



Faith Alive
James 2:14-26

The Church at Canyon Creek, Austin, Texas
©Monty Watson – July 16, 2017

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After the attacks on 9/11, a high school senior named Joseph Kapacziewski enlisted in the Army.¹ He rose through ranks and became a sergeant with the Army Rangers. During one tour in Iraq, a grenade was tossed into his vehicle and exploded on the right side of his body. His leg was shattered and nerve damage left his right arm useless. Doctors feared he would never walk again, but Joe had other plans.

When friends came to visit him at Walter Reed, they heard Joe vow to rejoin his unit. They would smile and admire his spirit, but knew it was impossible. And, it was agonizing for his wife Kimberly to watch, because Joe had a resistance to morphine that made it ineffective. So, for seven months, with Kimberly by his side day and night, Joe underwent 40 surgeries to repair his body and was in constant pain. Even though he lost his leg, he was determined to return to his unit.

It took five years, but Joe passed every qualification to return as a Ranger. After five years of grueling rehab, Joe could run five miles under 40 minutes, he could hike 12 miles under 3 hours, he could fast rope from a helicopter with 60 pounds of gear, and he requalified to parachute on one leg. Joe was once again an Army Ranger. He was fitted with a prosthetic leg and parachuted out of an airplane with his unit into Afghanistan. He was the first and only amputee to return to combat, and has completed four deployments as an amputee. Sgt. Joseph Kapacziewski has received multiple medals, including the “V” for valor and three Purple Hearts.

When a soldier loses a leg, it is devastating. And every amputee desires one thing – to walk again, to be whole again. Sgt. Kapacziewski’s story is heroic and offers many lessons. One I want to highlight is that it takes two legs to go into combat, even if one is prosthetic. As Christians, it takes two legs to go into combat. It takes two legs to walk with Jesus. It take the leg of faith, the faith, what we believe, holding to our dearest convictions. It also takes the leg of obedience, of surrendering to His Lordship, of living out our faith. Faith without obedience is like having only one leg. It takes two legs to go into combat, and it takes both faith and obedience to follow and walk with Jesus. Declaring our faith with no commitment and no evidence of lifechange is like having only one leg. It’s life with a limp. This morning, James confronts faith without obedience.

James was the brother of Jesus.² He did not believe his brother was the Messiah until after the resurrection.³ But from that moment on, he was convinced and became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. James wrote one of the first letters in the New Testament, and he wrote it to Jewish Christians who were new in their faith, and enduring persecution.⁴ So, James wrote this letter to encourage them to persevere, to be faithful, and to hang on their faith.

James challenged his readers to be ***“doers of the word, and not merely hearers.”*** He said, “A hearer of the word and not a doer is like a man who looks intently at his face in a mirror, and after looking at himself, walks away and immediately forgets what he looks like” (James 1:23-24). That’s absurd. No one looks in a mirror and then forgets what they look like. And it’s absurd to look into God’s word and not do what it ways. A mirror shows us what we look like on the outside, but the word of God shows us what we look like on the inside. “Be doers of the word, and not

merely hearers.” That challenge still stands. To look in the mirror of God’s word and ask the question, *does the life I live reflect the faith I profess?*

That’s the question James raised in chapter 2. Is your faith real? Is your faith alive? So, listen to the one of the most challenging and piercing passages in the New Testament.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and 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? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

¹⁸But 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. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder! ²⁰Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? (James 2:14-20, ESV).

Faith is both a noun and a verb. Faith is a noun when we say “the faith.” Faith as a noun is the content of what we believe. It’s the beliefs we hold dear. But faith is also a verb. It is living and breathing and moving. It’s the way we live. Faith is not just a doctrinal statement on a piece of paper; it’s a set of convictions that shape the way we live, that propel us to follow Jesus.

We cannot divide Jesus. There is no such thing as believing in Jesus as Savior without submitting to Him as Lord. He is both. And He demands both belief and obedience. That’s what James is so adamant about. James 2 is about “faith alive.” That’s why James said faith without works is dead. Faith without evidence is no faith at all. So, again the piercing question. *Does the life I live reflect the faith I profess?*

THE THEOLOGICAL QUESTION

James 2 forces us to clarify a theological question. James wrote more about practical things than theology things, but he had to clarify a distortion that was spreading in the new church. The confusion was over what kind of faith saves a person. What does true, saving faith look like?

