

XIII. James in Biblical Perspective
The Gospel Life According to James
“True Religion and Saving Faith”
James 2:14-26
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February 9, 2014 – Morning Sermon

We are in our 13th study of the book of James. This is the Word of God. It's the Truth. James 2:14-26 says [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 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.

The grass withers, the flower fades, God's Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

This is a challenging text. Now I want to try and go through not explaining away the challenge but explain what the challenge is there for. I think James has done it purposefully. I think he has chosen his words purposefully. He has a particular passion and burn for it. Before I get to it I want to go back to the turn of the century around the 1500s to the 1600s. Early in the 16th century there was a young monk whom God had brought to see his sinfulness, the shame, guilt and depravity of it. He had given his whole life as a monk in the monastery. He was diligent in acts of penitence. He went through all rites and rituals. He looked to the sacraments of the church. He did everything but his guilt continued to drape him. He let his fear dominate him and his shame overwhelm him. Then one day one of his mentors sent him on a journey to teach the books of Romans and Galatians. All of a sudden he began to see the light of the Gospel. It was the Gospel that had been shrouded in the existing church for centuries by ritualism, legalism, superstitions and darkness.

When he saw in Galatians particularly, ‘no flesh will be justified by the works of the Law, but we are justified freely as a gift of God and by faith in Christ alone,’ his heart was soaring that he was forgiven and accepted in Christ and united to Christ by a God-given faith. He gloried in his freedom. His life and ministry set off a firestorm in the church in Wittenberg, in the university there. It began to spread through Germany and throughout all of Europe and then to North Africa and eventually what would be

colonized in North America. Even beyond there it went to South America through the efforts of a John Calvin. It was through people like John Calvin, John Knox and Martin Butzer and others that it spread like wildfire. It was God's glorious recapturing of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

In fact, that became the watchword that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Then of course that same Martin Luther picks up the book of James and he is confronted in the chapter I just read in James 2 and his verdict on the book was 'Oh it's a strawy, weak epistle' because it seemed to be James going back to legalism justified by works. But is that what James is doing in the text?

I would say that is not at all what James is doing in the text. The critics of Christianity in general and the Bible in particular say 'see you people claiming this is the Word of God for if this was the Word of God it wouldn't contradict itself – justified by faith and justified by works – that's a contradiction, isn't it?' That's why first of all we go by way of convictions. I believe this is God's Word so that means it's infallible and inerrant and that means if there is an apparent contradiction then that's exactly what it is – an apparent contradiction. It doesn't need to be explained away but it does need to be explained and that's why you do your work historically and grammatically in the text to find out why it is written that way because the Bible doesn't contradict itself. I go to the simple text to understand the more difficult text and you work your way through to find out why this language is used. Why are these words used? What is the setting? With the conviction that it doesn't contradict what is the explanation? It is not to explain it away but there is something God is trying to communicate to us. Let's not dismiss it by shallow reading of the Bible but let's find out why it's there because it's something important and when something is hard to understand it's because there is something deep and important to understand. So it is with this text in front of us.

I want to remind you of what we've covered in this study where James the brother of Jesus, converted after the resurrection, the pastor of a mega-church in Jerusalem, is writing a pastoral book of wisdom addressed to professing believers. These believers say they have a Gospel foundation and a Gospel motivation so James keeps saying in his book 'my beloved brothers.' If you have a Gospel foundation and motivation then you want to live a Gospel life. To live a Gospel life you need Gospel wisdom so James takes this whole book to give to us the theme which is the Gospel life is a life of persistent ministry and joyful maturation in a sin-cursed world informed by the God-sent gift of "Wisdom from Above." Because you're in a sin-cursed world trials are there to prove to you what you know, to show you what you need to know and to uncover any strongholds of idolatry in your life. When those trials come you need Gospel wisdom.

How do you get Gospel wisdom? There are two ways. One is you pray for it. If any of you lacks wisdom, ask and God will give it liberally. The Holy Spirit will come upon us to give us wisdom. Then James says to get in the Word. Be hearers of the Word but not hearers only but also doers and the result of this prayer for wisdom and hearing and doing issues forth in what James calls true religion. It is not man-made religion. Man-made religion is one that thinks up by human imagination who God is and human endeavor to be right with God. James says there is a true religion and it's not there to get you to God it is there from your relationship with God. When God saves you by His grace He then gives you a sacred way of life. True religion is not the avenue to God, it is the way of life for those whom God has come and saved.

