



Sermon Transcript

July 22, 2018

The Gospel According to James

Faith Alone is Never Alone

James 2:14-26

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on July 22, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
James 2:14-26

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! 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.

Introduction

This morning we come to a passage that is pretty well known if you are familiar with the book of James. In fact, I would imagine that many of you can complete this verse from our passage this morning without even looking at it . . . “*faith without works is _____.*” And so this passage forces us to consider the relationship between “faith” and “works.”

This connection between “faith” and “works” is not always a simple connection to make. If anything, this connection between “faith” and “works” creates tension. It first of all creates a tension in our minds as we try to bring together what Paul seems to be saying about this subject and what James seems to be saying. Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9, “*For by grace you are saved through faith . . . it is the gift of God, not the result of works.*” We are children of the Reformation. We just celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. One of the clarion calls of the Reformation is “faith alone.” It is a core

doctrine to our faith. To be justified means to be made right with God and that can only happen through “faith alone.” But then James comes along and three times in our passage mentions the idea of being “justified by works.” In fact, the most alarming of his statements can be found in James 2:24, “*You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*” Do you feel the tension you need to resolve in your mind as you consider “the Gospel According to James?” Surely it is not a “different” Gospel than Paul’s. Is it? So there is an intellectual tension here that needs to be considered.

And then this tension moves quickly from the mind to the soul and the heart because James calls into question the nature of saving faith. He asks the rhetorical question in verse 14, “*Can that faith save him?*” The answer to this rhetorical question is, “No, it can’t.” What causes us to feel this tension in our own hearts is that James is talking to people like us. His audience is defined in James 2:1 as a confessional community, a community who confesses “*faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.*” But James asks the question that if that confession “*does not have works*” . . . *Can that faith save him?*” No, it can’t. And so we feel the tension as we evaluate our own faith. I am not suggesting that we quickly dismiss this tension with a quick theological answer to soothe our souls. Paul even instructs us in 2 Corinthians 13:5, “*Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.*” James is making a similar plea in this passage as well.

I want to ask three questions this morning? What does James tell us about faith without works? What does James tell us about faith with works? And then finally, I would like to get very practical and ask, How do faith and works—work together?

Faith Without Works

What does James have to say about faith without works? As you can imagine, James doesn’t have much good to say about a person who claims to have faith in Jesus but it fails to show up in the way they live. In fact, in verses 14-17 he states very clearly that such a faith is no good, it can’t save and quite frankly, it is dead. That is a conclusion he reiterates at the end of the passage in verse 26, “*so also faith apart from works is dead.*”

It is good to remind ourselves that James is not having a theoretical or an academic conversation about the relationship between faith and works. I am afraid that is how we often treat this passage. It is easy to rip this passage from its context and to resort to having some kind of academic conversation about the relationship between faith and works. But it is important to realize that this is a very pastoral conversation and it has a context. In other words, it flows from the passage you looked at last week.

Last week you heard James warn against the sin of partiality, treating the rich man with preference over the poor man. In the passage last week, James called us to love our neighbor as ourselves and to extend mercy to the one in need. That helps define for us what James is talking about when he talks about “works” in our passage this morning. When you keep our passage in its context it is saying this, “What good is it if you confess Jesus Christ to be Lord but do not show mercy to the one among you in need?”

James makes his point with an illustration in verses 15-16, “*If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 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?*” Clearly, it is of no benefit to the one in need. It is just words. Through this illustration, James is saying that a confession of faith in Jesus is just words if there is no mercy and love expressed for those in need. Tasker says it this way in his commentary, “where loving action is conspicuous by its absence, there is irrefutable evidence that real faith is lacking.”¹ Maybe we can say it this way, “faith without love is dead.”

