

# What is Good Faith?

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Date: 02 March 2014

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] faith comes by hearing and hearing by preaching of the word of Christ and our father we have asked this morning for the gift of love we pray now as we hear your word that you would add to that the gift of real faith and real hope we ask this in your son's name amen please sit down if you'd like to turn up to James chapter 2 that was just read for us and as you do I went over to Jeremy but he wouldn't give Jesus to me I don't I don't I wouldn't say I'm Jesus-less but he said he had to give it to the class and he'll bring Jesus to me halfway through I'm not sure what to say about this except it is the job of every Christian minister to preach Jesus you know that don't you we're not fooling around here the apostle Paul in the letter of Colossians speaking about Christ says him him we proclaim warning everyone teaching everyone in all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ so the whole goal of Paul's ministry the apostolic preaching ministry is to say proclaim Christ that people will come to faith in Christ and then we'll grow to maturity in Christ we don't grow to maturity in a different way we grow to maturity through the preaching of Christ so every time someone mounts this pulpit or every time someone teaches a group we ought to be teaching and preaching Christ that doesn't mean that a sermon is not a bible sermon if it only mentions Jesus one or two times let me show you what I mean so if you go if you go to James chapter 2 the whole chapter is about faith look at verse 1 my brothers show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ the Lord of glory it's faith in our Lord Jesus Christ so when we come to the second half of the chapter verses 14 to the end every time he says faith he's talking about faith in the glory of Jesus Christ you see you with me so far however if there is a sermon where the preacher is not preaching Christ you mustn't let him finish well you probably do need to let them finish don't you in case they bring Jesus in at the end however don't let them escape the building perhaps that's the safest way to do it this week I've last few weeks I've been reading the new biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was a Nazi Christian no he was a Christian pastor a German Christian pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis for standing for Christ

I've always felt a kinship with him because he was executed on April 9th 1945 and that just happens to be my birthday and I don't know why I just feel this kinship with him his writings are remarkable and still remain relevant today and he said that the one reason that the Christian church collapsed and capitulated to the Nazi ideology was because of cheap grace you probably have heard that phrase cheap grace has nothing to do with God it's what we give to ourselves it's grace that doesn't cost anything grace that has nothing to do with sin this second half of James 2 is about cheap faith real and living faith begins when we place our trust in Jesus Christ we begin to see in Jesus Christ's face the glory of God and that glory it draws faith from us but there is a difference between cheap faith and costly faith and what James wants to do is he brings these two into contrast in this section and he says cheap faith is faith that's dead and it cannot save whereas costly faith is living and it can save us and so it's very important for us this morning to understand these things and he says the difference between cheap faith and costly faith is essentially that cheap faith separates faith and deeds faith and works cheap faith is faith without any life change it's intellectual verbal profession without risk cost sacrifice it's correct theology without the deeds it's having the facts on your lips but not living it out through your hands it's intellect but it's not transforming it's very important for us because there's so much confusion about belief and faith in our culture today during the socio olympics i saw they resurrected the i believe campaign remember that as though belief and faith is something it's a kind of enthusiasm and optimism that if i just have enough of it i'm going to skate faster and jump higher and win lots of medals and those who did win medals did amazing jobs but often in the interviews afterwards they would say i won because they'd point to someone on the sidelines they just had infallible faith in me you know it was my mum or my coach or it was anyone really the canadian public as though faith is something that some people are born with and other

people other people aren't you see the christian faith is different christian faith is a wholehearted personal response of trust and commitment to the promises that god has made to us and it always shows itself in a changed life faith takes risks because it trusts god true christian faith is a faith that takes costly action and again i think james who was the half brother of jesus who grew up with jesus experienced in himself the great danger of knowing a lot without it leading to a costly commitment and so he exposes all our cheap faith the kind of faith you know where we can we can parse theology but it doesn't make a practical difference and he says if your faith costs you nothing it's worth nothing just cast your eye through the passage faith without deeds in verse 14 it cannot save faith without deeds verse 17 is dead

