

James 2:14–26

Faith That Works

The Summit Church, James

MPT: James contrasts false faith and true faith—true faith is validated by works.

MPS: We are to examine ourselves to see whether we possess true, saving faith...which is inevitably shown in our works.

JAMES 2

As promised, we are back in the book of James and you are back with me again! You know I'm not used to preaching back-to-back, and it's kinda unfair compared to Pastors J.D. or Bryan...

- Pastor J.D. is the smartest person I know
- Bryan sneezes and a sermon comes out

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and 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? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

*Father, as we turn to the Bible, what we **know** not, **teach** us...what we **have** not, **give** us...what we **are** not, **make** us. For your Son's sake. Amen.*

INTRODUCTION

Most Christians are _____. How would you complete that sentence? What James has been teaching us is that we *should* be able to fill that in with:

- ...steadfast
- ...quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger
- ...doers of the word
- ...impartial and non-judgmental
- ...involved with caring for the least of these

- ...full of mercy

However, what studies have shown is that most people would complete that sentence by saying **most Christians are hypocrites.**

- In fact, a study by the Barna Group asked non-Christians about their perception of Christians and found that **87 percent** said Christians were **judgmental**, **85 percent** said Christians were **hypocritical**, and **78 percent** said Christians were **out of touch**.¹
- That same study revealed **hypocrisy** is actually the number two reason people leave the Christian faith.
- In researching for a book called *unChristian*, one author found that **"84% of non-Christians say they know a Christian personally, yet only 15% say the lifestyles of those believers are noticeably different in a good way."**²

For all my accountants out there, what's the word you would use if you saw this data? **You'd say there's a discrepancy;** there's a lack of compatibility between two facts: on one hand you have people **saying they follow Jesus** but on the other hand you have these same people who **live lives that show no evidence of a Jesus follower.**

So how do we **cope with** these discrepancies?

- **Some people just change their belief system.** This is what we're seeing today—mass deconstruction. People witness the hypocrisy of the church or another Christian and they say, *"Deuces. I'm out."*
- **I think what's more common, though, is that people learn to compartmentalize.** On Sunday morning you're **dressed** like a Christian, you're **in church** like a Christian, you know the **songs** like a Christian, you **take communion** like a Christian, you know how to say **"have a blessed day"** like a Christian—**on Sunday you got it, bro!** But then when you walk out of these church doors the rest of your week has no marks of Jesus or faith or spirituality...your life bears nothing **noticeably different** than your non-Christian coworker.

To continue with our accounting term, a discrepancy must be reconciled. Verses 14–26 are **probably the most controversial passages** in the book of James. See, people think this whole passage is about **faith vs. works**, but it's not...this whole passage is about the **kind of faith that saves** vs the **kind of faith that doesn't**.

Look at v. 14: **¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?** First let's define our terms:

FAITH: Faith is just belief in action. **Head knowledge becomes faith once it's acted upon in obedience.**³

- That's why in Hebrews 11, the Hall of Faith, the faith of all these heroes is described with *action*:

¹ [Christians: More Like Jesus or Pharisees? - Barna Group](#)

² Kinnaman, *unChristian*

³ [PJD, Faith Is Action](#)

- Abel *brought* an offering
- Noah *built* an ark
- Abraham *left* his home and *offered up* Isaac
- Sarah *trusted* God
- Jacob *blessed* his grandsons
- Joseph *instructed* about his burial
- Moses *chose* to be mistreated
- Rahab *welcomed* the spies
- **Kids jumping in pool:** I have four small attorneys constantly negotiating. “Do you trust me?” YES ... “Then jump” NO
 - If they never jump, do they have faith in me? They might **believe** I will catch them; but it’s not **faith** until they’ve actually jumped.
- Faith is **belief** that leads to **behavior**.

WORKS: Literally *deeds*. There’s nothing tricky here in the Greek; when James talks about works he’s literally talking about acts...labor...stuff you do...morally positive *actions*.

