

Logan Smith
November 13th, 2022

James 2:14-26

Faith Without Works is Dead: It Doesn't Save Anyone

Preaching through Galatians last Spring was such a joy and delight for me, because what we saw again and again throughout Galatians was Paul unpacking his argument that we are not justified by works, but by grace through faith in Christ alone! We saw that we could never be good enough for God - that we could never do enough good works to justify ourselves and be righteous enough to earn eternal life. But then we turn to the book of James - to the very passage we just read: James 2:14-26. And we read here what sounds like the exact *opposite* of the message of Galatians. In Galatians 2:16, Paul says, "Yet we know that a person is *not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ*, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be *justified by faith in Christ and not by works* of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified." But here in James 2:24, we read, "You see that a person is *justified by works and not by faith alone*." At first glance, they seem to be contradicting each other, don't they? So what do we do?

This tension between Paul and James has troubled Christians for a very long time - it even troubled Martin Luther, the great Reformer. A couple weeks ago, I mentioned the significance of the Protestant Reformation, when men like Martin Luther led the charge in recovering the true gospel. I mentioned the "Five Solas" of the Reformation - one of which is that we're saved by "faith alone." So what did Luther, the stalwart defender of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone, do with this passage from James? He was stumped by it. He called it "a right strawy epistle" - an "epistle of straw." He still believed it was the infallible Word of God, he knew it was in the Bible and he didn't dare take it out. But he still didn't know what to do with it. He wrote: "Many have mightily labored to reconcile James and Paul... but not with real success. These are at odds: faith justifies [Rom. 3:28], faith does not justify [James 2:24]. If there is anyone who can bring these into harmony with one another, I will set my [hat] on him, and let him scold me as a fool."¹

But we shouldn't be scared of this passage. We know that James is just as much the holy, inspired, and inerrant Word of God as the letters of Paul are. And we know that the Word of God

¹ Cited in Timo Laato, "Justification according to James: A Comparison with Paul," *TJ* 18/1 (Spring 1997): 43. Original German article translated into English by Mark A. Seifrid.

is sufficient and clear - and this means, Paul and James *cannot* be contradicting each other. And indeed, they don't! So how do we reconcile James and Paul? They're actually saying the same thing, just in different ways! They both believe the same gospel - that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone! They both walk the exact same road of faith. But they were writing to combat different errors - different ditches of false beliefs that lie on opposite sides of the road. Paul was combating against *legalism* - the false idea that we are saved by works of the law - that our own good works are the basis of our righteousness, that we could earn our salvation in any way. Paul was making it clear that faith *plus works* does not equal salvation. But James is writing to combat against a *different error*, another ditch on the other side of the road that we can just as easily fall into: James is combatting against *antinomianism*, or "nominal Christianity" - where someone says they are a Christian or claims to have faith, but doesn't think that we have to obey God or worry about repentance and obedience. James is making it clear here that a claim to faith without any works to back it up is a *dead, useless faith*. James makes it clear that dead faith without works is no good to anyone because it doesn't save anyone. He then answers our objections by showing that genuine faith can't be separated from our works because real faith isn't just something we intellectually believe in our minds. And finally, he shows us that real, genuine saving faith in Christ is an *active* faith that necessarily produces good works.

So the first, most fundamental main point of this passage is:

I. Faith Without Works is Dead, Useless, and Saves No One (2:14-17)

James makes the main point of this passage painstakingly clear for us: *faith without works is useless, dead, and does no one any good because it does not lead to true salvation - faith without works doesn't save anyone*. James begins by asking rhetorical questions in v.14: "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?" The answer is supposed to be obvious: Faith without works does no one any good. Faith without works cannot save anyone. But we need to be very careful to make sure we rightly understand what James is saying here. He is *not* saying that *faith itself* cannot save anyone - as if faith is insufficient grounds for someone to be justified before God. Some have misunderstood James to be saying that here. In fact, if you read this verse in the King James Version, you can see plainly why someone might take that conclusion; the KJV reads, "Can faith save him?" But this is not only misleading, it's a very bad translation. The original Greek very clearly means, "Can *that* faith save him?" as most modern English translations recognize. In

other words, James is not pitting faith against works - as if faith can't save us but works can. No, that's not what he's saying at all. Instead, James is pitting two different kinds of *faith* against each other: faith that has good works that goes along with it, and faith that does not. He's saying this second kind of faith - that doesn't produce any good works of repentance and obedience - it's *this* kind of faith that is no good and can't save anyone, because it's not genuine faith. True faith that works leads to justification, salvation! But that faith without works does not save anyone - it's useless and dead, good for nothing.

