

Faith Apart From Works Is Useless
James 2:14-26
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Read James 2:14-26

"(Jesus) said, 'Blessed (rather) are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28)

Introduction

My parent went to Hawaii when I was in high school. They left my brothers and me home while they were celebrating their 20th anniversary. They come home with an "I Survived the Road to Hana" t-shirt and told us all about their vacation. They were excited to see their pictures, but this was back in the 80's when you had to go to a store to get them developed. And when they went to take the film to get it developed, they realized they had never loaded the camera with film. Nobody worries about that today, of course, with our phones acting as our main cameras, but you used to have to be really careful loading your cameras with film, and taking them out so they didn't get exposed. It was actually easy to take pictures with some cameras and not realize they were empty of film to record the shots. And my parents struggled with that. Kath and I still laugh as we quote my dad: "Annie, where's the film for the camera?" Of course, I've had computers crash and lost thousands of pictures because I didn't back them up, so my condescension rings a bit hollow.

There are a lot of things that are useless in this world if they're missing something inside them that makes them work: a car with no engine, a gun with no bullets, a smoke detector with no batteries, those old cameras with no film. They may look great on the outside, but they're essentially useless to function how they're supposed to. Today's passage says that the Christian faith is like that. A person can be deceived into thinking that they are a saved, thriving Christian believer but they are missing an essential element that makes their faith actually function: deeds or works.

This passage is at the heart of the message of the entire book of James. In the first chapter, James hammered the point home that Christians can't just be hearers of the word, they must be doers also; as well as identifying the ways that we practice worthwhile or worthless faith. Our text today is a logical next step in the discussion. And verse 14 sets out the big question: "¹⁴ *What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?*" In other words, can I say, "Hey, awesome, I'm a Christian. Jesus saved me. I believe all the right things... but I'm not going to worry about changing anything about myself. This new faith thing I have isn't going to motivate me to help people or try to do good things." As one of our recent songwriter theologians, Rich Mullins, put it: "faith without works, like a song you can't sing, it's about as useless as a screen door on a submarine."

In these thirteen verses, James gives two negative examples and two positive examples. Now, I appreciate this book and James as a writer, but that's supposed to be my job as a pastor - coming up with illustrations. James, you did all my work for me. I don't know whether to resent that or say thank you! So, in the first six verses, we have:

I. Two Negative Examples of Faith - The Callous and the Demonic (vv. 14-19)

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!

So first, the callous example: a fellow Christian believer lacks basic necessity for living, and you overlook their need with a hollow platitude. *“Go in peace, be warmed and filled”* – in other words, warm yourself and fill yourself, because I’m not going to help you. James gives what is probably the easiest case he can imagine. He’s not talking about feeding starving people in another country. He’s not talking about addressing poverty or homelessness for a whole community. He’s not even saying when someone comes up to you for loose change on the street and you’re not sure if they’re going to use it for drugs or not. No, he’s using a strategically uncomplicated example so that no one can counter with, “You never know if their need is legitimate or not” or “Do you expect us to feed the whole world?” James’ example is of a fellow person in church, a brother or sister in Christ, whose needs are legitimate that you’ve become aware of, but are unwilling to help.¹ If this is someone you know but you don’t actually lift a finger to help, James says there’s a chance that your faith is dead.

But this is just one illustration! This is not the main thing that you have to do or you’re not a Christian. That’s just one example that James gives here, there are plenty of others. And so if you’re sitting there feeling guilty, “Oh, I know that I haven’t helped out when the church asks for volunteers, and when they ask us to pack an Operation Christmas Child box we haven’t done that in a couple years, and we’ve never sponsored an African orphan with Compassion or World Vision... Maybe I don’t love Jesus at all?” There may be some appropriate guilt, some good self-examination that can happen; but don’t start doubting your salvation too much. Search your whole life for fruit and evidence of your caring for others and for the Spirit moving you to care for those who are not related to you.

The second negative example is of the demonic, verse 19 – *“Even the demons believe (that God exists)—and shudder!”* Are you pleased with your grasp of intellectual propositions of the doctrine of the Trinity? Congratulations! You are now on the same level of belief as the demons of hell. They know that there is a God, they have been shown that truth; there is not a single atheist demon. But rather than that knowledge changing them and motivating them to good things, it makes them shudder in horror. They know it’s true and they know they will be judged for opposing God. But they do it anyways, their understanding does not lead to right action, it leads to rebellion and wickedness. James’ point is that faith has to be more than mere head knowledge.

