

# What Good is Faith?

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 02 March 2014

Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, good evening. Let me add my welcome to Jordan's. If you're new here, my name's Aaron. I'm the minister for this service. I'd love to say hi to you after the service. Come and grab me and say hi. Let's just jump right into the passage now, shall we? Martin Luther was the 16th century reformer, and he was really big on justification by faith, which he was right to be. It's a core Christian tenet. Justification by faith means that we can't earn our salvation by doing good things, rather that we trust in what Jesus did, that he lived the life that we couldn't, that he paid the price for the evil done on the world when we should. So when Martin Luther came to read James, he really struggled with it. He was like, you know, he'd read it and go, come on, mate, what's the story here? Because it just didn't, he didn't see it as a fitting with what he really held dearly. So he'd read a verse like 21, and it says, and it says, was not Abraham justified by works? And he actually wondered out loud whether James belonged in the New Testament. Now, Luther was just a man, and he had an enormous theological brain, but he was wrongheaded when it came to his assessment of James, particularly this chapter, which is surprising, giving the following quote from Martin Luther. So he famously said this. He said, we are saved by faith alone, but faith that saves is never alone. We're saved by faith alone, but faith that saves is never alone. So that's what Luther said. And that's actually exactly what James is talking about here.

James is saying, Luther is saying, faith has got to be more than just mental ascent. Luther Luther knew this. James certainly wants us to know this. Now, let me press pause. That's an introduction. Let me press pause. I sound a little bit boomy up the front here. Am I a little bit boomy? I'm slightly boomy. Can you un-boom me? Sorry, that's a technical word. Can you un-boom me? Oh, that's better. I feel less boomy. All right. Before we get into the James passage, I just want to spend about five minutes talking about faith in general, because there are tons of misconceptions about the idea of faith. So would you turn to that Romans passage that Richard read out for us? That's page 942.

This idea of faith is primary concern to James in this chapter of 2. So I want to go wide with our definition and see what James adds to it. So we're going to sort of start in Romans here. And I want to define faith negatively through its misconceptions. Say, people think faith is this. It's actually this. People think faith is this. It's actually this. So we'll do about five of those, and then we'll jump into James. Okay, so the first misconception about what faith is, that faith is a leap in the dark.

[ 3 : 0 0 ] That's a common idea, I think. But it's not a great idea. Faith is not irrational. Paul describes Abraham's faith as quite reasonable. It does go beyond reason at times, but it has a rational base. And here's what I mean, and this is a key sentence here. Faith is believing or trusting in a person. And so its reasonableness depends on the reliability of the person being trusted.

Because it's very reasonable. It's always reasonable to trust a trustworthy person. My daughter, when I throw her up in the air and play with her, when I throw her up in the air, she's not freaking out. She's not like, I'm going to call social services. What are you doing?

This is crazy. She's laughing because she knows I'll always catch her. It's reasonable for her to trust me. Romans 4.21, fully convinced that God was able to do what he, God, had promised. It was reasonable for Abraham to trust in God. It wasn't a leap in the dark for him. He was trusting in God and his promises. That's reasonable. As a sub-point here, and this is an important point, we can only have faith in the things that God has promised. You know, we can't expect God to do anything he hasn't said he is going to do. We can't manipulate God. So back to the main point though. Faith is not a leap in the dark. It's very reasonable to trust God because God is trustworthy. Okay, second misconception about faith. Faith is subject-oriented. What I mean is this. You can sort of think, faith is all about me, right? Moving mountains is about how much I believe. No, no, that's not faith. Faith is object-oriented.

Faith is all about the object. In this case, it's God and his promises. So if you read the whole passage, this Romans 4 passage, you'll see there is this direction away from us. It's constantly taking us out of the center, a direction away from us to God. And in this sense, faith is actually a destabilizing influence in our life, a wonderfully destabilizing influence in our life. What it does is it pushes us out of the center of our universe and puts God there. Faith is supposed to do that. Faith is object-orientated. It's all about God and not about kind of us kind of trying to think really hard about something. Third misconception. Faith is a skill like cooking or a characteristic like having a good sense of humor. Have you ever, if you've ever looked at somebody and thought, and thought, I wish I had, you know, I wish I had Jordan's faith. I wish I had this person's faith. If you think that, you're under this misconception. Faith is not something you're, you're, you're born with. It's not something we, we drum up by, like, oh, you know. Here's another key sentence for you, okay? Faith is something we receive.

Faith. Faith is a gift. We get it as we hear the promises of God. Romans 10 says, faith comes by hearing and hearing the word of God. So faith doesn't come from in here, it comes downwards to us. How did Abraham's faith go? In verse 20, it said it grew as he gave glory to God.

