

James 2:14-26

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[0 : 00] which is found on page 15 of the church Bibles. And our second reading is from James. Please turn with me to Genesis 15.

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision.

Do not be afraid, Abraham. I am your shield, your very great reward. But Abraham said, O sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?

And Abraham said, You have given me no children, so a servant in my household will be my heir. Then the word of the Lord came to him.

This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir. He took him outside and said, Look up at the heavens and count the stars, if indeed you can count them.

[1 : 17] Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be. Abraham believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness. Our second Bible reading, as I said, is from James.

It's James chapter 2, verses 14 to 26. But before we turn there, I'm going to briefly summarize the other two Old Testament passages that James will refer to in this letter.

James refers to Abraham and Rahab in this section of his letter. In referring to Abraham, he mentions the passage we just read, as well as the start of Genesis 22, where God tests Abraham by calling to him and telling him to sacrifice the promised son, Isaac, as a burnt offering on a mountain.

Abraham obeys God and travels with Isaac to the place God told him. When he arrives, God prevents Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, saying, Do not lay a hand on the boy.

Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God because you have not withheld from me, your son, your only son. This leads to God reaffirming his covenant with Abraham.

[2 : 37] The last illustration James uses is about Rahab and her actions in the book of Joshua. When the nation of Israel came into the promised land, what was to become the land of Israel?

In the book of Israel, Rahab could see that God was with them and sided with them. She hid some Israelite spies who came to her and made sure they safely escaped from the city of Jericho by sending the spies and the people of Jericho in different directions.

Okay, now that you have those events in mind, let's read what James says in chapter 2, verses 14 to 26. And it's on page 1214.

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.

If one of you says to him, Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

[3 : 57] In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, You have faith, I have deeds.

Show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good. Even the demons believe that.

And shudder. You foolish man. Do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

You see that his faith and his actions were working together. And his faith was made complete by what he did. 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. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. 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?

[5 : 08] As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. We're going to consider the meaning of what we read in a moment.

But first, let's sing towards hardworking employees with end-of-year bonuses. It's the time of year when bonuses are decided. You've been working hard all year.

And your boss, the person who awards them in this workplace, comes to you and says, You're the best worker I have. You've done exceptionally well and deserve to get a bonus this year.

However, at the appropriate time, no bonus materializes. You ask your boss about it and they say, Yes, the bonus.

You definitely deserve it. Your boss freely admits that under the workplace policy, you deserve it. And that you should receive it.

[6 : 06] But it never materializes. What's more, you happen to know the business has the money to award them. How do you feel? Confused?

Hurt? Angry? Used? Now imagine another situation. You receive the death threat. You go to the police.

They're immediately concerned. They say, Your safety is our first priority. Given your circumstances, we will post offices outside your house for the next few weeks to keep you safe.

What if the offices never came? Would you not feel that the very institution that was meant to protect you had failed you? You may wonder what the motto, Keeping People Safe, really meant.

James tells us it is the same with Christians. What good is our faith if we do not have works? Let's turn back to James 2, 14 to 26.

[7 : 14] In this section, James answers the question, What does saving faith look like? He does this by arguing that faith without works is dead and does not justify the person who claims to have it.

We might say then that faith without works is not faith at all because it is not saving faith. In answering the question of what saving faith looks like, James begins by posing the question, What good is a claim to have faith which does not produce deeds?

From verse 20, he turns to consider the alternative. What faith with deeds looks like? Let's turn to verse 14. James writes, What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?

Can such faith save him? In this verse, James introduces the problem. A person who says that they have faith, who says that they follow Christ, but does not act like they follow Christ.

He is talking about claim versus action. This person might be identified with the one in James chapter 1, verses 19 to 27, who is merely a listener or reader of God's word and not a doer.

[8 : 34] In verses 15 to 17, James argues his point with a comparison to hospitality. Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.

If one of you says to him, Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs. What good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

What does James mean by this? His example here is a comparison. He wants us to see the similarities between the situations. This is why he says, In the same way, at the start of verse 17.

What is James' example meant to illustrate then? It's an example from hospitality. The example is like those I gave earlier. What good is it if your manager says you deserve a bonus, but neglects to give you what you deserve?

Or what good is it if the police declare that they care about keeping people safe, but they don't demonstrate they mean it with their actions? What good is it if you see someone's need?

[9 : 47] If you know how to fill that need and can fill that need, but you decide that what you have is yours, not theirs, so you wish them well in having their need met.

Is that showing hospitality? James is saying that in the same way, those well-wishers are worthless. So, faith is faith without deeds.

That is, faith that is not accompanied by action is dead. It cannot save. How does this fit with our belief that we are saved by faith alone? I'll go into that.

But let's save that for later, after we've examined more of James' arguments. Let's continue by looking at verse 18 and the first part of 19. But someone will say, you have faith, I have deeds.

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. Verse 18 feels slightly strange coming after verse 17. This verse ties back into 14.

