

Is Your Faith Real?

James 2:14-26

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I'm sure you've all heard the statement, "Your actions speak louder than your words." You know it well; it's been around a long time. That's what our passage today in the book of James is all about. The topic of our text is the central theme of the book of James. If you were to pick out a section of James that is basically the central theme and purpose of the book of James, it would be James 2:14-26. The title is Does Your Faith Work or Is Your Faith Real? Is it genuine? Is it authentic?

It is very possible that you can be deceived into thinking that you are a Christian or that you are going to heaven when you're really not. That's a false assurance, and we don't want anyone to have a false assurance. It's also possible to have eternal life and be a child of God but to lack assurance. We want you who are in that state to have assurance; to know that you have eternal life. Satan wants to steal your assurance. I believe the Bible teaches that we can know that we have eternal life, and thus be effective in living the Christian life.

As it is in our day, so it was in James' day. There were some who claimed to have faith in Jesus Christ, yet their lives showed no evidence of that faith. I've mentioned earlier in my studies in James the children's song:

If you're saved and you know it,

Then your life will surely show it.

If you're saved and you know it,

Say Amen.

If you're saved and you know it, your life is going to show it, and that's what James is actually saying in these verses. James is saying, "Examine yourselves to see if your faith is real."

There are three questions we need to ask, based on this text—three main points that are questions that we need to ask—in order to determine if my faith is real and genuine. Here is question number one you need to ask yourself: Is your faith just an empty claim? In other words, you are just a professor, but you're not a possessor. You have the talk, but you don't have the walk. Notice it in verses 14-17. James asks, "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says..."—Notice the key word in these verses is "say." It's his talk—"...he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?"—or "Can that kind of faith save him?"—"If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says..."—There it is again—"...to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

Anyone can say, "I have faith. I am a Christian." But the question is: Do they have the works to back it up? If not, it is just an empty profession. An empty profession can save no one. You can't be saved by just saying these certain things. I want you to notice in verse 14 that an empty profession cannot save you. Verse 14 says, "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?" Notice in verse 14 the key word "say" or "says." It appears in verse 14, in verse 16 and in verse 18. So they are professing, but they are not possessing. They say—they have the talk—but they don't have the walk.

James is asking two rhetorical questions in verse 14, which demand negative answers. I don't know if you noticed it, but in verse 14 there were two question marks. He starts with asking, "If you have faith but not works, can that faith save him?" Basically James is saying, "No, no, no, no; you can't just say that you have faith if you don't have works to back it up." Your actions are speaking louder than your words.

I don't know if you've ever read the story by John Bunyan called Pilgrim's Progress, but it's a spiritual allegory of a man named Christian who leaves the city of Destruction, and he's on his way to the Celestial City. It's about Christian's journey to heaven. He encounters different characters that depict different aspects of the Christian life. One of the characters he meets on his journey to the Celestial City is the man he calls "Talkative." What he says about Talkative is that "His religion is only in his tongue." I like that. All he does is talk, talk, talk. All of his religion is in his tongue and not in the way he lives.

So my question to you is: Does your walk measure up to your talk?

"Well, I'm a Christian. I believe in Jesus. Oh yeah; I follow Christ." But is your life backing up what you say with your words?

I want you to notice, secondly, about this empty profession. Not only does it not save, but it doesn't serve. It has no compassion. It doesn't show mercy. It doesn't help other people. James gives us an illustration of the truth found in verses 15-16. He says, "If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food..."—so you meet a fellow Christian, a brother or sister in the Lord, and they are "naked." The King James "naked" is not the best translation. It means scantily dressed. It doesn't mean they are stark naked in their birthday suit. It just means that they have shabby, old, raggedy clothes on, it's cold and they need more to put on. They may need a coat. Here's the point: If "one of you..."—another brother or sister—"...says to them..."—who are naked and destitute—"...'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body..."—Here's the question—"...what does it profit?" You know the answer: Absolutely nothing. Big deal.