[ 6 : 22 ] He received faith from God. Fourth misconception. If we just believe enough, anything can happen. You could say it, you could say it like this. The person with the most faith is the person who can believe for the most ridiculous or unlikely thing to happen. Again, it's, that's not, that's not faith.

That's faith in faith. That's faith in faith. That's not faith in God. That's a, if I believe enough, it'll happen. No, that, I remember, I might've told you this story before when I was a teenager, my youth leader was really into positive mental thinking and it kind of bled into his, into his, into his Christianity. And he came to youth group very excited one day because he saw a dead duck in a park and he laid hands, he thought, I'm going to, you know, I'm going to do a miracle, laid hands on the duck and prayed for it. And he swore to us that the duck moved. And he came back and the duck moved, the duck moved. And even as a teenager, I thought, that's, I don't know if that's, what do you, what, I don't know what this, what are you, I don't know what you're saying to me.

Like, I don't know what, what like, what am I supposed to do with that? You know? We can make faith, we can think of it as like magic, you know, like it's, you know, the famous verse, if you have the faith of a mustard seed, you can move mountains. It's, it's, you can misconstrue that and think that faith is like an incantation, you know, you quote these scriptures enough and all of a sudden you can make anything sort of happen. That's presumption. That's not faith.

Uh, we, we, uh, we rent this space here because we lost our, our church. We lost the court battle, right? So we lost our Shaughnessy building, lovely building. We didn't lose that because we didn't have enough faith. It was because God wanted to push his glory forward in some other way.

Faith, it's about faith in God, not faith in faith. Last misconception. We get more faith by training our mind to be more positive, pretending everything's okay. That's not faith either.

[ 8 : 33 ] Verse 19, Abraham says, Abraham's this, he's like, uh, he did not weaken in faith when he considered his body, which was as good as dead. He was about a hundred. And when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb, he considered it. He considered the situation completely. He didn't pretend he wasn't, uh, old. He didn't walk up to Sarah and say, okay, faith. I'm a faith man. I am a vigorous 25 year old man. You have the womb of Octomum. We're going to make some magic happen. Don't worry about it. It's going to be fantastic. That's not faith. That's just kind of like, you know, you're just kind of like trying to, uh, what's the word? You're just trying to try to think really positively about something and pretend everything's okay. It's not faith, man. It's just faith doesn't ignore life's realities, but, but it does, it does look, it does look at our problems in the light of God's promises. And that's exactly what Abraham did. Okay. So I'll summarize what I've said so far, and then we're going to move to James two and see what James two adds to these definitions of faith. All right.

Faith is trusting in God. It's trusting that he will do what he said he will do. It's not blind. It's, it's firmly planted in God's promises, things we can know about, things we can learn about. So that's why it's not blind. It's not a skill or an attribute. It's a gift. You are not the source of faith. You didn't drum it up in your brain. That's something we receive from God as we hear and learn about his word. You don't get faith by being told to have more faith. If I stood up here every week and said, have more faith, you know, we need to take the city for Jesus. Just have more faith. That's useless. That's not going to do anything. I can't just tell you to have more faith. You receive faith by submitting yourself to God. And in this sense, see, faith is not knowing something. It's trusting someone. And when you

trust someone, you will probably, you can then take radical, live quite a radical life. Faith pushes us out of the center and puts God there. And in this, in this, in this way, actually, faith takes us back to the fore, takes us right back to Genesis, takes us right back to our core sin, which is that we want to be the center.

Faith restores humanity to its rightful place. Now, that's faith in general. What does James have to say about faith? What does he add to this?

What does he add to the definition here? Well, he picks up one of the misconceptions and really digs into it. And it's the misconception about mental ascent, that faith is just mental ascent. And this is really important because, like James says, faith that is just mental ascent does not save us.

Now, we can read James chapter 2 and we can think, oh, James is offering up some alternative route to salvation, some works-based alternative route to salvation. No, no. James is all about justification by faith. He just wants us to understand what real saving faith looks like. And it looks more, it looks like more than just believing the right things. There's a small word in verse 14 that helps us see this. It's the word say, S-A-Y. Verse 14, if someone says he has faith, but he doesn't have works, can that faith save him? Now, the passage doesn't read, you notice, if someone has faith and does not have works, can they be saved? It reads, if someone says they have faith, this person says they have faith, they might actually have all the right answers. They could be the person that they might know the creed off by heart. They can give mental agreement to everything, but it's not a faith that results in a changed life. Can this kind of faith save him or her? Well, that's the question James starts off with. And then third answer is no, it can't save him. It can't save her.

