

Faith that Works

Text: James 2:14-19

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Introduction –

Which came first: the chicken or the egg? That's an age old question going back centuries debated by philosophers and scholars. One group insists that the chicken must have come first in order to lay the egg. After all, you need a chicken to lay eggs. Others disagree, claiming that the egg must have come first, because little chicks hatch from eggs. Where did the first chicken come from if not from an egg? There was a Greek philosopher named Aristotle who apparently tried to take the easy way out, concluding that both chickens and eggs have always existed, but that doesn't really make any sense to me. As Christians, we know that God created all the living creatures of the earth telling them to be fruitful and multiply, so I guess the answer is that chicken came first... unless God created it from an egg.

There is another age old question that people have wrestled with over the centuries and it has to do with the relationship between faith and works. Is a person saved by performing good works, observing religious rituals, earning God's favor by what they do? *Or*, is a person saved by faith, trusting in Jesus Christ as our Savior, relying on his finished work on the cross to cleanse us from sin and bring us into a right relationship with God? Which is it: faith or works? Most religions in the world claim that it is our works that save us. You must do this, this and this. Then you will make yourself worthy in the eyes of the Lord. Christianity, on the other hand, teaches that we are saved by faith alone. It's not what you do, but what Christ has done for you, that makes the difference. This is abundantly clear throughout the Bible, especially in passages like Ephesians 2:8-9 which tells us,

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Eph. 2:8–9 NASB95)

The apostle Paul explains that it's impossible for us to save ourselves. We are spiritually dead apart from the Lord. Sin has separated us from God, and there is no amount of good we could ever do to atone for our failures. That's why Jesus entered the world, to do for us what we were unable to do for ourselves. All we can do is accept his gift of salvation by trusting Jesus as our Savior, and we can't even take credit for that. Salvation is entirely by his grace.

But we would be mistaken to assume that good works have no place at all in the Christian life. In the very next verse, that passage in Ephesians, goes on to say...

We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10 NASB95)

In other words, if our hearts have been changed by the power of the gospel, and we have become a new creation in Christ, it will show on the outside. Acts of kindness and expressions of love will naturally flow from the lives of God's people. This doesn't come from within ourselves; it comes from the Lord, who accomplishes his work through us. He creates in us a

compassion for others, and a desire to serve, equipping us to bring honor and glory to his name. The Holy Spirit is shaping us to reflect the character of Christ in our conduct and behavior. The people around us will notice there is something different about us. We're not the same person that we used to be. God's light is now shining in us, pointing others to Jesus.

And so we are not saved *by* good works, but we are saved *unto* good works. First, we trust in Christ as our Savior, and then good works will follow as we live out our faith.

That's the point of our passage in James 2:14-20. These are some of the most challenging verses in the NT, and many have wondered if James and Paul contradict one another. Paul's emphasis throughout his letters is on the importance of faith. And yet, James very passionately urges believers to pursue a life of good works. Are they saying two different things? As we look closer at the context, I don't think that's the case. They are not saying two different things, but are addressing two different problems.

Throughout Paul's ministry, he was constantly battling legalists, who claimed that a person must earn God's favor through religious rituals and good deeds. Paul responded to that false teaching by proclaiming the grace of God, showing us that it is by faith alone that we are saved.

James, on the other hand, found himself dealing with the opposite problem. There were people in the churches who claimed to be Christians, but there was no evidence that their faith was real. They didn't look any different from the rest of the world. There was no change in their lifestyle or behavior. They had no interest in serving God. They shrugged their shoulders and claimed, "It doesn't matter what we do. The pastor gave the invitation, and we raised our hand and repeated the prayer, so we're okay. It doesn't matter how we live." James was speaking to that kind of attitude and asks those people, "Is that really faith? Because true faith will produce a change in our hearts, and if there is no change maybe you haven't really understood what it means to accept Christ as your Savior."

Paul wouldn't disagree with that. In his letters he tells us that God's people are to be zealous for good works (Titus 2:14), and he challenges us to examine our hearts to see if we are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). So they're not contradicting each other, they are addressing different issues.

