

Looking in the Mirror

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Preacher: Joshua Winters

[0 : 00] This week was a little bit of a crazy week for me, and I've thought of my message this morning kind of in the terms of a meal, and sometimes there are those meals where we've done our best to get things ready, and things don't seem to totally be fully cooked.

And so that's kind of how I'm feeling this morning. But we're going to try to eat the meal anyway, and if it tastes good, if it's good, then give the glory to God, and if not, the fault is mine.

I want you to imagine for a moment that I'm driving down the highway in my minivan. It's a cold, dark night, minus 30.

And as I'm driving to Regina, I see a vehicle abandoned on the side of the road, and it kind of looks like Charles' truck.

I drive on a little bit farther, and I see someone shivering in the cold with no jacket, walking along down the road.

[1 : 15] And as I get closer, I recognize it is Charles. So I pull over in my toasty, warm minivan and roll down the window and ask him, you know, what happened?

How are things going? And Charles gives me the story, and I can tell that he's freezing. And then I say this to him, well, I hope that you get where you need to go and that you stay warm.

See ya. And then I drive off. How would you feel if I said that to you in that situation, Charles? I'd be chilling. You'd be chilling.

Would you think that I meant the words that I said to you? I'd be chilling, because I'd be so steamed, I'd be chilling.

Well, that's kind of a modern-day example of one of the... It's actually an example that we're going to hear this morning. Very similar kind of situation.

[2 : 21] We're looking at what James has written to the believers that are scattered abroad. And we're tying this into the story of Abraham.

He's going to use what he learned from... He's going to refer to what we have looked at already in the story of Abraham, even just last Sunday. But James, as he writes his letter, he has this pastoral concern in heart that we, as people of Christ, have integrity.

That what we say matches up with how we live. He's talked about that earlier in the letter, that we are to be not just people who hear the word of God, but people who do it.

And he gives a similar kind of scenario, which we're about to see. If you have your Bible with you, please open it up to James chapter 2. James chapter 2, verse 14.

This is a different kind of letter than the one that we're kind of used to seeing from Paul. James is very practical and intersperses his practical instruction all throughout the letter.

[3 : 49] And his concern is very much that people live and do the word of God and not just hear it and say that they believe it.

Verse 14. James writes this. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?

Can such faith save them? So we're jumping right into the deep end here with James. If someone claims to have faith, this is James' concern.

There's a tendency that we might have or there are people out there who are claiming to have faith. They are saying, I believe. I believe in Jesus.

But then they don't have actions or deeds which flow out of that or which match up to what they're saying.

[4 : 54] What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? It's kind of a rhetorical question. And he's making a point already.

It's no good. It's no good. It's no good. And he takes it a step further. Can such faith, and I think we could almost put quotation marks over that, can such faith save them?

The interesting thing about rhetorical questions in the original language is that even in the way that they wrote it out, they actually start the question by answering it with a clear indicator of what the answer is.

And in this case, the answer is no. Can such faith save them? No. Overall, James' main point here seems to be that merely professing, merely saying that we believe is no good if there are no deeds or actions or works or a life that matches up to that, that confirms that we actually believe.

And James is going to go on to support this with examples and with arguments. And so we want to listen to what he has to say here.

[6 : 21] Verse 15. Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, go in peace, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

This is kind of where I got the situation with Charles here. What good is it? Do you really believe that I want you to stay warm when I'm here in this vehicle?

It's toasty. I got a blanket, an empty back seat, and I wish you well. And I hope you stay warm and make it to where you're going. I don't really mean that.

Not if I, it's in my power to help, to meet that need. And I just, I choose not to. I may say that I hope that it goes well for you, but I don't really mean it.

James's point is this, you know, if you, if you say it, but then your actions betray what you say and show that you don't really mean it. Well, what good is the profession? What good were the words?

[7 : 34] They're no good. They don't mean anything. You don't really mean what you said. James then applies this to this discussion of faith.

Verse 17, he says, in the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

The words that I, that I, that I say to you, Charles, in that moment, they're, they're empty. They're hollow. They're, they're lifeless. They're dead. And, and just the same as in that situation, so is it with our faith in Jesus Christ.

If we say the words, I believe in Jesus, but then our actions, our life, our living don't match up to that. Do we really believe?

James goes on verse 18. He says, but someone will say, you have faith. I have deeds. Now, as much as I looked at this this week, I was kind of wondering myself, what exactly is he talking about?

[8 : 52] What, what kind of situation would this be said? And I, I couldn't really think of, of a situation. And I think some of the, the commentators are kind of scratching their heads over this too.

When, when would someone say this to you? But one thing that does seem clear here is that the person saying this is, is almost pitting faith against deeds.