[10:58] His thought runs in this manner. If a man claims to have faith but no deeds, someone will say to him, you have faith, I have deeds. Is the imagined claim of verse 18 meant to be suggesting one can rely on their actions to save them, as though they could work their way into God's good books and earn the right to be saved under their own power?

Not at all. The imagined response turns out to be James' own response. You have faith, I have deeds, he says, but this is not an isolated claim.

James says that the person with deeds also has faith. I will show you my faith by what I do. James finishes verse 19 with a comment intending to show how faith without action is dead, that it is fraudulent faith.

You believe that there is one God. Good. Even the demons believe that and shudder. Faith without deeds, faith that does not produce action, may be equated with assent to some intellectual facts. It is faith that acknowledges what God wants, but then refuses to do it. It is like the boss or the police from our imagined incidents who declare one thing with their mouths and display something completely different with their actions.

[12:30] James reminds us that the demons, those angelic beings who rebelled against God, believe truths about God. But even the demons shudder at that knowledge.

James is suggesting that a person who claims belief and is not impacted by that claim, who thinks they can go on living as they always have, has even less than the demons.

Because demons in shuddering, at least demonstrate awareness of what such belief means for them. If we truly acknowledge who God is, there are practical implications.

True belief produces works. On the other hand, faith which is dead produces nothing. Such a person, in the words of James, deceives themselves and their religion is worthless.

In verses 20 to 26, James turns to examples to demonstrate the validity of his argument. First, he explains how Abraham's faith supports what he says in verses 21 to 24.

[13:41] And then, how Rahab's faith supports what he says in verse 25, concluding the whole section in verse 26. Let's look at verses 20 to 21. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? I summarized this story earlier, but we'll quickly cover it again.

Abraham, when called by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, the son promised to him by God, obeys. However, God stops him before he can. And in Genesis 22, verses 16 to 18, he commends Abraham for his actions, saying, I swear by myself that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.

Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies and through your offspring, all nations on earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me.

This oath, this promise that God makes is a reiteration of the covenant he made with Abraham, which appears in various forms in Genesis 12, chapter 15, which was the first reading, and chapter 17.

[15:21] There is evidence in Genesis 22 that Abraham was considered righteous for his actions in offering Isaac on the altar. That is, because of Abraham's actions, God reiterates his promise, his covenant with Abraham, saying, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son.

James does not stop here with his example, though. In verses 22 to 24, he makes his argument clearer. Let's read those verses together. You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did, 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.

You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. What is James saying in these verses? What is the relationship between faith and works that he's illustrating?

Is James saying we need to not just believe, but reach a certain level of goodness to be saved? We can answer that through a careful reading of these verses. The core of verses 22 to 24 is bracketed with the conclusion James is pointing us to.

Verse 22 and verse 24 both begin with, you see. You see that Abraham's faith and actions were working together. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

[16 : 59] Similarly, the core of these verses, which is the second half of verse 22 and all of verse 23, use terms of fulfillment. Abraham's faith was made complete by what he did and the scripture was fulfilled by what he did.

We need to pay attention to the order of events in this example so that we properly understand James' reading of Genesis. In Genesis 15, Abraham believed God that God would give him a son and make him into a great nation and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Afterwards, in Genesis 22, Abraham offered his son Isaac, the son of the promise, to God when God tested him and God reiterated his promises to Abraham saying, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son.

James has carefully chosen which events of Abraham's life to talk about. This is crucial to his argument. They both involve the promised son, Isaac. Abraham believed that God would give him Isaac in Genesis 15 and he freely offered Isaac back to God when tested in Genesis 22.

Because Abraham had faith in God, he carried out what God asked and so, it's put this way in the book of Hebrews, chapter 11, verses 17 to 19.

[18 : 36] By faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son.

Even though God had said to him, it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned, Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

Abraham offered Isaac by faith. His actions worked together with his faith. The faith he claimed to have and his actions were in agreement, they did not contradict each other and so, James says, Abraham's faith was made complete by his actions.

What does it mean that Abraham's faith was made complete? It sounds rather unusual in English. We don't really use complete in this way. Unfortunately, this is the result of trying to translate a concept.

This concept carries the idea of fulfillment. Abraham's works displayed the reality of his faith. They were the natural result of his faith. Going back to our examples at the beginning, imagine instead that your boss both declares you're worthy of a bonus and then gives you the bonus.

[20 : 01] Or the police declare that they care about your safety and they protect you from those who threatened you. Now, we could say that their actions back up their claims.

In James' language, their actions could be said to complete their claims, to show that they truly believe what they say. This is how James can go on to say that Abraham's actions fulfilled scripture. Genesis 15, 1-6, concluded with, Abraham, that is Abraham, believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness. Abraham's actions of offering Isaac fulfilled this scripture by demonstrating that his faith, his belief in God was true.

It was faith that was proven true by his action. So going back to those questions I said we could answer with a close reading of verses 22 to 24.

What is James saying in these verses? What relationship between faith and works is he illustrating? Is James saying we need to not just believe but reach a certain level of goodness to be saved?

[21 : 17] What is the answer? Well the answer is James is not addressing that question. What is James addressing? James is addressing whether or not saving faith will produce fruit in our lives.