James gives three marks of this true religion. One is that it has a bridled tongue because it has a new heart. The tongue speaks from the heart and when you get a new heart you get a bridled tongue. Number two is that it is a life of ministry to the powerless and the marginalized such as widows and orphans – people who are in need. God's people reach to these people not to be saved but because they are saved. We who were helpless reach out to the helpless. Number three there is a personal commitment to holiness that we would be unstained by the stain of sin. Our witness and walk with the Lord would not be stained because of our love for the Lord who has saved us from the stains of sin. Then the rest of James is to show you the impact of true religion out of a Gospel foundation, Gospel motivation and Gospel wisdom way of life.

I have already given you two Gospel wisdom Maxims from James 1 and then in James 2 starting in the last study we have started developing Gospel wisdom Maxim number three. Gospel wisdom Maxim number three is true religion is derived from a Christ-preeminent life view propelled by a Christ-passionate life love producing a mature Christ-shaped life style. In other words, here come the trials of life and we have this Gospel wisdom where we view them not in a man-centered way, but in a Christ-preeminent way. Then propelled by the love of Christ we embrace the trial of life to grow in grace and that results in not only a Christ-passionate life love but a Christ-shaped life style that the trial is producing as it is refining and growing us.

We saw one trial in the last study from James 2:1-13. They didn't know it was going to be a trial in the worship service but it was. A rich man and a poor man come in and they see the glory of the rich man, lift him up and worship him. They put the poor man down and James says with Gospel wisdom you never do that – discrimination, favoritism, and being judgmental are all antithetical to true religion with those who have a walk with Jesus Christ by grace. How did you get saved? You were saved because God is no respecter of persons. He saves rich, poor, black, white, down and outers, and up and inners. The Lord he says is your glory, not the glory of the rich man and the world. So you have no such divisions for that is not the way you respond.

There is one other point I don't want you to miss. James gives you five reasons why that life style of being judgmental, favoritism and discrimination is inconsistent with the Christian life, Gospel wisdom life. He doesn't just say 'don't do that.' It is because we have a relationship with God. He is our Lord. So as Lord He could just say 'do and don't do' but we're also His children. Like a Father He reasons with us. Now He is about to reason with us again. Everybody has some faith but not everybody's saves. I am going to take the time to reason with you so that you will understand what is saving faith. This Christ-preeminent life view, Christ-propelled life love, Christ-shaped life style that is Biblically informed and Holy Spirit enabled makes clear that not all faith is saving faith.

Do you remember the Gospel that Martin Luther discovered that had been shrouded in the church by ritualism, legalism and darkness? This is called the Gospel of free grace. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Here is what you need to understand. If Satan can't get you not to hear it or to dismiss it, then he tries to pollute it. Satan has two flank attacks. I want to use a military term here because it is an assault. Satan assaults the Gospel at the two flanks. One flank is; saved by grace through faith, absolutely, just as long as you're baptized and observe the ceremonial laws and dietary laws. He loves to pollute the Gospel of saving grace alone, through faith

alone, in Christ alone, by making it legalistic. That is you have to do something that enables God to save you instead of God's saving grace that enables you to do something for your Savior.

In that attack Satan has another attack. If someone says we're saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone then Satan has another attack which is called libertinism or licentiousness or antinomianism against the commandments of the Lord. You are saved by grace and not your obedience and grace overcomes sin??? Then Satan says the real believer will sin a lot because to save you God has to give you a lot of grace – one bucket of sin, two buckets of grace. So go get two buckets of sin and you'll get four buckets of grace. That is called licentiousness and libertinism when you are saved by grace but it really doesn't matter how you live. Those are Satan's two flank attacks.