One commentator explains,

The difference between James and Paul is a difference of starting point. Paul starts with the basic fact of the forgiveness of God which no one can earn or deserve; James starts with professing Christians and [calls] individuals [to] prove their Christianity by their deeds. We are not saved *by* deeds; we are saved *for* deeds; these are the twin truths of the Christian life. Paul's emphasis is on the first and James' is on the second. They do not contradict but complement each other, and the message of both is essential.ⁱ

Churches today continue to deal with both of these errors. There are legalists who are trying to earn their way to heaven. And so we need to proclaim the words of Ephesians and Romans and Galatians to show them the right way. But there are also people who claim to be Christians

but there is no evidence in the way they live. And so the words of James are also relevant in our world.

We are not saved by works, but believers should live a life of good works, because our faith is lived out in our everyday lives.

We're going to talk about true faith as we work through this passage, but first I want step back for a moment and consider the background of the letter. Who is James? There are several people in the NT with that name, but the person who wrote this letter was James the brother of Jesus. The gospels don't tell us much about the family of Jesus... only that during his earthly ministry his own brothers didn't believe in him. That's amazing to think about. They grew up in the same home but somehow failed to realize that their brother was really the Messiah, the Son of the living God. But they were eventually convinced, and we are told that Jesus appeared to James after the resurrection. He later became an important leader in the Jerusalem church. This letter may have been one of the books of the NT to be written, maybe as early as 45-50 AD, before Paul's first missionary journey. The book of Acts tells us that when persecution broke out in Judea, followers of Christ scattered. James may have been writing to those who had been under his spiritual care, but were now living far away. He addresses the letter "...to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." He has a writing style that doesn't pull any punches; he tells it like it is. When he sees a problem, he addresses it, and we see that here.

True faith bears fruit. (v.14-16)

Look at James 2:14. *"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?"* He is talking about a superficial faith, the kind that doesn't produce a change, but only consists of words, is that saving faith?

Think about that for a moment. If I claim to be a Christian, but there's no evidence in the way I live, what would you think? There's no joy in my life, no love for others. I don't spend any time in prayer, and have no longing for God. I'm more interested in following the ways of the world than following Jesus. I'm not especially kind to others, and have zero patience. I don't care about my neighbors or anyone else. I'm too busy looking out for number 1. I am harsh and critical, always muttering curses under my breath. – I know that sounds just like me, doesn't it? I hope not. – But if that's the way I live, would you believe me if I told you that I am a Christian? Obviously no one can judge the condition of my heart except for God, but there's a problem and you would have to wonder if I am really saved.

James gives us an example in verse 15 describing a hypothetical situation. He says,

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.¹⁶ If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

Imagine if someone were to walk through these doors on a Sunday morning, and they are obviously in dire need. It's bitter cold outside, with snow on the ground, but they are dressed in rags. They have no coat, their shoes are worn thin. The poor man is shivering, and if nothing

else, he hopes to spend a few moments inside where it is warm. Meanwhile, I have a drawer full of clothes at home that I barely wear, and an extra coat in the closet, but the thought doesn't even cross my mind to offer these to him. I just shake my head and say, "You'd better dress a little warmer than that, or you'll freeze to death out there." The man hasn't eaten a good meal in weeks, and it's obvious that he's hungry. He's so sickly and frail that his frame almost resembles a skeleton. Meanwhile, we are preparing for a potluck meal in the fellowship hall. You can smell the wonderful aroma of shredded chicken and sloppy joes from crockpots in the back. But instead of inviting him to stay and join us, I tell him "I'm sorry, we're getting ready for lunch, why don't stop by another time? Go in peace, be well." --Are those the actions of a Christian? Not even close.

That's not how Jesus treated people. He had compassion for the crowds, and showed kindness to those who were hurting and broken. And so it only makes sense that if I have come to know Christ, his love will be evident in my life.

