

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

Faith and Works James 2:14-26 Part One

I am sure all of you who have been attending Valley Bible these past few months know that we are studying the Epistle of James. I am also sure that you now know that the theme of this epistle is “Tests of a Living Faith.” And I would hope that each of you can name the three tests that we have so far examined. The first test that we examined was the “Response to Trials test” in **James 1:2-18**. The second test that we examined was the “Response to the Word test” in **James 1:19-27**. The third test that we have examined was the “Impartiality test” in **James 2:1-13**. We are now going on to a fourth test found in this epistle and we will call it “The Works test” in **James 2:14-26**.

Let us take our Bibles and read **James 2:14-26**. I will be reading from the NAS Bible. **(14) “What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? (15) If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, (16) and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? (17) Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. (18) But someone may well say, “You have faith, and I have works;” show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (19) You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. (20) But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? (21) Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? (22) You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; (23) and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to Him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. (24) You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone. (25) And in the same way was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works, when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? (26) For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”**

This passage of Scripture reinforces a truth which I believe most people will quickly accept and it is this: What we believe will impact what we choose to do or not do. If you believe that it is important to obey traffic laws, you will seek to obey them. If you do not believe it is important to obey traffic laws, you will not obey them. If you believe that it is important that you get up at a certain time in the morning, you will take steps to assure yourself that you will. If you don’t believe that it is important to get up at a certain time, then you will not take steps to assure yourself that you will in fact do this. It is just that simple.

And if what I have just shared with you is true, then examining what we choose to do or not to do is a much more accurate barometer of what we truly believe than what we say. If I say to you, “It is important to obey traffic laws,” but habitually and willfully break them, my actions reveal that what I said was in fact not true. If I say to you, “It is important for me to get up at a certain time,” but I fail to do this because I never set my alarm, my actions reveal that what I said was in fact not true.

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People are continually making statements which are proven untrue by their actions. Does this mean that all these people who are making statements that are inconsistent with their actions are lying? Of course not! What is the definition of a lie? A lie is defined in the dictionary as “a false statement made with intent to deceive; an intentional untruth.” Most people who make statements which are not supported by their actions are not lying, rather they are self-deceived.

They are choosing to believe something about themselves that is not true. They do this for many different reasons, but it certainly can have very tragic consequences. But there is no more tragic example of self deception than a person who says that they are a Christian and in fact believes this, when they are not. If we want to make sure that we are not one of these individuals, we need to understand clearly this very basic truth. The genuineness of a profession of faith is evidenced more by what a person does than by what he says. A person who professes faith in Christ, but who does not live a Christ-honoring, Christ-obeying life, is self deceived and exposes his so-called faith as dead.

We see examples of dead faith throughout the New Testament. In **Matt. 3:7-9** it says, “**When John the Baptist saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.’**” These Pharisees and Sadducees believed themselves to be righteous. But John saw them as self-deceived. This is why he responded as he did. In essence, he was saying to them, “If you truly trust in God and belong to Him, you will give evidence of it by repenting of your sins and living righteously.” His calling them vipers made it clear that their lives were anything but righteous and that their professed faith was therefore a dead faith.

Jesus picks up on this same theme in **Matt. 7:21** saying, “**Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.**” For the Jews, before the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, to simply claim that Abraham was their father was not sufficient to secure salvation and neither is it sufficient for professing Christians to claim that Jesus is their Savior and Lord. It is not what we say that bears witness to the genuineness of our faith as much as what we do.

Though this seems like a very simple concept for many people, it is very difficult to understand and certainly even more difficult to apply. This phenomenon was evident even at the very earliest stages of Christ’s earthly ministry. **John 2:23-25** says, “**When He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.**” He did not entrust Himself to them because they did not belong to Him. Their belief amounted to the acknowledgment of certain truths about Jesus, but they did not trust in Him as Savior or surrender to Him as Lord. Their faith was dead.

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Nicodemus , a leading Pharisee, is spoken of in **John 3:2-3**, **“Came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘ Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”** What Nicodemus said was completely true, but **“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”** Nicodemus believed Jesus was a prophet from God, that He spoke the truth, and that He performed miracles by divine power; and perhaps he even believed that He was the Messiah. But again, the Lord made clear that, no matter how sincere it may be, mere acknowledgment of certain truths about Him does not constitute spiritual rebirth.