God is in command of His army. God knows how to put a general at each flank to defend it. General (Apostle) Paul was put at the flank of legalism to defend it. When he went to those meetings and heard the leaders telling people if you do all this then you can be saved Paul said "God forbid, who is your father? Abraham and when was he saved? He was saved in Genesis 15:6 when it said Abraham believed in the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness." Abraham was Gentile. He didn't get circumcised until Genesis 17 so God doesn't need you to do something to make you savable for nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling. It is not the Law that saves you. The Law didn't come until 430 years after Abraham and Abraham is already saved. So Paul fights legalism. Paul is also fully aware of the problem of libertinism. While his major battle is against legalism, he will come back and say "Shall we sin that grace may abound? God forbid for how can we who are dead to sin still live in it?" Paul will defend both flanks but the major flank God has called him to, is to defend the flank against polluting the Gospel of free grace with legalism.

Jesus appoints General James to the flank of libertinism. James will defend this by pointing out the faith that God gives to unite you to Christ is not a faith alone but it is working faith. In other words, you're saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone but saving grace and faith are never alone. They have tracks and marks with them. He will also defend and understand the flank against legalism which he does in James 2:5 when it says 'those who inherit eternal life.' Why would he put inherit if you worked for eternal life? He understands that one is saved by grace but his major deal is to fight against libertinism and antinomianism and Paul's major deal is legalism but both accommodate the other person. Now let's see how James does it in this text that is not contradictory but complimentary to General (Apostle) Paul.

There will be two rhetorical questions and then four illustrations to teach us what saving faith is. The word faith in some form will show up in these verses 14 times. The word works is going to show up 12 times. Clearly he is trying to teach us something about faith and works. The key is in his first rhetorical question. James 2:14 says *[14] What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?* Let me rephrase that. Is that saving faith? Why is James asking that question? Here is why he is asking that question. Everybody you meet is a believer. I just debated an atheist last week and I've never seen such faith in all my life. The point is not whether you're a believer. In fact everyone I know is a religious believer.

I was not surprised to hear that last month the atheists have gotten together and have started a church for their denomination in New York. I heard this month that they are already splitting but they have started it up there already. We are religious because we were made with a relationship with the Lord. The question is do we have a God-given religion from the Gospel of grace or do we have a man-made religion that is deceptive. Everyone is a believer but the question is, in what and who and what kind of faith do they have? So James wants to clarify that saving faith is not just a talking faith. You say you have faith. Saving faith is a walking faith. It's a working faith. So James starts in at that point with that rhetorical question to make clear what he is talking about. He says if there are no works you don't have a saving faith but what you have is a dead faith.

When it comes to true religion and saving faith James will use these illustrations to point out that saving faith is not a dead faith, saving faith is not a demonic faith, saving faith is not a useless faith and saving faith is a justified faith. Now we have a key. The word justified in the original language has two uses. One use of the word justified is a courtroom verdict. Its opposite is condemnation. When you get to the end of the court case there are two possible verdicts – justification or condemnation, innocent or guilty.

What believers have in Jesus Christ is the verdict of justification therefore having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1) and there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). How can we as sinners be called innocent and justified and not be called guilty and condemned? It is because Jesus came and took our place and paid for our sins. He took our condemnation, gives us His righteousness and so when God sees us He sees innocence. The righteousness of Christ clothes us. That's how Paul uses the word justification in its legal sense.

James, I believe very purposefully, is using the word justification in another sense. You turn in your expense account and your boss says 'justify it' or 'verify it.' The word justification has another use to vindicate or verify and that's the way James is using it. He says you say you have a saving faith relationship with Christ and therefore a legal verdict of justification, well here's what justifies your claim to saving faith. Here is what verifies the reality of saving faith as opposed to dead faith, demonic faith, useless faith, barren faith, deceiving faith, false faith for this is saving faith. He then moves from the rhetorical question to the first illustration.

James 2:15-17 says [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 is that? [17] So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.* So here is a person who comes and is in great need. They're hungry, thirsty and without clothing and what you say is "My heart breaks and I feel your pain. I'll pray for you." You are doing the best for them which is praying but you're not doing all you can do which is to help meet their need, like give them something to drink or some clothing.

What was one of the marks of true religion? It was to minister mercy and grace to the powerless and the impoverished so you're violating true religion and yet you say you have faith. What you are doing is manifesting a dead faith in that you have had a talking faith but you haven't had a walking faith in light of what they needed and what you had to begin to alleviate it in addition to your good words and intentional prayers which

should have been an outreach of ministry, compassion and mercy to whatever degree you had available when you saw them. James says that's not a true religion for it violates all the marks of it by using a tongue wrongly, no ministry of mercy and staining yourself with sin by the way you have responded. He is not saying that giving to the poor is going to save you. He is showing you that those who have saving faith in Christ who saves you respond to the poor when they come into your life. Let's look at the next part.

