

“FAITH AND WORKS” // James 2:14-26 //
Practical Faith

When I was in middle school my dad bought a boat. It was a 17' SeaRay that was supposed to be a pleasure boat. We put fish finders on it, and rod holders, and a bait well in it.

But before you can put a boat in the water you have to name it. And I'll never forget when my Dad bought these vinyl stickers and named his boat “Visitation.”

I thought that was a weird name so I asked, “Why Visitation?”

“Well, I'm a pastor. So now when I go fishing and someone calls the church office the secretary can say the pastor is out on “Visitation.”

Now, my dad wasn't actually out on visitation. It was just a name on the boat. It was a funny joke, but he understood it was just a name on the boat. Nothing about that name meant that he was actually visiting people.

And I believe we live in a time when many people believe they are following Jesus. They say, “I have faith.” But, in reality it's just a word they've stuck on their life. Their faith is more talk than action. But, how can we know someone has true faith? How can you know that you possess true faith?

In James 2 we are given 3 descriptions of faith. The first two tell us what faith is not. And the final description tells us what true faith is.

Let's begin in verse 14. When James describes true faith to us the first thing he teaches us is that...

1. TRUE FAITH GOES BEYOND EMPTY WORDS (2:14-17)

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.

Now, if you have been with us for most of the year those verses should strike you. If you've read the rest of the New Testament there should be bells and whistles going off in your head.

Why? Because there is another prominent author in the New Testament. His name is Paul. And in his letter to the Ephesians here's what Paul wrote:

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 James says, “**Faith without works is dead.**” Paul says, “**We are saved by grace through faith and this is not a result of works.**” So, are they contradicting one another?

No. One of the most important practices you can learn, church, is when you find an apparent contradiction in Scripture is to cross reference the Bible with itself. Learn to compare Scripture with Scripture.

It sounds like James is saying Paul got it wrong. Paul preached just faith. It sounds like James is saying its faith plus some works.

But if you were with us for the Galatians series you'll remember a time when James and Paul got together and talked about this very issue:

Galatians 2:7-9-- 7 On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter

had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised 8 (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), 9 and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars (of the church in Jerusalem), perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians he tells us specifically that he and James were good friends. They had meals together. But even beyond that—they were on the same page theologically. Paul got with James. They both shared their faith and doctrine with one another, and James signed off on Paul's ministry.

So there was no fight between them. So why do James and Paul sound so different? Why does it seem that they contradict one another?

Paul and James wrote to two entirely different audiences and against two different, yet common misunderstandings of Christian conversion:

In Galatians, Paul was writing to converted Gentiles. These are people who never followed the law of Moses. As these Gentiles were converted some Jewish Christians began teaching them to observe Moses' law as well. And Paul wrote against a false view of conversion that said, **“You cannot be converted unless you obey God's commands. So, salvation is completely by faith. You don't obey in order to be accepted by God.”**

James wrote to a different audience. He addressed a different problem. Remember back in 1:1 who James is writing to? 12 tribes scattered abroad. **He is writing to converted Jews.** They are people who once followed the law of Moses— and the strict religious observance of the Pharisees. Now they have heard the gospel— that Christ has obeyed the law in their place, and suffered the penalty for their disobedience on the cross.

But, instead of trusting Christ **and obeying God's law** out of love for him— they've gone to the other extreme. **There were some in the church that James wrote to who said— as long as we have faith we don't have to do anything else.**

So, Paul wrote against a false view of conversion that said, “You cannot be converted **unless you obey God's commands.**

James wrote against a false view of conversion that said, “You can be converted **without following Jesus.”**

Some people live as if God's approval of them will only come through rigorous obedience to God's commands. **This person needs to read Paul.**

Some people live as if God's grace gives them permission to ignore his commands. **This person needs to read James.**

Paul is fighting people who want salvation to be by works. **James is fighting people who want a salvation that doesn't demand anything.**

Let me give you an important analogy. I hope it's a helpful analogy. You're in a doctor's office. The doctor's got two rooms where she meets with patients. And you're, out in the waiting room and it's going to be your turn. And you hear the doctor walk into one room and say, “You need to start jogging. You need to get up and start running. You need to be active.” Doctor walks into the other room, “You need to sit down. You need to stop running. You shouldn't be active.” Contradiction? No, different patients. All right, this guy's out of shape, and this guy broke his leg. So, this guy needs to run, and this guy needs to sit down. It's not a contradiction when you consider the patient. Then the diagnosis makes sense.

