

## James Faith That Works - Part I James 2:14-19

Stand for the reading of God's Word. James 2:14-19. Now the theme is straightforward. Real faith is alive. Real faith proves itself in works, fruitfulness, good deeds to the people around us here God's word. As James describes it,

*"...what good is it my brother's. If someone says he has faith but does not have works or deeds, can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, go in peace, be warmed and filled without giving them the things that need for the body. What good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 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. You believe that God is one. You do well, but even the demons believe that and shudder..."*

Let's pray for a moment.

Lord, give us, we pray, ears to hear all that you're saying to us by your word, and not only to hear it, but by your grace to live it more and more individually and together. We pray in Jesus name, Amen. And you may be seated.

Some years ago, I had a conversation. A long conversation. Two hours for sure, with a long-distance cross-country truck driver about Christianity, and after a long conversation about sin and Jesus and salvation and all the rest, he said to me, I understand that Jesus is the Son of God. I believe that he came God and man into this world. He died for our sins, my sins, and rose again. And I believe that. But I'm a married man and I'm a cross-country truck driver. And I have girlfriends in five, six, seven of the cities I go to regularly, and I just don't want to give them up. Now, what will we say about that man when we say that man is a Christian? Of course we can't judge. We don't know. But it does seem strange when somebody says, I'll follow Jesus, except when I choose not to follow Jesus.

Now, of course, that's not unusual. We have all kinds of people who do that today. They follow Jesus as a teacher. They like what he has to say. But you know, they pick and choose. Some people like to put different religions together. They like a lot of ideas from Christianity, but some from Buddhism or Hinduism. And they make it a little, a little stew out of their various beliefs, pushing out what they don't like, the doctrines, the ethical teachings, maybe. Maybe sex, ethics, maybe what God has to say about our money. So, there are people who want eternal life. They want to say, yes, Jesus is the Savior, but not my Lord. And I'll follow him and I'll follow him on my terms, if you don't mind. Again, we have hot topics in mind every age or things that Jesus says

the apostles, the prophets say that are unpalatable right now. What's unpalatable is what the Bible has to say about gender and sexuality and identity, at least for some people.

That's not what James has in mind. He has something very practical in mind. And that is the question. Do you help needy people who are right in front of you? Do you help the people who are in desperate need because of the hurricane, or do you simply notice it? It's a real question. My truck driver agreed with the Bible's diagnosis of the human condition, and the solution to that condition. And there are a lot of people like that. They agree about sin. They agree about Jesus, especially in the Bible Belt, not as much in Seattle or New York, where they don't really know what the Bible says. But around here, they're probably more people that have biblical ideas in their mind. But, even as they go to church from time to time, and even as they're happy to talk about religion or faith or spiritual topics and sound very orthodox when they do, there's nothing distinctively Christian about their life. There's no costly obedience, there's no self-denial, there's no acts that challenge their sense of a designer life, their wellness, if you will, James says.

What's the benefit of that kind of faith that says orthodox things but has no practice to it? Now, James has this question in mind throughout his book and chapter one verse 18, he says, you need to receive the implanted word which can save your souls. That is to say, the Word of God, when properly received, is like it's like a seed that goes deep into our bodies, the ground, our body, our soul, our spirit, our mind. And then it bears fruit. It's a planted, well planted, implanted seed. And earlier we notice that he says, you need to be doers of the word not. Here's only he said, the Word of God is like a mirror. It holds up who we are so we can see ourselves, and how absurd it is to see who we are and see all the flaws and do nothing about it. James has been saying that for a while. He also gave us a test of true religion. Three tests control the tongue unstained by the world, caring for widows and orphans and their distress. And what if? What if someone says, I believe in Jesus, but they don't meet any of those tests and maybe they aren't even trying. The concern for the poor runs throughout the book of James runs throughout the Bible. Jesus said, love your neighbor as yourself. And James picks up about that and says, that's the royal law. You gotta love your neighbor as yourself. And if you don't love your neighbor, then you're violating the law of the king, he said.

What do we say to the person who says, I'm saved by faith? And how dare you say that God's going to inspect my life? Well, the truth of the matter is probably a dozen times the Bible says, even if we're saved by faith or claim to be saved by faith, we will rendered account for the deeds done in the body, whether good or evil. Every word, every deed is seen is witness, and we'll speak for it. Now, that doesn't mean a believer is condemned, but we will answer for every last thing. God knows everything we've done, and if everything you've done does not indicate that you really follow Jesus, well, then there is a faith as provocative as it sounds, there is a faith that does not save.