James 2:18 says [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.* He is saying you can profess to have faith but if there is something not manifesting its reality then it's a dead faith, a useless faith yet saving faith shows up. It's not just verbal but it's also visual. It is showing somebody. Then he goes to a second illustration.

James 2:19 says [19] *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!* This is a big one for us. At Briarwood we take serious teaching the Bible and sound doctrine. Nobody has better sound doctrine than demons. They have been in the best seminary in the world for they were in heaven. Is God one? Absolutely. Is He three Persons? Absolutely. Did Jesus die for sinners? Absolutely. They have sound doctrine and theological accuracy. They just don't have a saving relationship with the God of glory. They have no saving faith. In fact, their theological accuracy even leads them to shudder and yet it's amazing how we just walk in and out of God's presence when we pray and they have enough sense to tremble, but they are not saved. It's a useless faith, a demonic faith, a dead faith. Let's go further.

James 2:20 says [20] *Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?* The book of James is here to teach us wisdom and being deceived with a false faith is foolishness. Here he is reasoning with us. Isn't it wonderful? He doesn't just say, 'here's what you need to do' but he reasons with you. God is your Father. You're His son or daughter and He is reasoning you to Gospel wisdom. Here is a third illustration.

James 2:21-23 says [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.*

He is saying that Abraham was justified legally according to Genesis 15:6 when he said *"Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."* A righteousness that was not his was given to him by faith. How do you know Abraham had saving faith? Look at Genesis 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 for those won't works to save him, those were works that showed he had saving faith. Then finally James gives you the content for Genesis 22. What is Genesis 22 doing and how is James using this? In Genesis 15:6 Abraham is saved by faith in the promises of God. He is circumcised by faith in Genesis 17. He receives the promise of Isaac. He frees Lot and then he tithes by faith to Melchizedek. He does act after act by faith and you see reality of his faith for it is a demonstrated faith. It's not just a talking faith but a walking faith. It's an alive faith and not a useless faith. It's a useful faith and not a demonic faith. It's a real faith and then he gets to Genesis 22.

Genesis 22:1 says [1] *After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."* He is going to take him up with the son that He

gave him and promised him to put him to death on Mount Moriah. Abraham took him up and said to his son that they would return not because he knew a ram would be waiting in the thickets but he believed that if God took his life, because he was the promised son, would raise him again. He obeyed. Why? He obeyed God because God and Abraham by faith were friends. He was the friend of God, not only in the family, not only his Lord, but his friend and he did what friendship called for that had been purchased by the grace of God. Abraham went up to set aside his son on that altar and not many yards from there one day the only Son of the One who sent him would be crucified to set us free from our sins. Here is this glorious moment where Abraham showed the reality of his faith. He was justified by faith in Genesis 15:6. His faith was justified in Genesis 16 through 22. A trial of life in the hands of a sovereign God came upon Abraham and he met it with confidence by faith in the God who saved him and in the God who was his friend.

James gives one other illustration from Rahab the harlot, another Gentile. James 2:25 says [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?* The people of God come into her midst as spies and she sees them. She knows the power of their God and His delivering power. She believes in this God and then she at the risk of her life took care of the spies and sent them out another way. If she is found out she dies. Do I know she has saving faith? Absolutely, look at the courage of this woman to be faithful to the Lord and His people. It was a demonstrated faith. It wasn't like she added God to all her other belief systems because of what she knew about Him but she abandoned everything, put her trust in the God who delivers and that faith was manifested by the courage to not only hide and take care of these spies but to send them out by another way and to protect them even with the fact that if she is found out it will cost her, her life.

James sums the whole thing up with this. James 2:26 says [26] *For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.* Do you know what physical death is? Physical death is the separation of the spirit from the body. Spiritual death is to deceive yourself with a dead faith, a demonic faith, a useless faith, a barren faith, and the deceit is manifested because it is absent and separated from a working faith. James is saying you are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone but saving faith is never alone. It's living, it's alive.