This is a difficult passage for people like us—evangelicals—to navigate because of what we have made of the doctrines of grace and faith. In a few moments, I will affirm that we are saved by grace alone and through faith alone and in Christ alone, and James affirms this truth as well. But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded us in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* it is not a “cheap grace” that we are called to. Rather, it is a “costly grace.” It is not a grace that calls us to just believe in Jesus. It is not a grace that calls us to just say a prayer. Rather, it is a grace that calls us to follow Jesus.—“it bids us come and die.” Pastor Ryan was sharing with me some of what our students experienced at Challenge earlier this month. He shared with me something one of the speakers said that was rather “James-like.” The speaker said, “Some of you grew up in a church like I did that told you if you prayed a little prayer Jesus would come into your heart and be part of your life. That is a lie from the pit of hell. Jesus has no interest in being a part of your life. He will have all of it or he will have none of it.” This is why Kent Hughes, the former pastor of the College Church in Wheaton gave this title to his book on the Beatitudes, *Are Evangelicals Born Again?* That is quite a provocative title. How could he even ask such a question, let alone blanket an entire book with this question? It is because we have pedaled a gospel that requires nothing from us but a confession and a prayer. Or as Bonhoeffer put it, “forgiveness without repentance . . . grace without discipleship.”² James looks at this and says, that a confessional faith that doesn’t lead to a life of love and mercy is no good, can’t save and it is dead. That is faith without works.

Faith With Works

After James says what he says in verses 14-17, he immediately anticipates an objection in verse 18. Perhaps there are some objections going through your mind as well as I speak. He says in verse 18, *“But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’”* The person making an objection here is making an abstract analytical statement about the nature between faith and works. This “objector” is basically saying there is no connection between faith and works. You could word his objection this way, *“One has faith and one has works.”* Scot McNight puts this objection this way, “Some Christians have only faith; others have both faith and works . . . all that matters is a Jesus-shaped confession.”³ Or at the end of the day, works have nothing to do with faith.

James is rather incredulous at such a notion and he challenges this person to give him one example of someone who confesses faith but has no works to back it up. He says, *“Show me your faith apart from your works.”* If this person has trouble producing such an example, James gives him one in verses 19-20. *“You believe that God is one; you do well.”* He is speaking to a Jewish audience and this is their most sacred creedal and confessional statement out of Deuteronomy 6, *“Hear, O Israel, the LORD your God is one.”* And then he says, *“Even the demons believe—and they shudder.”* The demons are fully aware that Jesus Christ is Lord. In Mark 1, Jesus confronts a man possessed by an unclean spirt—a demon. And the demon “confesses” to Jesus - *“Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.”* So James says, “there is your example of one who confesses—one who “believes”—but is without works, without love for God and submission to God—without love and mercy for others.” Then he says to one who objects, *“I’ll show you my faith by my works.”* This statement helps us understand what James means when he says in verse 21 and 25 that Abraham and Rahab were *“justified by works.”* Their works justified them before others.

When Paul talks about being justified by faith, he is talking about being made right before God. He says in Romans 3:28, *“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”* We can not do anything to earn our way to God. Jesus, the Son of God, came and lived the life we could not live and through his death on the cross he bore the penalty for our sin and so the only way we can be made right with God is to repent of our sin and turn in faith to Jesus—crucified and risen from the dead. But James says the same thing when he talks about Abraham. He says in verse 23, *“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness—and he was called a friend of God.”* Paul says at the end of Romans 4 that this statement about Abraham’s faith being counted to him as righteousness was not just written for Abraham’s benefit, but it was

written also for our benefit. How so? He says, *“It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”* In other words, we too our made right before God through faith alone in Christ alone. Through faith, we have the righteousness of Christ imputed upon us and we can never compromise this central truth of the gospel.

So when James says, *“I’ll show you my faith by my works”* he is not saying that we are saved by “faith plus works.” What is he saying then? I like what Douglas Moo says, “It is a working faith.”⁴ It is a faith that produces works. Notice what James says in verse 22, *“You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works.”* Saving faith is a working faith that produces a change in us. The point of emphasis for James is that our works give demonstration to the faith that lives inside of us. *“I’ll show YOU my faith by my works.”* And of course, Paul says the same thing. After affirming that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works in Ephesians 2:8-9, the next words out of his mouth are verse 10, *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before hand that we should walk in them.”*

So true faith is not faith plus works. Rather, true faith is a “working faith” that produces works in us. One of the books I read on sabbatical was a book by Eugene Peterson. It was his memoirs recounting his experiences as a pastor. And I love how he describes the Christian life. He says “it is long sustained obedience in the same direction.”⁵ It is not perfection. But it shows up in how we live and how we repent and how we love. One of Peterson’s theological heroes was the German theologian Karl Barth. He observed that Barth was not indifferent to getting it right, but his passion was getting it lived.”⁶ Of course, we want to believe “rightly” but our passion is to live it. It is what James says earlier in James 1:22, *“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”* Basically what James is saying is that we are made right with God through faith alone, but that faith is never alone. It is a working faith.