Jesus repeatedly emphasized this basic gospel truth, that mere intellectual acceptance of divine truth does not bring salvation. In **Matt 7:16-20** Jesus says, **“Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.”** In **John 15:5-6,8** it says, **“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.”** Again it is important for us to emphasize that mere intellectual acceptance of divine truth does not bring salvation.

This is one reason why I believe it is dangerous for a church to count so-called professions of faith, or to tie the success of a church to so-called professions of faith or baptisms. If we do this, we would be tempted to diminish the issue of true repentance and the Lordship of Christ and settle for mental assent.

As in many other times in its history, the church today desperately needs to recognize and deal with the soul-damning idea that mere acknowledgment of the gospel facts as being true is sufficient for salvation. We must clearly and forcefully counter the deception and delusion that knowing and accepting the truth about Jesus is equivalent to having saving faith in Him.

James is certainly trying to do his part under the inspiration of the Spirit. As I have already mentioned, the theme of this epistle is “tests of living faith.” We have already considered three, and are beginning to consider the fourth. All of the tests are based on the foundational truth that people who do not make a true commitment to renounce sin and obey and serve the Lord Jesus Christ have no claim on Him and should be confronted with the reality of their lostness. How we live proves who we are --or who we are not. As James declared in the previous chapter, genuine believers are **“doers of the Word and not merely hearers who delude themselves.”**

But also It cannot be stressed too often that no one can be saved by works. Salvation is entirely “By grace ... through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, so that no one may boast.” If works could have any part in salvation, it would no longer be by God’s grace. But neither can it be stressed too often that, as James declares in the present passage, **“faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself” (James 2:17).**

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Genuine, transforming faith not only should, but will produce genuine good works, notably repentance and obedient submission to Christ’s Lordship. This is the expression of the new nature, created in the new birth. It will not be perfect obedience and repentance, but good works will be present (Eph. 2:8-10).

For the self-deceived, however, salvation amounts to nothing more than a casual acknowledgment of the facts about Christ, with no idea or intention of permanent, irrevocable commitment to Him and to His Word and will. The 17th century English preacher Thomas Brooks wrote: “Christ hath freed you from all your enemies, from the curse of the law, the predominant power of sin, the wrath of God, the sting of death, and the torments of hell; but what is the end and design of Christ in doing these great and marvelous things for his people? It is not that we should throw off duties of righteousness and holiness, but that their hearts may be the more free and sweet in all holy duties and heavenly services... Ah, souls! I know no such arguments to work you to a lively and constant performance of all heavenly services, like those that are drawn from the consideration of the great and glorious things that Christ hath done for you.”

As I mentioned in chapter 1, James primary audience was Jewish, “**the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad.**” Those Jews had identified themselves with the Christian faith, many of them doubtless, at considerable cost. As in most Christian assemblies, however, some of them were genuine believers and some were not. That was the reason for James’s presenting so many tests of faith. It is why Paul also admonishes in **2 Cor. 13:5** “**Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves.**”

Some Jews had gone from an extreme legalistic Judaism to the opposite extreme of an antinomian Christianity. They replaced a works-righteousness system with one that required no works at all. Those Jews who were honest had long since realized that they could not possibly keep all the commandments of God or meet His standards of righteousness. The Law was a hopelessly demanding burden they could not possibly carry. Over the previous centuries, rabbis had added still more burdens. Consequently, when they heard the gospel of salvation through grace alone and faith alone, many Jews were immediately attracted. Some assumed this new religion gave everything and demanded nothing. Such people would make a profession of believing about Christ, but with the mistaken notion that, because works are not efficacious for salvation, they are, therefore, not necessary for anything. The inevitable result was non-saving faith and a type of living that differed little, if at all, from the way they had formerly lived. It may even have led to worse conduct.

We will be breaking up the section of Scriptures that we read this morning into two parts. The first part will be addressing “dead faith” in **James 2:14-20**. Then in **James 2:21-26** we will address the issue of “living faith.” But let us begin by addressing what James tells us about “dead faith.”