Here James is speaking to someone who claims to have faith in Jesus—**but there is zero evidence in their life.** They say they have faith, but they really don't. They have dead faith. **And,**

dead faith is a profession of faith that you do not practice because you do not possess.

This is like a guy who says, “I love my wife.” Do you talk to her? “No.” Do you serve her? “No.” Do you live with her? “No.” You don’t love her. “Yes, I do, don’t judge my heart.” **Well, the problem is your heart has overflowed into your life, and we see it.**

So someone says, “I love Jesus.” Do you talk to him? No. Do you gather with his church for worship? No. Do you tell others about him? No. Ok. You don’t love him.

I wonder if that might be you today? Do you really follow Jesus, or do you just claim to follow him? Has knowing him and loving him and trusting him changed you?

You may be someone who grew up in a dead faith kind of church. Sure, everyone claimed to know Jesus. They said all the right things. But was there a vibrancy to their faith? Had it transformed their actions? Did it make them radically loving and gracious people? Did they have a concern for the needs of those around them? You may have written off Jesus years ago because you knew someone who claimed to have faith—but they really didn’t.

True faith goes beyond empty words.

2. TRUE FAITH GOES BEYOND EMPTY KNOWLEDGE (2:18-9)

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!

James is great at anticipating the next argument. Someone is going to raise their hand and say—Ok, but isn’t faith just a

mental thing? Aren’t we just called to believe in the truth? Isn’t having right doctrine the core of the issue?

Well sure, we are to believe the truth. Right doctrine is essential. You’re listening to a theology nerd talk right now. I love doctrine. I want you to love doctrine. And there are some doctrines that are essential to true faith. You can’t have true faith without these propositional truths:

- There is one God who has eternally existed in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Propositional truth.
- God created all things, and all his creation was very good. Propositional truth.
- God created us, male and female, in his own image, to glorify him. Propositional truth.
- Sin is any action, thought, or attitude that is opposed to God and his kingdom. Propositional Truth
- God is righteously angry with our sins and will punish them both in this life, and in the life to come. Propositional truth
- Jesus Christ was truly man and truly God who came as our redeemer. Propositional truth.

We hold certain propositional truths that are essential—listen they are **necessary** for salvation. **But mental ascent to them isn’t sufficient for salvation!**

True faith is receiving (that is the propositional side) and resting (this is volitional) on Christ alone for salvation as he is offered to us in the gospel!

Propositional truths are necessary for your salvation— but until

you have a faith that moves beyond propositions and into your will-- that moves your volition-- such that you rest on him you cannot be saved.

And here's James' argument: the demons have better doctrine than anyone.

19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe

He quotes a doctrine: You believe that God is one—you're monotheistic. Great. The demons know that too—but they aren't redeemed. Did you know that demons have good doctrine?

Matthew 8:29 29 And behold, they cried out, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God?"

Mark 1:23-24 23 And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, 24 "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God."

Mark 5:7 7 And crying out with a loud voice, he said, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me."

Demons recognize Jesus. They know he is lord. In fact—I want you to know this—the devil has enough right doctrine to join this church.

Suppose Satan showed up at our next New Members' Seminar. And I begin to ask him some questions:

"Mr. Diablo, may I ask you a question? Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?" "Oh, yes, I do." "Do you believe He was born of a virgin?" "Oh, yes, I believe that very much. Yes, I believe in the virgin birth." "Well, do you believe He died on the cross?" "Oh, yes, certainly. I, I do believe He died on the cross.

Yes, sir, I believe that with all of my heart." "Well, do you believe He was raised from the dead?" "Yes, I believe that. I believe He walked out of the tomb." "Mr. Diablo, that's, that's very wonderful. Mr. Diablo, if you, if you come into Lake Wylie Baptist Church will you be a good member? Will you be willing to work in the church?" "Oh, yes, I'd be very happy. As a matter of fact, I'll serve as a deacon if you'll elect me."