Faith and Works: Working Together

How does faith and works work together? What does a working faith look like? James gives us two examples. He gives us the example of Abraham and Rahab. First of all, I am struck by the diversity of these two individuals. On one hand you have Abraham, the “father” of Israel; most revered among the people of Israel along with Moses. And then you have Rahab; a Gentile, a woman and a prostitute. It is a great illustration of not showing partiality. It really doesn’t matter where you are on the social ladder of life,

your need for Christ is the same. It doesn't matter where you have come from or how far away God may seem to you, he is accessible to anyone who calls out in faith. I often like to say that at the foot of the cross we all stand on level ground. No one has a leg up on anyone else when it comes to God.

That being said, I think there is a temptation that comes with a sermon like this that we need to address. Because James is advocating for a faith that works, a faith that is demonstrated by our works, the temptation is to get up from this sermon and say, "I really need to work on my works." I really need to double down on my works! That is the wrong application to this sermon and it actually will take you further away from the gospel. So if you are going to double down on anything this morning, you need to double down on the gospel. The gospel is what forms a faith that works.

This is what we learn from the example of Abraham. James says of Abraham in verse 21, "*Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?*" This was an extraordinary act of obedience on Abraham's part. But it was an obedience that came out of the gospel. God's promise to Abraham was that he and his wife would have a son and from that son would come a nation that would bring blessing to the world. It is a promise that ultimately points us to Jesus. And of course, Abraham and Sarah waited and waited and waited for that promise to be fulfilled. In fact, it was belief in that promise that "*was counted to him as righteousness.*" In their old age this promised son, Isaac was finally born. Then God came and called Abraham to take this promised son and sacrifice him. It was because Abraham believed God's promise about Isaac that he was able to obey God. Hebrews tells us that Abraham believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead because God identified Isaac as the son of promise. The point is that our works flow out of our faith in what God says. It was the same with Rahab. It is because of what she heard God had done for Israel by delivering them from bondage in Egypt that she put her faith in Israel's God and hid the spies.

This week I caught a few moments of the ESPY Awards, the award show put on by ESPN to acknowledge the top athletic performances of the year. One of the awards they give out is the Pat Tillman award. Pat Tillman was an NFL player who after 9/11 enlisted as an Army Ranger and tragically lost his life due to friendly fire in Afghanistan. The recipient of the award this year was Jake Wood. Inspired by Tillman, Wood gave up his final year of eligibility to play football at the University of Wisconsin when he enlisted in the Marines. He served four years in the Marines. As he was being discharged from the military, Woods was moved by the devastation he saw from the earthquake in 2010 in Haiti and felt led to do something to help. That began something that is now 80,000

volunteers strong (many who are former military) and they have responded to over 250 natural disasters. His organization is called Team Rubicon.

In his acceptance speech he said something that caught my attention. He said, “If Americans treated one another the way they do after disasters, we’d live in a truly special place.” He noted that in disasters economics and race no longer matter. People cross the proverbial tracks and care for each other and they engage their neighbor. Why is that? It is because disasters show no partiality and they are the great equalizer erasing the walls that divide us. But then he said that once the waters recede, we have a tendency to retreat and go back behind the walls that divide us.

I think that is the point of our passage this morning. When you embrace the gospel it shapes how you view God, how you view yourself and how you view others. The gospel is the great equalizer. Jesus became poor for us when he took on human flesh and died for us. These disasters are just a foretaste of the judgment that is to come. It is things like this—the gospel—that produces works of mercy and love. It is being rooted in the gospel that moves us to serve God by loving our neighbor. Root yourself in the gospel and God will do his work through you. God will produce within you a faith that works.

Conclusion

Faith without works is dead. Faith with works is a working faith. How so? It is a faith that is rooted in the gospel, producing acts of mercy and love in and through us. Faith alone is never alone.

Those being baptized today are confessing their faith in Jesus Christ and they are expressing their desire to follow Jesus. As they rest in the gospel and are rooted in the gospel, God will complete what he has started and produce a working faith in their lives and ours.

¹R. V. G. Tasker *The General Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 63

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959) 44-45

³Scot McNight *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 239

⁴Douglas Moo *James* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015) 136

⁵Eugene Peterson *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012)

⁶*Ibid.*, 89