

Series James

This Message Faith Without Good Works is Dead

“Faith, by itself, is dead if it is not accompanied by action.”

Scripture James 2:14-26

We have previously examined three of the nine topics in this letter written by James. He wrote about these topics to help his readers understand important characteristics of their “faith.” Each topic provided them with “evidences” of, or “requirements” of, or “proofs” of, genuine faith. The overall theme of the letter is “Faith without actions which give evidences and requirements and proofs of its quality is dead and useless.” So far we have thought about faith in regard to perseverance, obedience, and impartial love.

James wrote this letter in a hard-hitting style designed to grab the attention of his readers and challenge them to examine the vitality of their faith. He was writing to believers, followers of Jesus from a Jewish background, who were living in desperate unfortunate circumstances. He recognized that their behavior was not consistent with their faith, and hence, their professed faith was “dead” and useless.

In the passage we thought about last week, the issue was discrimination. They were showing favoritism toward wealthy people and insulting fellow believers who happened to be “poor in the eyes of the world.” James strongly denounced their behavior. “If,” he wrote, “you really keep the royal law found in Scripture to ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing what is right, but if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers” (*James 2:8-9*).

In the passage we will read and think about today, James will continue to bear down on the relationship between the profession of faith of believers and their activities. I have entitled this topic, “Faith Without Good Works is Dead.” The key thought is in verse 17, “Faith, by itself, is dead if it is not accompanied by action.”

Read James 2:14-26

According to James, the evidence / the requirements / the proof of the believer's faith will be recognized through their actions, specifically through actions of practical help and mercy toward fellow believers. James had previously written the general principle about this, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is to look after orphans and widows in their distress" (*James 1:27*). That was one of the Old Testament indications of obedience. He also wrote "Be merciful as you have been shown mercy" (*Implied in James 2:8 and 13*), and since God had "chosen to give them birth through the word of truth" (*James 1:18*) they were expected to represent God by their behavior.

The passage today begins with another personal appeal, "my brothers." James identified with his readers. He understood their difficulties, and he also understood their need to live out their faith in an acceptable way. Today's topic is introduced with two rhetorical and direct questions: "What good is it if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?" and "Can such faith save him?" James asked these questions in order to get the readers to consider the authenticity of their faith.

In the Greek language, these questions were written in a way which anticipated the response "no." James wanted the readers to recognize that faith without any accompanying acts of mercy and love was of no practical benefit to them. Faith which has been reduced to nothing more than an intellectual assumption of certain truths would be completely useless from a practical standpoint.

James immediately provided an example of the kind of useless faith he had in mind. "Suppose," he wrote, a "brother or sister," that is, a fellow believer, had the need for clothes and food. Rather than providing the unfortunate person with the needed items, the person with the impractical faith simply said, "Go, I wish you well; be warmed and be filled," but did nothing to help them. [*A modern-day equivalent would be something like, "God bless you, brother. I'll be praying for you."*]

The conclusion of this example is obvious: no matter how noble or pious the words might sound, the concern which was expressed for the welfare of the poor person was nothing more than an insincere facade. No practical help was offered. Like the previous questions, the question at the end of verse 16 was also structured in such a way as to anticipate a negative answer. The readers would agree, "There is nothing good about that kind of faith."

In verse 17 James stated his main point in a straight-forward way: “Faith, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” The example highlighted the incongruity of claiming to have a vital faith while at the same time not demonstrating any proof of it. Mere words, “be warm and filled,” were a poor substitute for a coat and a loaf of bread.

According to James, true faith would become self-evident when it manifests itself in tangible good deeds. If good deeds would not be forthcoming, it would be proof that the professed faith was meaningless. James did not deny the faith of believers. He was simply indicating that they were not practicing their faith in the correct way. Their’s was not a living faith. The believers were not practicing “the kind of religion that God the Father accepted as pure and faultless.” They were not “looking after” the needs of others.

There are two terms we need to clarify if we are to properly understand James. When he used the word “save” in verse 14, he was not referring to a “born again” experience or deliverance from hell. In Scripture the words “save” and “salvation” have very broad and rich meanings. There are more than 600 usages of the various Hebrew and Greek words translated “save” and “salvation” in the Bible. Only about 10 per cent of them refer to eternal salvation. Most of the other references are concerned with “sanctification.” That’s the theological term which describes the manner of living expected of believers.

In the example of verses 15 and 16, James was not saying that the person who failed to offer practical help was devoid of eternal life. He was saying that the faith of that person was “dead” because there was no obedience to the Word of God. James used the word “dead” to describe faith that was not working, that was not vital, that was dormant and inactive, and therefore useless for any practical and spiritual purposes.

Many believers today are like the person in the example. They make statements about their concerns for conditions in the world. They might say, “I feel sorry for poor people in my community,” or “I don’t condone prejudice and racism,” or “I hope the refugees from Syria find homes.” In response James would ask them: “What good are your feelings and opinions if you don’t do something to help the poor and work to alleviate the distrust and injustice between the races and show love to those who have no homes?”

James was concerned about concrete action. You will remember in chapter 1 that he wrote, “do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” Later in chapter 1 he explained that “anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like the man who looks at his face in a mirror, and then goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like” (*James 1:22-24*).

A very similar point is made in today’s passage. “If faith is not accompanied by action, it is dead.” The important question is: If there is no tangible application of faith, can it be called a genuine faith? James insisted that the profession of religious belief apart from actions of love and mercy is meaningless. Such a dead faith neither helps others nor serves the purposes of God in any significant way.