faith without deeds verse 20 is useless and again in verse 26 faith without deeds is dead it's not that james wants us to add works on top of our faith it's a much deeper connection than that he says if your faith is real it will inevitably inescapably reveal itself in good works and although those works can't save us it's only faith that saves us but it's only the kind of faith that demonstrates itself that is real faith so the passage divides in half you know the paragraphs in the english translation weren't there in the original the passage divides roughly in half the first half is verses 14 to 20 and i've called it cheap faith does not work and james gives us two dramatic pictures of cheap faith and then the second half costly faith works and again he gives us two brilliant pictures of true faith so firstly then let's look at how cheap faith doesn't work and let's look straight at the illustrations the first illustration in verses 14 to 17 is faith without deeds this is cheap faith so what good is it my brothers and sisters if someone says verse 14 you know if they outwardly say they have faith but they don't have works can that faith save him and the answer the way the question is written in the greek is no it cannot just like hearing the word of god is useless to us unless we do it so saying you have faith without acting on it is useless and then he gives us this amazing illustration in verse 15 just imagine you're at home and it's snowing outside and you hear a timid knock at the door and you go to the door and there is someone you know from the congregation someone who might be in your bible study group and they are kneeling in the snow they haven't eaten for weeks they're covered in rags and scars barely covering their modesty they're knocking on your door and the need is pressing and immediate and imagine instead of doing something for them giving them some food or taking them into your warm house all you do is you mouth some words god bless you brother sister be warm be filled off you go don't worry be happy and then you close the door leaving them as they were with a warm feeling in your heart that you've said nice things to them powerful isn't it I mean it's a non-Christians don't act like that it's a disgrace really of someone it's a picture of someone saying but not acting and the words are lovely it's very nice to say god bless you nothing wrong with the words but if those words don't issue in actions they're worse than useless it's dead he says in verse 17 because words separate from actions are empty and in this case they just act as a sort of a cover for my failure to truly love and it's dead in this sense it's deadening to you and it's deadening it deals death to others as well you see the point there's no such thing as an armchair Christian you know a Christian who just says Christian words who stands on Sunday and says the creed very loudly but when it comes to acting they do nothing they will not risk anything they won't get involved they're not going to sacrifice anything for their faith they refuse to they refuse to let it cost them anything because they don't see it as worth anything really this is the first picture of cheap faith it's just words without deeds and it doesn't work the second picture is in verses 18 to 20 our cheap faith is correct with a correct theology without life change but before he gets to this second illustration

James deals with an interrupter verse 18 see verse 18 there's a quote there someone says well you have faith and I have works I mean I'm the practical type there's no good trying to get me into a bible study just tell me when to show up and I'll do it aren't there all sorts of different types among us activists who dig in and then there's the reflective types there's some who do and some who want to think about it different strokes for different folks no says James we can't separate faith and works and he gives a shattering example I think of separating faith and works I wonder if you picked it up here's an illustration of faith verse 19 did you see it you believe that God is one you do well even the demons believe and shudder so the demons of hell are thoroughly accurate correct and orthodox in their theology there are no atheists in hell the devil himself if he was here this morning could stand and say the creed as loudly and as accurately as any of us but it doesn't make any change to him there's no life commitment to those truths see it doesn't matter how accurate the demonic the demon in grasp of Christianity is there's no repentance no transformation theirs is a cheap faith because it's separated from action

[ 12 : 41 ] I've never noticed this before but it's not only that they know the truth but they feel it emotionally it says James tells us that they tremble they're not just detached academic theologians they recognise the power and purity of God but it still doesn't change them so you can have an intellectual faith and you can have an emotional faith but unless it leads to change it's still cheap faith because it doesn't work it mistakes assent and agreement for costly transformation it can mistake emotion and accuracy for the living out of the truth of God's word see if faith is just words or if it's just intellectual agreement it's dead and devilish it's useless it literally just doesn't work so they're two pretty devastating illustrations aren't they well then the question of course is what is true faith and true faith is costly faith and costly faith how does it work let's look at this verses 21 to 26 and has a very different feel to it this section nothing hypothetical or abstract

James now takes us to two remarkable illustrations of two real people in the midst of very difficult circumstances overwhelming circumstances both Abraham and Rahab show us how faith works because they literally put their lives and their futures on the line at the moment of testing and trial and the stories share this in common they show us how costly real faith is that real faith involves a risk stepping out in sacrifice and in action based on what we call the crazy calculus of grace now if you've been a Christian for a while you may know there's historic controversy over these verses here's the controversy look at verse 24 you see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone okay if you're interested keep your hand there and go back to Romans 3 this is just the historic controversy

