

Faith

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[0 : 00] really this evening, selected verses that I'm going to be drawing your attention to. But to draw your attention to really the context of this evening's message, please turn to James chapter 2 and verses 14 through to 17.

So James chapter 2 verses 14 through to 17, now hear God's word.

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

If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, go in peace, be warned, be 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. But someone will say, you have faith and I have works.

[1 : 28] Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe and shudder.

Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?

You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.

And he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way also, in the same way, was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works, when she received messengers and sent them out by another way?

For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from the works is dead. Well, this is a really familiar passage, and rather than focusing on all of it, we're going to focus on the underlying issue.

[2 : 45] And it's really easy to see. But just to give you a recap, this is part three in the message on faith. Each message has been a layer, and it's been an important layer, because like anything, where you build even the foundation of a house, that one layer depends on the layer beneath it.

You know, that's important. You know, I was in the building trade long enough to know that the course that you laid had to be laid correctly for the course that you were about to lay on top of it to stand and be there.

And the same all the way up. So layers are important. So let me give you a brief, a real brief breakdown of where we've been in faith. We've looked at several things.

That the character of God is really important when it comes to faith. We must believe who God is. We must know who he is and what he is like. That he is a rewarder of those who seek him. That's found in Hebrews chapter 11.

Another issue is that Jesus lived by faith. And so this idea that, well, it was easy for Jesus to do because he was Jesus. Jesus gets ruled out by the very fact that he is the example, he is the author and the perfecter of our faith, but he is also the very example of what it is to live by faith, to continue through all the difficult times, following the will of God, whatever the will of God might be.

[4 : 11] That's difficult, but that's what it means to live by faith. We saw other areas of faith that it is trust. It is believing. It is a deep commitment to the things of God.

All of these are true. And then we saw, surprisingly, some of those things that put people on their back heels. That some people's faith can be great. Some people's faith can be small.

And the reasons for that. We also saw that how a parent's faith can benefit their child. Biblically, we saw that. You know, we live in a day where, you know, God has no grandchildren.

Well, that's absolutely true, but it's not true that a parent's faith cannot have a real effect over their child. Go read the Gospels. I'm not making this stuff up. And also, the measurement of faith tells something really important of what you actually believe about God.

But here's the underlying principle, the most important principle of all. That faith is your valuation of God. And how do we get to that conclusion?

[5 : 23] Here's how. God tells us that he values us more than the birds of the air. Why? Two reasons. Number one is because he's able to tell the difference between us and the birds of the air.

We're of more value because we are created differently. We're of more value because we are the very people who bear the image of God. So when God tells us not to worry and to trust him, he uses the comparison of value.

That God does love the birds of the air. He created them. But God cares for you more than the birds of the air. Now, it's because of this difference that God treats you differently.

We then reverse that and ask the question this way. That God is more valuable than you. And God is most definitely more valuable than the birds of the air. God is more valuable than your job.

More valuable than your house. More valuable than anything that you own. And so if you're able to tell the difference between the value of God and the value of everything else, how should you treat God?

[6 : 32] What is the appropriate response to God? And Hebrew says that the only appropriate response to God, the only way to treat God in a way that will please him is in faith.

For without faith, it is impossible to please God. Your faith in God, whether great or small, is your valuation of God.

Okay, let me say that again. Your faith in God, whether it be great faith or it be small faith, is your valuation of God. That's incredibly important.

Because you're trusting him above everything else. That God, believing God is worth more than anything else. Following God is worth more than anything else. Valuation.

Faith is a valuation. Faith is also the only appropriate way to treat God. Because it is the only thing that pleases him. And whatever else you do, it must proceed from a heart of faith.

[7 : 40] Now, it doesn't have to be great faith in its amount. It does, however, have to be real faith. It doesn't matter if it's simple faith.

As long as it's real faith, it doesn't matter if it's simple or deep, great or small. The only issue is whether or not it is real. And that's what James brings us to this evening.

James' famous statement is that faith without works is dead. His concern is this. Is your faith real? Is your faith living? Now, most of us can tell the difference between a plant that is living and a plant that's dead.

You know, some of us have difficulty. You know, I'm not quite sure, so I'll keep watering it. It's even more embarrassing when you water a fake plant because you're not quite sure if it's real or not.

[8 : 42] So if you notice the water on the floor at the back of the church, that's why it's there. So, the issue is what is the difference between real faith and dead faith or living faith and dead faith?

Well, James answers it for us here. So I'm going to point out a few obvious things that you all know, but I don't want to bypass the obvious for obvious reasons, hopefully.

