

How Faith Works

Walk the Walk: James Pt. 4

I've been reading to you big chunks of the New Testament Book of James each week. I want us to hear the language, even if we won't address every single thing in the text – after all, I have to leave *something* for your own personal Bible study! But today I'm going to read a bit of what we already heard last week, because we're going to overlap.

And that's because there is a very – and I mean *very* – controversial statement here in chapter two that has actually caused some of the greatest figures in church history to question whether James even belongs in the Bible! And I wanted to lay out the bigger picture last week – the foundational nature of justice and mercy in the Christian church. But we can't in good conscience just ignore this tension. So let's not.

Starting off, let's just take a listen to **James 2:14–26**, the first three verses of which you heard last week:

14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? 15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 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?

17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18 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. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. 20 You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

21 Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 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.

24 You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. 25 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? 26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Now, the summary of what James is saying is there is in **v. 24**. He says, "*You see a person is **justified by what he does and not by faith alone.***" Ok, now let me give you the controversy. Well let's just see if you can figure it out? Over in Romans, Paul has a famous verse that says, (**Romans 3:28**) "*For we maintain that a person is **justified by faith apart from the works of the law.***"

Paul says we are justified by faith alone, *not* by what we do. And James says we're justified by what we do and *not* by faith alone. See? Well, there you have it. It's the end of the church. It's the end of Christianity as we know it. People will say, "What more do you want? That proves the Bible has divergent views. They contradict each other. The Bible is an infallible guidebook. It's like any other ancient body of teaching. You can't accept all of it. You're either going to accept what James says, or you're going to accept what Paul says."

No less an authority than Martin Luther, the Great Reformer, famously called James an "epistle of straw" claiming, "James mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all Scripture." That's pretty strong. And while it's true that Luther did not think James should be included among the "chief books" of the Bible, plenty of his contemporaries did – including John Calvin.

So let me let you off the hook right up front - I don't want to keep you in suspense about whether we're going to have to toss out the Bible. No, we're not. Because really, there is no possibility that James is contradicting Paul. You know, if you only look at things through one eye you lose depth perception. You need two eyes looking at the same object to have depth perception. Why? Because each eye is looking from a slightly different perspective at the same object, and as a result you see it better.

In the same way, James is looking at the same gospel from a slightly different perspective than Paul – in an attempt to maintain an important tension. The Bible is filled – heck, the *world* is filled – with ideas that must be approached with nuance in order to get the whole truth. Otherwise you're over reacting in one direction or another. In fact, I think that explains Luther's reaction here. You have to understand his historical context.

He was opposing a church that used the teaching that faith alone didn't save, in order to control people. The priests were teaching, "If you want to be sure of your salvation, you must do all of these works – that quite conveniently we *alone* can provide for you, sacraments and such – and then *we'll* tell you if you're justified or not." And they would frequently use James to back them up. And so Luther was rightfully upset by this. But just because someone – or a whole lot of someone's – *use* the Bible wrong, doesn't mean the Bible *is* wrong? Does that make sense?

So I understand why Luther wouldn't want to take time to wrestle with the nuance – given what he was facing at the time. But I think it's not necessary to go as far as he did. Because I think James is actually being *mischievous* here. One commentator put it that way, and I thought that was so intriguing.

He says James *knows* that the way he's putting what he's saying sounds outrageous. That's why he puts it that way. Doesn't he go out of his way to sound like Paul and yet to sound like he's contradicting Paul? Of course. Before you say, "Oh, this is a contradiction," first you have to realize that at the end of the first century when the church began to *assemble* the writings of the apostles - as the apostles were dying out - they put James and Romans together, they slapped them together, and they didn't have a problem. Lots of theologians as important as Luther - Origin, Athanasius, Jerome, Augustine - they didn't see the teachings as being diametrically opposed. Give them a little credit.

Not only that, the book of Acts chapter 15, tells us a historical fact. And that is, in the very early days of the church there was a great council - the Council of Jerusalem - and James *and* Paul and all of the apostles got together and talked about this very issue. They all came away with consensus. James certainly knew what Paul said. "We are justified by faith alone and not by anything we do." Then he comes and says, "Don't you see we're justified by what we do and not by faith alone?" He's trying to get our attention.

And he's using a fairly standard rhetorical device to do it. James is using the word "justified" in a somewhat different way than Paul uses it. You know, words have their original meaning, and then they have their more common usage. Like the word "awful" in English. The original meaning of the word awful meant "to be full of awe." But now the word awful just means to think something is terrible. They're related, but they're not quite the same.