This is the emphatic point of the passage. He makes this clear in v.17: "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." He repeats this refrain throughout the passage: in v.20: "Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?" and again in v.26: "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead." The entire passage unpacks that main point further. James begins by giving us an illustration of what he means in vv.15-16, with another rhetorical question: "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?" This is a pretty straight-forward illustration, isn't it? Imagine you're at church and a fellow Christian - a brother or sister in Christ - comes, you ask how they're doing, and as you talk, it becomes clear this fellow Christian is really struggling, going through a very hard time. YOU try to encourage and comfort them, you tell them that you care for them, that you want to show the love of Christ to them, and you ask if there's anything you can do to help, and they answer, "Why, as a matter of fact, yes, there is." They open up, and begin to be very vulnerable and transparent about all the needs and burdens they have; they tell you that they just don't have enough money to make ends meet; inflation is through the roof and they don't have enough to put food on the table for their kids anymore; and with winter just around the corner, they're scared to death because they don't have any winter clothes or coats for themselves or their kids, let alone money to buy them. Now what if you responded by saying, "I am so sorry to hear that. Well, have a good day! Stay warm this winter! Enjoy lunch!" How do you think that would blow over? What kind of good do you think that would do? We all know the answer, don't we? THAT would do absolutely no good at all! It would prove that your words were cheap and meaningless; that you didn't really care about that person at all, you didn't mean what you said.

In the same way, James says, someone who claims to have faith but then never backs up their claim with the fruit of good works of repentance and obedience to God proves that their talk is cheap, their profession of faith is meaningless and useless, doing no good - because they don't actually have genuine faith at all. If someone professes to have faith in Christ, but never shows any love for Christ with their actions, then it shows they don't really love Him or have faith in Him. After all, Jesus says in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." If someone hears the gospel, and claims to believe, but then refuses to make any changes, refuses to repent from their sin, refuses to respond through baptism, being disciplined by the church, or making any attempts to obey GOD, then their profession of faith is meaningless and does them no good - it isn't true, saving faith. If someone claims to have faith but falls away into sin and chooses a life of unrepentant sin, refusing to repent and make an attempt to obey God, then their faith is called into question - there isn't any evidence of faith in their life. Such faith is useless, dead, and cannot save anyone.

But that can be a really hard word for us to hear. In fact, that might even sound outright offensive to you today. You might be thinking, "How dare you or anyone else call my own private faith into question! How dare you question someone else's faith, accusing them of not really being a Christian just because there aren't good works in their life!" After all, you might say: I thought we were saved by faith alone? If that's true, then what does it matter if you can see good works in someone's life or not? If we're really saved by faith alone, then isn't that inward, subjective, personal faith enough to save - no matter what that person's life may look like, even if they are living in sin and refusing to obey the Bible? Can't we just say that faith by itself is still sufficient to save?

No, we can't say that - because that would be a misunderstanding of what faith is. We see this in point number 2:

II. Faith Cannot be Separated from Good Works: Saving Faith isn't *Just Intellectual Belief* (2:18-19)

True, genuine, saving faith in Christ cannot be separated from works; true faith in Christ good works of obedience to Christ always go together. James makes this point, in the first half of v.18, by putting forth a hypothetical objection that someone might raise: "But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.'" In other words, he anticipates someone objecting to this entire argument and saying, "Listen, it's just not right for you to focus on what people do so

much. One person has works, another has faith.” Maybe the idea here is even the objector claiming to have faith while James has works. I think a lot of people in our cultural context today can relate to this objection. Many today may say, “Listen, works don’t matter; all that matters is whether or not someone has faith - which is personal, private, and subjective. So leave me alone, stop worrying about works so much; if someone says they have faith, who are you to say otherwise?” I’ve lost count how many times I’ve heard people give that kind of response. Or, if they’re more theologically trained, they might even say, “Hey, stop being so legalistic; don’t you know that we’re saved by faith alone? If that’s true, then it doesn’t matter whether they sin or do good works - all that matters is if they have faith!”

