

*Faith That Works: Faith Made Complete*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*August 30, 2020*  
*Matthew 5:14-16; Ephesians 2:1-10; James 2:14-26*

Our final Scripture reading today is James 2:14-26. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that -- and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 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. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. 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? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

Today we come to one of the most controversial and important passages in all of Scripture. In our era, we tend to think of controversies around the Bible being about moral realities that are out of favor – the world thinks the Bible is out of step on matters of sexuality and gender and all that stuff. But those aren't really controversies; the Bible is clear and we must determine whether we'll accept what the Bible says or not.

In comparison, a true controversy happens when the Bible can be misread by well-intentioned Christians, even Christian scholars who've devoted their lives to reading Scripture well. A controversy happens when Scripture contains what on the surface appears to be a contradiction – where it says opposite things on the same topic. That's a real problem that has to be solved because God is by His very nature truthful. His Word is truth. Either we figure out the apparent contradiction or we start to doubt God's Word as being less than truthful. And so what we study today is really important not only because we must figure out what is really being said, but also because this passage helps us to know what saving faith in Jesus Christ is truly all about.

James starts this portion of his letter with a couple rhetorical questions. You might remember that in our last two studies, we've seen James promote good deeds as a part of proper faith – taking care of widows and orphans, the least in society, and loving your neighbor as yourself by not showing favoritism to the rich but showing mercy to everyone. This section of the letter expects pushback on these instructions. James anticipates that his commands might get some people up in arms who thought that was over the line. James says, “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” The Greek here is written in such a way that the expected answer is “no.” Note too that James doesn't say that this person has real faith, only that he claims to have faith.

James' example of someone claiming to have faith without deeds is a guy who tells a fellow Christian without the necessities of life, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed." Parts of this were common at the end of a time together, not unlike us saying, "Bye." "I wish you well" was the "bye" of the day. There's well meaning intent here too – "keep warm and well fed." There's no negative intent, no harm. It's not unlike what I see in a lot of social media posts when someone talks about some difficulty they are going through – "our thoughts and prayers are with you." And yet if we do nothing about the physical needs not being met, James says, what good is it? Faith not accompanied by action is dead.

Now I want us to clear up a few things about what James is *not* saying. He is not saying that we can help everyone who has a need. There's a reason that James specifies a Christian brother or sister. It is not that we won't help anyone in need, but our priority is the family of faith. While we can and often do help the stranger on the street, this is a fellow traveler with Jesus. We have mercy towards all, but it starts at home with those we know need it.

Nor is James saying we must help alone. James' audience is primarily poor, and some barely had enough to keep a roof over their heads and food in their family's cupboards. But poverty alone doesn't keep us from helping. It might mean driving someone to a food pantry, having them over to share meals on occasion to relieve the burden, to get them assistance with the gas bill. Because those things are just as much work and just as much count.

It also doesn't mean that we don't need prayer. We absolutely do. When we say we are praying for someone and we do it – not just well wishes – that matters. In some cases, all we can do is pray. Sometimes it's distance – I can do nothing in the moment for my good friend Mark in Taiwan when he's in the hospital with gallstones. Sometimes it's talent – you don't want me doing your carpentry work! (I've gotten a bit better with plumbing!) Sometimes prayer is the most effective thing we have. We should pray, often and with passion. But when we can help in a physical way, while we pray, we also share what we have.

We cannot beat ourselves up about not helping every need in every case. We live in an era where we are barraged with needs from everywhere that we have very little ability to meet. And yet, the needs in front of us, the works that need to be done, the deeds that God has placed there for us to do, doing them is not separate from faith but integral to our faith. We'll come back to this thought in a minute.

James continues, "But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that -- and shudder." Here James is clearer about what faith is and what faith isn't. He's defining faith. Faith is not mere belief in God, or even in the God of the Bible – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Demons know that truth and are haunted by it. The ancient Israelites who heard the thunder and lightning on the mountain in the wilderness knew God existed and wanted God to go away in their terror.