The original word justified, *dikaiosune*, means to *make* yourself right, to be *made* right. And so therefore, literally, if you justify something... Let's just say you have a debt, and you make that debt good. What have you done? You have made yourself just, or right, with your creditor. Do you see? But the word justified can also mean - then and now - to *prove* yourself right.

So for example, if I say to you, "Justify that statement," what am I saying? Am I saying, "Make it true"? Oh no. What am I saying? I'm saying, "*Demonstrate* that it's true. *Prove* to me it's true. Give me *evidence* that it's true." I'm not saying, "*Make* it true." Well, it's the same thing with the word justified. When Paul says we're justified by faith, he means we cannot be *made* right with God except through the merits of Jesus Christ and the works of Jesus Christ. We can't *make* ourselves right. It has to be done through him.

But when James says we're justified by works, he means it's our works that prove we're right with God. See now Paul would say the same thing. When Paul says, "You're justified by faith," he is saying, "You're made right with God only through the work of Christ." But when James says you're justified not by faith but also by works, he's saying, "A mere profession of faith isn't enough to prove you really are right with God. You have to show some concrete changes in your life."

Philipp Melancthon, who was the protégé of Martin Luther, put it perfectly. He took the two things...what Paul is saying - that you are made righteous only by faith, not by your works - but then what James is saying - that you're only seen to be and you're only proven to be and you're only known to be righteous with God because of the fruit and changes that come into your life. He put these two things together. He said, "What is Paul saying, and what is James saying?" In one sentence he said, "Paul talks about one kind of faith, James, another...James, therefore, does not fight with Paul, but speaks about another reality. We're saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that remains alone." There it is.

James is not saying you are *made* right with God through your works. Everything about the whole book assumes the apostolic and the Pauline teaching. Just last week, we read earlier in the chapter (**James 2:5**) that Christians are, "*rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him.*" You see, a Christian is an heir.

Do you know what the difference is between an employee and an heir? Between wages and inheritance? Let me just show you how James assumes it. Wages come to you because of what you do. Inheritance comes to you because of what you are. Wages come through your efforts. Inheritance comes because of a relationship you have.

Wages are things that only come *after* you've done something, but an inheritance is money *already* in the bank. Wages come bit by bit. They're not in the bank until after you're done working for the week, or working for the month. An inheritance is already in the bank. You wait for your paycheck. Your inheritance is waiting for you.

James says we're not *earning* our salvation; we're *heirs* of salvation. Big, big difference. Totally different. Absolutely he is saying we are saved by grace. When you become a Christian, you become an heir. That means you're adopted into the family and you become heir of the wealthy God who is now your Father. There's no way he means, therefore, that you're *saved* by your works. What he's saying is you're *justified* by your works. You're *proven* to be saved by your works. There it is.

I like how one of the main commentators I'm reading for this series, puts it: "When differences between Paul and James were noted, they were harmonized by distinguishing referents: **Paul was understood to be talking about the faith that led to baptism, and James, about the faith of the baptized.** Therefore, as Paul was correct in asserting, that no deeds of Torah could lead one to faith in the Messiah, so was James, correct in asserting the Christian faith needed to be expressed in deeds." (Luke Tim Johnson, James, 134.)

James is trying to get our attention, and he did, didn't he? Didn't he get your attention? He knows what Paul says. He knows what the apostolic teaching is, and he gets their attention. He says, "You're not justified by faith alone, but by what you do." Well that gets your attention. And then you read and you see he's actually making a different point than Paul, to some degree. Here's what he's saying. He's saying, "I want to show you how you can *know* you're saved. Not how you *get* saved. Not how to *become* saved. Not how to become right with God. I want to show you how you know you have a *living* faith."

Do you see what he keeps saying? If you say you have faith but these things are not in your life, your faith is *dead*. What does that mean? It means it's not alive. It means it's not saving faith. It means it's not real faith. That's what he's saying. How do you know you have a *living* faith? How do you know you're alive? How do you know you're right with

God? Which was a big question Martin Luther was asking, actually! James gives us four examples here. And by giving us these four examples, he shows us both what are *insufficient* signs that you really have a living faith, and what are *unmistakable* signs that you have a living faith.

Let me show you what the insufficient signs are first. In **v. 19** he says, "*You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.*" Now right here in a *negative* illustration, he shows us what it's possible to have and still not have saving faith. Back in the middle of the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon on this verse – I read it while I was iced in this week – you're welcome! Do you know what the name of the sermon was? "*True Grace Distinguished from the Experience of Devils.*" They don't make titles like they used to, do they?