But James takes that objection head on and proves that it’s just utter nonsense: it doesn’t work, because *you can’t actually separate faith and works like that*. James answers this objection in the rest of v.18: “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” Note very carefully that James is not pitting faith against works; on the contrary, he’s saying: *you can’t do that*. You can’t completely separate faith from works like that, as if they are isolated matters that exist independent of each other. No - they are closely, inseparably related; so close, in fact, that our works - whether good or bad - display the content of our faith. What we do shows what we really believe and put our faith in. The relationship is so close, James says, that we visibly *show and demonstrate* our inward faith by the outward works in our lives! Faith in itself isn’t visible; to personally believe the Bible, trust the gospel promises of God, and put your faith, hope, and trust in Christ alone for salvation is something that happens in the heart! You certainly know it when it’s true of you, and it changes your life! But it’s also not something that other people can tangibly see. When you become a Christian and put your faith in Christ, your heart changes dramatically! But it’s not like the way you look changes - our skin doesn’t turn golden and we don’t get halos that hang over our heads or anything. When James says, “Show me your faith,” he’s being a bit sarcastic; he’s not down-playing the significance of faith by any means, but he’s just making the point that faith itself isn’t visible or objectively identifiable. We don’t have spiritual X-ray vision; when someone claims to be a Christian and professes faith in the gospel of Christ, we can’t pull off our Clark Kent glasses and use our spiritual Superman X-ray vision to peer into their hearts and know whether or not they are genuinely trusting in Christ.. That would be really nice if we could! But we can’t, it doesn’t work that way. So then, how can we tell whether or not someone has faith? If they have true faith in

Christ, then we can see it *by their works*. Likewise, if we really have faith, then other people should be able to tell by the works in our lives. Genuine faith in Christ leaves behind objective evidence of good works - repentance from bad works and the putting on of good works of obedience to God in Christ, loving God and loving other people.

But why is this the case? Why do true Christian faith and good works have such an intimate, inseparable relationship - so much so that you cannot have one without the other? It's because real, genuine faith in the gospel of Christ is *not* merely intellectual belief; true faith doesn't just mean that we believe certain things are true in our heads. Now, true faith certainly *includes this* - it's never *less* than intellectual belief - but it necessarily includes more; it's not just a matter of belief in our heads, but faith and trust flowing from our hearts, the very core of who we are. James makes this clear in v.19: "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe - and shudder!" When James says, "You believe that God is one," he's referencing back to the Shema of Deut. 6:4, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD your God, the LORD is one." It's a basic, confessional summary of orthodox belief in God, that there is only one, true, living, Creator God. James says if you say you believe this, you do well - we *have* to believe this in order to be Christians: to believe that God exists, specifically, the God of the Bible, and that there are no other gods but Him; the Lord is one. But just believing that fact *isn't enough to save you*. After all, James says, "Even the demons believe - and shudder!" The Devil and his demon hoards believe in God - they know good and well that He exists, that there is only one God, that He created all things. In fact, they even believe - they intellectually affirm with their head knowledge - that there is a coming judgment, and they shudder in fear of the living God! Just think of when Jesus walked up to two demon-possessed men in Matthew 8; as he was casting them out, the demons not only knew who Jesus was - they believed that Jesus is the Son of God and Messiah who came to bring salvation! - and they also *shuddered* before him, begging Jesus to have mercy on them for a time since the time of their final judgment had not yet come - and so Jesus sent them into the pigs. Yes, the demons believe in God, even in who Jesus is; they intellectually affirm the basic points of the gospel; they even shudder in fear of God, believing that the final judgment is coming and they will face God's Wrath! But we all know, obviously, *the demons aren't going to be saved!* Even though they have this intellectual belief in their heads, the demons don't put their faith and allegiance in God - no, they're living in outright, open, unrepentant rebellion against the Lord and all that is good! It doesn't matter that they believe

God exists - they have rejected the good, have rebelled against God, and they have chosen to align themselves with sin and evil and darkness.