You have faith and I have deeds. It's, it's faith versus works. And one possibility, I'm not sure if this is what he means is, you know, that, you know, you have what you believe.

You have religion perhaps. And I have what works, you know, I have pragmatism. I have the stuff that will actually bring results. That might be one of the things that, that is meant by this statement.

But James says this, he says, show me your faith without deeds. I think the sense here is, is probably along the, something along the lines of prove to me what you believe without your actions.

[10 : 01] Can you do it? Or if you can. And then he goes on to say immediately following, I will show you my faith by my deeds.

I will show you what I believe by my deeds. And his, his vocabulary here is, it's, it's very strong. It's literally, I will show my faith to you from my deeds.

It's not faith versus deeds or works. It's, you will see what I believe by how I live, by what I do.

The proof is in the pudding. Maybe you've heard that expression before. Is the pudding good? If you tell me the pudding is good, the real test is in the eating of it.

The action of eating it, not just in the words that are said about it. James goes on, he says, you believe that there is one God.

[11 : 09] You, you believe, you know, you've, you've got your, your core theology, your doctrine, right? This is the most, you know, core thing that there is to the Christian faith.

That there's one God. You believe that you've got it right. Good, says James. Even the demons believe that.

It's quite the thing to say. The sense here is almost, you know, good for you. Even the demons believe that and it doesn't do them any good.

In fact, they shudder. They, they have an, in a sense, a somewhat appropriate response to this truth.

Showing that they, they really do believe that he is God. They don't act as they should based on that truth. But at the very least, they shudder.

[12:07] In the same way, I think James is just underscoring and giving another example. That point that merely professing that you believe or saying, I agree with this, this doctrine, this statement.

Is, is, is not enough. The test is, do we live according to it? Verse 20.

James goes on. And this is where the big example comes in. This is where this intersects with the story that we've been working through. The story of Abraham. He says, you foolish person.

Or you empty minded person. Do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Do you want confirmation?

Do you want to know why? Let's go back to the scriptures. Let's go back to the scriptures. Let's go back to the scriptures. clearly on this matter. Esther is reading directly in the story.

[13:28] He commanded Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. We know from last Sunday that it was a test. And Abraham, he passed the test with flying colors.

He took his son to the place. He was ready to go through with it. And at the last minute, God intervened and stopped. He said, I don't want you to do that. But now I know that you fear God. Because you have not withheld from me your son. You have obeyed. You have done what I commanded. Even though what I commanded flew in the face of all the promises I've made concerning Isaac.

We were encouraged by Abraham's faith in that moment. But now James is making his point. And helping us see what we can learn from that story from a different angle.

He says, was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

[14:35] Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

In other words, it wasn't just about the verbal profession. I'm willing to give Isaac to you. The proof was in the pudding.

Now I know that you fear God. It was said after Abraham did what the Lord commanded him to do. It was his obedience which showed that he believed. That he really did fear God. James goes on.

He says in verse 22, you see that his faith and his actions were working together. And his faith was made complete by what he did.

[15:38] In other words, when faith is genuine, then the actions will match up. Abraham showed by his action, by his obedience in offering Isaac, his son, that he really did believe the Lord, that he really took his word seriously.

His actions, what he did was the evidence that his faith was genuine. When our faith, what we say we believe, and our actions match up, when there's that harmony there, then our faith is seen for what it is, as genuine faith.

It's not just empty or hollow profession. James says his faith was made complete by what he did. Now we have to be careful here.

I don't think James is meaning to say that his faith wasn't good enough until it was proven. The sense of the word there, made complete, might be another way to say it would be, it reached its end.

It reached its end. His faith was confirmed in reality by what he did. James goes on, he says, Abraham believed God.

[17:05] And the scripture was fulfilled in this situation, in that moment when Abraham offered Isaac, the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

And he was called God's friend. What is he saying here? Well, we looked at those words, Abraham believed God, a number of weeks back.

This was even before he had offered Isaac, and God had commanded that. God took him out to look at the stars, and told him that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars.

And it says, Abraham believed God. He trusted that God would do as he said. And his faith in that moment was credited to him as righteousness.

And we talked about what that means. The word credited implies that he lacked it. He lacked a right standing with God. He was a sinner just like we are. But on the basis of his believing what the Lord said, God gave him a right standing with himself.

[18 : 22] What James is saying here is that the fulfillment of that is seen in how he offered his son, Isaac.

That he had real, genuine faith for which he received a right standing is seen so clearly. It's fulfilled in how he did exactly what the Lord told him to do.

He took the Lord's word seriously. His faith was proved genuine. Verse 24.

You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do, and not by faith alone. This is one of those verses that has caused a lot of debate and discussion.