He's keying in on the difference between a devil and a Christian. He says, "Let me show you two things demons have that are fine. They're *perfectly* good. They're *perfectly* wonderful. They're fine. But I want you to see you can have them and still just be a demon. There's nothing wrong with these things, but having them doesn't mean you're any more than a demon. It doesn't even qualify you more than that."

So what are those two things? He says, first of all, sound doctrine. See this is where it gets kind of scary. He says, “You believe God is one. Good! So do the demons.” Edwards says the demons have the doctrine of the Trinity down. Here’s his actual quote: “**The devil is orthodox in his faith. He believes the true scheme of doctrine...The articles of his faith are all sound, and in them he is thoroughly established.**”

And then – a bit of a burr in the saddle blanket to someone like me, someone who has attended not one but two divinity schools – he says, “**Thus the devil has undoubtedly a great degree of speculative knowledge in divinity, having been, as it were, educated in the best divinity school in the universe, viz. the heaven of heavens.**” Have you ever thought about that? Where did the devil get his theological training? The throne room of God! Satan knows more sound doctrine, knows more about God, than the greatest saint who has ever lived.

We *read* about God’s works, the devil *saw* them. With all of his followers. Edwards says, “**The devils know God’s almighty power. They saw a great manifestation of it when they saw God lay the foundation of the earth, etc. and were much affected with it.**” Wouldn’t it be nice to have seen God create the world rather than just read about it and accept it by faith? Sure, but even that wouldn’t guarantee you’d serve God.

Now here’s where Edwards really gets close. “**It must be no small degree of terror which should make those principalities and powers, those mighty, proud, and sturdy beings, to tremble.**” And he points out, “Do you see? They don’t just believe this; they *respect* the power of God. They respect the greatness of God. They’re scared of God. They *know* what He can do. They move about, you might say, basing their lives on what they know about what God can do.”

He says if that’s true, then it’s very possible for human beings to know God is great, to believe God is great, to be scared of punishment - to be afraid they’ll be punished - and to even alter your behavior and become a very moral person, even an *incredibly* moral person, even an *incredibly religious* person, says Edwards, and all of your religion and *all* of your morality is nothing but shuddering.

You’re hedging your bets. It’s fire insurance. You know there may be a God, or there probably is a God, or you certainly can’t prove there isn’t a God, and you know if you displease a God like this that you’re in tremendous trouble. Therefore, you’d *better* start to do these things. He says it’s possible to have an *incredible* amount of morality and religion that’s nothing but shuddering. He says all it does is qualify you to be a demon.

He says there's nothing wrong with having conscience pangs. There's nothing wrong with actually realizing, "If there's a God who is the great Creator, then I have to obey him." There's nothing wrong with that, says Edwards. And there's certainly nothing wrong with understanding doctrine and understanding about God and the attributes of God and the nature of God and the unity of God, like it's mentioned here in this verse.

There's nothing wrong with any of that, but you have to see, he says, that doesn't prove you have any faith at all - *living* faith, *real* faith, *saving* faith. You see, a person with saving faith will have these things, but a person who has these things does not necessarily have saving faith. So there, by one negative example, we see what are insufficient signs. Well how do you know, then, you have a living faith?

And here's what's so wonderful about it. James, with the other examples, shows us the two signs of a real living faith. The reason I keep using the word "living" is he keeps saying it's possible to have tremendous doctrinal accuracy and also to have a very religious life, but it's a *calculating* life. It's a life simply of adding things up, plusses and minuses, profits and debits, and "I guess I'd better live like this."

In other words, it's a religious calculation in which there's no life and vitality in your faith. And if your faith is dead, it won't bear fruit. Dead things don't grow. Dead things don't reproduce, but living things do. And so he goes on and says, "If your faith is alive it will produce this fruit." Here are the two things. **First of all, he says the sign of a living faith is it's alive toward *other people*.**

In **verse 14-16**, we read this last week, he says, "*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.*"

Now what is he saying? If you get into the presence of poor people, of broken people, of hurting people, of people very different than you, and you respond either with scorn or indifference, you don't have a living faith. How can he say that? Now we have to be *so* careful. We have to penetrate to the principle.

Because I can hear some of you saying, “Oh my gosh. I’m a Christian and I don’t do *anything* for the poor at all. I’m not involved. Where was that in the newsletter? Where are the signup sheets? Gosh, I missed all that stuff that happened at Christmas. I could have been involved. There are so many things at Christmas for the poor.” And you say, “I’d better do something about this. This says if I don’t do this I’m not a real Christian.”