James says it four times in just 12 verses. He says, faith without faith by itself, unaccompanied by works, is dead. He says faith without works is useless. Verse 26 of our chapter he says, Faith

without works is dead one more time. And in verse 14 he says, literally, what do we want to say about a person? It's there in verse 14. What good is it? What is the benefit? What's the profit? My brothers or someone says he has faith but does not have works. Can that faith save him? Now I have to tell you the original language, the word that isn't there. Some translations say such faith, that faith, that kind of a faith they stick a word in. But the literal Greek is can faith save him? If you say the words I have faith and have no works, can faith save him? And the original has a way. The Greek language is a way of asking questions and making very clear that the answer is yes or no. And here the answer is no. Can that kind of faith save him? The answer is no.

It cannot because it's not a living faith doesn't demonstrate itself by deeds. People soften it. But James is stark. Now you may say, wait, wait, hang on, hang on. We've been going to this church for a long time. We've heard so many times that we're right with God by faith and not by works. Yes, that's true, but living faith works. Let me say to you this way it's not my idea. It's been around for a while. A baby does not gain life by breathing, but a living baby breathes. A baby does not earn life by thinking to itself. I think I'll start breathing now. A baby comes to life because husband and wife come together. Gestation occurs. The child is born and it breathes. It breathes because it's alive. Living beings breathe and living Christians breathe out good works toward those they see in need. The Bible says elsewhere that a good tree cannot help but bear good fruit. If you're alive. There are consequences. Now. Results James describes his four ways. We'll look at two of them next week, but I want to give you a survey just in case you aren't here next week. I certainly hope you are. But he starts off by saying, first of all, a faith without deeds of compassion for those who are in need. That kind of faith brings no good. It's dead. It's ineffective toward our fellow man. Second, we'll only talk about this one briefly. There is the faith of demons who have orthodox ideas in their head about God. They believe God is one. They believe Jesus is the Son of God. They believe he died and he rose. And it means a whole bunch of trouble for them. And they tremble, they shudder. They have orthodox ideas. But they put no trust in God. And so false faith is useless man wired toward the person in need and worthless God Word. And then later in the passage we meet Abraham, who had a living faith, and that's why he was able to be willing to sacrifice his son on the altar, because he knew that if, if necessary, God could raise him from the dead, that God is sovereign over all things. And that proved that his faith is alive toward God.

And then finally, shockingly, almost the Bible cites James cites Rahab, who was a prostitute, but she showed her faith was real by taking care of hiding, protecting the scouts, the messengers that came on Israel's behalf to see Jericho. She said the words, I believe God is powerful. I believe God is mighty. He's more powerful than our gods. And then he proved he believe she proved. She believed that by taking care of people not from her tribe, but from the tribe and the people of Israel. She proved her faith was real. Now some people will say, boy, James is kind of conflicting. If you know the Bible well, doesn't James conflict with what the Apostle Paul says? Now, the first thing I want to tell you is James and Paul knew each other.

Paul says explicitly that he came to the leaders of the Church of Jerusalem, and James was one of the main leaders of the Church of Jerusalem. They met, they talked. Paul shared his gospel. Paul knew what James was saying, and James knew what Paul was saying. There's no contradiction here, but there is a difference in emphasis. And when Paul's out speaking to Gentiles. When Paul's out speaking to Jews that want to trust their works, he changes his message a little bit. The fundamental points of the same to meet the needs are in front of him. And James does the same thing. So Paul does say things like A man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. That's Romans 3. And in Galatians 2 he says, A person is not justified by works in the law, but by faith. We're not justified by works, but we do work. And that's James's point. He's creating, shall we say, a constructive tension between people who've heard Paul and are trusting in dead ideas, mere ideas in their mind, and the call of Christ.

To follow up words with deeds. Of course, we know you can't be right with God by simply saying the right words right? I mean, it's not like some incantation. If you say, I believe in Jesus by sick, by merely saying the words, I will gain eternal life, you have to mean it. You have to ally yourself with Christ. You have to trust Christ. You have to receive him. And if you do, then your life changes. That's what everyone says. This is not mean. If you're worried that you have to ask the question, so, how much does God require? And, and if I have to give an account for the deeds done in the body, to what extent am I going to be liable to judgment?

Let me make it clear. The Lord looks at the course of our life. So right now, at night by my bed, there's, you know, a little pile of books. And one of them is a biography of Jonathan Edwards, a great man, wonderful man. But a biography of Edwards is going to point out his flaws, and he could be kind of cranky and legalistic from time to time. And he had a slave, and so far as we can tell you, the slave, because people in his peer group had slaves and maybe didn't really think about it. Wonderful man. Some flaws. God looks at the course of his life. John Calvin could get angry and irascible and make rash decisions, but he lived for Christ for his whole life.