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (James 2:14, ESV). The rest of the Bible is clear that faith in Jesus is all it takes to become a Christian. James is not disputing that. But he is challenging the person who professes faith in Jesus and yet has no evidence of lifechange. James is asking if that faith is real. And the answer is “no.” Faith without any evidence of lifechange is no faith at all.

We need to go further to clarify this, because in 2:24, James says, “A person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” That contradicts the theology of Paul, who said, “A person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law” (Romans 3:28, NIV).

So, what do we do with this contradiction?

The science of interpreting the Bible is called hermeneutics. And a chief principle of hermeneutics is to let Scripture interpret Scripture. When one verse is confusing, we look at other verses in the Bible which address the same issue and look for clarification. We can do that with this apparent contradiction and reconcile James and Paul.

Then Paul said, “a person is justified by faith,” he was talking about justification, how to become a Christian. He was talking about faith as the necessary step leading to conversion. We might say he was talking about faith as a noun, about believing the content of the Gospel. Paul was confronting a distortion of the Gospel that said a person could, by their works, earn God’s favor and earn salvation. That’s impossible. “A person is justified by faith” in order to become a Christian.

James, on the other hand, was confronting a different distortion, the lazy notion that mere words were enough. When James said, “a person is justified by works,” he was talking about sanctification, how to live as a Christian.⁵ He was talking about a lifestyle flowing from conversion. We might say that James was talking about faith as a verb, about living out the Gospel.

It’s unfortunate that, throughout Christian history, so many have confused this and pitted James against Paul. James and Paul were confronting different distortions of the Gospel, and they were in full agreement on the Gospel.

Paul is clear in Ephesians 2 when he writes about faith and works. “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. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus ***to do good works***, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:8-10, NIV). And James is in full agreement when he speaks of Abraham’s faith. “You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works” (James 2:22, ESV).

So, let’s be clear. Faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to become a Christian. But, faith without evidence of a changed life is no faith at all.

THE PERSONAL QUESTION

Now to the heart of the passage, to ***the personal question – does the life I live reflect the faith I profess?***

“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” (James 2:18, ESV).

Maybe you grew up in a Christian home, or you went to youth camp as a teenager, or you’re a member the church. James says, “So what? Show me your faith!” True faith is living and breathing and moving. Faith alive has a lifestyle to prove it.

True faith, faith alive, bears fruit. Paul said, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23, NAS).

Paul and James were echoing Jesus. “Every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit ... So then, you will know them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord’ ... but I will say, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me’ ” (Matthew 7:17, 20-23, NAS).

Jesus was so direct when He asked the crowd, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46, NAS). And that’s the point of the letter of James. “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (James 1:22).

James gives this practical example. “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? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:15-17, ESV). “Go in peace” sounds pious, but it doesn’t do a hungry person any good! James is confronting false compassion. The Apostle John did too. “Whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth” (1 John 3:17-18, NAS). Passing by the poor calls our faith into question. Because, if the compassionate one lives in us, then compassion should flow from us. Jesus talked about loving the “least of these” as proof of our faith.

Verse 19 has a bite when James said, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder” (James 2:19, ESV).⁶ Remember, James was writing to people with a long history of Jewish religion. He was also writing to people who were new to the Christian faith. But he refused to be soft about faith without works. He told them they were no better than the demons. In fact, demons have more respect for God than we do, because they have seen God. They were in heaven with God. They saw Him in all of His glory. They know what He is like. And they “shudder.” Luke 8 records the story of Jesus encountering a demon-possessed man near the Sea of Galilee. When the demon saw Jesus, the Bible says he cried out and fell down before Jesus and said with a loud voice, “Jesus, Son of the Most High God ... I beg you, do not torment me” (Luke 8:28). That demon knew it was Jesus and he shuddered. James said, “Even the demons believe.”

Being a Christian is more than acknowledging the existence of God. It is throwing yourself at the feet of Jesus and asking for mercy, and once mercy is granted, it is adoring Him and following Him and obeying Him.

James did not lighten up. “Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?” (James 2:20, ESV). Then he gave two of the greatest examples of faith in Jewish history – Abraham and Rahab. Their stories were as familiar to James’ readers as the stories of Washington and Lincoln to us.

Abraham was the father of Israel, the godly patriarch. He was the revered example of faith because he left his homeland at the command of the Lord. He even tied his son Isaac to an altar and was willing to sacrifice him as a test by the Lord. Verse 23 declares that “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”⁷ By faith, he believed God. And trusted God enough to put his faith into action.

