

Is Your Faith Alive or Dead? James 2:14-26

Slide 1

Suppose I was to stand before you today and hold up this object (in this case, a piece of chewing gum) and tell you that it is a piece of gum. How would you know that what I am saying is true?

You could observe that, as I open the wrapper, the contents appear to hold a piece of gum.

If you were close enough, you could smell the gum. If I had enough pieces of gum or you didn't mind sharing, we could all taste the gum to see that it was indeed gum.

The point is that, beyond my statement that this is a piece of gum, you'd have to either take my word or test the evidence in order to know for certain what's true.

This is the kind of argument James uses to talk about saving faith. If you were to consider the book of James to be a series of tests for Christians, then James 2:14-26 would be the test of a genuine salvation.

By describing the difference between faith that's false and faith that's genuine, James helps believers reach a deeper understanding of what it is that God expects of those who claim the name of Jesus.

It's not enough to simply take one's word regarding salvation. I'm reminded of Jesus' words in Matthew 7:21a, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven.*"

It's not enough to simply know what it takes to be a Christian. Real faith is shown by the way we live and the things we do on an everyday basis.

Slide 2

In today's passage, James begins by asking an important question we need to consider.

James 2:14, *"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?"*

What James is asking is, *"Can a person be saved simply by saying he is a believer?"* You and I would probably agree that the answer is at best questionable if not an outright "No."

We've all have seen people say that they're Christians when even a passing glance at their lives leads us to believe otherwise.

This is exactly the kind of thing James was addressing when he asked his initial question. Genuine saving faith is more than just saying that you are a Christian.

This argument continues with a hypothetical illustration in verses fifteen and sixteen.

James 2:15-16, *"Suppose a brother or a 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?"*

Understand that the people in question are believers, not strangers, and they have real, long-term needs.

None of us here today would say, *"Hey, your problem is only a passing thing. God's going to take care of you. Hang in there!"* At least I hope we'd respond differently. Remember, these people are a part of the body of Christ.

So how well do we fare in light of these words? Are we taking care of our own?

Sometimes I think we're guilty of writing a check and moving on with our lives, rather than taking the time to care for a brother or sister in need.

When needs go unmet in the household of faith, then the church has a serious problem. Before we can ever expect to care for the world, we must first care for our own members. Otherwise, our faith is dead.

This is what James says in verse seventeen, *"In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."* Faith alone, without works, is dead.

His statement sounds like a terse version of 1 John 3:18, *"Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."*

If we say that we're believers, then we ought to be moved with compassion for our brothers and sisters.

Look at verse eighteen, *"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."*

This statement points to the necessity of acting on one's faith. It shows that works may be a clearer indicator of saving faith than a verbal confession.

Look closely at this verse again, because in so doing you'll see that the evidence of a relationship with Jesus Christ is manifested in the things we do on a daily basis.

Do you feel the need to pray regularly? Are you drawn to the spiritual things in life? Has your motivation changed directions since you became a Christian?

Are certain behaviors you used to enjoy becoming loathsome now?
Are behaviors you used to find to be loathsome becoming enjoyable?

Works are the evidence of saving faith. Without them, there is no saving faith.

Now look at verse nineteen, *“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”*

In witnessing encounters where people say, *“Well, I believe in God,”* this verse just jumps into my mind in a flash.

When it comes to orthodox belief, there’s no one more correct than the demons of Hell. They’d agree with every word of every creed known to mankind.

You wouldn’t have to argue one word of doctrine with Satan and his demonic host. Their esteem of the Bible is probably greater than yours or mine.

But, the demons of Hell are condemned to the Lake of Fire, and nothing will change that.

James said, *“You say you believe in God. That’s nice. The demons believe in Him too, and they quake in their boots at his power.”*

It’s not enough to just believe the right things. We must have a transforming faith that produces righteous acts in our lives.

2 Corinthians 5:17, *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”*

That kind of faith is not dead. In fact, the *“I-believe-in-God”* faith passes away when we come to know Jesus.

James reminds the “I-believe” crowd again, in verse twenty, that faith without works is dead.

Newer translations substitute words like “useless” or “worthless,” but I’ve come to find that most words in either category are equal in weight and force.

The tone of James’ instruction reaches a high intensity mark in this verse, and the reader is left to examine himself in light of these verses.

In every case, it becomes clear that real faith must be made manifest in real works of righteousness. Anything less is defective, inferior faith. In James’ words, it’s DEAD.

Slide 3

Two heroes of faith round out the discussion of faith. The first is Abraham, father of the Jewish people and archetype of a life of righteousness before God.

The second is Rahab, a Gentile prostitute from Jericho and ancestor of Jesus Christ by her marriage to Salmon, a descendant of Judah.

Through these two examples, James covers every possible excuse and solidifies the necessity of a works-producing-faith.

The illustration from Abraham’s life deals with the challenge from God to go to Mt. Moriah and sacrifice Isaac. It’s good for us to remember that Isaac was born when Abraham was 99 and Sarah was 90.

It’s also good for us to remember God’s promise to Abraham that he’d have descendants more numerous than the sands.