So here's the first thing. James' first concern is to determine whether or not your faith is alive or dead. He does this by asking you whether or not your faith shows up anywhere.

Here, he's talking about concern for the poor brother or sister. Now, there's many ways that your faith can turn up. He just chooses to use charity towards a brother or sister in the faith.

Faith without works is dead. So his concern, like I said, is not whether your faith is great or small. It's not whether your faith is deep or simple.

[9 : 51] The fact is, is whether or not your faith is real. That's really important. Because too often we make the kind of mistakes that should never be made.

I'll give you an example. The best example is when the disciples stop children from coming to Jesus. And Jesus rebukes the disciples.

Why? Well, because the disciples are saying that their faith is not real. And Jesus says, no, you've got it completely the wrong way around. The lesson that you're to learn here is not that children should have adult-like faith, but rather adults should have children-like faith.

They got it the wrong way around. Faith is believing. It is trusting. It may be simple. It may be deep. It may be big, like the centurion.

Or it may be very small, like the disciples. All of those things can exist in real faith. The issue is, it doesn't matter what these other things are doing.

[11:04] The question is, is your faith real? A good tree produces good fruit. But let me just change the analogy slightly. Only a living tree can produce fruit.

A dead tree cannot. And that's James' point. Now, how many of you have gone out, perhaps, on a walk, or perhaps seen in a film or a picture, two trees?

One which is alive and one which is dead. They're both trees. They both stand there. But it will take a whole season for you to truly be able to tell, if you can't tell, that one is living and one is dead.

See, one will go through its seasons and the other will remain the same all the year round. How many of us who are Christians remain the same all year round?

I think that's what James is getting at. Christians go through seasons. Their faith can grow. It can produce great fruits. And then they can struggle.

[12:10] But it's always there. It always produces fruit. Dead trees remain the same all year round. It's still a tree. You would still call it a tree.

But it's dead. And this is the very point that James is trying to get to. And so he uses this analogy of people who want to protect dead faith.

And as a pastor, I've been around long enough and I hope you just give me a little bit of room here and maybe a little bit of respect to be able to say that with James, I'm able to tell, may not be as good as James, but I'm also able to tell the difference between living faith and good faith in a person in a congregation.

I'm not being judgmental. I'm just trying to be observant. You know, and yet too often I see people protecting the dead faith of others.

Well, they made a commitment when they were 22, 33, 48. And yet they remain the same all year round. You know, that sounds incredibly judgmental, doesn't it?

[13:21] And yet, am I really, as your pastor, saying anything different than James has just said? No, not really. It's just that I've said it. The issue is, let's have a look at your faith.

Faith turns up in works. And James says this. This is, I don't know if he's being sarcastic or if he's just got one of those kind of sense of humors of, you know, some people have got a dry sense of humor.

It's my favorite type of sense of humor, by the way. Those who are dry and blunt. And you don't know quite whether they're joking or being serious. James says, look, even the demon believes in shudder.

What's his point? His point is this. That there are people in his church who are hiding their dead faith by saying they believe in God and they don't even shudder. Demons believe and shudder. But you, no, you hide your dead faith by saying you believe in God but you don't even shudder. That's the implication coming through here. And that is, I think, quite a serious implication.

[14:33] James' point is, is your faith real? So that's the obvious things out the way. All of them, I know you will be aware of. So I've not told you anything new. But here we're going to magnify a different point.

And by magnify, I mean that the point is there. We're just going to bring it out of its shell. And that is that real faith is always a response to God's will. Real faith is always following the will of God.

James doesn't pick on charity for any reason. He picks on charity towards a brother and sister in the faith because that is God's will to brothers and sisters in the faith.

God wants us to look after different people. And so James isn't just saying, look, go ahead and do some works and then you'll prove your faith to be real. No, he's saying something quite different.

Faith will turn up in works in the same way an apple turns up on an apple tree. Does an apple work? To get an apple?

[15:37] No. It happens by nature. Works are the fruit of faith's nature. Let me say that again.

Works are the fruit of faith's nature. That's why James doesn't argue, go and do works. In fact, he doesn't even argue about works here.

His whole argument is real faith. Faith turns up in works. He's not even arguing for works. He's arguing for real faith. Another example would be Noah.

Noah built a boat or an ark, believed God, believed exactly what God was going to do with the world, and just did it. Because he believed God, he built an ark.

He didn't build the ark to prove that he had faith in God. It was because he had faith in God that he built an ark. It's the other way around. Abraham left everything that he had, didn't know where he was going, and he started following God.