Put those definitions together and James is asking: *What good is it to say “I’m a follower of Jesus” but then not actually follow Jesus anywhere, not love others, not care for the hurting? Can that kind of faith save a person?*

You know, last weekend we **examined the Bible** to see whether we can know it’s true; **this weekend we’re going to examine ourselves to determine if our faith is true.** **2 Corinthians 13:5:** **Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.** We’re gonna put ourselves on trial, scrutinize, look for evidence, and try to determine the genuineness of our faith.⁴

- And, as usual, James is about to get all up in our business...*again*. Not sure about you, but I’m kinda developing a **love/hate relationship** with James—he reminds me of Tony Hortin, the P90X guy (*AbRipperX: I hate it, but I love it*).

But James isn’t just throwing punches for the sake of being controversial. He’s **diagnosing** us so we might be **cured**. The question James wants us to wrestle with is this: *How do we reconcile when someone **declares one thing about faith in Jesus** but their **life demonstrates something totally different?**...and is that kind of faith really faith at all? **Is there a type of faith that simply doesn’t work?**...and if there is, what do I do if that’s the only faith I’ve got?*

In these passages, James shows us three types of faith—the first two are false faiths, and the last one is true saving faith. Let’s look at it...

⁴ **Examine** = *peirazō*. Put to the test. Make proof or trial of.

Test = *dokimazō*. Scrutinize. Try to determine the genuineness of.

¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and 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? ¹⁷So also **faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.**

1. Dead Faith (15–17)

James opens with a pretty ridiculous illustration: someone you know—a "brother or sister"—needs **clothes and food**. They're on the **struggle bus**. And you see them and you're like, "*Oh my goodness. Are you okay? Dang, that's tough...so awful. I hope things get better. Thoughts and prayers. Alright, well, see you later...alligator!*"

- Reminded me of this comic from **Peanuts**: [Charlie Brown and Linus...](#) Charles Schulz got the idea for this comic from James 2!

This might seem like a farfetched illustration; it's not that far off from how a lot of professing believers live. James is asking: *What good is it to identify a need and then not meet it?*

- "Thoughts and prayers" aren't gonna warm up Snoopy. **Words** can't **warm** someone. **Sentiments** don't help someone **starving**.
- Charles Spurgeon: "If you want to give a hungry man a tract, wrap it in a sandwich." It's tough for someone to hear the good news of the gospel over an empty rumbling stomach. (I don't know about you, but when I'm **hangry** or **hot**, you can keep the "hope" you're trying to offer me, I just want **food** and **air conditioning!**)

In the same way, faith that's **just words** doesn't do you any good either. And words are empty if there's no action that backs them up. You may even be sincere in your words; but **sincerity**, James says, **doesn't serve others** and it **certainly won't save you**. **Believing the right things** and **having good intentions** are not the sum total of being a Christian.

Consider this: We wouldn't be okay with this type of "faith" applied to any other area of our lives. In no other area of life would we think it's okay to have the **right understanding** and **good intentions** and think that alone is sufficient.

- **Relationships**: *I don't understand why this is so upsetting to you, hunny?...I had every intention of getting you flowers and a card and taking you out for your birthday. I even added it as a reminder on my phone! Why isn't that enough?*
- **Physical fitness**: How many of us have bought a piece of exercise equipment or gym membership that we used for a month and haven't touched since? Intentions don't make an impact.
- **Finances**: How well would it go over if you called your credit card company and told them you intended to pay your bill, but you didn't have enough? Think they'll give you a pass because of your good intentions?

J.C. Ryle: **"Satan cares not how spiritual your intentions be, and how holy your resolutions, if only they are fixed for tomorrow."** Intentions without action equals an imposter.

In the same way, a “faith” that has no **interest in the Bible**, no **zeal for seeing your unsaved friends** or neighbors come to know Christ, no **call to a holy life**, no **desire to spend time with God in prayer**, no **concern for the poor**, no **love for others**...if this is you, your exam results have come back, and the diagnosis is DEAD FAITH.

- You can't call yourself a Jesus-follower if you don't actually follow Jesus anywhere. (I'm not saying it; James is!) If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck...then it probably is a duck.
- If you **look** like the world, **play** like the world, and **talk** like the world...then you're probably of this world.

Then James (knowing he's offending!) anticipates an objection: ¹⁸But 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.