We should probably not forget that Abraham also had a son by Sarah’s servant, Hagar, whom she had named Ishmael, but he wasn’t to be the heir to God’s promise.

The Bible tells us in Genesis 22 that Abraham took Isaac to Mt. Moriah, built an altar, tied him up and lay him on the altar, and drew the knife to cut his throat.

Were there tears in Abraham's eyes? Did Isaac struggle to be free from the cords around his ankles and wrists?

Did he cry out as he began to see the plan come together? Was there anger in Abraham's heart, or intense sorrow?

He had been childless for almost a hundred years when suddenly a child whose name meant "laughter" brought joy into his home.

He had been with Isaac every day of his life, more like a doting grandfather than a father. And now, this.

He heard God's voice calling him to go to Canaan. He personally witnessed the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

He hosted the messengers of God in his own tent. He had spoken, as with a friend, to God on numerous occasions and now, this.

Was it important that Abraham obey God's request for the life of Isaac? Yes, it was! Abraham's salvation was at stake.

If Abraham hadn't carried through at this precise moment in history, God would've put him on the shelf and the Jewish nation would call someone other than Abraham "Father." It was that important.

In verse 21, James says that Abraham was justified by his works, "*Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?*" He also goes on to say that faith was made "perfect" through works.

This word “*perfect*” implies completion and maturity. Abraham’s obedience to God was vital to his justification before God.

Verse twenty-three then brings us to another important point in James’ argument.

James 2:23, “*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.*”

This is a reference from Genesis 15:6 that says, “*And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.*”

Abraham’s belief was not merely a confession or an agreement with God: it was a lifestyle that affected the way he did almost everything.

It was a living relationship that was forever different from what it had been when he was living in Ur of the Chaldees.

The result of this lifestyle is found in the final clause of verse twenty-three: *and he was called God’s friend.*” That is a pretty meaningful title.

I’ve heard of many servants of God and men of God and women of God, along with an occasional enemy of God or a fool for God. Rarely, though, do you hear one called a “friend” of God.

Perhaps it’s because it was a title assigned to a great man like Abraham. There have been few to live since him who’ve been friends of God.

In any case, the title fits Abraham. Maybe as we live out our faith on a daily basis, it will come to fit us, too.

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Then we come to Rahab in verse twenty-five. It's interesting that James quickly points out her career, her relationship to the Jews, and her ministry.

James 2:25, "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?"

He tells us first that she was a prostitute. While this may have been acceptable in many cultures of the day, it wasn't the kind of thing in which God wanted His people to be involved.

God has always maintained that the proper context for a sexual relationship is between one man and one woman in the confines of marriage.

The Jews had no call for temple prostitutes or sexual slaves in their religious practices. The fact that Rahab was a prostitute amplifies the remarkable nature of her faith.

The second thing about Rahab was, even though she was not a Jew, she welcomed the spies into her home.

Rahab found a kinship with the Jewish people that eventually led to her marriage to Salmon, a descendant of Judah.

Through this marriage they had a son named Boaz. Boaz married Ruth, a Moabite woman, and had a son named Obed. Obed had a son named Jesse, and Jesse had a son named David, the second king of Israel.

You see, in welcoming the Jewish spies into her home, Rahab unwittingly became the great-great grandmother of one of the greatest rulers in Israel's history.

As far as Rahab's ministry is concerned, we can all imagine the risks she took in not only sheltering the spies but helping them escape the city.

Yet she did it willingly and graciously, helping them and advising them in their preparations to conquer what, at that time, was one of the great cities of the ancient world.

With walls wide enough to drive chariots around the top, the conquest of Jericho was a feat that only God could accomplish.

Rahab became a part of God's plan as she aided the spies in their reconnaissance mission. It was her actions that justified her and her faith before God.

Having explained the acts of faith of Abraham and Rahab, James concludes his challenge with one final illustration, found in verse twenty-six.

James 2:26, *"As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."*

He compares the relationship of faith and works with the spirit in a living body. Take away the works and the faith is dead. Take away the spirit and the body is dead.

A person can give the appearance of life by many signs, but life itself is made manifest in the works that go along with living. They are inseparable.

Slide 5

Conclusion

As we close our study of James today, I want you to look with me at Ephesians 2:8-10.

Ephesians 2:8-10, *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*

Being a Christian happens by God’s grace as we trust in Christ to save us.

According to these verses, God even provides the faith needed to be saved, if we’ll accept it. Nobody can be good enough or do enough good things to obtain it.

When we become God’s handiwork, our motive for anything good that we do is no longer to try to obtain God’s approval, but a tribute of gratitude to Him for all that He has done for us.

We do good things because we love God and we want to thank Him for His generosity. Are you producing the works that indicate your faith in God? What evidence is there in your life that you are what you claim to be?

Matthew 7:20, *“Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.”*

Even if you have all the right words and believe the right things, James says that faith without works is dead.

Are you caring for our brothers and sisters in need? Are you obeying the Scriptures in what they teach?

Are you cultivating a growing relationship with Jesus Christ on a daily basis? Do you have more than a nominal belief in God?

Is God convinced that you are His child this morning? Only the works produced by a living faith will tell.