Because as we looked at a couple weeks back, Paul has seemingly said the complete opposite. We are justified by faith alone and not by works of the law, is what Paul said.

[19 : 36] And now James seems to be almost saying the exact opposite. You see that a person is justified, that's the word used here, by what they do. And not by faith alone.

How do we work through that apparent contradiction? I think if we take the time to really listen to what James is saying, and the point that he is making, what kind of behavior or attitude he is seeking to address, that some clear possibilities emerge.

The first thing that I think we need to notice is what James means. In all of this, what does he mean by faith alone? If we look back, he's referring to empty profession.

To empty words. That's what he was talking about in the example. Go in peace, keep warm and be well fed. Merely saying, I believe this.

And yet, not having the actions that fit with that. In fact, having the actions that confirm that you don't really believe that.

[20 : 45] That's really what James, I think, is talking about here when he says faith alone. Same thing with what he says in verse 18. I will show you my faith by my deeds.

By my deeds. That's the evidence of what I believe is how I live. So we might almost put quotes over faith, I think, to understand this the way James, I think, is saying it.

You see that a person is justified by what they do and not by faith alone. Not just by saying, well, I believe that.

But by how they live. The second issue here comes with what does James mean by justified. And this is a tough one.

This is one where there's still a lot of discussion over this. One thing we know for sure it doesn't mean. He doesn't mean that we are justified in the sense of that a person receives a right standing with God by works.

[21 : 52] By doing enough good and right things to somehow earn a right standing with God. Paul has already argued totally against that. We looked at that.

And the good news is that Jesus has done what is required. So that we can have a right standing with God. Paul made that point.

Abraham was, he received, he was credited a right standing with God before he did anything.

Simply by faith. Believing in the promise that God had made.

And so he doesn't mean that. What are some of the possibilities of what he means? You see that a person is justified by what they do and not by faith.

One of the possibilities is that justified carries the sense of proved or proven. It is used this way in at least one other place in the New Testament.

[22 : 53] Wisdom is justified by her children or proven by her children. We might read it that way as you see that a person is proven or their faith.

What they believe is proven by what they do. And not merely by what they say. That's one possibility.

A second possibility is that justified means considered righteous. Righteousness. Now, in this view, we have to distinguish between being credited righteousness and being considered righteous.

Credited righteousness implies that we lacked it. And God's giving us something that we didn't have. If he's referring to considered righteous, then the sense here is something to the effect of, you see that a person is considered righteous by their actions and not by their affirmations.

That at the end of the day, the way that the Lord judges is based on our behavior and not just based on what we say we believe. That's another possibility for how to take this.

[24 : 10] And finally, the third possibility, some have said perhaps when he says justified, he's really looking to kind of the end. Paul speaks of justification as receiving a right standing with God now by faith.

The moment that we're saved, that status of being an enemy of God is changed. Now we're a friend of God. James perhaps is using it here a little differently.

You see that a person is justified at the end, in the final judgment, based on how they actually lived. And not just based on what they said they believed.

Now we have to be very careful here as well. I don't think the sense there is that we receive a right standing with God at the end because we did enough good works.

It's more that the works that we did do point to the reality that we had genuine faith in the Lamb of God to take away our sins and give us that right standing.

[25 : 18] And we kind of see that come through in some other passages in the teaching of Jesus as well. You know, what you did or did not do for the least of these brothers of mine plays into the final verdict.

Gives evidence to the reality of whether or not you were a child of God. And genuinely believed and had faith. Bringing all of this together, what is James really saying here?

I think if we look through it again, it's that we should be people who do not merely profess and say, I believe. But then our lives don't match up with that at all.

We should be people who not only profess, but also live in light of that profession. People like Abraham, where our works and our faith, what we say, match up.

That's the evidence that we truly believe. If our living doesn't match up with what we say we believe, then there's a problem with what's going on in our lives.

[26 : 41] And we need to perhaps repent. We need to seek the Lord's forgiveness. Because our profession, in that case, is empty or useless.

How does this apply to kind of the more practical elements of life and the Word of God? Well, you know, if Jesus has given us a command, the evidence of whether we have faith is, do we obey it? Not just do we agree with it. If it's a promise, do we actually make our decisions and our choices and live in light of what's been promised?

Or do we just say, I agree with the promise. Sounds good to me. If it's the Lord's return. If it's the Lord's return. That glorious hope that we have that he's coming back and soon.

Do we affirm that just with our words? Or do we actually live in light of that? We talked about this a little bit in Sunday school this morning.

[27 : 47] When it comes to the love of God to send his son to die for us so that our sins would be forgiven. The proof is in the pudding when we extend the same grace and forgiveness to others who have sinned against us.

These are some of the ways that I think that this applies to daily life. These are not easy words. Because they do kind of cause us to do some self-examination and really ask the Lord the question. Does my living match up with my faith?

