

Sermon for Sunday, July 31, 2011
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Faith that Works
James 2:14-19

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.

1. What is real faith?

I went to college in the 1970s, when students still hitchhiked at times. One day I caught a long ride with a truck driver. As an enthusiastic new Christian, I hoped to guide our conversation toward the faith. Indeed we had an intense conversation about the Bible and the faith. After about two hours he declared his problem:

I understand that Jesus is the Son of God. I know I'm a sinner and I believe that Jesus died on the cross for my sins. But I'm a married man and a cross country driver; I have girl friends in several cities and I don't want to give them up

Is this man a Christian? Will this kind of faith unite to him to Christ, so he gains eternal life? Over the years, I have met many people who say they believe in Jesus, but want to live on their own terms. I also meet people who want to follow Jesus and also adhere to another religion – combining a bit of Jesus and a bit of Buddha. Why? There are parts of Christianity that people don't like – doctrines, the call to sacrifice.

So there are people who want eternal life, want Jesus as Savior, but want to follow Jesus on their own terms. This is an important question: Do you belong to Jesus, do you truly believe in Jesus, if you announce conditions in advance. James doesn't talk about sex or money, his topic is a willingness to offer help to the needy. But whatever the topic, the question is the same: "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" (2:14).

This question is genuine. Many of us know someone like the truck driver. They accept the biblical diagnosis of the human sin. They understand how Jesus' life, death and resurrection removes their alienation from God. They go to church from time to time. They like to talk about faith and religion. They know the central teachings of Christian faith. They are pleasant people and seem to live decent lives, although they have a few problems. When conversation turns to Jesus, they sound like orthodox, evangelical believers.

On the other hand, there is nothing distinctively Christian about their life. There is no real self-sacrifice, no costly obedience, no self-denial, no acts that go against the grain and challenge their well-designed life.

When James asks, "What is the benefit of that kind of faith?" he revisits a topic that holds his attention in chapters 1-2. James tells his readers they must receive "the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (Revised Standard Version (RSV)). He says they must "be doers of the word and not hearers only." The man whom God blesses is not a "hearer who forgets, but a doer who acts" (English Standard Version

[ESV], 1:21-22). True religion shows itself in action. It controls the tongue and cares for widows and orphans in their distress 1:26-27.

The concern for the treatment of the poor runs throughout James 2. Compassion for the poor includes care to treat everyone with the dignity they deserve. James says the "royal law" requires us to "love your neighbor as yourself." If we refuse to love our neighbors, or deliberately disobey any part of the law, James says we will be judged by the law (2:12).

Perhaps some in the church were surprised to hear that they were still liable to judgment. They thought they were saved by faith and, therefore, free from judgment. But James had to shred their false sense of security so they could see themselves as they really were. He does this, in part, through a series of questions.

2. What good is "faith" without works?

James asks, "What good is it... - what is the benefit my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works? Can that faith save him?" (2:14, [ESV]). That is, does the kind of faith that affirms orthodox theology, but produces no distinct Christian deeds, save? Does that faith lead to justification before God the judge? It's an old question: Does every brand of faith save? Is there a faith that does not? Does an evangelical confession of faith, with nothing more, make one right with God?

As the truck driver shows, it is a contemporary question. James answered directly. There is a "faith" that does not save. It is the faith that adheres to orthodox theology but has no actions. James labors to make his point unmistakable. The kind of faith that makes orthodox statements, but produces no deeds is useless and dead. It has no value, in the present or the future. James says it three times:

- Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead (2:17).
- Faith without deeds is useless (2:20).
- Faith without deeds is dead (2:26).

He says it a fourth time, in 2:14, with a question. The literal translation is stark: "Faith can't save him, can it?" In Greek, there is a way to ask questions to show that the answer is "No." James uses that form, making his point clear: No, "faith" **cannot** save the person if it has no works, because if it has no works, it's dead.

Modern translators soften James' language a bit, when they render 2:14, "Can **such** faith save him?" (New International Version (NIV) or "Can **that** faith save him?" (ESV). But there is no word corresponding to "such" or "that" in the original. The original (cf. King James Version (KJV)) asks bluntly, "Faith can't save **him** [the person with no works] can it?" No, there is a kind of faith that is so dry and feeble that it cannot save.

This is James theme: faith without works cannot save. Next he illustrates it with four case studies. We will consider the first two today and the last two later.

- Case #1: Faith without deeds of compassion for a needy brother does that brother no good. Thus "faith" without works is dead (2:15-17).

- Case #2: Demons believe [have faith that] God is one, but they shudder. Such faith is useless (2:18-20).
- Case #3: Abraham was justified when he offered his son on the altar. That act proved his faith was alive (2:21-24).
- Case #4: Rahab was justified by the work of caring for Israel's messengers (the spies sent to examine Jericho). That act proved her faith was real (2:25-26).

