

Action

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[0 : 00] Well, what is faith? Sometimes you hear people say, I wish I had your faith, or even just have enough faith and then everything will be okay.

So what does it mean to have faith? Because everybody has faith of one kind or another. Even atheists have faith. That is, everybody's got some kind of belief or basis by which they go and live their lives that affects how they think and what they do. So what does having faith look like? Well, what James does here is he addresses people who believe in Jesus Christ, Christians, and shows through his words that if you profess to have faith, if you claim to have faith, then your faith ought to be seen in the way that you live your life, in the things that you do.

So he's saying that real faith, saving faith, genuine faith will be seen. In other words, we might claim to have real saving faith, but if it can be seen in our lives, then James is challenging us to say, well, is the faith really there at all? Is it genuine saving faith?

And that is the message of this section in James chapter 2, verse 14 to 26. James is challenging his readers, including us, those who would claim to have faith in God, because he's saying your faith will be seen by what you do.

There will be vital signs that will be evident to people that you have a faith in God. And it will be saving faith, or if there is no sign that you have faith, saving faith, then your faith can be dead faith.

[1 : 47] It's not there at all. And so dead faith can't save you, it's dead. And he makes this point three times. So just look down, verse 17, he says, Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Verse 20, faith without deeds is useless. Verse 26, faith without deeds is dead. So he's saying that faith that isn't active faith is dead faith.

And yet, saving faith, real faith, will be active, will be seen in all kinds of works. So to drive this point home, James essentially gives us an explanation of dead faith, and then he gives us an example of saving faith, an explanation of dead faith, and an example of saving faith.

And by doing this, he wants to challenge you and me as to what our faith is like. Because if we don't have faith that works, if we don't have faith that can be seen in action, our faith is useless, it's dead.

And so there are three points this afternoon. First of all, the questioning of faith, verse 14. Secondly, the explanation of dead faith, verse 15 to 19. And then thirdly, the example of saving faith, verse 20 to 25.

[3 : 07] So let's look first of all at the questioning of faith. He says in verse 14, What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?

Can such faith save them? So James approaches the issue with two rhetorical questions. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?

The answer is, it's no good. The second question, can such faith save them? The answer is, no. Faith without deeds is no good.

It cannot save you. So James imagines a person who claims to have faith. He's not saying this person has faith, but only they say they have faith. But James is saying, well, what is the evidence to back up that claim to have faith?

Well, he says they don't actually have the faith they think they do, so their faith can't save them. It's not real, genuine saving faith. It's dead faith. In other words, you can't claim to have faith in Jesus if there's no evidence to show it in how you live your life.

[4 : 19] And this is what sets the alarm bells ringing for James, because some people were clearly saying they had faith, but there was no proof of this faith in their day-to-day lives.

There was nothing they did, no good deeds to back up their claim to be a Christian believer. That's why James is making it so clear that faith without deeds cannot save.

But real faith, saving faith, is active faith. It's practical. It's not really something in the head. It is in the hands and the feet as well. Because it's going to be obvious in a multitude of different ways and different actions by how a person lives out their life as to whether or not they have saving faith.

And so this is the challenge James gives his readers, including us, because if our faith is an active faith, then it must be dead faith.

But let's just be clear at this start, the beginning, what James is not saying. James is not saying that we are saved by our works. He's not saying we're saved by the things we do.

[5 : 28] Not at all, because we're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. And James isn't saying that we've got to somehow add works onto our faith to make saving faith.

So it's like a math sum. Faith plus works equals saving faith. He's not saying that either. No, the point is that real saving faith will be characterized by works.

It will be seen in what you do. And if it isn't, then it isn't real saving faith. I could claim to be a professional footballer. I go to professional football matches.

I train with a professional football team. But if you watch my life closely, it'll be obvious that I am in no way a professional footballer.

If you looked at me in the training ground, you'd see that was true. It'll be obvious that I am no way a footballer. There's no evidence to back up the claim.

[6 : 28] And so what James is doing here is he's telling us there's dead faith and there's saving faith. And you'll be able to see it in how a person lives. So next he moves on to show us what each looks like, what dead faith looks like, and what saving faith looks like.

So the second point after the questioning of faith is he gives us an explanation of dead faith in verse 15 to 19. He describes exactly what dead faith is like.

And there are two aspects to it. Then the first aspect, verse 15 to 17, is that it's all talk but no action. See what he says. Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.

If one of you says to them, go in peace, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

This is a really practical down-to-earth illustration. The genuine nature of our faith will be seen in how we respond to other people. So James describes a person who's badly clothed, somebody who doesn't have enough food.