We’ve seen two negative examples of how faith doesn’t lead to good works, now we get

II. Two Positive Examples of Faith – A Patriarch and a Prostitute (vv. 20-26)

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.

Here we have a “righteous” person willing to take a life and an “unrighteous” person willing to save a life. First the upstanding one - Abraham, of course, was the father of the Jewish nation, the first

¹ Peter H. Davids, *James*. (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2011), p. 64.

one called by God to establish the line of those who would come to be known as the Israelites, the Jews. He and his wife were well past child-bearing years when God finally gave them a child who would start this line - his name was Isaac. They were overjoyed, and Abraham believed all these great promises that God had given him. But then God said, "take your son and sacrifice him to Me." And in total faith that was demonstrated by his actions, Abraham took Isaac up the mountain, tied him to an altar, and raised the knife, fully intending to kill this precious child, this promised child who was Abraham's great hope. God, of course, stopped him because He never meant for Abraham to kill Isaac. He was testing Abraham's faith and teaching him deep lessons of trust.

Hebrews 11:17-19 frames the incident this way: *"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."* Isn't that fascinating? Abraham's faith told him not only to obey, but that if he did end his son's life, that God would bring him back from death, since this was the child of promise. Abraham's faith in what God told him throughout his life worked itself out in acts of obedience.

Next is the example of the "unrighteous" person, Rahab. Rahab was as different from Abraham as you can get - he was the ultimate insider and hero of Israel, she was an outsider, a foreigner in a disreputable, unsavory profession. But they were alike in one way: their faith moved them to action. When God's people had left Egypt in the Exodus and were getting to the Promised Land, they sent spies into Jericho to scout it out. Joshua chapter 2 says they somehow ended up in a prostitutes' house - maybe the line of thinking was that no one would wonder why a prostitute had people in her house, it was less suspicious. And they were about to be caught by the king's men, but Rahab hid them because she had heard that the God of the Israelites was powerful, and she knew that He was going to help them take down the city. So, she saved the spies and made a deal that they would spare her and her family when they took over the city. Which is exactly what happened. And to our ears, perhaps, that sounds like just reading the writing on the wall and picking the right side in a war. But the Bible goes out of its way to commend her - she too is written up in Hebrews 11 (the chapter that is called the Hall of Faith): *"By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies"* (v. 31). Even though she was an outsider to the faith, she saw Yahweh's power, believed that He was the true, all-powerful God, and she acted on it.

So the big question that many people have as they read this passage and compare it with the rest of the New Testament is

III. Do James and Paul Contradict Each Other?

In between these four examples, we have James imagining a conversation in verse 18 with another church member: *"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."* Essentially, they're saying, "Hey, one of us can be a works guy, one of us can be a faith guy." The implication is that, "we're both fine just emphasizing one area." But James says, "No way, you can't separate faith and works like that. True faith is proved by works." He says it a whole bunch of different ways:

Verse 17 - *"faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead"*

Verse 20 - *"faith apart from works is useless"*

Verse 24 - *"a person is justified by works and not by faith alone"*

Verse 26 - *"faith apart from works is dead"*

James says that faith must have works to bear it out in about as many ways as you can say it.

So the question that Martin Luther and many others have struggled with is: Doesn't all of this contradict Paul's teachings on faith alone? Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9 - "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*" That seems pretty cut and dried – don't even talk about works, your faith is the only thing that saves you. But neither James nor Paul recognizes a bogus faith, an empty faith as sufficient to save. They are teaching from different angles, trying to correct different errors:

-James is teaching about the Christian life, what we call sanctification, correcting the people who believe in easy, cheap grace- "hey, I'm saved by grace and faith, I don't have to do anything." James challenges them: "you really need to examine that faith because I don't think it's real faith at all. You're not really saved if you're not moved by the Holy Spirit inside of you to do things differently. It's possible that you're still dead in your sins because you have not come spiritually alive."