In **Matthew 7:16** Jesus told his disciples, "*By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?*"¹⁷ *Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.*" (Mt. 7:16-17 NIV84)

Jesus has been warning his disciples about false teachers and false prophets and he shows them how to tell the difference. You will know them by their fruit. A person who knows the Lord, who has come to experience God's love, who has the Holy Spirit dwelling within them, will bear fruit in some way.

If we were to walk through an apple orchard in the fall, what would you expect to see? You would expect lots of ripe and juicy apples growing on the branches. What if you found a tree that was empty, and barren, with nothing but withered branches. There is not a sign of fruit anywhere. What would think? That tree must be dead, because if it were alive and flourishing there would be apples on it.

And so we should expect that our lives will bear fruit, as we grow in our walk with the Lord: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. The closer we walk with the Lord, the more this fruit will be evident in our lives. We understand that we're not perfect. We have bad days. We might struggle along the way. But more and more, his character is being formed in our hearts, if he lives in us. Faith produces fruit.

That's not telling us to walk around and judge who is saved and who isn't saved: "I'm sure he's a Christians, and she's a believer, but I'm concerned about the guy back there." But it does challenge us to look within ourselves and examine our own hearts. Am I growing in my relationship with Jesus? Is his love evident in my life? Can my neighbors tell that there is something different about me? I hope so. Because if there is no fruit, there's a problem.

Ephesians 5:8–10 (NIV84) "*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light*"⁹ *(for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)*¹⁰ *and find out what pleases the Lord.*"

True faith is more than intellectual knowledge.

Look at James 2:19. *“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”*

Knowledge alone isn't enough. James says, “You believe God is one, you do well.” This was one of the most important doctrines of the Jewish faith. Unlike the nations around them, Israel was monotheistic, believing that there is one true God. Deuteronomy 6:4 says, “Hear O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one.” The phrase became something the people recited in their daily prayers. But memorizing this verse was not enough, unless it meant something in their heart. Even the demons believe that there is a God, and they are terrified of him. But that knowledge certainly doesn't save them. Knowing certain details about God and knowing God are two different things. We need to act on that knowledge by placing our trust in him.

We realize that knowledge and faith are not necessarily the same thing. I can possess all kinds of facts and information in my mind that has no bearing on my life.

For instance, a student might write a report for school about the Golden Gate Bridge. She might know all the details including when it was built, how much it cost, and how many days it took to complete. She might be able to describe it perfectly, explaining how long it stretches from one side to the other, and how high the bridge is suspended above the waters. She might get an A+ on her paper and her teacher writes glowing compliments at the top of the page: “wonderful knowledge of your subject.” But that's not the same thing as having faith in the bridge. One day her parents say, “Let's take a trip as a family and drive across the Golden Gate Bridge, wouldn't that be fun.” And she tells them, “No way! I'm terrified of heights. I could never trust that bridge with my life.” She has knowledge, but no faith. Faith would mean stepping out onto the bridge with confidence trusting it to support you.

There are a lot of people who say, “I believe there's a God,” but they don't seek him or pursue a relationship with him. They go about their lives ignoring him. That's not faith. There are people who say, “I believe Jesus was a good man who walked this earth and did miracles.” But that's not the same thing as trusting in him as our Savior. We need the kind of kind of faith that responds to the gospel by opening our heart and inviting him to become our Savior.

Someone has said the distance between your head and your heart is only a matter of inches, but it makes all the difference in the world. You might hear the gospel and have a basic understanding of it in your mind but it will be ineffective unless the message moves to your heart and you believe.

Romans 10:9 (NIV84) tells us, *“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”* The apostle tells us that it's not just a matter of repeating the right words, it is believing in our heart, the center of who we are, the core of our being, throwing ourselves on the mercy of Christ and saying to him “I need your forgiveness, come and rescue me from my sin, and make me a child of God.”

One commentator writes,

The person with dead faith has only an intellectual experience. In his mind, he knows the [the right] doctrines, but he has never submitted himself to God and trusted Christ for salvation... Beware of a mere intellectual faith. No man can come to Christ and remain the same any more than he can come into contact with a 220-volt wire and remain the same. "He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life" (1 John 5:12).ⁱⁱ

True faith moves us to action.