Stop. Look, far be it from me to stop you from getting involved in social benevolence, but be careful. It could be that all of that work with the poor is nothing but shuddering. What is he saying? He says faith without works is *dead*. Faith without a care for the poor is dead. Faith that is just shuddering, just being scared, isn’t real faith. What’s the opposite of shuddering? What’s the opposite of fear? Not courage...*love*.

In other words, he is saying there has to be an organic - not a mechanical - there has to be some *organic* way in which your faith is touched by the presence of the poor and broken people and marginal people and messed-up people, or people who are just very different than you are. If you have a living faith, the presence of the poor trips the switch, accesses a file, activates a principle. What is the principle?

This is what James says earlier on - you go back up to **James 2:5**; “*Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?*” Now I can’t recap that. We went into that in great detail last week – if you missed it, stream it. But here’s the main thrust. James is saying if you have a living faith, you know you also are **spiritually poor**.

If you’re a Christian, you know you’re spiritually poor. The great hymn Rock of Ages is a perfect example of what that spiritual poverty is:

Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress;
Helpless look to thee for grace;

Do you notice what’s going on? The author of that hymn is showing you repentance is not just saying, “Oh yeah, sin. I shouldn’t do that anymore.”

Repentance is not just saying, “This or that thing is wrong; I need to stop it.” *Real* repentance - real living faith - is seeing that spiritually you’re *bankrupt*. You see? Repentance is expressed in terms of poverty.

A real Christian is somebody who says, “I was homeless. I was naked. I stunk in the nostrils of God. And I have been saved strictly by grace.” Therefore, when you come upon somebody who actually stinks, or who is actually homeless, or who is actually marginal, you see the connection. Oh, I’m not saying Christians are always walking this way and it’s automatic – in fact, I wrote this paragraph on Friday at the downtown library because we didn’t have any power in the church office. And a guy came and sat down behind me who *burned* my nostrils – brought tears to my eyes. And I almost moved...but then I looked at my outline again and realized God was messing with me.

We won’t always get it right, but there’s a living principle growing down there. If you do not find that as you grow in Christ and as you get in touch with who you are and what he has done for you, that people who are very different than you trip that switch, spark that principle of grace and love...if you don’t find yourself growing in graciousness toward people like that, if you’re scornful or indifferent, James says you may *say* you’re a sinner saved by grace but you don’t *believe* it.

You may say, “Naked, come to thee for dress.” You may sing that hymn, but you don’t know what you’re talking about. You think you’re saved on the basis of your works, and as a result, you will not care for those kinds of people. A living faith is *alive* to other people. There’s another example he uses, and that’s Rahab.

(V.25), “*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?”* What was Rahab doing? Rahab was a Canaanite woman, and she was in Jericho. And when the Israelite spies came, she believed their God was God, so she hid them. She risked life and limb. There was courage. But you see, that is also a sign of faith.

There’s this great place in **Galatians 6:14**, where Paul says, “**May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.**” Do you know what that means? If you actually have faith - not in the grace of Christ - but in yourself, in your works, then you’re going to be condescending to people who are a mess. You’ll be boastful. That’s the first sign that your faith is dead.

But now here, if you have faith in Jesus Christ...Paul says, "I used to have faith in my career. I used to have faith in comfort. I used to have faith in these things. But when I saw my *glory*, my meaning in life is Jesus Christ, that means there's nothing else out there in the world. Comfort is crucified to me. Money is crucified to me. Approval is crucified to me. It doesn't mean I don't care about these things, but they no longer animate me. I'm not boasting about them. They no longer are *my life!* They no longer control me."

And therefore, what is James saying? If you believe you're a sinner saved by grace, if Christ is your life, then these other things you used to be so scared to lose, you'll be willing to take a risk. Are you living a life of growing compassion to people who are different than you? Are you living a life of growing courage? Is there a principle these things are getting at? James says if you don't see that happening, you may say you believe, but you don't.

Now the other side, one more thing. We said the first sign of a living faith is it's alive to people. But **ultimately, the sign of a living faith is it's alive to God.** Because here we have the ultimate example of faith. Not only does James use it; of course, Paul uses it. It says, "You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Look at Abraham. Abraham was considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. You see, then, he was called God's friend."

Let me say, this is the bottom line. This is the bottom line, by the way, of Jonathan Edwards' sermon on this passage. It's the bottom line of what James is trying to say. James says, "Do you want to see the difference between a dead faith and a living faith? A dead faith may obey God for what you get out of it or what you avoid." Shuddering. It's possible to be very religious, and all your religiosity is just shuddering. He says true faith wants friendship with God. True faith longs for God.

