

FAITH AT WORK

James 2:14–26

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We're reading from verse 14 through the end of the chapter.

“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor 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 justified by what he does 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” (James 2:14–26, NIV).

My message this morning is titled, “Faith at Work.”

You may have heard the story of the two men who met one another on the street. One said to the other, “Have you heard about George? He embezzled the company out of half a million dollars.” That’s terrible. I never did trust George. “Not only that, but he left town and took Tom’s wife

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with him.” “That’s awful. George has always been a low down good for nothing.” “Not only that, but he stole a car to make his getaway.” “That’s scandalous. I always did think that George had a bad streak in him.” “Not only that, but he was drunk when he pulled out of town...!”

“George is no good. But what really bothers me is—who’s going to teach his Sunday School class on Sunday?”

I thought of how the church, from the earliest days, has had in its company those who separated what they believed from how they behaved.

The contemporary church, the electronic church, so many parachurch organizations today, seem to be in a quest for believers. If I read the New Testament correctly, I’d say that Jesus was in a quest, not simply for believers, but He was in a quest for discipleship. He was in a quest for disciples. There is a difference between giving mental assent, which we call salvation, and truly being converted—being changed to follow Jesus Christ.

This past Friday night, October 31, an annual anniversary of one of the most important events in the history of the Christian church was celebrated—four hundred and seventy years ago, Martin Luther nailed ninety-five theses to a church door in Germany through which he protested the approach of the religion of his day, which was to elevate works above faith and to say that one was saved by deeds rather than by a saving trust in God. I think if Luther were alive today, he would see that the imbalance has shifted the other way. He might nail another thesis to church doors, which would protest a kind of salvation marked by easy “believerism.” Cheap grace. No commitment. No cost. No sacrifice and no discipleship. I think, as we study the New Testament, we will not see, as some have, a real tension between James and Paul on the subject of faith and works. What James is saying is that real faith really works.

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Faith and works is sort of like the composition of salt. I understand that sodium is an extremely active element found naturally only in combined form. That is, it must be merged with something else. Chlorine, on the other hand, is a poisonous gas that gives household bleach its offensive odor. When sodium and chlorine are combined, the result is sodium chloride, common table salt. Faith and works are like sodium and chlorine. Faith without deeds is inactive. Faith without deeds is irresponsible. Faith without deeds is faith present in church, but not in the everyday world. It's pietistic. It sings songs. It raises hands. But it's divorced from ethics. It's divorced from morality, divorced from serving the Lord in the real world. Faith without works lacks commitment to discipleship.

But works without faith is equally as dangerous, because works without faith produce duty rather than joy. They bring legalism and bondage. Faith without works is like trying to drive a car without any gasoline. That's a picture of the Christian life without a vital faith. If we try to do the duty of the Christian life without an energizing faith, the fuel that drives the Christian faith will fall short. Faith to be effective must be joined by deeds, as salt must be sodium and chloride.

James 2:22 mentions that in the case of Abraham, faith and actions were working together.

There's a word in the Greek language that carries over straight into the English language. James says faith and actions were *synergizing*. "Synergism" is a term which means that when two parts are put together, the power of those two parts united is greater than the power of the individual elements when separated. It's like sodium and chloride. When you put them together, there's synergism, and the new power is mightier than each of them has in isolation. It's like faith and works. Synergism. The power of them coming together is greater than simply faith alone or works alone. Or synergism, like when this church and the college join together in the use of land

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and facilities. We were able to do more, each of us were able to do more, because of the synergistic relationship. Faith and works go together—like love and marriage.

Our Scripture today points us to two questions that establish the principle that faith and works go together. The questions are, “What good is it if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?” and, “Can such faith save him?” The answer to both questions is negative. That is the principle that James is after. The principle that works or deeds must complement and illustrate faith. After establishing that principle in verse 14, he goes through the rest of the passage and furnishes us with four illustrations which show how faith and works belong together.

I. The first illustration is the illustration of the needy brother or sister (verses 15–17).

Someone coming into the body of believers who is a brother or a sister, a fellow Christian, and has nothing to eat and no clothes to wear. “How can you have faith and not have a love that cares for them?” That’s what James is saying.

The Early Church, by the way, quickly had to learn, as do we, that there are enough needy people within the church that there needs to be some administrative process set up in which the church can meet their needs with equity. So the Early Church set up a welfare fund for widows—Acts 6 is an illustration of that. They did this so that they might really meet the needs of those who were needy, that they might be impartial and have equitable distribution. And so they could also filter out those who were claiming to have needs but were in fact impostors preying on the body of Christ. We have that same kind of thing in the body of Christ today.

As pastor, I get a lot of calls and a lot of requests from people with needs. When we know it is a member of the body, that is always a need that we want to address. And we attempt to do that in a variety of ways. When it is people coming from the outside, we’ll help in non-cash ways with food or with clothing. But over the course of time, you can get cynical in trying to meet people’s

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needs—I'd be honest to confess that. Sometimes this Scripture, which tugs at our heart, has to be filtered through some experiences. I've had people who've come to me who I have found out later have made a profession of going from church to church, making a living off of telling a sob story which is not true at all. On the other hand, I've met people with genuine needs in the body and outside of the body, over the years, who have been a joy to help.