The objection he anticipates is someone who says: *Whoa, James...some people might be more works-driven, but others are more faith-driven. God has gifted some people with serving gifts and others with faith gifts. But both are Christians, James, let's not be too harsh here by drawing this line in the sand.*

James doesn't even hesitate in his response and says, “Nope. Because your saving faith will be *validated* by your works.”

- Think about it like this: **when Liz told me she was pregnant**, I took her word for it. But then the subsequent actions confirmed there really was something working inside of her⁵:
 - She was tired
 - Got sick
 - Cute baby bump
 - Baby moved in her belly
 - Sense of smell got all crazy—couldn't eat my grilled chicken or ground beef
 - Obsessed with **ice cold water**, especially with nugget ice from Chick-fil-A (had to be CFA)
- What happened after her “confession” confirmed whether what she said was true or not.
- In the same way: *How do we know you're really pregnant with the gospel?* It's evident!

This is what Jesus was talking about in **Matthew 7**, ¹⁶You will recognize them by their fruits (In other words, a person's *works* verifies their faith; real faith = real fruit). **Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?** (Jesus says this offhandedly and I'm like, “Honestly I don't know where grapes or figs come from. I get my grapes from Harris Teeter. Figs are gross. I have no idea where they come from.”) ¹⁷So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. . . . ²⁰Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

⁵ Nod to BL for this illustration

- You can't be a Christian in *name* only...if you haven't jumped in the pool yet, you haven't fully trusted Jesus. No works = dead faith.

Just like any examination, you know how you go in for one thing but then it seems like they end up finding a bunch of other stuff (*My back hurts...that's cuz your hip is jacked up...let's fix—and bill you for—both!*)? That's kinda what happens here. And we need to address it so it doesn't get out of whack. It has to do with the *supposed* contradictions between James and Paul.

Do James and Paul contradict one another?

If you're listening closely you might be thinking, "*Uhhh, hold up... Everything The Summit Church has taught me is that there's nothing I can do to be saved... I thought the gospel message was that Jesus did everything for me? What happened to the gospel being "d-o-n-e" instead of "d-o"?... but now you're telling me I have to do good works to be saved? I'm confused, Pastor.*"

Here's the supposed contradiction:

- **James 2:24**, You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.
- **Romans 3:28**, For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

So which is it: *Is James right or is Paul right? Do they contradict one another?* One of the Bible reading principles I've tried to teach you is that we should **interpret harder verses by easier ones**. At face value these look like *seeming* contradictions; I assure you they are not.

(What we need to decipher this is **spiritual depth perception**. The way depth perception works is that **your left eye** doesn't see the exact same thing that your **right eye sees**. If you close one eye, everything flattens out and it's harder to judge **depth** and **distance** and **such**. But when you have two eyes looking at the exact same thing from two inches apart, it dramatically increases our ability to **see the reality of the situation**.

- And that's what James and Paul do. They're just two inches away from each other. But they are **both talking about salvation**. And when we look at salvation through both of their eyes, we see it with more **depth** and **clarity**.)

Hopefully this will help—let me give you some general themes of Paul and James' writings:

PAUL	JAMES
Works = laws you try to keep in order to earn God's favor	Works = deeds done out of gratitude for having received God's favor
Fighting legalism: <i>I have to keep all these rules to be saved.</i>	Fighting laxity: <i>It doesn't matter what you do as long as you believe.</i>

Justified = righteousness declared	Justified = righteousness demonstrated
How do you <i>know</i> Christ? (faith)	How do you <i>show</i> Christ? (works)
OBGYN—how we are born into true faith	Pediatrician—how we are living out our faith

Paul and James aren't enemies, quite the contrary. We should see them on the same side **fighting back to back against *different* enemies coming against the gospel**, fighting for the *preservation* of the gospel: **Saved by grace through faith alone (Paul)...but not by a faith that remains alone (James)**. Even Paul would go on to say in Ephesians that we were "**created in Christ Jesus for good works**" and then echo the same thing in his letter to the Galatians that what means most is "**faith working through love.**"⁶

There's your theology lesson for the week. (I don't know about y'all but after these last two weeks my thinking cap is running out of storage!)

Let's return to our regularly scheduled programming. First, James showed us dead faith—a faith that believes the right thing but doesn't do anything about it. Let's keep reading in v. 19...**¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!**

2. Demon Faith (18–19)

You may not know this, but **demons have a strong belief in God**. Demons aren't **atheist** or even **agnostic**.