So you leave here and go to In-N-Out for lunch and you're eating a double-double with extra onion and mustard added with a spread—which is the way I order my double-double. Try it; it's awesome—and you're eating and look over and think, I saw that person at Revival. They're shivering in the cold, they don't have money to buy food and you ask them, "Hey, don't you go

to Revival?"

"Yeah. I'm a Christian."

"Oh, good to meet you." You detect that they're hungry and need help, but you say, "God bless you. Be filled. And I'll see you in church next Sunday." And you go away thinking, Maybe I should have offered to buy them something to eat. Maybe I should have given them my coat. Maybe I should have helped them out. Maybe I should have asked, 'Do you have a place to stay? Are you okay?'

So basically James is saying that all of your profession means nothing if you don't back it up with works; you don't do good things, you don't show benevolence and care. Remember that Jesus said, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." And there's no better way to show love than to roll up your sleeves and help other people.

In 1 John 3:17-18, John said, "Whosoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother has need, and shuts up his tender mercy and compassion from him, how could you say the love of God dwells in him? My little children, let us not love in word, nor in tongue, but in deed and in truth."

So James is saying, in summary, "Your profession is empty and dead." In verse 17 of our text, he says, "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

I want to mention a couple of points. A lot of people are confused with these verses, because it seems to contradict the teaching of Paul, which says we are saved by grace through faith; that a man is justified by faith alone. We don't work to get to heaven. God saves us by His grace. All we do is trust Jesus, and we're forgiven. That is indeed what Paul teaches. That is indeed what the Bible teaches.

So how do I reconcile that with James when he says we are not saved by our faith alone but also by works? Many people confuse this and will use it to teach that we are saved by faith plus works, when the Bible actually teaches that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Let me reconcile it for you: They are not fighting one another; James and Paul are not against each other. They are actually back to back fighting different enemies. James is talking about justification before men, the fruit of our salvation. Paul is talking about justification before God, the root of our salvation. When Paul talks about justification by faith alone in Christ alone, he's talking about our initial salvation when our sins are forgiven and God sees our hearts. When James talks about justification, it's more in the sense of vindication before men, who can't see our hearts; they can only see our lives.

Someone said that faith is somewhat like calories. (This one really convicted me this week, an illustration that convicted Pastor Miller.) You can't see calories, but you can really see the effect on your body when you eat calories. You can't actually see a calorie, but you can see what it

does to you. You can't really see your faith, but you can see what it does to you, how it changes your life.

So the idea is that Paul is teaching that you are saved by faith alone, but James is teaching that faith that saves is not alone; it manifests itself in works. Thus the conclusion is that "Faith...if it does not have works, is dead." You have a dead faith.

Let me ask you the second question from the text showing us where we need to examine our lives. Ask yourself: Is your faith in just a creed? The first question was: Is my faith just a confession? Is it just words? Now ask yourself the second question: Is my faith in just a creed? In a doctrine or in a belief but not in a person, Jesus Christ? This is in verses 18-20. James says, "but someone will say..."—key word "say"—"...‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works..."—You can't do that; you can't show someone your faith without your works. Faith can only be seen by the evidence of your works—"...and I will show you my faith by my works." That's how it's done.

Verse 19 says, "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!" Faith is more than believing a creed. James has, in verse 18, an imaginary objector. This objector says—and we hear it all the time—"Well, I have faith. I believe. I'm a Christian." But they can't back it up with their works, their life. So James says, "I'll show you my faith by the way that I live, by my works."

By the way, when Paul uses the word "works," he's talking about works of the Law, keeping the Commandments in order to be saved; we cannot do that. When James uses the word "works," he's talking about philanthropy or love in action: compassion, helping people in time of need—a life that reaches out to others. That's the mark of the believer.

So basically James is saying here, "Your faith can't be just something you say. It has to be something that you do."