I think that when it comes to this church, over the years it has demonstrated its concern for the needy, both in its midst as well as the spiritually needy in the world. None of us who takes the Great Commission seriously, “Go into all the world” (Mark 16:15), can ever ignore the opportunity to put some of our own resources on the line. None of us who truly serve Jesus of Nazareth, who came to bring good news to the poor, is not moved with compassion when we know about people around us who have genuine and real need.

So that's the first illustration. Real faith cares and gives.

II. A second illustration he gives on real faith, faith at work, is about demons that believe (verses 18–19).

Evidently, there were some in the church who were thinking back to a kind of language that Paul will use later in 1 Corinthians 12, when he talks about some having the gift of administration, some teaching, some speaking in tongues, some healing, some miracles. There were evidently some who were saying, “My gift is faith. I'm a faith person.” Another person was saying, “I'm a works person.” And I hear, “I'm a Mary person,” or “I'm a Martha person.” There are dimensions of quality and emphasis in our life, in which those aspects might be present. But they are not to be taken as a dichotomy—that I'm all faith or I'm all works—but faith and works can join together.

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James counters this kind of attitude for persons who said, “I don’t need to have any deeds because I’m a faith person.” He says, “The demons are also faith people. They just don’t do anything with their faith. All they do is believe and shudder.” What he’s saying is that there are no agnostics and there are no atheists in hell. Everybody in hell is a monotheist. They know there’s one God. They’re able to join in the affirmation of a phrase that began each synagogue service out of Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (NIV). Whether it was a Jewish synagogue then or now, or a Christian synagogue in the early origins of the Christian faith—before the church was called the church, when it was still being called the synagogue, as it is here in James. James says that even the demons can enter into that kind of service. They can say, “Yeah, that’s right!”

But the practical dimensions of that faith go on in Deuteronomy 6:5 to say, “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (NIV). The demons don’t do that part.

So we’re being called to a faith that has action.

III. The third illustration that is given by James is the illustration of Abraham, who James says is not justified by his faith alone, but by what he did.

This has been perhaps one of the most misunderstood passages in the New Testament. As though, somehow, James is disagreeing with Paul. May I remind you that when James was written, Paul had not even begun to write. So James is first on the matter. I think what Paul does later is clarify an emphasis of James that was misunderstood. Both of them, in regard to faith and works, go back to Abraham, the father of faith and the father of the faithful.

Paul, in Galatians 3 and Romans 4, links back to Genesis 15:18, when Abraham became the man of faith. He was without son, without heir, when God took him out of his tent one night and

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showed him the stars of the heavens and said, “Count those stars...there are millions of them up there. You don’t have a son but, as many stars as there are, that’s how many of your descendants there are going to be.” Scripture says, “Abraham believed God and God credited that to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3).

Paul drives this home as a point, that the children of Abraham are children, not because they physically descended from him, but because they share in Abraham’s faith. To have faith in God is what is credited to you as righteousness.

James comes along and he orients us to another part of Abraham’s life. Genesis 22—where Abraham is asked to offer his only son, Isaac, on an altar of sacrifice. The only time God has ever, in all of human history, asked anybody other than himself to lay a son on an altar of sacrifice. Genesis 22 is thirty years after Genesis 15. What James is saying is that Abraham was justified by faith. He started out by faith, but sooner or later, that faith was tested. Was it real faith? Was it faith that would demonstrate its vitality by obeying God? Whatever God asked? Was it that kind of faith? Or was it just sort of an intellectual faith, like checking off a list a doctrine statement. James says that Abraham’s faith was fulfilled. That is, it was completed by this action of laying Isaac on the altar. Therefore, there is a correspondence between these two moments of Abraham’s life. The moment Paul singles out in Galatians and Romans, and the moment James singles out in James 2. Abraham was a man of faith, but his faith was not an idle faith. It was a relationship of faith. James encourages us to have that kind of faith.

How does God feed the world? Does He just drop bread out of the clouds? No, He uses us. He moves in our heart. He moves in our hands. He moves in our checkbook. He moves in our wallet. He uses us to reach out. Abraham’s faith is not some idle faith. God is at work in him, but Abraham is at work.

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IV. The fourth illustration that James gives us is the illustration of Rahab (verses 25–26).

In giving this illustration, that faith and works are joined together—that faith must be at work—James shows us that faith is not something just for the big heroes of the Bible, but for the little folk as well. Look at the contrast between Abraham and Rahab. Abraham was a major Bible figure. Rahab was a minor participant. Abraham was the father of the faithful. Rahab was a foreigner. Abraham had a great reputation. Rahab had a terrible reputation. She was a prostitute. Abraham was a man, which meant a whole lot in a Semitic world. Rahab was a woman, which meant little.