- Intellectually they *know* God is real and powerful.
- They even believe in Jesus and that he's the Son of God...which is why every time they get in his presence they're begging Jesus not to hurt 'em.

Demons have an even better faith than **dead faith** because not only do they **believe the right things**, but they're even **emotionally impacted by their belief**—they *shudder*! I never thought about that until this week.

- Demon faith is the type of faith that believes the right thing *and* has an emotional response to it.

And, y'all, if ever there was a description of **Bible Belt Christianity**, that right there is it. Pastor Bryan's talked about this before but it bears repeating: In Bible Belt Christianity you know **who Jesus is**...know **why he came**...you've had an **experience with him**...you know **you need forgiveness of sin**...you've even **felt bad about that sin at times**...you've **felt some of the emotions**...you might've even **prayed the "sinners**

⁶Eph 2:10; Gal 5:6

prayer,” but you have had no accompanying life change to accommodate your belief. You know a lot **about** the Savior; but you don’t **personally know** the Savior!

This was me before Christ!--I had **belief** and **emotion**. My own story is proof that **profession** does not always equal **possession**. Salvation isn’t just information we learn, it’s a relationship with a Savior we love.

Just because your faith might **produce an occasional emotion** isn’t evidence of **possessing faith that produces salvation**.

- You can **regret** something without actually **repenting** of it.
- You can **weep** over your sin without being a **worshiper** of the Savior.
- You can be **zealous for God** without being **submitted to him** as Lord of your life.

Listen: Cultural, Bible Belt Faith is just a much nicer Southern way of saying, “Actually you have DEMON FAITH.”

Billy Graham used to say most people will miss heaven by **18 inches**—the distance between your head and your heart. Eighteen inches is *almost saved*.

Eighteen inches represents people whom Jesus talks about in Matthew 7 when he says, **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven. . . [but I will tell] them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”**

Demon faith knows the right things; it even **feels** the right things...but it **stuffs all of that down** and in no way affects **obedience unto the Lord** or **how you actively love other people**. Friends, the Bible is more interested in **how you walk** than it is your **verbal profession** or **one-time experience**.

But like I said at the beginning, James’ aim is not just to offer the **diagnosis**, but also to offer the **cure**. Finally James shows us what true saving faith looks like, and that’s...

3. Dynamic Faith (20–26)

²⁰Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? (I’ll prove it to you:) ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?

If you’re unfamiliar with Abraham’s story, here’s the short version:

- Abraham is the **archetypal Jew**—he’s a man, he’s a patriarch, he’s rich, and he’s part of God’s people.

- **Genesis 12:** God calls Abraham to leave his land and says “I’m gonna bless you and make you into a great nation.”
- **Genesis 15:** God covenants with Abraham and tells him “his very own son shall be his heir” (which is wild because he and Sarah, his wife, are both old and Sarah’s barren).
- **Genesis 22:** They’ve had their promised heir, a son named Isaac, but God calls Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac to prove that Abraham’s ultimate loyalty is to God alone, not just to what God can give him. **Well he goes to offer up Isaac** but at the last second, just as he’s about to stab his son, God sends an angel to shut the whole thing down and says, “*You’ve proven your ultimate allegiance to me by obeying me even in this.*”

Which is why James says (v. 21) Abraham was justified **by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar.** **You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works;**

Does that mean Abraham’s faith wasn’t complete until then? No... “completed” in this context just means that his faith was “made known to us” by his works. How do we know that’s the context?, look at v. 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.**

Okay, make sure you have the chronology correct here: **Genesis 12** - God calls Abraham. **Genesis 15** - he covenants with him. **Genesis 22** is when Abraham sacrifices Isaac.

- *Between Genesis 12, 15, and 22, when was Abraham declared righteous?* You’d think it was *after* he sacrificed Isaac in chapter 22. But it’s not! Genesis 15:6 is what v. 23 is quoting!
- We learned that Abraham has **saving faith that is credited to him as righteousness in Genesis 15, even though** he doesn't hold this knife until Genesis 22. **That’s incredibly important. Abraham didn’t become a follower of God in chapter 22 because he did something. Chapter 22 was just the proof that he already was a follower of God, as told in Genesis 15. Don’t miss that!** He had the faith roots in Genesis 15; but the faith tree bore fruit in Genesis 22.