[16:44] What about Moses? You know, Moses' one is super challenging because it says that Moses rather chose to be, or chose rather to be mistreated with his people in Egypt rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

So here you've got Moses living in a society where he could have anything that he wanted, all the education that he could have, all the pleasures of money, of wealth, of food and drink and everything, and he decides, by faith, by faith, to trust in God and reject those fleeting pleasures of sin.

Now where's the work in that? There's no work other than turning away from the fleeting pleasures of sin. Yet it was by faith that he did it. It's the fruit.

It's a different type of work, you might add. So real faith is concerned with the will of God, and that's why real faith is so difficult.

This is the point that I want to get to. Why is trusting God or real faith in God so difficult? I'm going to give you a few illustrations. First, I'm going to give a quote from Donald MacLeod.

[17:58] Donald MacLeod has this to say. In the 21st century, the human soul is much more preoccupied with insecurity than the question of guilt.

Let that settle in. I mean, that is an insight, if I've ever heard one. You think about your own Christian life.

You know, if you do struggle with guilt, that's also an insecurity. You know, am I saved? Am I really saved? But insecurity of all kinds of other things, we all know, don't we, that we're far more preoccupied with other insecurities.

And that, unfortunately, or rightly, plays right into the will of God. Insecurities. And that's why it's easier to trust in other things than it is God.

I'm going to try and illustrate this to you. What is James saying, or what is he implying? Well, here's a couple of things. Number one, if I said to you this evening, please come into this room and please sit down.

[19:12] Two things happen. Number one, the instruction's super easy to understand. Please sit down. You all understand it. Take a pew, a little bit more confusing.

You know, I can remember growing up as a child and the teacher would say, take a seat. And you're not quite sure what she means. Sit down. You have to be told, sit down, because you're not quite sure what take a seat means.

So, but you know, you're grownups, please sit down. Easy to understand. It's also really easy to perform. You've been sitting down your whole life.

You find it incredibly easy to sit down on these chairs. So, just think about those two things for a moment. Please sit down and you do it. Number one, the instruction's easy to understand. Number two, the action is dead easy to perform.

Now you say, well, I've sat on this chair a hundred times, so I know that it's going to hold my weight, so it's easy to believe that I can sit here and not fall on my bottom. Okay. But even on chairs that you've never sat on before, you still sit down without hesitating whether or not it's going to hold your weight.

[20:18] No problem. You do it all the time. And let's just say for a minute, you did sit down on a chair and it did break. Okay, a little bit embarrassing. Maybe you would hurt yourself a little bit, but it's no big deal.

You'd get over it. You find it dead easy to sit down on a chair. I find it embarrassing before God, really embarrassing, personally, as a pastor, to say that I trust in the chair more than him.

I have a relationship, as to you, with the God of the universe, the creator of all things, who can bring things into existence just by speaking.

And yet I have more trust in a piece of wood than I do God. And I think most of us do here as well. And I think I know why. Would you like me to explain to you why? Here's why. Because when I sit on the chair, the chair serves my will.

[21:34] The chair does what I want. It doesn't argue with me. It doesn't say I'm going to do it differently. It doesn't invade my personal life. I sit on the chair, and the chair does what I want it to do.

But to trust God, the problem there is that God has a will. And God's will interferes with my will. And God's will introduces itself into my personal life. It invades it, it interrupts it, and it changes it. You know, that's why we find it difficult to have faith in God.

That's why it's easier to trust in a piece of wood, a chair, than it is to trust in the living God. Because the moment we trust in the living God, we are trusting in the will of someone else.

Real faith is following the will of God. You know, Abraham, let's just alter the story. Not that I'm changing the Bible, but let's just say for a moment that Abraham decided where he was going to live, and what he was going to do, and what he was going to eat, and where he was going to go next.

[22 : 45] And let's say he trusted God for everything. Easy. We all do it all the time. Super easy. Not a problem. But when God says to him, pack your bags, you're going somewhere, and I'm not going to tell you where you're going.

Let's go. Difficult. Why? Because you don't know where you're going. You don't know where you're going to live. You don't know what you're going to do. You are following the will of another person. That's why it's difficult to trust in God. It's not that you find trust difficult. Rather, it's that you find the will difficult.

Because you trust in a chair easy. And God's will is easy to understand, and it's also easy, in respects, to follow.

Easy to perform. The difficulty comes with the fact that it is God's will that is at stake. So when James says here, what good is it?

[23 : 51] What good is it if you have faith and you have no works? What good is it for the person who says it? No good at all. The person who says that they have faith, but does not have any fruit coming out of their life for deceiving themselves.

Secondly, if you say you have faith and no works, it's not any good for your fellow brother and sister in the faith. You can't help them out of poverty. You can't give them food when they need it. You can't give them clothing when you need it.

