“Go in peace, be warmed and filled” – A religious act that covers up a failure to act.

Instead, a person with true faith will see the need right in front of them and do what they can to help. A person with true faith will take any opportunity to love their neighbour.

Application – Need right in front of you

A thing to point out is that James is not saying you must do humanitarian work to prove your saving faith. NO. He is saying, what is your attitude to a need right in front of you?

It could be as simple as doing the dishes for your wife instead of only encouraging her to get some rest.

Or of showing hospitality to a grieving person instead of only saying you are praying for them.

The possibilities of loving your neighbour right in front of you are endless. You don't need to look far, just open your eyes and your heart.

Scenario 2 – Demons Believe

But let us look at the second scenario of Dead faith, look at verse 18 and 19 with me:

*¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and **I will show you my faith by my works.** ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!*

Some people seem to be trying to separate our Faith and Works. *someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.*

James says they are inseparable. True faith will be seen by faith-deeds. True faith will be seen by works.

And to make his point that a mere knowledge of the facts is useless he compares his listeners to Demons.

Even the demons know the facts, and that does not help them.

Even the demons can articulate theology, but that does not save them.

In fact it seems their belief is actually more real than the listeners because they at least respond in some way. They believe and shudder. You believe and do nothing.

Application – Correct doctrine means nothing without correct practice

How confronting for the religious hypocrite to be lumped in the same category as demons.

Correct doctrine means **nothing** if it does not lead to correct practice.

Our knowledge must inform our convictions, which in turn drive our commitment. Mere knowledge is useless.

Link

We have seen two examples of dead faith. Let us turn our attention to two examples of live faith. Which brings us to our final section.

Part 3 – Live Faith (20-26)

Abraham

Look with me at verse 20 to 24.

You can sense the frustration and the desire for his listeners to hear what he is saying. He wants them to stop being self-deceived. He wants them to have true faith, but they are blinded by their false religion.

Which is why, as we mentioned before, he uses strong language. Including the word “justify” to in a rhetorical way get his point across.

In verse 20 we read:

²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God.

²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Now we know that Abraham was declared righteous (in an order of salvation sense) by God many years before he offered up Isaac. He is declared righteous in Gen 12 and the offering of Isaac happens in Gen 22, a number of years later.

So James is simply making the point that although Abraham was saved by faith alone, saving faith is never alone.

The offering of Isaac was an incredible display of his faith in God. It was the proof of Abraham's total and absolute dependence on God. Proof that Abraham took God at his word. The display of his saving faith.

Abraham knew Isaac was the son of promise. He knew God would fulfil his promise. He believed God would rise Isaac from the dead, the book of Hebrews tells us. He was prepared to take this radical measure because of his saving faith. It was the saving faith that drove the action. Not the other way around. Verse 22 makes that clear.

You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works;

Application – What are you to give up?

So how can you know if you have saving faith?

You will not be asked to give up your only son, but what does God ask you to give up?

Your Sinful pleasure.

Your Control over your life

Your Self-assurance

Your Self-sufficiency

Your Self-dependence

Are you willing to give those up because of the promise that God is your refuge, your portion, and your hope?

Do you truly believe that God is good, powerful and wise? If so your actions will show that belief.

Rahab

But we have another example of live faith: Rahab. This is the knockout blow for the religious hypocrite. If this does not open their eyes, what will? In verse 25 we read:

²⁵ And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Rahab is the example of saving faith...? An example of true religion. This is insulting to anyone who thinks themselves “a good person” and “religious”.

Rahab the prostitute.

Rahab the Canaanite.

Rahab the pagan worshiper.

All of those together paint a dark lifestyle that any of us would be repulsed by.

Yet she is the perfect example of saving faith or true religion because her faith brought her to action.

There is no way that James is saying she lived a perfect life before God and somehow earned righteousness that way.

No, he is saying that her actions were evidence of her faith. She believed that God would conquer her city. She believed that would do what he said he would.

She believed something that seemed impossible. But she took action based on that belief. Heb 11:31
hampions Rahab for here saving faith:

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

Her actions showed that her faith was alive. Her actions were the fruit of her saving faith. The evidence of her saving faith. And she survived the fall of her city, and she was spared from eternal punishment.

Conclusion/ Application - Do you have saving faith?

Friends, the bottom line to consider is the state of your faith.

Do you have a living faith?

Do you have real faith like Abraham and Rahab that is evidenced by action?

Do you take God at his word and live accordingly?
Regardless of how you feel? Regardless of how

impossible things may seem. Regardless that it is outside your understanding?

Or do you have a dead faith. The faith of a religious hypocrite and the faith of demons, who merely know things to be true but do not act on those truths? Who say the right words, but their actions betray their heart? Who can tick the right boxes, but tick everyone off?

Is your faith dead or alive?

If you realise that your faith is dead. That you are living like a religious hypocrite, praise God that you realise that now! Rejoice that he has shown you the danger you are in before it is too late.

But don't add to your hypocrisy and try to do more works. Don't try to stick good fruit on a thorn bush. The bush will still be thorny and the apples will eventually rot. And no real difference will be made

No, instead turn to Christ.

Trust in his promise.

Cling to his work on the cross.

Accept his sacrifice for your sins.

Repent of your sins,

Confess your unbelief, confess your self-sufficiency, confess your self-reliance, confess your sinful practices and trust in God.

Believe that he is the only source of joy and purpose.

Believe his word.

And from that genuine faith will come the fourth genuine fruit of good works which will prove your saving faith.

Conclusion

Friends, there is nothing more precious than saving faith,

but there is nothing more precarious than a dead faith.

Let us cling to Christ who gives us that saving faith and who also gives us the grace to live out that faith.

Let us pray.