[12:44] So then James helps us and he gives us four illustrations of what faith looks like and what it doesn't look like, okay? So there's two positive illustrations, two negative illustrations. Here are the four. There's the ill-clad, hungry brother or sister. There's the believing but troubled demons.

There's Abraham, the friend of God. And there's Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute. So let's look at all these illustrations. And the text actually pairs them together. So we're going to look at them in pairs, okay? So the first pair I want to look at is what we'll call the armchair philanthropist of verse 16 and the risky compassion of Rahab. And we know they're meant to be contrasted because they are joined by the word dead, which summarizes their faith. Verses 17 and 26. Right, first of all, the armchair philanthropist. This is verses 15 and 17. So someone is lacking basic material needs, like they have an acute presenting sort of problem here. And we say, go in peace, be warm and filled. Now you might agree immediately. Yeah, that's kind of lame. That's not very good. You could probably lift your game there. But there's a subtext here. Go in peace. That's an ancient benediction. It's a blessing. It's a prayer. So the person is saying, oh, you've got less problems. I trust in God's provision. He'll help you. Off you go. It's basically what you're saying. So when confronted by real need, when your remedy is just sort of kindly Christian hope, like I'll pray for you. Go in peace. When you're in a position to help and you don't, James says that's not half faith. That's not dry faith. That's dead faith. I mean, a Christian in the story might really actually believe in God's provision. But when they refuse to sort of, you know, participate in God's providing of that provision, that's dead faith. Now compare that to Rahab. Rahab, on the other hand, wow. Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute, as I've said.

In Joshua, Old Testament book, it tells the story of how she rescued these Israelite spies who were in Jericho. She helped them to escape and eventually Jericho was conquered. So great result.

[15:13] She became the great-great-grandmother of King David and she was an ancestor of Jesus. She, and confronted by great need, put it all on the line to help these Jewish spies who had snuck into Jericho, couldn't get out. She doesn't hold back. She pours all her resources into this.

Her house, her ingenuity, her personal safety. So James compares the faith of the inactive Christian in verse 16, which turns out to be not faith at all, and compares that to the costly faith of rehab, a faith that produces works, a faith that justifies. Now, the middle pair. We've looked at these outside pairs. Have a look at these middle pairs here. This is 18 to 24. So on the one hand, you have demons who believe and shudder. And on the other hand, you have Abraham who believes and is called a friend of God.

Now, I think the using of the demon example is genius and inviting. Here's why it's so biting. You see, the demons believe the orthodox idea of God. There is no doubt in their mind about God and who he is. And it's not even just mental assent for them. It's emotional. They shudder.

So saving faith is not just believing the right thing and having an appropriate feeling about it.

Because we can do that. People can do that. They can believe right things, the theory of it, and even have emotional religious experiences. It's not necessarily saving faith because it doesn't produce a changed life. So how can we be sure our faith is true? Well, the answer is in the story of Abraham. Abraham, the father of Judaism, Christianity, renowned for his faith, trusting in God, willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, and started to go through with it until God stopped him.

[ 17 : 15 ] Abraham, a faith that was willing to sacrifice. Rahab, a faith willing to radically care. Abraham, a faith that was willing to sacrifice. A changed life.

Now, we can misunderstand James in two ways as I sort of start to tidy this up at the end here. We can think, ah, okay. So what you're saying is James is a works guy. He's all about the works. No. James is a faith guy. But he wants to show us that works prove the living reality of faith.

Now, the other misconception is this. You're saying, okay, okay, I understand that. So James is a faith and works guy. No. No. James is a faith that produces works guy. That's saving faith. That's real faith.

Okay, I'll finish up here. We finish chapter two of James with a serious warning and a great challenge. And the warning is this.

Here's the warning. It is possible for someone to have the object of faith straight and still not be right with God because it's not a real faith. It's a faith that never goes beyond our mind, never goes beyond our emotions to the point where it actually affects our will, where it actually is change, where it leads to a distinctive life. You know, this means a person can be enlightened, so to speak, in their mind and even stirred in their heart and be lost forever.

[ 18 : 51 ] But that's the warning. The challenge is this. The life of faith is not just private transactions with God. It's a life of obedience that holds nothing back from God and is intolerant of want in our community.

This is because true faith means that we have a spirit of God. The spirit has entered our life and is transforming us into the likeness of Christ. That's our journey. And in that journey, there will be lots of backwards and forwards and missteps and there is forgiveness, of course.

true faith results in a changed life, a distinctive life. True faith looks into the face of God that loved extravagantly, at great cost, and true faith is transformed by that. Amen.