So then real faith, the faith that follows new life and justification before God, proves it is alive by its deeds. But faith without works is dead and useless. This is provocative, but the church needs it because we can fall into orthodox lethargy and James shakes us awake. It is not enough to mumble the confession, we must live it.

Since Paul taught widely, we assume that James' congregation knew Paul's foundational teaching on justification by faith: "A man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Romans 3:28). Again, "A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16, ESV).

If James' readers knew the gospel of justification by faith, then James is creating constructive tension when he said there is a faith that does **not** save. He provokes thought, corrects an error when he says there is a "faith" – a strictly external faith - that does not save. It is lifeless. We know because real faith generates good deeds (Matt 7:17-20, 12:33-37).

Let's be clear on two points. First, no one is saying these deeds earn God's favor. But if someone is truly united to Jesus by faith, he begins to look and act like Jesus, at least a little. Second, no one is demanding perfection. But sincere effort counts and shows, even if we are far from perfect.

I've been thinking and talking about joining our prison ministry for three years. I reproached myself "You keep talking about it; make time to do it. Jesus said, "I was in prison and you visited me." Does that mean my faith is dead? I hope not. It means I'm a sinner. I don't always order my life correctly. I finally got there this month and spent an afternoon, listening, teaching the gospel and the life of discipleship and meeting people. I plan to go again soon, but it took me years to get there. I also fail to return phone calls when I'm too tired. James is not condemning ordinary mistakes. If we believe Jesus and desire to follow him, that is enough.

James uses the word "faith" in two ways. There is a faith that makes us heirs of the kingdom and there is a "faith" that does not work and cannot save. As James said, "We must be doers of the word and not hearers only" (1:22). Paul agrees: "It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous" (Rom 2:13).

Question: What good is a faith that has no works? What good is a church service where worshippers casually mistreat people instead of loving them? What is the value of that faith or worship? What is the benefit if someone claims to live by faith in God, but refuses Jesus' way of life? What is the benefit if someone says, "I've been baptized and catechized" and then lives however he pleases, with a life of self-indulgence and self-pity, a life of manipulation and selective faithfulness?

There is no benefit, James says. In fact, it's self-deception. Again, the issue is not ordinary sin. We all fail at times. Jesus came to forgive our sins, not condemn us for them. James wants us to consider our course of life. So he asks a series of question that begin, "What is the benefit...?" If someone says he has faith but has no works, that faith cannot save, can it?

3. Case of a needy brother shows false faith is useless manward (2:15-17)

James quickly sketches a realistic scene. He pictures a brother or sister who is poor, even by ancient standards. When James says they are "without clothes" (2:15) he means their clothes are either few or ragged; they do not have enough to keep warm. They lack "daily food" (2:15). They have not yet received the answer to the prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." They are hungry that day, or every day.

Jesus says genuine faith meets the needs of the poor. It is not content to say, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but do nothing. Real faith knows that on the last day, when Jesus judges all mankind, he will mark whether we actually helped the needy whom we met. He will gather believers and say (Matthew 25:36-40):

"I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?... The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'"

True faith meets clear, present needs. False faith greets the needy brother with kind words and warm wishes, but no action. Instead of helping, false faith offers a false blessing. The blessing is "Go, I wish you well." "Go in peace" is actually a common biblical blessing (Judges 18:6, 1 Samuel 20:42, 2 Kings 5:19, Luke 7:50). It means "May God go with you." The statement itself is fine. The problem is that it functions "as a religious cover for a failure to act."¹ "May God go with you" stands in the place of "I will go with you."

False faith offers trite words and meaningless advice. "Keep warm and well fed" (NIV) can be translated two ways. The first: "Warm yourself and feed yourself." That is, "I wish you well as you take care of yourself. You look cold; you ought to try to get warm. You look skinny; you should eat more."

The poor person knows she should eat more and stay warm! But her problem is neither anorexia nor fussiness. She can't feed herself, for she has no food. She can't stay warm, for she lacks clothing. In this case words without actions are useless.

The second translation is, "Be warmed and be well fed." That means "May God feed and clothe you, because I certainly won't." This amounts to counseling someone to pray that God will help him. But perhaps the poor brother has been praying, and God expects us to answer the prayer!

James 2:16 ends with the question, "What good is it?" Answer: None. It does no good for the brother or sister in need. Kind wishes also do no good for those who utter them. Indeed, they prove their faith is empty. As James already said, "What good is it if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?"

¹ Johnson 239

A faith that claims to unite a believer to God, but does nothing to help fellow believers, is useless and dead (2:17). Those who have such faith fail the second test of true religion. They have no true love of God (1:12, 2:5). They aren't reborn by the word of truth 1:18. They haven't received the implanted word, which saves the soul (1:21).