Jonathan Edwards said false faith can see the holiness of God, can see the wisdom of God, can see the greatness and power of God, can even see something of the love of God, but the one thing false faith can never see, he says, is the *loveliness* of God. True faith wants to please God just because of who He is. Not for what you get. Not for what you avoid.

One of the things you're going to find out - some of you do know this - when you have teenagers...When your kids have friends, you say, "Where are you going?" "Out." "Well what are you all going to do?" "I don't know." "Don't you have any plans? What time are you going to get in?" "I haven't figured that out, I just want to be with my friends." And that's what friendship is. It doesn't need an agenda. You can just hang out because being with the friends *is* the goal.

And that's how Jonathan Edwards concludes his sermon about the differences between devils and Christians with a living faith. The devils may have a strong knowledge of God...the devils may have a strong sense of the wisdom of God...the devils may be in awe of the power of God...but they have no desire to be a *friend* of God. Because they don't see the beauty of the cross.

Edwards says, "The wicked, at the day of judgment, will see everything else in Christ but his beauty, his amiableness, and his divine loveliness...When Christians come to see Christ's divine loveliness, it's not difficult to conceive how the blood of Christ should be esteemed so precious as to be worthy to be accepted as a compensation for the greatest sins."

When you see the *beauty* of what Jesus has done, when you come to long for it, he says, just because of what he is and what he has done, he says, "Now you properly see the preciousness of Christ, and the Christian also properly sees and understands the very ground and reason of your acceptableness of God." Edwards says there are many people who just do not get the idea of grace.

You tell them, "You're saved by grace alone, not because of your works," and some people say, "That just can't be. I don't understand it." Edwards says that is a refusal to see the beauty of Jesus.

When you find your heart going out, "He did this for *me*?" that's the essence of living faith. And when you see, "He did this for me?" and you see him as lovely and amiable, you say, "If I see this much of the loveliness of Christ, how much more does the Father see the loveliness of Christ? And therefore, when God sees me via my Advocate, in my Mediator – when God see me *in Christ* - what a ravishing thing I must be."

When you see the loveliness of Christ, then you *want* to live a good life just because you want to know he's smiling, just because you want to rejoice the heart that has done this for you. God's friend. And that's the reason why the ultimate, ultimate justification by works, the ultimate proof you're a Christian, the ultimate proof you have a living faith, is what Abraham did.

Granted it is a problematic story and one I have dealt with in more nuance elsewhere. But for our purposes this morning let me be brief. God said, "Sacrifice your son." Do you see? There's no law anywhere that says you have to sacrifice your son. Just the opposite actually. Why did God do that? Because of this. When Abraham lifted the dagger, God said, **Genesis 22:12**, "'Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.'"

God was after his love, and Abraham responded in love. There was no law there. There's no rule. That's not one of the Ten Commandments. God was saying, "I want you to do this because of who I am. I want you to love me first." That's living faith. It responds to that. I'll tell you what really changes you. Is your life, all your religiosity, just a lot of shuddering, or is it a *transformed* desire for friendship that comes from seeing a greater One than Abraham?

God the Father walked up a mountain with His Son, and He sacrificed His Son. And there was no one there to stay *His* hand. He went through with it. And a Christian looks at God sacrificing His Son and says, "Now I know you love me, for you did not withhold your Son, your only Son, whom you love, from me." Does that give you goose bumps? That's living faith. Does your heart go out to that? Do you say, "Oh my word. I don't care what God does for me. All that matters is that I please and know and rest in the embrace of One who did this for me. I want his friendship." That's a living faith. Do you have that?

What we're going to do right now in the Lord's Supper is gaze upon his beauty. In **Psalm 27:4**, David says, "*One thing I want: to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and inquire in his temple.*" David was king. He couldn't dwell in the tabernacle – that was for the priests. What it means is he continually went back and gazed on the beauty of what God did.

And James is saying, it's a desire for friendship with God, a love for who he is, a dwelling on the divine loveliness, that is what really is the fuel for your life. It's what you need. If you're down on yourself, self-hating, or, on the other hand, if you're boasting about elements in your life that can't sustain your soul, you don't see the beauty of God. Don't you see? It's *the* thing that heals everything. Let's gaze on the beauty of the Lord. Let's inquire in his temple. Let's ask for the one thing that's necessary to demonstrate a life of living faith.

I'm going to ask Adrienne and the band to come back at this time...