-Paul, on the other hand, is correcting the people who say that salvation and heaven and right standing with God has to be earned by following the law and doing enough good things. And so he absolutely insists that there is nothing you can do to earn or deserve your salvation; Jesus has done it all. But, of course, Paul agrees with James, because he goes on in Ephesians 2 (verse 10) to say, "*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*"

And it's not just Paul and James. Jesus, Peter, John, and all the writers of Scripture agree as well. Jesus said in Matthew 7:21, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*" 1 John 2:3, 4a, 6 - "*And by this we know that we have come to know Him (Jesus), if we keep His commandments. Whoever says, 'I know Him' but does not keep His commandments is a liar... whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked.*"

A very theological way to put all this is: "Can justification be divorced from growth in sanctification?" Can my being saved and justified before God the Father be accomplished if I never actually grow and mature in the Christian life?" And the answer is no. When God gives you salvation, He gives you the whole package, from beginning to end. They are interconnected, mutually beneficial: Faith informs and motivates action; action matures faith. Faith in Jesus Christ alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone.²

Conclusion

Listen, this is always going to be a bit of a balancing act, a tug of war. Some churches are proud of their doctrine and making sure their people believe all the right thing but ignore the suffering around them, while other churches are proud of their food pantry and their eighteen ministries to the poor but you never hear the gospel on Sunday mornings. One group of Christians is going to be saying, "You people just exist in your heads and think that believing the right things saves you, but you never tell people to work for the Lord in obedience." And the other group responds with, "You can't emphasize a bunch of things to do; you're trying to grow a bunch of Pharisees! We're saved by grace alone." But we should embrace the tension, teach both and live both.

The Westminster Confession Of Faith 16.2 (Authentic Modern Version) is very helpful here. (You can write down the citation to look up later, or pull up my manuscript on the website later.)

"These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, (1) are the fruit and evidence of a true and living faith. By them believers (2) show their thankfulness, (3) strengthen their

² David Guzik, *James and 1 & 2 Peter* (Ventura, CA: Enduring Word, 2009), p. 28.

assurance of salvation, (4) edify their brothers in the Lord, and (5) become ornaments of all those who profess the gospel. Good works in believers (6) silence the criticism of the enemies of the gospel. They also glorify God by (7) showing that believers are the workmanship and creation of Jesus Christ, because their aim is that holiness of living which leads to eternal life.”

Listen, the path to Jesus has always been the same, it will not change: putting your faith in Him as your Savior and Lord. He is both the God who created all things with the Father and the Spirit, and the One who became a man when He came to earth to live a perfect life and die a sacrificial death. Jesus’ sinless life and an atoning death was the method that God used to take away our sins. If you accept by faith those things, believing them in your heart, then Romans 10:9-10 says that you will be saved. We want to be very clear that salvation is through Jesus alone. If you add anything, you’ve changed the Gospel. It’s “Jesus + Nothing = Salvation.”

Then from your salvation comes the new life, the life where the Holy Spirit changes your desires and affections, and makes you want to embrace a life that pleases God and helps other people. As the Confession said, we will do good works, they will be very natural fruit of this redeemed life, of this heart that has been awakened. An apple tree produces apples, a mango tree produces mangos, they just can’t help it. A saved life produces godly actions. There’s still a battle waged with the old nature, we’re never perfectly obedient and we’ll always be fighting selfishness and indifference. But our new nature has changed us, the Spirit helps us, and our love for God compels us.

Imagine falling in love with the person you’re going to marry and then announcing to them: “I love you so much that I’ll marry you but don’t expect anything after that. I’ll be doing my own thing or sitting on the couch doing nothing. Hope you’re OK with that.” I’ve got news for you: you’re probably not getting married. You don’t even need to come to my marriage class that I’m starting in two weeks to figure that out. Because that’s not true love. True love can’t wait to express itself, to act on it. So it is with our relationship with God.

Loving our neighbors, participating in programs that feed the hungry, volunteering to help at church, bringing a meal for a family with a new baby, sitting with the lonely kid at school, going on a mission trip to help an orphanage, giving up a Saturday to help a local church fix their roof, tutoring failing students, babysitting for the overwhelmed parents, and a thousand other things show that we are becoming more Christlike because we belong to Jesus. We strengthen our own faith, we edify our fellow believers, we silence the criticism of unbelievers, and we glorify God.

→ Communion

Benediction

Colossians 2:13-14 - *“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”*