[7 : 36] Sounds like a one-off emergency situation. But he's talking about a needy person who is part of the church family because he calls this person a brother or a sister.

So you'd think that a brother or a sister within the church family would get help if they were in need, right? Well, wrong. James says, no, it's not happening. Instead of getting the practical help they need, instead, what they get is a bunch of pious platitudes.

Go in peace, keep warm and well fed. And it does sound kind of spiritual, doesn't it? And yet it's useless. What good are kind wishes when kind action is what is required?

I guess the equivalent is probably the often used Christian comment. That's often said, I'll pray for you. I'll pray for you. It's a good thing to throw into a conversation when you can't think of anything else to say.

Or even when you actually want to avoid doing something. I'll pray for you. Oh, you need help? I'll pray for you. Oh, you need food as well? I'll go and pray that you would get some food from somebody.

[8 : 45] And you need money too? Let me go and pray about that. And hopefully the Lord will provide for you. And of course, we're not suggesting that prayer isn't important. But if we're all talk, but no action, our faith is dead, isn't it?

If all we've got are words to say, but no heart to feel, or hands to give help, or time to give, or resources to share, then what use is our faith?

Because we can't claim to have faith in Jesus, James is saying to us. We can't claim to have faith in Jesus if we fail to love a brother or sister in Christ.

People often say that they want Christian teaching to be practical. What James tells us here is so practical, isn't it? So it's not that God's word isn't practical.

It's that God's word is so practical, so challenging, that we don't do it. Now remember, James isn't contrasting faith with works.

[9 : 49] He's contrasting dead faith with saving faith. Because dead faith will always talk a good game, but it will never deliver. It won't get off its seat in the stand, go down onto the pitch, and get stuck into the game.

And so faith that does nothing isn't real saving faith. And Jesus also talked about the need to take action when he spoke about separating the sheep from the goats.

Listen to these words from Jesus in Matthew 25. He says, For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink.

I was a stranger, and you invited me in. I needed clothes, and you clothed me. I was ill, and you looked after me. I was in prison, and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?

When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you ill, or in prison and go to visit you? The king will reply, Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

[11 : 03] What's Jesus saying? Jesus wasn't saying that you will be saved if you hand out food and water and clothes. But he was saying that a sure sign that you are saved is that you will love Jesus, and you will do the kind of things that will help people who belong to Jesus.

You'll be practical in the expression and the outworking of your faith. And so James is saying if our faith is not accompanied by action, it isn't just poor faith or bad faith or inadequate faith or weak faith.

He's saying it's dead faith. Faith that works, goes beyond action, sorry, goes beyond words to produce action. So dead faith is actually all talk, but no action.

And then there's another thing here in verse 18 and 19. Dead faith has got right belief, but no action. Right belief, but no action. See what he says. But someone will say, You have faith, I have deeds.

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. So James is highlighting the objections to what he's saying. So there's this imaginary objector who is arguing that faith and works are two different things.

[12 : 26] And so the suggestion here is that some people have faith, other people have deeds. As if it's a choice or a preference or maybe even a spiritual gifting.

And you get this kind of thing today. Like when some people are more drawn to Christian doctrine or theology, more drawn to knowing things, whereas other people are more drawn to Christian living or Christian practice or doing things.

And as if we can choose which our preference is, knowing or doing. And so the doctrine person has got it all sorted theologically in their head. They've got the knowledge.

They can spot a heretic a mile off coming down the street. No problems with theology. And there's the practical person who doesn't worry too much about what they should believe.

They don't want to talk theology. They just want to get on and do it. And yet James is saying these can't be separated. He says, Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

[13 : 33] He's saying you can't have faith without deeds because your faith is seen by the deeds that you do. And so he presses us home with a note of sarcasm here.

Verse 19 says, You believe that there is one God, good. Even the demons believe that and shudder. Now remember, James's audience is mostly Jewish Christians, where every believer would say, I believe in one God.

This came from the Shema in Deuteronomy chapter 6, which says, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And it was a fundamental declaration of faith in God.

James says, But simply believing this can't save you. Why? He says, Because even the demons believe it.

And so the demons are spot on in their theology. They believe there is one God. James says that's why they shudder with fear. So he's saying, Demons have faith, which means you can have the right belief and yet be no better off than the demons in hell.

[14 : 47] You can claim to have faith. You can say the right words. You can even believe the right things. But it is no good if your faith isn't an act of faith.

If your faith can't be seen by your deeds, it's no use. In our house, we used to have a cupboard that was called the fixing cupboard. And it was where all the broken toys would end up going.