Rahab was a prostitute from the pagan city of Jericho. God sent spies to Jericho to plan an attack. Rahab had heard about the great God of the Hebrews, so she helped the spies. For Rahab, faith was believing and doing. She put her faith into action.

James summarizes his point in verse 22, writing about the faith of Abraham. “You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works” (James 2:22, ESV).

Faith in action is ...

- 50 students in Progreso this week
- a team of 8 in Czech Republic
- last month, 10 from our church joining 300 others to build a church in New Mexico in one week
- Faith in action is the Dilbecks moving to California to plant a church. There is no church there yet! But they are going. Selling their furniture, selling a truck, and renting a 1,000sf house with three kids.
- And it's you and I putting faith in action every day.

Again, James does not lighten up on this. “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:26, ESV). If there is no evidence of your faith, if there is no evidence of lifechange, you are like a corpse!

So what is the Christian life supposed to look like? What is faith alive? What is the evidence of true faith?

- It's a love for God, adoring Him and worshiping Him.
- It's humility before a holy God, bowing before Him in reverence and awe.⁸
- It's gratitude for grace. “Oh Lord, thank You, thank You, thank You!”
- It's submission to His Lordship, surrendering to Him, following His lead, putting your entire life in His hands.
- It's obedience to everything He says, completely, exactly, joyfully, doing whatever He says.
- It's the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.⁹
- It's saying “no” to the world. It's heeding Paul's warning, “Do not be conformed to this world.” It's rejecting the values of the culture and choosing to stand with Jesus.
- It's loving people. Loving the worst and loving the least. It's loving all kinds of people.
- It's going to work, doing your job with integrity, and being a light to those around you.
- It's knowing that all you have is a gift from God, and acknowledging that by giving and tithing as a way to express your thanks to God.
- It's praying with your kids before they go to bed at night.

- It's a burden for lost people, for people who are far from God, and caring enough to tell them about Jesus, to tell them what Jesus has done for you and why you love Him so much.
- It's the sole ambition of pleasing God; no longer pursuing satisfaction in career, affluence, materialism
- It's praying moment by moment in dependence of God.
- It's feeding on God's word. As Jeremiah said, "When I discovered your words, I devoured them. They are my joy and my heart's delight" (Jeremiah 15:16, NLT).
- It's being a doer of the word.¹⁰ Be doers of the word, because faith without works is dead. Because faith without evidence of lifechange is no faith at all.

CONCLUSION

I want to ask Shawn to come up and wrap up our morning. This past week, Shawn wrote prayer for their mission to California. When he read it to me, I knew it was the appropriate ending to this message. This is Shawn's heart for a new church in California, but also his prayer for us.

So what are we for?

We're for the down and out and the up and out
We're for both sides of the track

We are for kindergarten teachers and bartenders, single moms and soccer coaches
We're for families ... step dad's, tired dads and the fatherless
We're for the addicted, the confused, the hurting and the hungry
We are for each other

We are for the forgotten and the has been, the ambitious and the dreamers
We are for those who have it all together and for those who know better
We are for those who think, act and vote different
We're for artists and accountants, for the CEO's and the no-one-knows

We are for grace, grace for everyone
We are for hope, hope for everyone
We are for reciprocating an incredible love that is found in Christ

We're for loving where we live and knowing our neighbors
We're for block parties and back yard fire pits.
We are for listening to one another, we're for face-to-face and for real togetherness

We are for extending a hand, swinging a hammer, and being there when we are called upon
We are for students and teachers having everything they need to succeed
We are for what is wanted and needed

We are for a community, a community that would love a city and point to Jesus
We are for people, people who matter to God.

We are for Jesus in Santa Barbara
We are for Jesus in Austin

NOTES

¹ Gregg Zoroya, “Despite the loss of a leg, Army Ranger is back in the fight,” *USA Today*, June 27, 2011.

² According to Matthew 13:55, Jesus had four brothers, James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, and 13:56 also mentions sisters.

³ See John 7:5, also 1 Corinthians 15:7.

⁴ Peter also wrote to those who were “scattered” throughout the Mediterranean world (1 Peter 1:1).

⁵ See Titus 1:16, about “those who profess to know God, but by their deeds deny Him.”

⁶ “God is one” is a reference to the sacred Shema in Deuteronomy 6. Every Jew quoted this. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

⁷ See Genesis 15 and Romans 4.

⁸ See Psalm 2:11.

⁹ See Galatians 5:22-23.

¹⁰ See James 1:22.