

James: The Practical Christian

Beyond Easy Believism!

James 2:14-26

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October 23, 2005

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Scripture

A Chicago-based newspaper, *StreetWise*, is sold by homeless people, who collect a portion of the proceeds. One day as Dr. Joseph Stowell, then serving as President of the Moody Bible Institute, walked to work, he passed a *StreetWise* vendor. It was a bitterly cold January morning, and he had already stopped by Starbucks and paid more than a dollar for a small cup of coffee. Feeling noble, he struggled to find his wallet, reached in, and took out a dollar.

The homeless woman asked, “Do you really want the paper, or can I keep it to sell to someone else?”

“Keep the paper,” he replied. Then he added, “How are you today?”

“I’m so cold,” she said.

“I hope the sun comes out, it warms up, and you have a good day,” he told her as he turned to go.

He continued on, with the cup of coffee warming his hand. About half a block later, the conversation finally registered. He wrestled for a moment with what he should do, but he was late, so he kept walking.

Dr. Stowell concludes this account with these words, “Ever since, I’ve regretted not giving her a cup of hot coffee in Christ’s name.”¹

We call ourselves “Christians.” But do our actions back up our claims? That is what James is addressing in today’s text. So, with that in mind, let’s read James 2:14-26:

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of

¹ Joseph Stowell, *A Heart for the City* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999).

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? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

²⁰ You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² 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. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

²⁵ In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (James 2:14-26)

Introduction

James Dyer, a political scientist from Texas A & M, has been quoted as saying, “It’s fairly obvious that people are tending to measure their religious convictions by a different yardstick than people did thirty or forty years ago. Being in church on Sunday and how important religion is are not totally held as the same thing in everyone’s mind today.”

An overwhelming number of people call themselves “Christians,” but in reality are not. The problem is often called *nominalism*. The term *nominalism* is derived from a Latin term meaning “belonging to a name.” A Christian *nominalist* is one who claims to be a true Christian, but who has no authentic, personal, life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. His allegiance to Christ is

in name only. But that's all. It's a belief that doesn't show itself in his behavior.

Oh, he says that he believes in the importance of Christ's salvation, but he just never speaks of it. He is quick to claim to believe in the goodness of God's will, but he just doesn't submit to it. He speaks openly about the value of God's word, but he never reads or studies it. He talks about the need to advance God's kingdom, but he doesn't ever participate in it. He claims to believe in the evil of sin, but he's just not turning from it.

What's the problem? Somewhere along the line, people have bought into the tragic idea that a person can be a Christian without being a true follower of Jesus Christ, that you can know Jesus as your Savior and just not ever acknowledge him as your Lord, that all you really need to do is at some point in your life be sure to "ask Jesus into your heart" or "invite him into your life." People think that you can give just the barest intellectual assent to the fact of Christ's death being for you, and then you can know for sure—whether you ever really follow Christ or not—that you have peace with God, and that you are eternally secure.

I shudder to think how many thousands of people across this country have a sense of peace with God, but they are not truly in God's family. It almost reminds me of the days of Jeremiah, when we are told that the false prophets were saying to the people, "Peace, peace' . . . when there is no peace" (6:14; 8:11).

Lesson

How can you know whether or not your faith is the real thing? It's a very important question. All of your eternity is at stake in the answer.

James answers that most critical question in James 2:14-26. This passage is really the crux of this entire book we call "James." Everything before this passage points forward to it. And everything that follows this passage is pointing back. It's the peak of the pyramid of this New Testament book. For it is in this part of the

book that James sets forth his primary answer to this critical question, “What is genuine faith?”

In James 2:14-26 we find two great truths about genuine faith that are meant to give you a solid spiritual foundation upon which to build your life and ministry. In these verses we learn:

1. Genuine faith is more than a mere profession, and
2. Genuine faith always leads to a changed life.

I. **Genuine Faith Is More than a Mere Profession**

First, genuine faith is more than a mere profession.

In verse 14 James asks, **“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?”**

Notice that this man **“claims to have faith.”** He has made a solid profession. Some would say today that this man has “prayed to receive Christ.” He has prayed the sinner’s prayer. He has made “a decision for Christ.” He has “invited Christ into his heart.” He may even have made a public profession of his faith before some church elders and joined a church.

But the problem here is that this man’s profession of faith is really all he has. His lack of deeds shows that there is no true reality lying behind his profession of faith. And so James asks the question, **“Can such faith save him?”** The Greek construction of this phrase expects a negative answer. The implied answer to the question is a very strong, “No! That kind of faith cannot save him.”

Many people don’t realize that there are different kinds of faith mentioned in the Bible. The faith spoken of at the end of verse 14 is not genuine faith—for it does not save the man. One of the most important truths you can learn today is that not all faith is genuine faith. Not every profession of faith leads to the possession of salvation.

So the question we naturally ask is this: “What, then, is the essence of genuine saving faith?”