To be repaired. And it was dad's job to repair the broken toys. I had a rule. If a child asked for the toy after I'd been in the repair cupboard again, I'd fix it.

If they never asked, then it never got fixed. It just stayed there. And then went in the bin. But anyway, the fixing cupboard. Before a toy went into the fixing cupboard, one of the children would come and say, It's not working.

And so it would either need new batteries or it would need glued in order for it to function. And of course, it still looked like the toy, but it didn't really work as the toy because it was broken.

[15 : 47] So it was useless. And so can you hear what James is saying here? He's saying there are people who claim to have faith, but they don't work. They're like a broken toy that doesn't do anything and that is essentially useless.

James tells us that such faith is dead faith. And so there can be no assurance of salvation if there are no deeds that prove real saving faith.

And that's why James goes on to give two examples of what saving faith is like. He's given an explanation of dead faith. Now he wants positively to give examples of saving faith.

And that's our third point. So first, the questioning of faith. Second, the explanation of dead faith. And then third, the example of saving faith. Verse 20, he says, you foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

He's saying, I'll show you that faith without deeds is useless. Because real faith, saving faith, will be seen by what it does.

[16:53] And so he gives two examples. And the first example is Abraham. Verse 21 to 24. But before we think about Abraham, it's probably worth pausing because what James says here seems really strange.

Because he insists that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Says this in verse 24. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

Now, it sounds like James here is contradicting what the rest of the New Testament teaches us about faith. Because Paul, the apostle, seems to teach the opposite.

Paul says this in Romans chapter 3. He says, for we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. And here, James is saying, verse 24, a person is considered righteous or justified by what they do and not by faith alone.

So, do Paul and James contradict each other? Well, the short answer is no because they're both actually telling us what true saving faith is like.

[18:07] It's just that they're expressing it differently because they're writing to different audiences and they're addressing different problems. Paul's focus is on how a person is justified before God because he was writing to people who thought they could be justified by their good works, which they couldn't be.

That's why Paul emphasizes faith alone. But Paul also says that real faith will be accompanied by works. And James' focus is slightly different.

It's not on how a person is justified before God, but on how we can see that they are justified. What's the evidence that they claim that they believe in God and have faith in God?

What's the evidence that that claim is true? Well, there should be evidence of their faith in the way they live, James is saying, because if it isn't there, then there's a question as to whether they have saving faith at all.

And that's the issue James is dealing with. An old hymn writer, Augustus Toplady, said this, Grace can't be severed from its fruits. If God gives you St. Paul's faith, you will soon have St. James' works.

[19:20] And so James wants to show the difference between dead faith and real saving faith. Because faith is the only way we are justified before God, but when we are justified by faith alone, our faith will never be alone.

Our faith will be seen in what we do. It will be accompanied by action. And that's why James chooses Abraham as a prime example of this. What did Abraham do?

Well, we get a synopsis of the story of Abraham here in verse 21 to 24. So he says, verse 21, was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

So Isaac was the son God had promised to Abraham, but his faith in God was seen in his obedience in the offering of Isaac.

So verse 22 says, you see that his faith and his actions were working together and his faith was made complete by what he did. So Abraham's faith showed itself, revealed itself, was completed by what Abraham did in offering Isaac.

[20 : 33] But James doesn't say that it was this work that justified Abraham. That's not why God considered him righteous. And that's why James quotes from Genesis chapter 15, verse 23.

And the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. And he was called God's friend. So Abraham was justified on the basis of his faith alone.

That's Genesis chapter 15. But then James points out that his faith wasn't alone. His faith was expressed by what he did. And so the faith that was established in Genesis 15 is then displayed by action in Genesis chapter 22 with the offering of Isaac.

So James is saying faith was first, but it was seen in his works. That's why James can say what he does in verse 24 because nobody is justified before God by a faith that does nothing.

Real, saving faith will always be demonstrated by action. The evidence that our faith is the real deal will be seen by what we do.

[21 : 52] So Abraham's his first example and then he goes on to Rahab verse 25. In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?

So as well as Father Abraham, the ultimate ancestor of Israel, James chooses Rahab, an obscure Gentile prostitute.

And she is about as different from Abraham as you could possibly get. But the point James is making is the same. The point is saving faith expresses itself in action, in the action of Abraham in offering Isaac and in the action of Rahab in hiding the spies.

Because Rahab, if you don't know the story from Joshua, Rahab risked her life. In fact, she betrayed her people by protecting some Israelite spies. Why did she protect them?

Well, because she had heard of how the Lord had done great and mighty deeds for his people. And so she had a trust in God that led her to hide the spies who were God's people and help them escape.