Romans is a letter written by the apostle Paul and in Romans 3 verse 28 page 941 the apostle Paul says for we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law see seems to say one thing and then James 2 24 seems to say another and this led the great theologian Martin Luther himself to say that James is an epistle of straw I've always thought what he meant by that was when you eat if you eat straw it gets stuck in your teeth and there's not much tastiness for the tummy however in Luther's defense he still said it was part of the inspired scriptures you may have heard about this controversy but of course James and the apostle Paul don't disagree they're just using the word justification in two different ways the apostle

Paul uses justification to mean the act the beginning of our Christian life where we are converted and declared righteous where the declaration of the last judgment is brought in and we are said to be counted right with God even though we still live sinful lives something James knows about we'll come to in verse 23 did you know that the apostle Paul is the only Bible writer to use justification in that way that's not the way we use the word today James Jesus and the Old Testament use the term justification just in the way we would use it in speech today it means demonstrate that you're right so one illustration when one of my sons was a teenager he and a friend had promised to be home on a Saturday night by a certain time when they were three hours late which was actually getting on to quite morning time his friends the friend's father was getting extremely worried his friend's father was a psychiatrist and I thought having a psychiatrist worried is a very good thing it justified my worry we the two of us fathers got in the car and started driving around the suburbs you know imagining we'd find them in a bit of a mess somewhere well they turned up back at the friend's place and when we got there there was you know they were quite happy and they'd had a bit of an adventure they'd been walking along

Arbutus and one of the water mains had burst under the road so they'd used their cell phones and done what's right they'd called the police and called the city and they'd waited around for the trucks to turn up until the water main was fixed I think it's a pretty good justification it slipped their minds to call home it was a good justification for those three or four hours that's the way that's the way James is using the word it's that our faith will demonstrate itself justify itself it won't just be merely words but it will show itself it will demonstrate itself to be true faith so let's look at the two illustrations Abraham verses 21 to 24 this illustration of Abraham's comes from right near the end of his life was not our father let me say it this way shown to be righteous by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar see faith was active along with his works and faith was completed by his works this is a fascinating and horrifying story right from the end of Abraham's life

[ 18 : 38 ] God had taken Abraham and as an old man had promised to make a great nation of him he was already in his 70s God waited 25 years before he gave him Isaac he was he was a hundred when Isaac was born and now here we are Isaac is a young man the Hebrew word indicates probably a late teenager and God calls on Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice it is an excruciating test and it's it is horrifying and I think we would say it's too much for God to ask in a way but the way

James uses it here is that part of the essence of true faith is being willing to make any sacrifice for God massively costly for Abraham and though we don't understand all the details we learn fairly quickly in the story that it's never

God's intention for Isaac to be touched but in his grace God provides a lamb caught in the thicket for the sacrifice and yet Abraham didn't know that during the test and his test is very very real and his willingness to trust God in the midst of this costly decision marks him out as having true faith that's what works are you see works are not just random acts of kindness works are living in this world with a sort of heavenly wisdom that we've been seeing so far in James if you just go through what we've seen already works are counting our trials as joy praying for wisdom works are keeping a bridle on the tongue not looking at each other and assessing each other by our wealth works are being quick to hear and slow to speak and slow to anger bridling our tongue works are receiving God's word and doing God's word visiting orphans and widows keeping ourselves unstained from the world not showing partiality but we're not finished with Abraham are we in verse 23 we go back James runs the story back close to the beginning of Abraham's journey 25 years before where Abraham hears the promise of God from Genesis in Genesis 15 and Abraham takes hold of the promise of God and God counted him as righteous back there so Abraham is already actually righteous and saved in God's eyes but now 25 years later he demonstrates it's only when his faith costs him and he's willing to sacrifice everything he shows himself to be righteous it's when he demonstrates his faith in action we're told here he fulfills the scripture and the promise of God and it's exactly the same for each one of us every time our faith works every time we do something in line with these good works we fulfill the scriptures no matter how difficult our circumstances and for that