James goes on to cite the example of Abraham, from the OT. When God first appeared to Abraham the Lord made some incredible promises to him, calling him to go forth from his country and his relatives and his father's house to the land that God would show him. That couldn't have been easy, but Abraham trusted God and followed him into the unknown. The Lord told Abraham that he would have a son, even though Abraham and Sarah were well past the age of child bearing. It seemed impossible, but Abraham believed God and clung to the promises.

Years later, after Isaac was born, God made a very strange request, asking Abraham to bring his only son and offer up Isaac as a sacrifice. It was unthinkable. How could he do such a thing? Following God had never been easy, but this was most difficult test he had faced. Abraham didn't understand the reason, but looking back we know that God was pointing to the sacrifice he would one day make sending his son Jesus into the world to die for our sin. Abraham had no idea what it meant, or why God would ask this of him, but he believed somehow the Lord had a purpose and would not let his son perish, so he followed God to the mountain and prepared the wood and the altar for a sacrifice. Just as he was getting ready to follow through, at the last moment, the Lord took hold of his hand and spared the child. And Abraham noticed a ram in the bushes which he offered instead.

In verse 22 James says, "

You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend.

James isn't saying that Abraham was saved by works, or that it was some combination of faith plus works that brought him into a right relationship with God. But his faith was confirmed throughout his life when he followed the Lord. There was evidence of faith along the way through his response to God. When Abraham left his homeland and stepped into the unknown, he was demonstrating his faith in action. When Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac, he was demonstrating his faith in action.

That doesn't mean his faith never wavered, or that he never struggled to do what God asked of him. If you were to go back and read the account of his life in Genesis you would find moments when he messed up along the way, but even then he trusted to God to pick him back up

and set his feet on the right path. It was faith that brought him into a right relationship with God, and throughout his journey he had opportunities to demonstrate that faith through his actions.

The same is true for us. By faith that we enter a relationship with God. And over the course of our lives that faith is expressed through our actions.

For one man, his faith is expressed in action as he battles illness. Through doctor's visits, and surgeries, and scans he continues trusting the Lord to give him the strength he needs each day to keep going. There are certainly moments when he gets discouraged, but during those times he is drawn to the Lord in prayer. People look at him and see a powerful example of faith.

For a young woman, her faith is demonstrated in action as she shares her faith on the college campus. The Lord has been placing a burden on her heart for her classmates, and so she starts a Bible study in the dorm placing invitations in all the student mailboxes. She knows that it won't be easy. Some people are bound to give her a hard time. But she trusts the Lord to guide her.

For another couple, faith is expressed as they serve in the church. They are always willing to help out whenever there is a need. They are faithful.

Think about the examples of faith that you have looked up to in your life. What are some things the Lord was teaching you as you saw the way they lived out their faith? Think about how the Lord is shaping you to be an example of faith to others? What are some ways that you trust and rely on Christ in your everyday life?

Conclusion –

Which comes first, faith or works? The answer is faith: we are saved by trusting in Christ as our Savior relying on his death burial and resurrection to cleanse us from our sin. But good works are sure to follow, as we walk with the Lord. James challenges us to live out our faith.

Everyday we have opportunities to share God's love with others. It might be something simple like a word of encouragement to a friend, or lending a helping hand to neighbor in need. We are given opportunities to witness to those around us. It could be inviting someone to church, or reading the Bible to your children. We make decisions to live in obedience to God's Word, instead of following along with this world. We draw closer to God as we spend time with him in prayer lifting up the needs of others. We can't pat ourselves on the back, and tell ourselves how wonderful we are for doing these things, because we realize that it's all from the Lord.

¹⁰ *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10 NASB95)*

^{i i} Barclay, W. (2003). [*The Letters of James and Peter*](#) (3rd ed. fully rev. and updated, pp. 85–86). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

ⁱⁱ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [*The Bible exposition commentary*](#) (Vol. 2, p. 354). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.