Believing a set of facts about God doesn't save anyone. That's because mental agreement with certain facts rarely makes us *do* anything or *change* anything about our lives. Some people believe the earth is flat. That belief is typically harmless because those who believe it don't change anything about the way they live because of it. Many people who believe in man-made climate change still fly in planes and use electricity. Whether or not I believe that Kenya is a country in Africa or that Columbus discovered America or that Detroit has the best sports teams in the world makes no difference in how I live my life.

Many people believe in Jesus, and there are levels to that belief. Some (not all) people believe Jesus really existed. A smaller set believe that Jesus was a wise and good prophet. Still fewer believe that He lived a perfect life, died on a cross, and was resurrected the third day to save sinners from eternal death. And still fewer than that believe that those events, combined with Jesus' teachings, means that true faith in Jesus requires us to become His disciples and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, live and act in ways that reflect Him.

People walk into church services all over the world at all those different levels. They sing, listen, pray, and worship for an hour or two. Almost all of them believe that they will receive a place in God's Kingdom or, more generically, in heaven. Some will believe it is because they have been "good enough." Some will believe it is through their mental agreement with the beliefs they have picked up from the Bible and from church, that they believe the right things. But a much smaller subset meets the criteria found in Scripture – those with a genuine faith in Christ shown to be real through their actions in life.

Is there evidence in Scripture for this? James says absolutely. It helps for us today if we look at this backwards from the way James presents it. Scripture says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." God credits righteousness to Abraham because of his belief. This was the belief that God would honor his covenant with Abraham and make his descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky, even though at that time he had no heir.

There was no way to prove that Abraham believed God's promise – we just have to trust in the text. And yet that statement is believable because Abraham's belief in God's promises is shown to us in several other ways. On the word of God alone, without proof, Abraham takes his family more than 800 miles from where he was living to the land of Canaan – now Israel. At God's command, Abraham takes his son Isaac up the mountain, fully believing that God would have him follow through and sacrifice him (as other Canaanite gods required). Abraham believed in God's promise so much that he was willing to let God have the only son he had, the only way that God could in fact keep His promise to Abraham. God does not require Isaac's life as He shows that He is loving and merciful; yet Abraham's actions show his trust in God. Abraham is God's friend because his actions proved their relationship.

James turns to another example that proves it doesn't matter who you were, it matters who you are now as a believer. Rahab lived in the city of Jericho. Rahab knew the Israelites would invade, and she trusted in the God of Israel even though her line of work wasn't godly. Her faith was proven by risking her life by helping the spies escape. Rahab would not just be spared, she would wind up the great-great-grandmother of King David. By her faith, shown through what she did, Rahab would become part of the lineage of Jesus.

So we come to the most controversial lines. “You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” These concepts follow naturally out of James’ line of reasoning, and they make a lot of sense. But they also run smack dab into Paul’s teachings. From Romans 3:28, Paul writes, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” Romans 4 goes on to quote the same passage about Abraham to show that Abraham was not justified by the works he did but by his faith in God’s promise. Paul says in Romans 4:5, “Faith is credited as righteousness to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked.” Ephesians tells us we are saved by grace through faith and not by works. The whole book of Galatians is Paul insisting that Gentiles don’t have to follow the Old Testament law because works of the law don’t save!

So have we run into a genuine contradiction? Did these two faithful believers teach two different ideas? Nothing less than the split between Catholicism and Protestantism hinges on this. Martin Luther, the lynchpin of the Reformation, found his life radically transformed when he read Paul’s view of salvation in Romans. Luther insisted that the Roman Catholic Church’s theology of justification, of faith plus *necessary* works for salvation, was wrong. Instead, he argued that we are saved by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. He argued against the purchase of indulgences the Roman church had set up to fund itself. The Roman church disagreed. For over 500 years, the church has fought, spilling not just ink but blood over the split. It’s truly sad, a blemish caused by Christians who have not acted Christianly.