Jesus saw the faith of the four men who were the friends of the paralytic. They put him on a mat, went up on top of the house and tore the roof off. They lowered their friend down on the mat into the house right in front of Jesus. Jesus was in the home teaching. They ripped the roof off and they lowered their friend down, and the Bible says that Jesus "saw their faith." Don't you love that? What did He see? He saw them in action. They had so much faith that they ripped the roof off; they put a hole in the roof. I don't know whose house it was, by the way. Some people think it was Peter's. "Ay, yai, yai! They're going to pay for that roof!" Tore a big hole. Lowered their friend down. And Jesus "saw their faith."

Here's my question to you: Can anyone see your faith? Not just hear what you say, but can they see it in the way that you live? So is your faith in just a creed?

Here's my point, verse 19: "You believe that there is one God." That's orthodox; that's accurate. The Bible teaches there is only one God. There aren't a multitude of gods. The Bible doesn't teach polytheism or pantheism. It teaches monotheism, one God. Taken from

Deuteronomy 6:4, it says, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord." We, as Christians, are monotheistic; we believe in one God. So that is orthodox belief; you have right belief.

So James says, "You do well." But then he points out: "Even the demons believe—and tremble!" Not only do you have a dead faith, but if your faith is in a creed, you have a demonic faith. This is something that can freak people out. They don't realize it, but you can have "all your ducks in a row" doctrinally, you can have everything correct intellectually, you can assent to that truth—"I believe in one God. I believe in Jesus. I believe He died. I believe He arose. I believe the Bible is the Word of God."—but still not be saved. You can be that close to salvation and still not be saved. Being that close does not mean you're saved. There are no degrees of salvation. It's like death; you're either dead or alive. You aren't kind of "semi-dead." You're either alive spiritually, or you're dead spiritually. Jesus said, "You must be born again." So James points out that believing correctly is demonic if it doesn't change your life.

Do you know that demons believe in one God? They actually believe there is only one, true and living God? They know the truth? They know more about God than we do, and they tremble. It's interesting that they believe—that's the mind; they believe in one God—that's the truth; and they tremble—that's the emotion. So you can have the right thoughts and the right belief and you can tremble but not be truly saved.

I remember before I surrendered to the Lord. I was in high school. Whenever I encountered a Christian who would witness to me, I would come under such heavy conviction. Sometimes I'd even start to cry. But I was running and resisting and fighting against God. I knew Jesus was the Savior. I knew the Bible was the Word of God. I knew Christianity was true, but I hadn't committed my life to Him.

You can come to church every Sunday and believe everything the preacher says but die and go to hell, if you haven't trusted Jesus Christ. You can even say, "Amen!" when the preacher is preaching and go to hell when you die, because you haven't trusted Jesus Christ.

So it's not enough just to believe with your mind in some facts or a creed. It's not enough to just feel it with your emotions—to cry and be sentimental and emotional. You must trust with your life. That's what it means to be a Christian; have you trusted Christ alone? Christianity is not a creed; Christianity is Christ. Christianity isn't just believing certain things; it's trusting a person, Jesus Christ. A lot of people get those confused. "Okay, I gotta be indoctrinated and believe what Christians believe." That's wonderful, but if it doesn't change the way you live....

We exercise faith all the time. About 100 of us are going to get on a plane and go to Israel for a couple of weeks. We're going to land in Tel Aviv. You have to get on the plane to go to Israel. You can stand on the tarmac and look at the plane and say, "I believe that plane can fly me to Israel," but unless you get on the plane, you're not going anywhere.

You can say, "I believe in Jesus. I believe He died. I believe He rose from the dead." But have you trusted Him? Have you put your faith in Him? Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the

life; no one comes to the Father except through Me.” Jesus isn’t a stairway to heaven. He’s an escalator. I like that.

Don’t you thank God for escalators? I thank God for those moving sidewalks in the airport. You just stand on them and they move you along. My wife is into exercise, and she wants to use the stairs. I say, “Okay, I’ll pray for you,” as I go up the escalator. She’s walking and I wave as I go by. But Christianity isn’t a set of stairs you have to work your way up. You just step on Christ, like an escalator, and He takes you there.