"Well, Mr. Diablo I'm glad to hear your doctrinal statement. Have you bowed your knee to Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior and King of your life?" Absolutely not.

Friends—the demons know that God is one. They know the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They believe in the virgin birth. They believe in the sinless life of Christ. They believe in the empty tomb. I even think they agree with us Baptists on immersion.

Listen to me—they have all the right doctrine, but when they encounter the Son of God they don't bow in worship, they shudder in fear.

Word: "tremble" is literally bristle like a frightened cat. All of the right doctrine in the world doesn't make them right with God.

Here's what this tells you: You can know right doctrine. You can attend join a Bible teaching church. You can be baptized in the church, you can grow up in the church, you can sit in the church every week, you can have your wedding in the church, you can have your funeral in the church, close your eyes, and wake up in hell. Because true faith goes beyond empty knowledge.

Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to McDonald's makes you a hamburger.

Does the knowledge you have create worship within you? Or do you know Jesus simply in an academic sense?

Two challenges:

- True faith goes beyond empty words.
- True faith goes beyond empty knowledge.

Having shown us what faith is not, James now shows us what true faith is:

3. TRUE FAITH TRANSFORMS OUR HEARTS AND OUR ACTIONS (2:20-26)

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.

Now, when, when did this happen? When did Abraham believe God and it was counted unto him as righteousness. Did that happen when he offered Isaac upon the altar? **No**. It happened thirty years before that. In Genesis, chapter 15, and verse 6, the Bible says over in the Book of Genesis, “And he believed God, and it counted unto him as righteousness.” God speaks to him and tells him His plans and of His love and His sovereign grace, and Abraham says, “God, I believe You.” At that moment God says, “All right. You’re justified. It’s counted unto you as righteousness.”

Then, thirty years later, in Genesis 22, he offers up Isaac. Now, what’s he saying? All, all James is saying is this: That when Abraham offered up Isaac, he showed that what happened back there in Genesis 15 was real. It didn’t make it real. No. The sacrifice of Isaac was not the **means** of his salvation; it was the **mark** of his salvation.

Having faith in God means trusting him with everything. And friends, when Abraham was forced to trust God with everything—his faith proved to be real.

Abraham was justified by faith before God, but he was justified by works before men. Genesis 22 was when the whole world could see that Abraham had a living faith. He put his son on the altar.

Now look back at verse 24:

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?

Rahab was exact opposite of Abraham

- Man and Woman
- Jew and Gentile
- Man of Faith and Prostitute
- Abraham, top of the social order, Rahab, at the bottom.

And yet, just like Abraham, Rahab was put in a position where she had two choices: trust God with everything, or trust herself. She trusted God—and her actions bore out the truth of her faith.

The grace of God was the only thing enabling the obedience of Abraham and Rahab. Only the grace of God can give you the power in your human weakness to ascend the mountain with Abraham or to trust God with your families’ lives like Rahab.

When God rescues you in his grace he always calls you out into radical obedience to him. It happened with Abraham. It happened with Rahab. And it’s happening with you. God has places of obedience he wants to take you that you never even see coming:

Lewis—Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so

you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

When God comes into your life he says, "I'm not here to give you empty words. I'm not here to help you learn empty doctrine. I am here to inhabit and rule your life."

Non-Christian, religious person, moral person, you're not a good person—you're a sinful person. There's nothing you can do to fix yourself and please God. You need to stop whatever you are doing and start trusting in what Jesus has done.

Christian, God has prepared good works for you to do. There are people for you to love. There are people for you to talk to about Jesus. There are things for you to learn. There are ways for you to grow. There are desires that need to be changed. There are mindsets that have yet to be altered. There is generosity for you to share. There's a kingdom for you to serve. There is a mission for you to be a part of. And Jesus invites you to join him in this wonderful, glorious, good works of the gospel, moving through the nations of the earth, starting in the lives of his people.

True faith transforms our hearts and our actions. Let's pray.