James did not, in this passage, explain what God will do to the believer who “knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it.” That’s a quote from chapter 4 (*verse 17*) which we will think about in a few weeks. However he has already given some warning to his readers about judgment. In the passage we thought about last week he summarized his instructions with these words, “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law ... because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful” (*James 2:12-13*). Believers need to understand that without evidence of faith, they will be subject to judgment. [*Note Jesus’ words in John 15:1-2, 8.*]

I’m sure James remembered the words of Jesus, “My Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” A few verses later Jesus added, “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (*John 15:1-2, 8*). Without visible evidence of life and fruitfulness, God will judge the believer.

In verse 18 James raised another rhetorical question. He anticipated that some of the readers would object to his previous statements. The main point has been that works are necessary to prove that a person has faith. The objection is whether faith and works must be related or whether it is possible to have one without the other. The grammar and lack of punctuation in the original Greek words of verse 18 make the interpretation of this verse difficult, but I think we can assume that the objector is saying that it is possible to have faith without works and works without faith.

James refutes this opinion in strong words. We can paraphrase his response: faith without works is only an intellectual invisible attitude of the mind and heart which cannot be recognized or appreciated by others. On the other hand, visible actions are strong evidence of a person's inner beliefs and attitudes. Mere profession of faith proves nothing as to its reality. The conclusion is that faith cannot be shown without deeds.

In verse 19 James directly addressed the individual who thought that his inner intellectual faith was enough to satisfy God's requirements for a personal relationship. According to James, the individual was "foolish." The individual's claim that a person merely had to "believe," while leaving it to others to engage in ministry, put him on the same level of faith as "demons." Scripture indicates that demons had accurate theological convictions about God. They knew who Jesus was. They were afraid of Jesus' authority. In this passage, their profession of faith, that God is one, was correct, but their faith was not sufficient to provide them a spiritual relationship with God because they did not obey the truth they knew.

James chose the most fundamental affirmation of the Jewish faith to make this point. Every Jew knew the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one." It must have surprised the Jews to realize that they and demons were in agreement in regard to the intellectual aspects of this statement. What the demons understood caused them to "shudder." The implied question here was whether foolish believers who insisted that their inner invisible faith was adequate were caused to "shudder" or not. The point in these verses was that belief without obedience was useless.

I suspect that James' readers were in a state of shock because of his comments, but he was not finished with his teaching. "Did they want more evidence that faith without deeds was useless?" he asked. In verse 20 he introduced the perfect example for the readers to mull over. All Jews looked up to Abraham as their great model of faith. He was "their ancestor," and, as it states at the end of verse 23, was known as "God's friend."

In verse 21 James wrote that Abraham was “considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar.” We must consider this verse in the context of this passage because elsewhere in Scripture we read that righteousness is given to the believer through faith and not of works, and the result is eternal salvation. In this passage, however, James has a different purpose in describing the actions of Abraham. He is explaining that righteous actions were evidence of genuine faith. The next three verses confirm this.

Concerning Abraham, James wrote, “You see that faith and actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.” Verse 23 is a quotation from Genesis 15, which describes an event that occurred many years before the faith of Abraham was tested when God commanded him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. The point of verse 24 is that the offering of Isaac was confirming proof of the genuineness of Abraham’s faith, the outworking of the faith declared earlier in Genesis 15. If there had been no good deeds following Genesis 15, no obedient actions, there would have been no way to validate the faith of Abraham. As far as later generations were concerned, without obedient actions the extent of Abraham’s faith would have remained unknown, “incomplete” (*verse 22*), “useless” (*verse 20*), and “dead” (*verse 17*).

The second Old Testament example of genuine faith was Rahab. What an unlikely person she was to be “considered righteous.” She was a member of a pagan people group the Israelites were commanded to destroy, and she was a prostitute. Nevertheless, by faith (*see Joshua 2:8-13 and Hebrews 11:31*) she declared her desire to become identified with the people of Israel, and she acted on her faith when she risked her life to protect the two Israelite spies who had come to her house. As a result of her efforts, “even Rahab the prostitute” was “considered righteous.” This was the identical phrase used to describe Abraham in verse 21. Rahab’s actions were evidence of her faith.

James summarized this passage with the use of an analogy. In the same way that the human body without its life giving spirit is dead — nothing more than a corpse — “so faith without deeds is also dead,” and just as useless as a corpse.

In writing all these thoughts, James was clearly trying to “rattle the cages” of his readers. He did not want them to be cold hearted towards God and one another. In spite of their adverse circumstances — maybe we should say, because they were in adverse circumstances — he wanted them to live out their faith with zeal and enthusiasm. Yes, they were being tested by many difficulties, but they still needed to live as God expected them to live.

I must not conclude this message without briefly addressing the debates about the theologies of James and the Apostle Paul. Some commentators are of the opinion that James' teaching is in conflict with statements written by Paul. According to these commentators, Paul insisted that works could not be a condition for salvation. (*See Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 11:6*)

As commentators have reflected on the writings of Paul and James through the centuries, most of them have concluded that the two men were writing about different aspects of salvation.

There are several ways to explain the emphases of James and Paul. James was concerned about a superficial faith that had no wholesome effect in the life of the professing believer. Paul, on the other hand, was combating the belief that a person could earn saving merit before God by doing good works. Paul's sense of justification was vertical—relating to one's standing before God. James' concept of justification was horizontal—relating to how the believer displayed faith before men.

Both men recognized the twin truths of the Christian life: people are not saved by their deeds; they are saved in order to do good deeds. Paul's emphasis was primarily on the first truth; James's emphasis was on the second truth.

The verses that best combine the emphases of James and Paul are in Ephesians chapter 2: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, ... it is the gift of God; it is not by works." This is salvation into God's family. Then the passage continues: "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (*Ephesian 2:8-10*). Neither Paul nor James depreciated good works. They agreed that good deeds are the product of genuine faith.