[23 : 04] So she put her life in danger because of her faith. Imagine if Rahab had said, well, yeah, all this stuff about God is true. I believe it, but I'm just afraid I can't help you guys out.

Go. I wish you well. Go in peace. Hope all works out for you down the line. If she'd said that, her faith would be dead. It would be useless. And so whether it's patriarch like Abraham, prostitute like Rahab, real saving faith was seen by what they did.

And so the question is, well, what about us? If we claim to have faith in God, is that faith seen in what we do, in our actions?

Because we can gather together in church to learn the content of our faith. We can gather together in community groups to discuss our faith. We can be orthodox, confessional, reformed, Presbyterians when it comes to doctrine.

We can know the Westminster confession of faith. We can rattle off the shorter catechism, questions and answers. But what difference does it make to our lives?

[24 : 14] How does it lead to concrete actions on a day-by-day basis? Well, we need to apply the example of Abraham because he lived out what he believed through his willingness to obey God at great personal cost.

And so we need to ask, well, what sacrifices am I prepared to make in my life as I live out my faith? What am I going to do?

Not just what am I thinking about, but what will I practically, physically do? We should also apply the example of Rahab. She lived out her faith by risking her life to serve God's people.

And so we've got to ask ourselves, well, am I prepared to take risks to support and to advance God's work? What am I going to do?

Not just in how I think about it or even pray about it, but practically, what will I do? Because if our faith is real, saving faith, then clearly we will sacrifice where we can and we will support when we can.

[25 : 23] Our faith will be active. So for example, real, saving faith, well, what does it look like? What does it do? Well, it cares for children in creche, doesn't it? It teaches children and explorers.

It makes coffee, bakes cakes, it cooks meals, stacks chairs, it opens doors a couple of hours before anyone else turns up. It stands outside in the cold and the rain and the snow to welcome people in.

It sets up audiovisual equipment, it takes it down again, it clears up rubbish, it empties nappy bins, it serves where there's need, it offers hospitality, it visits people, it talks about Jesus, it sends a text or it sends an email or it makes a phone call to somebody in need.

It knocks on a neighbour's door. Real, saving faith also will go to the other side of the world to do something for the sake of Jesus. So can you see, real, saving faith rolls up its sleeves, doesn't it?

It risks, it gives, it prays, it works, it sweats. And isn't that what saving faith in the Lord Jesus looks like?

[26 : 37] And you know it when you've seen it, don't you? If you don't see it, then how can you be sure that real saving faith is there? James would say it isn't.

So would Martin Luther. Listen to what he says. He says, when it comes to faith, what a living, creative, active, powerful thing it is. It cannot do other than good at all times.

It never waits to ask whether there is some good work to do. Rather, before the question is raised, it has done the deed and keeps on doing it. A man not active in this way is a man without faith.

And so as we close, we can't really miss James' point, can we? Faith without works is dead. Verse 26, as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

He concludes with an illustration of a dead body. I guess it's just to kill off his argument. So a body without the spirit or without life is dead.

[27 : 48] Now as part of my ministry training, they sent our class to the mortuary in Edinburgh. And it was a deliberate tactic to really help us see what a corpse looked like, dead body.

And the dead body was a middle-aged man. He had his hair combed, lying on the slab. He had his suit on with his tie close to his neck, his hair, immaculate, makeup on his face just to make him look normal instead of white or blue.

And yet the fact is he was dead. He wasn't moving. He wasn't going anywhere. He wasn't doing anything. James is saying, just as a body without a spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

So somebody can be living and breathing. They can have a pulse. They can be physically and bodily present in church for many years. They can claim to have faith.

But James is saying if their faith isn't active, then they're spiritually dead. They're like a dead man or woman walking. And so saving faith comes to us when we trust in Jesus Christ and his death on our behalf.

[29 : 06] We're saved not through any works that we do. We're saved through the work that Jesus Christ has done. Paul says in Romans, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

So while we were under God's condemnation, deserving hell, unable to do anything, Jesus took action on our behalf. Jesus did something.

The greatest thing anyone has ever done for us is that Jesus gave up his life by dying on a cross. Jesus did not come down from heaven to offer mere words and good wishes.

No. Jesus worked on our behalf by dying on a cross in our place. And so we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

And when we are saved, our faith will never be alone. It will be accompanied by good works. Not in order to be saved, but out of gratitude because we are saved.

[30 : 13] Real saving faith is faith that works. And it will always find a way of working. It will never stop working. And you will see real saving faith by what it does.

it's really alive. It's active. It's practical. It works. It works. It works. It works. It works.