What I've been saying? I believe. We may not like this. In one sense, this is almost like God holding up the mirror to our faith.

You want to see what you really believe? How do you live? Because if we really believe, it will change. It will affect the way that we live.

[28 : 57] This is kind of how Jesus taught as well. I mean, he said, don't worry about your daily needs. All these other things in life. Look at how I take care of the birds.

Look at how I clothe the grass of the fields. And when we get our eyes on that truth and really believe it, then we can stop worrying.

But if we're constantly worrying and anxious about something, we're actually living like that, then maybe it's evidence that our trust is not placed in the right place in the Lord.

That our faith is not strongly placed in him. That he's the one who's in control of this. Finally, I think this is a word that applies very much to our salvation.

That's what James says right at the beginning. He says, can such faith, can the empty or hollow profession of faith save a person? Answer, no.

[30 : 11] And these are sobering words, but I think they're words that we need to hear. I think that they help us in how we think about salvation. I know that we all long for people who don't know the Lord to be saved.

That we shouldn't have a hope that just because they prayed a prayer once or said the words once, that they're okay.

We don't want to give people false assurance. There's no hope in false hope. Genuine faith that saves, it will lead to obedience.

It will lead to the production of fruit in the life of that person. It's not that they're saved by the fruit or because of the fruit or because of the works that they do.

They're saved by faith. But if there's no fruit or all the fruit is bad, then the question is, do they really believe?

[31 : 17] Their actions are showing perhaps that they don't. And in those situations, we need to continue to pray for those people to be saved and to reach out to them and fish for conversations about Christ and not just hold on to this kind of empty hope that, well, they prayed the prayer one time.

So hopefully that's good enough for them and we'll just leave it to the Lord. Can such faith save? It can't.

The kind of faith by which we are saved is the kind that really does take the Lord at His word. That when we hear the gospel, there's genuine brokenness in our hearts over our sin and a genuine desire to seek and to receive His forgiveness.

And the rest of the story for that person who has that moment with God should be on the whole generally that they begin to listen more and more to the word of God and obey more and more the word of God and trust more and more the promises that He has made.

Please don't misunderstand. It's not a perfect faith that God is looking for. To be saved, though, we must have a genuine faith.

[32 : 50] Empty and hollow professions won't suffice. And we may wonder, you know, are we getting this right from James? Is this really what he's saying?

What did Jesus have to say? When it came to this issue, I just want to look for a moment here at Matthew chapter 7. This is what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount.

He says, Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?

Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers. At the final judgment, everything will be revealed and there will be some who say, Lord, Lord, they made that profession.

[34 : 11] Yeah, you're the Lord. But what Jesus is saying is that not everybody who just makes the profession and says, I believe that Jesus is the Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven.

The proof is in the pudding of how they live. Did they really believe? Did they really believe that I am the Lord? But only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

What is the evaluation that Jesus gives to these people despite the fact that they claim to have done all of these really great religious things in his name?

It's Jesus' judgment or evaluation that is true. And what is his evaluation? At the very end of verse 23, away from me, you evildoers.

Literally, you workers of lawlessness. In other words, they professed faith in Jesus.

[35 : 16] They said, I believe that you are the Lord. But then the way that they lived for the rest of their lives was characterized by lawlessness and disregard for the word of God, the commands of God, the things that Christ has said.

They thought that they could just make the profession and, you know, almost like fire insurance. We're going to get the fire insurance. We're going to say the prayer and that's all that we need.

Then we're good on that and we can go on and live however we want despite what the Lord has said about how we should live. And the word from Jesus is that that's not going to cut it.

At the end, in the judgment, it will be clear. Some who professed, who claimed me as Lord, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

And the determining thing will be how they lived because it will be the proof, the evidence, as to whether I knew them or not. And so, yes, we're understanding it rightly.

[36 : 28] This is what James is saying. We need to be people who not only say, I believe, but who genuinely take the word of God to heart and then live and do the word of God.

Obey the commands he has given us. Trust and act in light of the promises that he has made to us. make our decisions in light of the realities that we find in his word.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you have given us this mirror to look in to see what's really going on in our hearts.

And we thank you that you have given us words to prevent us from being self-deceived. we admit and we confess that what we say we believe and agree with does not always match up with how we're living.

And we pray and ask that you would expose those things to us, that you would convict us of our sins, even as we talked in Sunday school, Lord, that you would help us to see even those places where we have not been compassionate or kind or patient.

[37 : 48] Help us to bring those things to you and we ask that you would do the work in our hearts. We want to be people who genuinely believe like Abraham did and who live lives that please and honor you.

So please come do that work in our hearts. We ask in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. color and color