Martin Luther could say terrible things, horrible things, hateful things came out of his mouth. But he lived for the Lord. And so we don't look at the worst moment. We look at the course of his life, and God looks at the course of our life, a life that says by deeds, not just words, that I'm really a disciple.

Let me give you another example. There's a man named John Wesley. You've surely heard of him, and I'll talk to you about him again. John Wesley was a minister in the Church of England. He went to Oxford. He was brilliant. He was dedicated, but he didn't always make good decisions. For example, at one point he was, called to be the pastor of the church, the leading church in Georgia, in Savannah before it was even a state, 1740. And he loved or was moved by the beauty of the governor's daughter. And he hoped that she would choose him in marriage. She did not choose him. She chose another man. And Wesley was so upset about this that he denounced her from the pulpit for not choosing him, and denounced her father, the governor, and banished them from the Lord's Supper. Didn't go over real well. He was urged to find another place to maybe sober up and practice his faith a little better. Okay, but it's also true.

Despite that episode, that Wesley was a man of persevering faith. I don't know if you know this or not, but in his day, you couldn't start to start a church. The state had to permit you to start a church. And if somebody wanted to start a church in a town that had sprung up and had no churches, it might not exist. There might not have been a church for years. And there were people who lived in these areas with no church, and there were people who were working seven days a week going down to the mines to mined coal. And Wesley, who could preach in the biggest cathedrals and did preach in the biggest cathedrals of the day, also spoke in open fields and towns where there was no church. He preached by mines. When the shifts were over, he would stand and preach to the people, although it was illegal, and he could go to jail for it. And so, although he did foolish things, the course of his life was one in which he cared for the poor, the weak, the spiritually needy. And therefore we know that whatever his flaws might have been, he is a man of faith. That's what God is looking for, not perfection, but a course of life that demonstrates that we are indeed following Jesus. Paul says the same thing in another place. In Romans 2:13. He says, this is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but those who obey the law. They will be declared righteous, not perfect obedience, not earning salvation by works, but demonstrating that you're a believer. Again, the question is what is the benefit? Oh, we're on verse 19. We're not there yet. Go back please. Thank you so much. What is the benefit? What is the good? What is the value of a faith that does nothing? The casually mistreats people overtly or covertly by noticing their needs. Verse 15 and doing nothing about them. So here's the scenario before us. You have to remember how prominent poverty, true poverty could be in Bible times. I mean, we live the poorest among us are kings and queens by ancient standards. These are people who are really hungry. They do not have enough food. They're losing weight, not because they're diet has gone awry. They're losing weight because they can't find enough food, and they're cold because they don't have enough clothes and they can't find enough clothes. And so the question is, what is the benefit if somebody says, you know, I believe the right doctrines and there's a poor person, a hungry person right in front of them, and what they say is go in peace, be warmed and filled.

Now go in peace is sort of a classic blessing in the Old Testament. It means May God give you peace as you go. May God give you peace, because I won't. And may you be warm than filled. Be warmed means in the end, in that culture, be warm means May God warm you. May God fill you, may God give you clothes, and may God give you food. Because don't look to me. And that's a person right there. Now there's other translation is possible. It could be warmed or could be warm yourselves and feed yourselves. The Greek. I'm not going to talk about Greek anymore. Promise. But the Greek can be translated be warmed or warm yourself, and it can be translated be filled or fill yourself. And it means here I encounter somebody who's, is looking pretty thin. And I say, you know, you ought to eat more. Really? And, they're dressed in rags. And I say, you know, you should you should get a warm coat. It's kind of like sending a message to the people in Asheville, and you hear that, you know, everything's soaked by rain, and you say, you know, you should turn a fan on and, that'll help the moisture dissipate.

Well, they don't have any electricity, so it doesn't really make a lot of sense to say turn on a fan. And, you know, we could communicate with you so much better if you would get on your email. Well, they don't have any power and they're not going to have power for, in some cases, six weeks. I understand. And so they need help, but we need to help those people as, as best we can. And it's the call here to take care of somebody who's right in front of you. The person who has a dead faith says nice words, and the person who is living faith meets the need. That's right there. This is what Jesus says. Jesus says, not only do you help that person, but you help me. He says, I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison, I was in prison and you came to visit me. And the righteous will say, when? When did you see you hungry and feed you? When do we see you thirsty and give you something to drink? When? When were you in rags and we clothed you? And Jesus says when you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers, you did it to me. On the other hand, on the other hand, Jesus will also say in the last day to people who did nothing to indicate their faith was real. He said that he'll say to them, depart from me, you workers of iniquity, because I was hungry, and you did not feed me, I was thirsty. You did not give me anything to drink. I was dressed in rags, and you did not clothe me. Real faith proves itself in deeds.