You can't even serve in the church. None of it's there. What good is it? No good at all. What's involved is the will of God.

Real faith follows the will of God. And so James here is not coming up with random acts so that you can prove your faith. He's simply saying faith looks like something every day.

It's going to show up somewhere in some form or other. You know, one of my favorite sayings was said by a minister.

[24 : 55] I hardly ever repeat it because it's a little bit rude, but I'm going to do it this evening. And he said this, you know, we both serve God. You do it in your way and I do it in his.

And I'm going to say that again just so you've all got it. We all serve God. You do it in your way and I do it in his. Who's he quoting?

Jesus. Now, Jesus didn't say those exact words. But what were the Pharisees about? The Pharisees did good works for the simple show of it.

The Pharisees did what they wanted to do, not what Jesus wanted them to do. The Pharisees served God in their own way. And we see Jesus turning over the temple.

Jesus is telling them exactly what they think about their type of service. They pray on street corners so as to draw attention and Jesus has to say to them, you've had your reward.

[26 : 01] Everybody's seen you. You've got your glory on an earthly level. But that's not the way we do it. You know, we both serve God. I understand that. But let's be clear of how we serve God.

You do it in your way, which is not really serving God, and I do it in his, John 6. All I do is to follow the will of my father, Jesus said. That's crucial.

Real faith, living by faith, is following the will of God. Now, I said this as we draw to a close a couple times before, but it's worth repeating.

Do you know what? It's far easier to fall in love with a position in the church than it is with people in the church. You can love being an elder without loving the people.

You can love being a deacon without loving the people. You can love being a Sunday school leader without loving the children. You could potentially love the position more than you love the people that that position is there to serve.

[27 : 07] You know, Jesus says, love your neighbor. You know, that's way more difficult than loving your neighbor's house. You think about it.

How often, you know, an extension goes on, they have a swimming pool put out the back, they have this garage put on, and, you know, much easier to love their house than it is to love them. And yet, what does Jesus say? Love your neighbor's house? No, he says, love your neighbor. Yeah, that's the challenge, isn't it, that real faith in God to really follow what Jesus says all the way through to its end is very difficult.

Why? It's because we're following the will of somebody else and not our own. That's why it's difficult. But that's the challenge. So here's the exhortation as we close.

Faith pleases God. Real faith pleases God. For without real faith, it is impossible to please God.

[28 : 11] Jesus exercised faith in God. The disciples exercised faith in God. The centurion exercised faith in God. The Canaanite woman on behalf of her daughter exercised faith in God.

Children who came to Jesus exercised faith in God. It all looks different. Some of it was deep.

Some of it was simple.

Some of it was great. And some of it was small. But it was all real. And Jane says, because it all looks like something.

It all turns out in a certain way. So faith without works, says James, is dead. It looks like something.

So I want to end where we began.

And it's with this, that a person's faith can grow and will grow always as they remain close to the will of God. Listening to his word and following it.

[29 : 13] That's how faith grows. Faith can grow. You're not given a certain amount to get you through the rest of your life. Your faith can go up and down over a period of a day.

It can go up and down over a period of your life. Faith can grow but it can also shrink, unfortunately. And that's one of the reasons why John wrote his gospel. At the end, there's an argument over what did he actually mean.

But you'll know the story. Thomas struggles to believe in Jesus. And he says, I'm not going to believe until I can touch him and see him for myself. Jesus turns up, satisfies him at that level.

But then he has some very strong words to say to Peter, Thomas. And Jesus says to them, okay, Thomas, you've got to see. Now you believe. Great. But blessed are those who have never seen yet believe.

And John makes the very crucial point of saying, look, I've written this entire gospel so that you may believe. The Greek actually changes it ever so slightly.

[30 : 12] Or not changes it, it emphasizes what John is saying rather than the English. And that is, that you may continue to believe. Think about it. I've written this so that you may continue to believe.

Like John knew. He tells the story of a man called Thomas who believed and followed Jesus. And then struggled with believing in Jesus. And then ends his gospel saying, I've written this gospel so that you may continue to believe.

Now you won't get that in the English. It only turns up in the Greek. English Bibles tend to leave at the continuance part because there's an argument over did he just say believe or continue. I'm favoring the continue because of the context of Thomas.

And what he's saying is this. That to believe the word of God leads to the same kind of conviction and blessing that Thomas experienced when he saw Jesus for himself.

So grow in your faith and grow in your faith by listening to the word of God. Grow in your faith. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.

[31 : 19] It all starts there. Hear the word says James. Oh and by the way be doers also. Amen.