Some say, “Oh, Christianity is just a crutch.” No; it’s a stretcher. It gets you where you’re going. Jesus takes you but you must first put yourself in Christ. You must trust Him. You must put your faith in Jesus Christ. Demons have right doctrine, but they’re not saved. They’re not going to heaven.

The first question was: Is it just an empty claim? The second question was: Is it a creed or is it Christ? Here’s the third and last question: Does your faith produce a committed, obedient life? So the question is: Has your life changed? Is there fruit or evidence of salvation?

James now gives us two examples of real faith—not a dead faith, not a demonic faith, but a real faith. He uses two examples from the Old Testament. One is a patriarch, Abraham, and the other is a prostitute, Rahab. Verses 21-26 say, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?” or “complete.” “And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it...’—that is, his faith or belief—“...was accounted...”—or “imputed” or “reckoned”—“...to him for righteousness.’ And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

What a contrast between Abraham, the patriarch, and Rahab, the prostitute! One was a Jew; the other was a Gentile. One was a man; the other a woman. One was a friend of God; the other belonged to the enemies of God. But what they had in common was a faith and a belief and a trust in God that resulted in their salvation and a changed life.

Why would James use these two extremes—the very religious, Jewish, Hebrew man, Abraham and the very, very, ungodly, wicked woman, Rahab the harlot? By the way, she was a prostitute. She wasn’t just an innkeeper. The Bible makes it very clear. I believe James used these extremes, because most people lie somewhere in between these two; not as good as Abraham, but not as bad as Rahab. Although I’ve seen people who are really wicked and sinful get saved, and God transforms and changes their lives. Maybe you are at one of those extremes. But it is basically saying that God saves religious people and even so-called “wicked” people. Everyone in between, likewise, must trust God in order to be saved.

Let's first look at Abraham. Notice that Abraham's faith is demonstrated, in verse 21, when he offered up Isaac upon the altar. "Was not Abraham our father justified..."—or "vindicated"—"...by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?" When did that happen? It happened in Genesis 22. God came to Abraham and said, "Offer thy son upon an altar on a mountain that I will show thee of." You can imagine how difficult that must have been for Abraham. But faith obeys God in spite of the consequences. Abraham believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead if God allowed him to plunge the knife into his only son.

By the way, I believe the same mountain that Abraham offered Isaac on was the same mountain that God the Father offered God the Son to die upon. Mount Mariah was Calvary, where Jesus died for the sins of the world.

Can you imagine that you have one son, and God said to offer him up on a mountain. Now God knew all the time that He wasn't going to ask Abraham to plunge the knife in; He was going to stop him. But He was testing Abraham's faith to see if Abraham really loved Him. It could be that Abraham was starting to switch his love and affection to his son and away from God, so God wanted to win his love and make sure he loved Him supremely.

Can you imagine how easy it would have been to resist that or fight against that? But early the next morning, Abraham got up and saddled the donkey and took off. I would have slept in that day. I would have argued with God. I would have resisted God. But if you really are a Christian, it's going to result in obedience in faith. You really want God's will. You'll follow His will, no matter what it costs, no matter how difficult it might be. And the blessings will come.

So the manifestation of his faith took place in Genesis 22. It's important to note that, as far as the timeline is concerned. Again, even though Paul says that Abraham is an example of salvation by faith, it says here that it was manifested among men "when he offered Isaac his son on the altar."

It was not only the demonstration of his faith but the vindication of his faith in verses 22-23. Notice that his "faith was made perfect." Verse 22 says, "Do you see that faith was working together with his works..."—a reference to Genesis 22, the offering of Isaac—"...and by works faith was made perfect?"—meaning "complete." So the trials and testings of life mature our faith. It was perfected.