Are we saved by works? No. It is helpful to consider Paul on this subject. Paul says in Ephesians 2 verses 8 and 9 Paul quite clearly writes that we are not saved by our works but he does not stop there.

He goes on to say in verse 10 for we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.

So we see that while we are saved by faith alone that is what we do works sorry that is what we do remain important. Why then does James claim that we are not saved by faith alone in verse 24? because he is answering a different question. He is talking about whether or not we are saved by a claim to have faith. True faith will necessarily produce evidence of its existence as Paul says we are created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.

[22 : 49] Jesus tells us if you love me you will obey what I command and if anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

Saving faith is productive it is worked out displayed in changes in every aspect of life. Saving faith is a work of God in us which inevitably transforms us affecting how we think and all we do.

When James uses the word faith in this passage he is choosing the language of those whom he is critiquing. In verse 14 he talks about those who claim to have faith.

All through this passage when he refers to faith he is talking about the claim to faith. Making a claim to faith does not save you. You need to have faith.

Faith which is not dead. Faith which produces action. You need to have saving faith, faith. The Westminster Confession of Faith which is the doctrinal standard of our church in its 14th chapter summarizes what saving faith is.

[24 : 06] It says among other things that by saving faith a Christian acts differently in their life. However the principal acts of saving faith are accepting receiving and resting upon Christ alone for justification sanctification and eternal life by virtue of the covenant of grace.

What does that mean? Many wonderful things but the important part that I want us to take away this evening is what I have been saying. What James has been saying.

That saving faith that is faith which is not dead will produce changes in our life good works good works which do not themselves save us but are instead an outworking of our faith.

What saves us? The sacrifice of Christ. He saves us through his death and resurrection. Saving faith is not idle it produces many things but our salvation our forgiveness by God for all the wrong things we know we've done all the shameful things we wish to hide from the world even for all those wrong things we do not realize we do.

Our salvation is as Paul says not by works so that no one can boast but instead is through faith and so we are transformed inwardly so that we can desire what is right and we are gradually changed outwardly sanctified by God so that we both more and more desire what is right and are enabled to do the good works which we now desire to do which God has prepared for us to do.

[25 : 51] James has one more example for us. Let's look at verses 25 and 26. 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 as the body without the spirit is dead so faith without deeds is dead.

In verse 25 James offers the example of Rahab the prostitute. As I said earlier her story appears in Joshua. She is a prostitute who lives in Jericho.

She protects the Israelite spies from being captured. In exchange when Israel captures Jericho her life and the lives of those in her house are spared.

Essentially she and her people become a part of the people of God. I do not believe James idly chose this example. Rahab was a prostitute and he points that out here.

She had a shameful sinful occupation. However she was considered righteous by what she did in receiving the spies. James offers this example to show that our past no matter what we were it cannot prevent us from being saved.

[27 : 12] That is because we are saved by grace not by works. What shameful things are in your past? What things make you think that if someone knew everything about you they would despise you?

God knows everything about us not just what we've done he even knows all the thoughts we've ever had. no matter how shameful or sinful our pasts are God offers us his friendship if only we believe in him in Jesus he promises us his spirit.

He has prepared good works for us to do but not on our own. He transforms those of us who believe gradually and gently into better people who care and love others.

What if you're thinking I'm not that bad I'm a pretty good person really. Jesus tells us that to earn ourselves into favour with God through our own works requires nothing less than perfection according to God's rules.

In Matthew 5 48 he says be perfect therefore as your heavenly father is perfect. We're all far from that kind of perfection.

[28 : 32] However the example of Rahab who had such a shameful occupation demonstrates that we can be saved if only we believe in God with a true faith.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 6 verses 9 to 11 Paul writes Do you not know that the wicked will inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

And that is what some of you were. But you were washed you were sanctified you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Through Jesus we who do so many things God detests can be made clean from those things. Because God loves us he made us a way through Jesus to be clean to be changed to come to him. Rahab was considered righteous for what she did and spared the destruction that came upon Jericho. We too though we are sinners though we do what God detests need to come to God in faith and being transformed by him we need to seek his will and do the good works he gives us to do.

[30 : 09] James wrote this passage to answer the person who is thinking I believe God saved me by faith but I don't need to change I can live for myself and do whatever I want but what about the person who's thinking I believe and I want to change I want to be what God wants but I just can't see any changes in my own life should they be worried for their salvation should they be afraid do you understand that it is by grace you have been saved that it is not by works and that there is nothing you can do to earn your salvation such a person should pray pouring out their heart to God seeking his help this is a prayer he delights to answer he will not let you down in Ezekiel 36 verse 26 God speaking through Ezekiel of the new covenant which we now have says

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh the fact that you desire what God wants is a sign of change in itself pray that God will complete this change in you what's more you need not do this alone and you are never alone if you believe God is with you but he's also given us each other to help to encourage to build each other up let's help each other as we seek to live for God let's help each other as we become outwardly the people God has made us inwardly let's pray