I'm just going to pause to make sure I say something important. This church is good at that. I'm not trying to condemn you. I'm trying to urge you to keep it up. I know that you take care of each other when, when my wife had surgery, which most of you know, about eight weeks ago by now, we were getting so much food that we had to say, please stop. I'm still working. We're still digging in the bottom of our freezer. And it's not just food. It's good food. And I know you didn't just do it for us. You do it for each other. Keep up the good work. Keep living that way. Now, of course, the reasons why we. Well, we slip away from that. Aren't there. We get what's called compassion fatigue. That's what we keep hearing request after request after request. And some of them feel kind of manipulative. And you think, I don't want to be manipulated, so I'm not going to give to that, cause it's possible to say they're trying to manipulate me, but I'll still give to that cause, right? And then, of course, there's the problem of excessive belief in God's sovereignty - you know, if God wants these people to take care of him, he'll make sure it happens. I mean, God is sovereign. We could call that fatalism because, you know, the thing is, if God wants someone to get their food in their clothing, there's a really good chance he wants that person to get their food and clothing from you or from us, especially if we see them.

Another problem is, is what people call effective altruism. I'm not against effective altruism. It's a good idea. The idea is when you give, give wisely. So, you know, if you see a beggar by the by the street, by the side of the road, you know, we want to feel good and give to the beggar, but, you know, it's actually better to give to a homeless shelter where they won't just take the money you give them and do who knows what with it. They'll have a bed and maybe a counselor and maybe the gospel as well. And so it's better to give to a shelter or give to a food bank. Okay. So far so good. But the difficulty with effective altruism is, as some people say, and I've heard them say to me, I should not get involved in actually helping people, giving food to the hungry, or distributing clothing or blankets or something like, because I'm so good at making

money that I can make thousands of dollars during those two hours, and I should just make money, keep making money, give it away. And that makes a certain degree of sense. But it's also very good for us to show kindness to the people right in front of us, and to use our hands and use our feet so that we're we feel it. We connect with people. We have compassion for the people that God puts in front of us. What good is it my brother's?

Someone says he has faith but does not have works. If you only say the words be will warm, then well filled, you're failing the test of true religion. You're not taking care of the orphan and the widow in their distress. You're not using your tongue well, you're using your tongue idly. And how worldly it is to think that a nice word can take the place of actually doing something for the people in front of us. That's why I think everybody should take a turn in the nursery, and everybody should take a turn doing, you know, doing something practical. I don't know, I didn't get many head nods on that one. I got three, three, three for a thousand. That's less than one half of 1%. We should take a turn in the nursery. Thank you. We should wash dishes. We should just do what lies before us to do from time to time. It's good for us. Listen, the apostle John said it this way. He said God sent his son as a propitiate to sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, if God is so loved us, let us love one another. The gospel leads us in this direction. I'm not going to be satisfied with trite words. That's why we want to do things like help our friends in Asheville, pray for them and decide what we can do. You're an amazingly generous church. Keep it up. I've been here for about a year now. I remember because I was with some people this week and, and, I was actually in the house.

I thought I was coming here a year ago as a consultant, and about two thirds of the way through a particular visit, I said, these questions don't seem like questions for a consultant. They seem like another kind of question. And for a year I've been watching this church, and there's so many things that are so beautiful and so healthy in this church. The discipleship, the gospel proclamation. I say to your friends, keep it up, keep being generous, keep on going with these good deeds. Now there is a warning that comes in verses 18 and 19. We're ready for them now. The warning is, and this will be much more brief. Some will say you have faith and I have works. That is to say, faith and works are kind of like spiritual gifts.

And some people are good at administration and leadership and others are good at serve us and others are good at a different things. And some people are good at believing the right thing. They have good doctrine, and other people are good at doing the right things. And some do one and some do others. And James says, not really. That's not really how it works. How it works actually, is that if you have faith that proves itself in deeds, he says, show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. I'll prove or demonstrate that I have faith by actions. And then he gives us this painful illustration of the demons who believe God is one.