The evidence of a fruit tree being what it's supposed to be is the fruit when it's borne on that tree. I'm thinking of this little orange tree we have that has only been about two feet tall for the last six years. As you can tell, we don't know how to grow orange trees. We're about ready to tear it out of the ground. It's never had any oranges on it. It's professing. It claims to be an orange tree; the tag on it says it's an orange tree. But there aren't any oranges on it. If it had oranges, I would be assured it's an orange tree. How do you know an orange tree is really an orange tree? It gets oranges! How do you know a Christian is really a Christian? It shows Christ-likeness in their lives. Christ manifests Himself in them. So Abraham's life was vindicated, because it was made perfect.

Also Abraham's life fulfilled Scripture. Notice verse 23, which says, "And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God...'—that's faith—"...and it..."—that is, his faith or his belief—"...was accounted to him for righteousness." That's teaching that Abraham was declared righteous by God simply because of his faith.

"And he was called the friend of God." When did that happen? That happened in Genesis 15. Chronologically, Genesis 15 comes before Genesis 22. There is a 40-year gap between the two. So in Genesis 15, "Abraham believed God," and God gave to Abraham righteousness. That's the foundation and basis on which God saves sinners. Not by their works, but by their faith.

God said to Abraham, "Come out of the tent" late one night. Abraham was 75 years old. He didn't have any children. Not much hope you'll have kids at 75 unless you adopt them. God said, "Abraham, look at the sky." In those days they could see the stars clearly; no lights to weaken the sight of the stars. God said, "Abraham, that's how many kids you're going to have." And being 75, Abraham said, "I have to go sit down for a minute. What did you say, God?"

"You're going to have as many kids as the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore."

"Whoa!" Can you imagine trying to tell Sarah that? "Get ready, sister! You've got some kids on the way!"

But Abraham didn't argue with God. He didn't question God. The Bible says that Abraham said, "Okay. I believe it. You bring life out of death, so you can resurrect Sarah's womb. You can bring life where there is no life. I believe that." So God says, "Okay. You are declared righteous." That's the very way that God still saves sinners.

God said, "My Son died on the Cross for your sins. He was buried. He rose from the dead. If you'll repent of your sins and trust in Him, I'll forgive you and give you eternal life and take you to heaven when you die." What you do is say, "I believe it. I trust that. I accept that." Then God says, "Okay. I declare you righteous." This is justification.

So 40 years after Genesis 15, Abraham offered his son Isaac on the altar, and his faith was justified or vindicated before men. He was saved by faith alone, and his works manifested the reality of his saving faith.

Abraham also became known as "the friend of God." I love that. Can you imagine that? "God's my friend. God calls me His 'friend.' We walk and we talk and we commune with one another." That's what Christianity is; it's a relationship with the living God.

Then the conclusion about Abraham is in verse 24: "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only." Again, James is not contradicting Paul. Rather, he's saying that our faith is manifested in works, which confirms our faith and demonstrates the reality of our faith.

Then we move to the prostitute, Rahab, verse 25. What about her faith? James says, “Likewise...”—just like Abraham—“...was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?” The answer to this rhetorical question is “Yes.” Rahab, by faith, hid the spies and sent them out another direction.

This is recorded in Joshua 2 in the Old Testament. What happened was the Israelites were going into the land of Canaan to spy it out. They crossed the Jordan River and came into Jericho. So they wouldn’t be detected, they went to the place of ill repute. They went to the place where a harlot kept her house. They knocked on the door, and when Rahab opened the door, she could tell these men were different. They weren’t there for the usual reasons.

If you study the account in Joshua, Rahab asked, “You’re Israelites; right?”

“Yes.”

“We have heard about the God of Israel. We have heard about all the miracles and the things your God has done. Our hearts are melting; we know that we are under the judgment of God, that we are a condemned people.” So she took those spies and hid them in her home, because the soldiers came looking for them. She heard a knock on the door.

“Rahab, where are those two men who just came in?”

She said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. They were here but they went that-a-way.” She sent them off in a different direction.