DEAD FAITH

What we will discover is that James gives us three different characteristics of dead faith, of worthless faith. The first characteristic that we will be considering is “empty confession.”

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EMPTY CONFESSION

Let us read V. 14, “What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?”

Let us look at the very first phrase, “my brethren.” Perhaps this phrase refers to James’s fellow Jews, but certainly he is also addressing the church at large. Now, let us take a look at the very next phrase.

“If someone says he has faith” this phrase governs the interpretation of the entire passage. James does not say that this person actually has saving faith, but that he claims to have it.

The context indicates that the faith being referred to is the acknowledgment of the basic truths of the gospel. A person making such a claim would believe in such things as the existence of God, Scripture as the Word of God, and, presumably, in the messiahship of Christ and in His atoning death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. In any case, the theological orthodoxy of such a person’s faith is not in question; the issue is that “he has no works.”

Look at the very next phrase, “What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works?...” The verb form in that phrase “he has no works” describes someone who continually lacks evidence to support the claim of faith he routinely makes. If we say that we have faith, saving faith; if we say that we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and that He died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and was buried, and that He was raised again the third day according to the Scriptures; and if we say that based on these facts, we have embraced Him as our Lord and Savior, then we need to be living a life characterized by works that are consistent with this profession.

James does not specify any particular type of work. But certainly I would have to assume that it would include a “proper response to trials” as we saw in **James 1:2-18**, the “proper response to the word” which we saw in **James 2:19-27**, and the presence of “impartiality” as we have seen in **James 2:1-13**. And, of course, any other work that Christ has commanded us.

Have you been examining your lives as we have been studying this epistle to see if these works and other works consistent with being a disciple of Christ are present? I can’t do this for you. You must do it for yourself. I can only share with you the importance of it and encourage you to in fact do it. This means that in your conversations, in your activities, in your thoughts, in every aspect of your life you are continually evaluating yourself in light of the Word of God and are seeking to perform the works that you believe that Christ would have you to do in the strength that He provides. If we are not seeking, as a general pattern of our lives, to bring ourselves into conformity to Christ and do not see the works being produced in our lives that come from seeking to please our Lord, then we are faced by James with a question.

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“Can that faith save him?” The question, “Can that faith save him?” is not offered to dispute the importance of faith, but to oppose the idea that just any kind of faith can save. The grammatical form of the question calls for a negative answer - “No, it cannot save.” A profession of faith that is devoid of righteous works cannot save a person, no matter how strongly it may be proclaimed. As already noted, it is not that some amount of good works added to true faith can save a person, but rather that faith that is genuine and saving will inevitably produce good works.

No NT writer is more adamant that salvation is solely by God’s grace working through man’s faith than Paul, and no writing of Paul makes that clearer than does his letter to the church at Rome. Listen to his words in **Rom. 2:6-10** and then again in **VV. 13-16**. **“(The Lord) will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek It is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the Law, do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.”**

James is therefore obviously not in conflict with Paul about the basis of salvation. Paul opposes works-righteousness legalism; James opposes easy-believism. But both men make clear that we are going to be judged on the basis of what we have done, for that is a sure indicator of genuine salvation.

Where there is true salvation, where sovereign grace reaches down to regenerate and transform a person from sinner to saint, God will create in the soul of that person new longings to forsake sin and self and gladly serve the Lord Jesus Christ and obey His divine standards of righteousness. The moment that Zaccheus believed in Jesus, it tells us in **Luke 19:8** “Behold, Lord half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.” When pagans in Ephesus trusted in Christ and were “confessing and disclosing their practices ... many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver” (**Acts 19:18-19**).

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CONCLUSION

We are examining “Tests of Living Faith.” The first test that we considered was the “Response to Trials test,” the second test that we considered as the “Response to the Word test,” the third test that we looked at was the “Impartiality test.” And now we are looking at the “Works test.” To help us understand this test James begins with a discussion of the characteristics of “dead faith.” The very first characteristic that we have considered this weekend is that it is characterized by a “shallow confession.”

Remember: The genuineness of a profession of faith is evidenced more by what a person does than by what he says. A person who professes faith in Christ but who does not live a Christ-honoring, Christ-obeying life is self-deceived and exposes his so-called faith as dead.