They have right doctrine, and they're terrified. Maybe that describes some of you, because it's possible to have all the right doctrine and be afraid. I meaning God. The solution is to believe, to really believe. One person said it this way if demons can have such faith, orthodox doctrine, and

remain in perdition, it's possible for men to hold such faith and go to perdition. Let me say it more positively. probably most of you who've been around a cook, haven't you? And they talked about their recipes and they found the extraordinary value of a pinch of cumin in this recipe. And, they're using just a tiny bit of lard. Lard is back, you see, and they talk about their recipes and the right amount of butter and olive oil, and they've put it in with the broccoli and steam it on a low, low flame. It's just caramelize a few onions and they just talk and talk and talk and you think, how about if you produce some food for me? I would love to have some of those caramelized onion, caramelized onions with broccoli al dente, flavored by extra virgin olive oil. Or I'll stop talking. Give me some of. Give me some of your peach pie, your blueberry pie. Your cherry pie. I want to see it. I want to see action in the Bible Belt. Unlike other places on the coasts, it's. It's probably easier to go astray here to think going to church from time to time and having right doctrine is enough. And it's not.

If you ask me the question, what is the most troubling thing for my faith? The most troubling thing for my faith is when I read again that a Christian leader has been living a deeply immoral life. I don't mean a few mistakes, I mean a deeply immoral life. A double life for two years or five years, or even ten years.

The strongest argument against Christianity, I think today is fallen leaders. And the strongest argument for Christianity is a beautiful life, a life that reflects the glory of the gospel that the Lord has made us beautiful by faith. He makes us beautiful by making us his children and changing us. That's what the Lord wants. It doesn't have to be accomplished through a plan.

If you have real faith, it works. some years ago, when I was pastoring a church much like this one, somebody kind of abruptly and maybe with a little bit of a critical spirit, said to me, so, Dan, what's your plan for the growth of our church? And I wasn't ready for it. And, I don't know, maybe I was in a slightly grumpy mood, I don't know. And I and I said, I have no plan. My plan is to preach the gospel and see what happens. That's my plan. And I went away thinking, I know I didn't feel great because they were kind of springing this question on me, but I actually think I gave the answer. I believe I actually believe that my plan makes sense. Programs are helpful, but what counts is the gospel taking root in our life. And then things happen. We express it and maybe organize it later on. That's living faith. Now you have a handout in front of you. It's in your bulletin. Actually. You don't have it in front of me, of you at the moment. You're making lovely eye contact with me. Would you make eye contact with the insert in your bulletin that has the questions on the back, not the one about the National Missions conference, but the other one at the bottom of the outline? There's something. We'll talk about it more next week, but I want to at least mention it this week. There are four ways this this comes from the mentor of R.C. Spruill, and it's been shared with millions of people over the years.

What's the best way to describe how one gets right with God? One answer, which is the answer of pagan religions. The bad answer is that works number one works produce salvation. That's paganism. It's Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam number two, faith plus works. You've got to faith. Have faith and do stuff in order to gain or obtain or earn salvation.



That is classical Roman Catholic theology and other theologies. If you're a Catholic, we're glad you're here. You probably don't actually endorse that, I'm guessing, but that is classic Catholic theology from centuries past. Number three looks pretty good. Does faith lead to salvation? The arrow means leads to are results in. So yes, that's close. That's almost right. But the best way to say it is faith leads to salvation. Plus works that necessarily follow. They're not antecedent. They don't earn salvation, but they do follow salvation. Because if we're alive, we breathe. If we're alive in Christ, we do good. That's what Jesus says. I'm going to give you one very practical thought before you go today. And that is you might want to try to make two lists, a list of hope on the one side, and a list of celebration on the other side. The list of celebration is to give thanks for the places in your life where, by God's grace, you have been showing more kindness. It's not boasting to say, by God's grace I've done better. I've done things that I want to keep on doing. I want to celebrate what I've been able to do. I don't want to keep doing it. Write a few things down. If you came with a friend, came with a spouse, share it with each other and then a second list would be a list of hope. A list of hope is those areas where you would like to hope, to pray, to show your faith a little bit more, where if you examine yourself today, you think you know, I've left some areas out of my life that aren't manifesting my faith. I want to show my faith there a list of hope. List of celebration, both of which reflect you've heard God's word. Your faith is real. It's alive. And just as a living baby breathes, the living child of God breathes out good works that redound to the glory of God and testify that God is at work in our lives.

Let's pray together.

Father, I thank you for the challenging words of the apostles. Paul telling us about justification by faith of James, declares to us that real faith works, and the dead faith is of no value, can even fool us into thinking that the right words are good enough. Lord, I pray that you would disabuse us of the idea that uttering correct words, or believing the right doctrines, or enough the demons are there, or moving our hearts, give us true repentance, true faith, desire to serve you. That shows up sometimes by discipline, sometimes spontaneously, in acts of kindness. And all this, Lord, we do ask that you would do your good work in our life, give us real living and abiding faith, and we pray in Jesus name.

Amen.