In closing here is the takeaway. Saving faith which comes from God, by grace and fixed on Christ is a living, useful and Godly faith, verified by responsive compassion, unstoppable courage, and loving obedience. It comes from God. John 6:28-29 which says [28] *Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?"* [29] *Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."* If you believe then it was God's work that brought you to faith. Why did He work to give it to you? It was unmerited. For by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourself for it is the gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). Saving faith comes from God. Saving faith is a gift of God's grace to you. Saving faith is in Christ.

It's a living faith. It's not a dead faith. It's a useful faith. It's not a useless faith. It's not a demonic faith. It is a Godly faith. It shows up. You are saved by faith alone. You are not saved by faith plus works or a faith and works. You are saved by a working faith. Faith is at work. Let me quote Paul again. Ephesians 2:8-10 says [8] *For by grace*

you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. There are no works on the way to the cross. To the cross you come empty-handed but when you walk from the cross you walk away full lived. Your life is full to overflowing. He is working in you and you're working out what He is working in. You were not only saved by faith but you now live by faith and one day you'll die in faith. So saving faith which comes from God and is fixed on Christ is a living, useful and Godly faith.

I'm just drawing on James' illustrations here. It is verified by responsive compassion. What happens when a true believer meets a poor person? It ignites compassion. I was helpless and He helped me. I was poor and He saved me. I was cast away and He reached me. When the believer who has been saved by grace through faith, sees someone marginalized and impoverished it ignites their life. They can't do it all but they can do what they can do by God's grace and I can manifest it. That's how saving faith is ignited by the needs of others. It's not just a talking faith. It's a walking faith.

It not only has responsive compassion but it has unstoppable courage. Lord, I have the courage to give You my son at Mount Moriah. Lord, I'll take care of Your soldiers and I'll protect them and send them out another way even though it may cost me my life. Saving faith is an unstoppable courageous faith. No matter what the assault of the evil one or what the culture or nation is found, with humility there is courage to meet it out of love to Christ because He is our friend. Go read the accounts of all these soldiers and these medals of Honor and the men who were awarded them posthumously. With all due respect I'm not meaning this to be unpatriotic, but it wasn't for freedom or the flag or to win the battle that they threw themselves on a grenade but it was for their friend that was next to them that they did it.

When we have been saved by His grace and now this One whom we were His enemy has made us His children and His friend and our faith is not only responsive to others in need, unstoppable in its courage, but it's manifested not with a slavish obedience but a loving obedience to our Savior who is our friend. The poor and the hungry ignite us. Our doctrine isn't just to be accurate but it's to be a living, sound doctrine. Our reverence and shuddering is now joined with rejoicing and our obedience is to God our Lord, our Savior and our Friend.

So, Lord do you want my son in this upcoming mission's conference? He is Yours. Do You want my daughter? She is Yours. Do You want my resources? They are Yours. You're my Friend. You've saved me. Lord, do You want me? I'm Yours. I have been bought with a price. The One whom I believe I now want to follow. Help me to leave tracks of loving compassion of unstoppable courage and loving obedience to my Savior, Lord and Friend.

Friend, please do not leave with a deceived faith, a dead one, a useless one, a demonic faith. You may be doctrinally accurate but separated from Him and don't leave to go do better. Don't leave without coming to Him. The full life of faith begins with the empty hands of faith. Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Your cross I cling. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You so much that we could be in Your Word together. If you're reading this today, I love you but my love for you is in no way comparable to the love that God has had for you. He gave His Son that the way that was blocked by your sin and my sin was cleared by Jesus who is a Friend to sinners. Receive Him by faith and the faith that God gives by grace in Christ is a living, useful faith but its first step is an empty handed faith. Lord, Jesus alone is who I need. If you have made that prayer or want to make that prayer please contact us here at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200 and we'll help you get started on journey of walking by faith and not just talk of faith. God's grace is sufficient. Dear friends, join me in asking the Lord to give us such a vital, deep, intimate relationship with our Savior that our faith would not be demonic in sound doctrine without sound lives and our faith would not be useless but useful, not barren but fruitful and not dead but living and in it people might see to some degree even in the weak moments of our faith the assailing of our faith and that they still might see Jesus in us for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.