Abraham is called a friend of God and secondly and very quickly now we go to the illustration of Rahab in verse 25 I don't know about you but I always feel a bit daunted reading the Abraham story it's you know he's an amazing guy but here is a second illustration of costly faith Rahab she was not an Israelite she worked as a prostitute she lived in the city of Jericho and she'd heard all that God had done delivering the people from Egypt and she believed and she placed her faith in God and Israel had sent a couple of spies into Jericho to spy out the city and the king heard that they were in the city and sent the army to find them and they chased them to Rahab's house they hid in a brothel and Rahab took them and hid them up on the roof of her house and when the king's troops came she said they're not here they're not here they're not here and sent the troops on a wild goose chase which gave the spies time to get away making the spies promise that the Lord would save her and he did incredibly risky maneuver don't you think I mean a moment under extreme pressure what did she have to go on just stories she'd heard about God but she chose to put a whole life on the line to identify with the people of God because of what she believed about God and if she had been caught if the spies had been caught she would have been executed along with her family very risky wasn't a cheap faith it was a costly faith but it's exactly you see in taking that risk to identify with the people of God as it is for Abram to give to God what God had given him the true faith is shown so let's stand back for a moment and I just want to say two things to try and focus our reflection as we go away from this just two things the first is this real faith is seen in action cheap faith is not cheap faith is assent without action confession without conviction orthodoxy without obedience influence without involvement it's dead it's useless it cannot save but when our faith if it's true faith connects our hearts to God it will unfailingly show itself because when by faith we take grasp of God through Jesus

[ 24 : 42 ] Christ there is a new energy within us that draws its life from God yes yes faith receives with open hands but what does it receive it receives the spirit of the living Christ and he changes us this is what Luther himself said about true faith it's a living busy active mighty thing this faith it's impossible for it not to be doing things incessantly it does not ask whether good works would be done to be done but before the question is asked it has already done this and is constantly doing them whoever does not do such good works however is an unbeliever he gropes and looks around for faith and good works but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are yet he talks and talks with many words about faith and good works if your faith is real if my faith is real it will be seen and secondly real faith costs everything cheap faith costs nothing if you think that the

Christian life there's nothing flat or boring about the Christian life it's not a smooth path of mathematical growth like this you know it's not it's one step forward and three steps back and two steps forward and it happens in the midst of great trials and great difficulties through many

tribulations we'll enter the kingdom of heaven and on the day when God called Abraham to sacrifice his only son Abraham had no warning of it and on the day when Rahab had to side with the people of God she'd had no warning that it was going to happen and I think the test of our faith comes to us when we least expect it to and it's when the test comes that's when we demonstrate the genuineness of our faith not just to God not just to others but primarily I think to ourselves that's why so many fall away in testing what Jesus said in the parable of the sower you remember there are ones who fall on the rocky ground this is emotional faith who hear the word and receive it with joy but they have no root in themselves they endure for a while but when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word immediately they fall away others are the ones thrown amongst thorns here are those that hear the word but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desire for other things enter in and choke the word and it proves unfruitful because it's too costly it's too costly too costly to my lifestyle too costly to what

I hope other people think of me it's more worth more my possessions are worth more to me than the treasure in Christ but what is risk what is cost anyway it's a calculation isn't it it's a potential of losing something so that you might gain something of greater value if you see a cheap piece of property and you suddenly secretly discover it's got the largest oil reserve in the local province under it it's worth the risk if you have a child you risk losing sleep is it worth the risk of course it is and when it comes to faith what we are talking about is the reality of God the father of our Lord Jesus Christ who not only made himself made us for himself and was not only willing to sacrifice his son but he gave him up for us not sparing himself and he will graciously give us all things with him that's why true faith is based on this crazy calculus of grace it's

God who is the father of lights from whom every good and perfect gift comes with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change he has paid the great cost of course he has paid the infinite cost and faith sees the treasures we have in Jesus and that there's nothing else in all creation that can separate us from that and so it completely changes every calculation any understanding of risk we have if we already possess Christ sometimes God will call us to give back to him what is already his and although it may mean suffering for us when we act like that our faith is real I say again if our faith costs us nothing it's worth nothing it is in giving our lives away that we find our lives so as we finish and go to prayer maybe you should ask maybe we should all ask ourselves what risks have I taken for God these last 12 months is God calling me to do something that's costly for him the amazing encouragement is that when we do that we're not only fulfilling scripture but we find ourselves to be friends of God and that's worth more than everything so let's kneel and pray