And James' warning to us, and to all, is that if we just have this intellectual belief in our heads, but reject God with our hearts, then we're no better off than the demons of Hell. And that's because mere, intellectual belief is *not the same thing* as genuine, repentant faith in the gospel of Christ. Genuine faith requires intellectual belief - for example, that we believe that there is only one God, the God of the Bible, who Created all things; that He is the perfectly righteous Judge and Ruler over all; that we were created to be in relationship with Him but instead sinned and rebelled against Him; that we deserve God's wrath and eternal judgment in Hell; but that Jesus, God the Son, was born as a human baby, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross for our sins in our place, bearing the punishment we deserve; and that on the third day, Jesus rose again, showing that God accepted His sacrifice as satisfying atonement to save sinners from our sin; and that whoever repents from sin and puts their faith in Christ alone will be saved and raised to eternal life! This is the gospel message. But it's not enough just to intellectually *affirm* that these things happened or are true - that's essential, and we must believe that! But that in itself isn't saving faith. No, true saving faith means to *trust, receive, and respond to* this message; to actually be one of those who *repents and believes* - not just in our heads, but in our hearts! Saving faith means actually *trusting* in this gospel promise, casting your allegiance and all your hope on Christ alone, trusting in His mercy and grace as your only hope! Saving faith is *repentant*. And if you really have *this* kind of faith, it changes your life! It leaves a mark - the visible mark of repentance from sin and obedience to God.

This is why we can't truly separate faith from works. You can't say, "My faith is personal and precious" when it has no effect on your life whatsoever. Just because someone *says* they believe doesn't necessarily mean they are a Christian. Not too long ago, I was having a conversation with someone I am very close with and love very much. This person grew up in the church, claims to be a Christian, still claims to believe the Bible and the gospel - but has chosen to plunge head-first into a life of open sin, moving in with a significant other outside of marriage. Out of love and grave concern, I gently rebuked this person I love so dearly; when I asked if they knew that what they were doing was explicitly sinning against God, they said, "Yes, I know it's wrong... but it's the only way for me to be happy. And after all, I still believe in Jesus so I'm still going to be saved, so what does it matter what I do?" I was heartbroken. ANd with tears in my

eyes, I had to tell this person that I love so dearly that if they continue to dive headlong into sin, if they don't repent, but choose sin and darkness over the light and love of Christ, then they don't really have faith in Christ at all, and they will not be saved, but will go to Hell. I even went to this very passage, to make that clear. I wish I could say this person repented - but that didn't happen. They said they understood, but they still wanted to choose earthly happiness over eternal life. But even though the conversation was painful, and didn't end the way I wanted, I'm still very glad I had that conversation - because now, at least, this person I love doesn't have false assurance. Someone you love going to Hell is heartbreakingly tragic and terrifying - but the one thing even *worse* than that, is if you pat on them on the back and give them false assurance on the way there. With tears in our eyes and prayerful hearts, we need to love our friends and family enough to warn them that faith without works is dead and doesn't save anyone.

And instead, we need to point them - and ourselves - to the faith that *does* save. Which brings us to our final point:

III. Faith that Saves is Active and Necessarily Produces Works (2:20-26)

James finishes proving his point by giving two examples of what saving faith *does* look like in the lives of two Old Testament figures: Abraham and Rahab. First we see the example of Abraham, in vv.21-24: "Was not Abraham our father 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; 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. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." In Genesis, God gives Abraham a promise: He will give Abraham a son, and through Him, turn Abraham's family into God's chosen people, to live in God's promised land, and through Abraham's family would come the blessing of eternal life and favor with God! And then, God finally delivers: Abraham's son Isaac is miraculously born, against all odds! And then, the craziest thing happens: God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on the mountain. Abraham obeyed - but just as he was about to plunge down the knife, God stopped him, and provided a animal sacrifice to take Isaac's place!