Abraham has DYNAMIC FAITH: belief, conviction, emotion, and action...and that faith was **counted/credited to him as righteousness.**

- The word counted is a legal or financial term; it means “to put on one’s account.” **And it’s here we see the gospel all the way back in Genesis!** **Without faith, all of us have a spiritual bank account with insufficient funds to purchase our salvation.**
- But when Abraham trusted God, God credited **“RIGHTEOUS”** on Abraham’s spiritual bank account.
- Please hear this: Abraham didn’t perform and *then* God credited righteousness to him...Abraham just *believed* and God credited righteousness to him.
- Abraham did not work *for* this righteousness; he received it as a gift *from* God.⁷

⁷ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). The Bible exposition commentary (Vol. 2, p. 356). Victor Books.

But then that righteousness—that saving, dynamic faith—was *verified* by his act of sacrificing his son. We don't have a faith *of* works...but a faith *that* works. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Remember: James uses “justified” as righteousness demonstrated. *“You see? A person demonstrates their gift of righteousness by their works!”* That's dynamic faith!

And James wants to make sure we know that this dynamic faith is possible for everyone: ²⁵And 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?

When Jewish spies came to Jericho before destroying the city, they ran into Rahab, who was a prostitute in the city. Instead of **ratting them out** or **running for her life**, she chose to help God's people. We're not sure when, but this **act of dynamic faith** was a clear sign that she wasn't looking to add Yahweh to the list of gods her people believed in, but was declaring God the one true God over her life. Rahab proved her faith by her works. What's awesome is how both **Abraham** and **Rahab** are used as examples of saving faith. Jen Wilkin points out how beautiful this is. She says: First, we have a man, a Jew—the ultimate Jew, and a patriarch. And then we have a woman, a Canaanite, and a prostitute. And James says that **one thing unites them both**: faith in the word of God. John 3:36, *“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life”*

- patriarch or prostitute
- billionaire or beggar
- upper class or lower class
- black or white
 - WHOEVER BELIEVES has eternal life!

James concludes his argument: ²⁶For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

The “**works**” that **dynamic saving faith** creates is a love for God that leads to love for others. That doesn't mean you love others perfectly—we're still sinners in need of a Savior—but I can say with full confidence that **if you have no desire to obey God, no conviction of the Holy Spirit** in your life, **no real love for other people** (people are just a means to an end for you; they exist for you), then you need to stop calling yourself a Christian. You're not one. All of those things are evidence that you have not received a new, regenerate heart. I don't care if you **prayed the prayer**, were **baptized when you were 8**, that your **grandma “remembers when you cried and made a decision,”** or that you've **been in church your whole life**. If you have no desire to *work out your salvation* by being obedient to the clear calls of holiness and active love for others, you're not a Christian.

But like I said earlier, sure, James wants to **afflict the unjustifiably comfortable** who have **dead** or **demon** faith. But he also wants to **comfort** those of you who are wrongfully afflicted about your salvation and encourage you in your **dynamic faith**.

CONCLUSION

So I want to ask you this question—based on dead, demonic, or dynamic faith: **If being a Christian were illegal, would there be enough evidence in your life to get you arrested, tried, and convicted beyond all reasonable doubt?**

What would the evidence suggest for your life? Dead, demon, or dynamic faith? Would you be part of the 15 percent whose profession matches their lifestyle?

- And, hey, if you examine your life—you ask for God’s wisdom in that and for others to speak into your life—and you find out you’re saved, PRAISE GOD!
- If you examine your life and find out you’re NOT SAVED: PRAISE GOD! Now let’s move forward together in Christ and get to work...

Because, see, we ARE saved by works: the **work that saves us** is the work done by Jesus on the cross on our behalf. **For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God**. All we do is receive him by grace, through faith...and the evidence that we’ve received will be works done **in his name** and out of a **grateful, regenerated heart**.

PRAY

Pray for next steps in SHOWING faith:

- Make a decision for Christ?
- Get baptized?
- Become a member?
- Super practical: get involved caring for the needy?