But in fact, Paul and James are not disagreeing but discussing different concepts. Paul is dismantling one particular false notion – that anyone can be saved through following the Law of Moses or that anyone has to not only believe in Jesus but also keep the Law of Moses to gain eternal life. That someone can put God in their debt through their works so that God owes them anything, that you can be declared righteous by your own righteousness. That anyone can be “good enough” for God to admit to eternal life. That we are the makers of destiny and not God.

James is dismantling a different argument – the idea that faith is simply a matter of the mind and agreement with concepts or a recognition that Jesus is the Messiah. That faith can be disconnected from life or has meaning apart from actions. We know this is true in everyday life. I think a rope bridge is stable enough to hold me, but if I have faith, I walk across. I *know* that planes are the safest way to travel, but if I always drive out of fear, I have no meaningful faith. When James says faith without works is dead, he’s saying it’s not really faith at all.

And you know what? Paul, the master of justification by faith alone, gave detailed lists of how Christians should live out their faith in action. No one less than Martin Luther agreed, forcefully. This from the opening of his commentary on Romans: “O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.” Modern theologian J.I. Packer defined it this way – “The truth is that, though we are justified by faith alone, the faith that justifies is never alone...[that faith] transforms one’s way of living.”

We could go into the reasons the wings of the church are still very much divided; that would take far long than my usual sermon, and I doubt anyone wants that this morning! What I want to focus on in our final few moments together today is what this means for us as Christians in the modern world. And the takeaway question for us, the thing I really want us to contemplate on this week, is simply this: *how are your actions making complete the faith you have in Jesus?*

Because that's what this is about, really, and it's just as pertinent now as the day it was written. Because we as humans have a great capacity for self-deceit, for lying to ourselves about ourselves. Because of what we've read or been taught, we can believe we are good people, "good" Christians, and do terrible things. We justify our bad behaviors all the time. On the flip side, in my experience, good people don't need to tell anybody that they are good people. Other people know it by their actions.

How are your actions making complete the faith you have in Jesus? We so often wonder, "Am I truly saved?" I've heard it many times. The best remedy for that angst is living out your faith meaningfully. I've never been working at Military Avenue, I've never been helping people do their taxes, and suddenly thought, "My relationship with God would be better if I were at home watching TV instead." I've never doubted in those moments that God wasn't beside me. There might be a problem if the reason I was doing those things was to justify myself, to declare myself righteous before God. But my faith is strengthened when I work alongside other Christians and see the good God is doing in the world through us.

How are your actions making complete the faith you have in Jesus? Don't be too quick to judge what those actions look like. God gave you gifts and talents – as Paul said in Ephesians, we are God's workmanship, created to do good works in Christ. Use those gifts and talents to do good works. God has given those to you to make a difference.

I got a reminder of that this week. In a couple minutes, we'll play the theme song I wrote for Trinity around their theme verse, hoping it might help the kids focus on Jesus during a bizarre start to the school year. On Thursday, a friend of mine came over to hard-wire our new garbage disposal. (I'll do plumbing; I don't mess with electricity.) In 25 minutes, he'd done the job that would have taken me hours. We asked his wife if we could get them a gift card somewhere. She wrote back, "Nope! Jason can write songs. Scott can install garbage disposals." She was right. Both of us had used the gifts and talents we had to bless others.

You might send someone a loving note. You might tutor someone. You might give someone a gift card to Meijer or make an anonymous donation to someone's account at DTE. You might volunteer to go down and help with the repairs that they're going to need down in Louisiana. Where has God given you gifts? Because I firmly believe that you'll feel like you're fulfilling the purposes God made you for when you use your talents in His service to help others.

I don't want a useless, worthless, dead faith that's no faith at all, and I don't believe you do either. We were made for more than that. We were made as complete people – heart, mind, soul, body – and our faith is meant to motivate every part of us. Let's make sure not to ignore our call to show our faith in action – and when we do those deeds that show our faith, we'll know our faith is being made complete.