“Sometimes,” people feel, “I’m not as great as someone else. I haven’t been in the church long. I haven’t been a Christian a long time.” But here is Rahab, representing all those who feel that way. She too was a person of faith. She had a faith that worked. When Israel came through the land, she believed that God was going to use them to take the land, so she hid the spies and demonstrated her faith by saying, “Be sure you save me” (Joshua 6).

It’s been written, “Millions of Christians live in a sentimental haze of baked piety, with soft organ music tumbling in the lovely light of stained glass windows. Their religion is a pleasant thing of emotional quivers, divorced from the will, divorced from the intellect, and demanding little except lip service to a few harmless platitudes. I suspect Satan has called off his attempt to convert people to agnosticism. After all, if a man travels far enough away from Christianity, he is liable to see it in perspective and decide that it is true. It is much safer, from Satan’s point of view, to vaccinate a man with a mild case of Christianity, so as to protect him from the real ‘disease.’ It’s much better from Satan’s point of view to vaccinate us with a mild case of faith, than a faith that breaks down strongholds and that attempts great things for God and attempts to serve him in every small and practical way.”

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Dr. Tony Campolo was telling of his experience in his home church. His family has always lived in downtown Philadelphia. When the neighborhood went through racial change, his Italian family stayed. They were the only white folk in an all black church. Wherever Dr. Campolo goes, he tells about this black pastor. Some of his great sermons arise out of his black pastor's preaching. He said, in talking about the difference between good black preaching and white preaching, most white pastors get up and take all the service on Sunday morning to exegete verse 4 of Romans 10. He said, "My pastor can preach through the whole Bible in ten minutes."

His pastor was recently preaching through the Bible. Some students were giving the testimony of how they were trying to serve Christ on the college campus. Dr. Campolo's pastor stood up and said, "Children, you're going to have to decide whether in life you're going to go for a title or you're going to have a testimony. You can get the title, the D.D., M.A., the Ph.D., but that doesn't matter. It's the testimony that matters. You can profess to be a Christian, but that doesn't matter. It's the testimony that matters." Then he went through the Bible. "Pharaoh had the title, but Moses had the testimony. Nebuchadnezzar had the title, but Daniel had the testimony. Jezebel had the title, but Elijah had the testimony. Herod had the title, but John the Baptist had the testimony. Pilate had the title, but my King Jesus had the testimony. He was right on!

Children, one of these days, you're going to die. You may not believe that. You may not like that. But you're going to die. They're going to take you out and somebody's going to dig a grave and drop you in the grave and they're going to throw dirt on your face and they're going to go home, back to the church, and eat potato salad. In that day, when you stand before the Lord, the question is not going to be, did you have a title? The question is not going to be, did you teach a Sunday School class? Did you serve as a deacon? Were you a pastor? The question is going to be, did you have the testimony? Will you hear the Lord say to you, 'Well done good and faithful

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servant’? Those go together: done—deeds. Faithful—faith. Joined together by the Lord himself in that day when we stand before Him.”

A true story from the early part of this century. A restaurateur was a close friend of Albert Schweitzer and managed Schweitzer’s business matters while he was in Africa as a medical missionary and humanitarian. The restaurateur would never allow a Christian pastor or missionary or worker to pay for a meal in his restaurant. It was always free. The cash register was always closed. One day, the secretary for the London Missionary Society, the largest missionary society in the world in that day, was there, and the cash register happened to be open. As he looked down, he saw with all the currency and coins lying there, a 6-inch nail in the cash drawer. He asked the restaurateur “What is that nail doing there?” This wealthy man said, “I keep this nail with my money to remind me of the price Christ paid for my salvation and what I owe Him in return.”

I think, “What a good response that is to life.” A faith that does not work, a faith that does not commit, a faith that does not sacrifice, is no faith at all. But faith that works keeps the testimony and not the title. Faith that works takes hold of the nail and remembers that Christ was in this world, not in name only, but in deed.

Is there any area of your life that God is calling you to have faith at work? Let this word of Scripture call you to serve Christ with fruit and not just words today.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, there are times in life when, in all honesty, each of us would have to recognize that we have failed living up to these great callings that You’ve placed upon our life—that our faith be manifested in action. There are times when we have not only divided faith from deeds, but there are times when we’ve divided the church side of us from the earthly side of us. We’ve not been

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the same person at home or at work as we've been in the body of Christ. We've not been the same person in private that we are in public. We're not the same person at home as we are with friends. Wherever we have erected partitions in our life which have isolated our faith, Lord, which have kept it from engaging every dimension of our being, we pray, Holy Spirit of God, that You will break down those walls that we have built and help us to have a faith that is a pervasive faith, a faith that does not only reach out to intellectually agree with the great doctrines of the Bible, but a faith that reaches out to do Your work in the world. A faith that dares us to live life following in Your steps. A faith that challenges us to pray, to sacrifice, to commit, to be a disciple, to be a real Christian in this world. We pray for a faith like that. Thank You for the beautiful morning You've given to us and the joy of sharing in communion together. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.