Then she went up on the roof, uncovered the spies and said to them, “Now you go the other way, and you’ll be okay.” But she also said, “When you come back to destroy this city, remember me and my family.”

They said, “Okay. We want you to do this: Take this scarlet rope and hang it out the window. When our soldiers see that, it indicates that we don’t kill you, we don’t destroy you, we save you alive.”

So Rahab was moved with faith. Her mind was educated—she knew the God of Israel. Her emotions were stirred—“we’re trembling.” And she put her faith into action—she hid the spies, she protected them and sent them another way. Then she dropped the scarlet rope out of her window, which was an act of faith, believing the promises that were made to her.

The reward for her faith was that she and her family were saved, and she became part of the nation of Israel. And in Matthew 1:5, where you read the genealogy and lineage of Jesus Christ, you see Rahab the prostitute. How’s that for a rich heritage? You’re reading the genealogical record of Jesus Christ, and in the middle of it, there is a prostitute. Bathsheba is also in the genealogical line of Jesus. She was the woman who committed adultery with King David. Both of these women were in the very lineage of Jesus the Messiah. Rahab was also mentioned in Hebrew 11, in the great hall of faith.

Everybody is interested in their ancestry. We have ancestry.com. You see the commercial that says, "I thought I was a German until I found out I was Irish, so I had to change my skirt and dance a little differently." With all sympathy to your nationality—Who cares what nationality you are?! You're a sinner who needs to be saved by God's grace.

I want to do one of my own commercials: "I was wondering about my heritage. I realized I was from Adam the first, and I'm a sinner going to hell. I discovered who I am, and I need to get saved!" That's who we all are; we all go back to two people: Adam and Eve. That's where we're from, and because of our inheritance from Adam and Eve, we're sinners and we need to be saved.

First James mentions Abraham and then he mentions Rahab. Now here's the conclusion in verse 26: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." James actually closes with another illustration. It's a little morbid—a corpse, a dead body. By the way, this is the Biblical definition of death, what constitutes death: "the body without the spirit." The immaterial part of you leaves the material part of you. Every person living will eventually die. "It is appointed to everyone once to die, and after this, the judgment." We continue to live after we leave our bodies; we'll either go to heaven or to hell, depending on where our faith lies. We'll go to heaven if we trust in Jesus Christ.

I've done a lot of funerals in my years as a pastor. I've seen a lot of corpses. I can't tell you the number of times when coffins are open people say, "Oh, they look so good! They really looked great!" I'm thinking, Really?! Now they can do a lot with a body, but they're still dead. They may look good, but there's no life there. They're dead in their trespasses and sins if they're not saved.

Now you can have a dead faith, which is just your words; you can have a demonic faith, which is just your intellect—you believe the right things, but you haven't trusted Jesus Christ; or you can have a dynamic faith, which actually says, "God, I trust You. Lord, I put my faith in You. I'm going to go to heaven not because I'm good, not because I've been baptized, not because I believe the Bible's the Word of God, not because I live in a Christian nation, but because I've trusted Jesus Christ as my Savior."

After examining your own heart, is your faith dead? Is it demonic? Or is it dynamic? Is it real? Is it alive? I want to give you an opportunity if you don't know for sure that when you die you'll go to heaven, you don't know for sure that your sins are forgiven, you don't know for sure that you've really been born again. Jesus told Nicodemus, a very religious Jewish man, that "You must be born again to enter the kingdom of God." It's not going to church, it's not being baptized, it's not being good—no one's too good; no one's too bad. We all must be born of God's Spirit. If you don't have that assurance, if you don't know for sure, if there is any doubt or question in your mind, I want to give you that opportunity today.

Jesus died on the Cross for your sins. When He died on that Cross, He paid for your sins. He was buried and three days later, He rose from the dead. That doesn't mean you're

automatically saved. You must trust Him for salvation. You must put your faith in Him to be saved. If you haven't done that, you need to do it right now. The Bible says He'll forgive your sins, He'll give you the hope of heaven and He'll change your life from the inside out.