The kind of faith that offers warm wishes and trite advice is no good when Jesus returns. He described what he will do on Judgment Day (Matthew 25:41-43):

He will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me.'

We know how to apply this today. If a friend is unemployed, false faith says, "Hang in there; the Lord will provide." If a single mother with small children is sick, false faith says, "Take it easy. Don't do too much; we're thinking of you."

James does not require believers to do everything, but we must do something when we see a need. When someone is sick, a long phone call may be a burden not an encouragement. If a sister is ill, it's better to bring a meal and say encouraging words at the door as you deliver it.

It doesn't have to be a neighbor either. We can care for orphans and widows overseas. We can give money to get Bibles and a basic library to third world pastors – books that cost us three hours of wages might cost them a month's wage to buy.

Individual acts are good, but the Christian community must collaborate and marshal resources for larger projects. We give a great deal to ministries of mercy both as a church and as individuals. But most of us can do more. In Information Central and bulletin, please see some ways that you can join in. Our missions' team has chosen diverse projects and partnerships, that may match your prayers, desires and hopes to show love in the world.

- Some for needy individuals – widows and orphans, direct relief.
- Others rather build systems, infrastructure in community.
- Some allow you to help overseas, others in our community.
- Let us know if you want to join a ministry of mercy team.

The idle wish "keep warm and well fed" fails the tests of true religion. Idle wishes indulge the tongue, rather than controlling it. Mere talk does nothing for the poor. And it is so worldly to let sentimentalism supplant loving deeds. Warm sentiments, without action, mark false, vain religion. So, spurious faith is ineffective manward.

James says, "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (2:17, ESV). The phrase "by itself" is crucial. Genuine, living faith is never by itself. A "faith" that has no deeds is lifeless. That faith has no real connection to Jesus, Savior and Lord and produces no works for that reason.²

² Moo p.126

4. The Case of knowledge without peace shows false faith is useless Godward (2:18-19)

But James anticipates an objection to his message. Someone will view faith and good works the way we view spiritual gifts. James lets an imaginary critic speak: "Someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds'" (2:18). James replies, "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." (2:18-19)

Is the question valid? Are faith and works like spiritual gifts; some have one, some have the other? Faith is called a gift (Romans 12:3). Someone thinks: "Those who offer food and clothing to the hungry and ragged have the gift for good work. But my gift is knowledge or faith in the heart, not action."

The wording, "You have faith, I have works" is unexpected but the point is clear. Faith is proved by a way of life. James says, "I will show you my faith by what I do." When James says "show me your faith" he means good works make real faith visible. Good works demonstrate that faith is real (3:13). A claim of faith is vindicated by a life of holiness and good deeds.

Suppose someone tells his friends he is a great cook. After they hear the claim a few times, his friends will say, "So then, invite us to a gourmet meal. Let us taste your lobster bisque and vegetables al dente, the light, flaky crust of your cherry pie." In sports, an unwritten code says a true athlete minimizes his skills. But some boast about their prowess. When they leave the room, the put-down is, "He talks a good game." Claims not backed by deeds are useless.

If someone says, "I believe in God," James replies, "I will believe you have true faith when it manifests itself in deeds." If someone claims to have faith, but only has orthodox theological ideas, it proves nothing. The "faith" of demons proves the point. Demons have orthodox theological ideas. They believe that there is one God and that Jesus is his Son. Yet demons are tormented by their beliefs. They shudder when they think of God. Their theology doesn't save them, it terrifies them, for they don't love God or man. Someone said, "If demons can hold such faith, and still *remain* in perdition, men might hold it and *go* to perdition."³

Millions have a dead faith. They attend church, know the gospel, maybe even live morally. But the thought of meeting the eternal God creates terror. John says perfect love (for God) "drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). True faith knows and trusts Jesus and his Gospel. It casts out quaking fear. It grants peace with God, a desire for his word, and the capacity to love others in word and deed.

Do you have real faith? Do you love Jesus? Do you know that he came to join you to himself? That he paid for your sins? That his resurrection can be the beginning of life for you? James' comments on false faith can feel like bad news, but no. You can have real faith that expresses itself in loving acts – caring for the needy and walking in God's way. New behavior flows from a new heart.

We could make two lists: A **list of hope** records areas where we hope and pray to show our faith more clearly than before. A **list of celebration** praises God for those places where, by his grace, we have demonstrated the reality of our faith.

³ Barnes 53

Hear James. Real, saving faith in Jesus, shows itself in deeds of love that look like Jesus' acts of love. We struggle with temptations, we falter at times, but our deepest desire is to know Jesus, to trust and follow him, in a new life. If you aren't there just yet, contact me or another pastor or an elder or a teacher you know... And if you do believe, keep eyes open for the door to good deeds and walk through.