Now why have all that happen just to stop Isaac from doing it? It's because it *proved that Abraham really did have faith in God to deliver on His promises!* Because Abraham believed, God considered him righteous - yes, Abraham was a sinner like us, but at the end of the day, he put his faith in God's promises! It wasn't mere intellectual belief - it was heartfelt faith, proven

by the fact that Abraham did what God said! Paul points to this passage - both in Rom. 4 and Gal. 3 - to prove that righteousness and justification comes by grace through *faith*, not works! But James here seems to say the opposite, doesn't he? He says Abraham was "justified by works" (v.21), that "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." But James isn't contradicting Paul here - he believes that we are justified by grace through faith, just as much as Paul does. But James is making sure we understand what *kind* of faith we're justified by: one that is *active*, accompanied by works of obedience to God, faith that is "completed by works," just as Abraham's was. The point is not that we are justified by faith plus works - no, of course not! Our good works could never be the basis of our salvation; only trusting in Christ's gracious substitutionary sacrifice can do that! If someone doesn't have an active, living faith, it's not like doing good things would save him! No, it's that he *actually needs to repent and put faith in the Lord!* The problem with faith without works is not that the works are missing - it's that *genuine faith in Christ* is missing. No, good works don't save us. But true, saving faith will always be accompanied by good works - or else it's dead, useless faith.

James makes this clear in the example of Rahab, in vv.25-26: "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? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead." This story comes from the book of Joshua, when Israel is about to go into the promised land. They send spies into the land, they come to the city of Jericho, fortified by it's strong, imposing walls - and they meet Rahab, this prostitute, who not only hides them from the townspeople, but also tells them that she has heard that their God is going to give this land to Israel - and she believes it! So much so that she casts her lot with Israel, promising to help them, as they in turn promise she will be saved. We know she believed in God and trusted in His promises for salvation because she *acted upon them* - she hid the spies, snuck them out of the window, and tied a scarlet thread outside, just as they told her to. Her works proved her faith - she was justified because she had an active, living, works-producing faith in God!

But still, we might ask: why does James list Rahab as an example here? Because *she was a foreign Gentile and a prostitute, and yet she produced the good works of faith!* It shows that this isn't about being justified by producing enough moral good works, cleaning yourself up, being perfect and moralistic - Not even about adding good works to your faith. No, it's all about having a certain *kind* of faith - a faith that necessarily results in works, responding to God

outwardly because you're responding to God inwardly. Furthermore, this shows that *anyone* can be justified through active, obedient faith - not just the legendary Abraham, but even a lowly, foreign, pagan prostitute. And that means even you and me, no matter how young or old, rich or poor, moral or immoral we may be! We're saved by grace through faith in Christ alone! But the faith that saves never is alone - it always results in *action*, a visible response to God.

So this passage leaves each one of us with the most important question you'll ever answer in your life: *Do you truly have faith in God?* Do you believe God exists, that this Bible really is His Word, that Christ did everything it says He did? If you do, that's good! But it's not enough; even the demons believe that. The next question, the even more important question, is: are you putting your *faith* in the Lord? Are you personally trusting in Christ alone as your Lord and Savior? Do you *really* believe the gospel, in your heart? Do you trust that Jesus shed His blood to pay the penalty that your sins deserve? Have you repented and asked the Lord to forgive you for all your sins and declare you righteous because of what Christ has done for you? Do you believe He has? Has it changed your life? Are you *willing* to let it change your life? Are you willing to put your faith into action? Because if you're not, then you don't have any faith - not really. If you're not willing to let Christ change your life, then you're not willing to let Him save your life either. I plead with you: put your faith in Christ - with a living, active faith! Put your faith into action!

But maybe you do believe; maybe you are willing to put your faith in action - how do you do that? How do you respond to the gospel with repentant faith? The very first good work God has given us to demonstrate our faith is *baptism*. Baptism is supposed to be the first good work of obedience that marks out Christian faith - it's the way we're supposed to make our faith public, the way we profess our faith to the world! It's the first way we're called to put our faith into action so that our faith can be *heard* from our mouths but also *visibly seen* in our life. If