Traditionally, biblical scholars have broken down the true essence of saving faith into three parts. I will spare you the Latin names given to each of these elements of true faith. But I do want to encourage you to take careful note of these three elements. For this concept is extremely important to grasp. True, saving faith consists of three elements, easily remembered as “k-a-t.”

The first element of true, saving faith is knowledge (or cognition). If you put your trust in someone, you must have some basic information or knowledge about that person. Paul lays out the facts for us in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 by saying, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” It’s very important to know those facts. But merely knowing those facts is not saving faith.

The second element of true, saving faith is assent (or conviction). You must not only know the facts about Christ but you must also have the conviction in your mind that those facts are indeed true. It’s one thing to know the facts about Christ. It’s another thing altogether to believe that those facts are true. But it’s still not enough to know the facts of the gospel, or even to know that you are in need of Christ and that he can save you.

The third element of true, saving faith is trust (or confidence). You must entrust yourself to Christ, as an act of your will. You must come to the place in your life where you completely abandon all trust in yourself and in your good works as a means of ever being truly right with God. You must come to place your trust totally and completely in the person and work of Jesus Christ for you. You must abandon all confidence in yourself. You must rely totally on Christ for your salvation.

To illustrate, let’s say that you were to travel to Niagara Falls. And for some reason you found yourself in a life-threatening situation where you had to cross over those falls and get to the other side. And if you do not make it across the falls, you will surely die. As you are standing there, in despair, you suddenly ob-

serve a tightrope tied across the falls. To your amazement, you see a man walk across the falls on the tightrope wire and then come back. Then, he takes a wheelbarrow, loads it with 200 pounds of potatoes, and goes over and back again. You applaud his efforts.

You know that he can carry something in his wheelbarrow over the falls. You're convinced that he can do it. But now, you must entrust yourself to him so that he can carry you over the falls.

It's not until you entrust yourself to that man and you actually get in that wheelbarrow and rely upon him completely to take you across that you have genuine faith in that person. And until you do that, you will never get to the other side. No matter how much you say you believe in him. You see, mere knowledge and assent is just not enough to get you there.

In verse 19, James writes to those whose faith is really nothing more than knowledge and assent. He says, **“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”** James is saying, “It is good for you to have knowledge and assent about God. You do well to do that. But that kind of faith alone will not get you across to the other side. It will not save you from the coming judgment.”

Several years ago George Gallop conducted a major poll of Protestants in America. He wanted to know if they believed in God. He found that 95% of the Baptists believed in God. 93% of the Presbyterians believed in God. And 85% Methodists said they believed in God. What James is saying in verse 19 is that if Gallop pollsters visited hell and surveyed the demons, they would find that 100% of the demons believe in the one, true God. The demons have faith! They know who Christ is. And they know he can save those who put their trust in him. But they don't have saving faith. Why? Because they only have knowledge and assent, but not trust.

Genuine saving faith, then, can be summed up as that act of the soul which involves all three elements that I have just described: *knowledge, assent, and trust*.

When the apostle Paul uses the word **faith** in Romans and Galatians he means this kind of faith. A faith that includes a voli-

tional movement of your confidence away from yourself and into the Lord Jesus Christ alone for your salvation.

Paul teaches that the very moment you trust in Christ, you are justified by God. To be justified means to be declared “Not Guilty” by God in the heavenly court of every past, present and future sin in your life. At the very moment of saving faith, you are given by God a totally new standing before him. At that very moment you believe in Christ, God declares in heaven that all of your sins have been placed on Christ’s account and all of Christ’s holiness has been counted to yours.

And from that moment that you come to saving faith, throughout all eternity, God sees you as one who is clothed in the perfect righteousness of his Son. That’s why he accepts you into his presence. And you are justified by faith only one time. It is a once-and-for-all declarative act of God, based solely on his grace, that is never repeated.

This is how Paul uses the word **faith**. But it is very important to know that when James speaks of **faith** in verse 14 he has in mind a totally different kind of faith than the faith Paul speaks of in Romans or Galatians. James has in mind *a faith that is merely intellectual*. It is a mere verbal profession. And his message to you is “Be warned!” for such a faith cannot save you!

James confronts you here with the question, “Is your faith the kind of faith that saves? Or, is it mere knowledge and assent? Have you jumped into the wheelbarrow? Are you sure that at some point in your life you have trusted in Christ alone to forgive you and carry you to heaven?”

If you’re not sure you’ve done that, then you need to make sure today. I want to encourage you to respond by trusting in Christ alone!

II. Genuine Faith Always Leads to a Changed Life

And second, genuine faith always leads to a changed life.

In verse 14a James writes, **“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?”** In verse 26 he writes, **“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”**

James’ thesis is that true saving faith will always lead to a changed life. Whenever someone comes to genuine faith in Christ, it will always produce transformation in the life of the one who believes.

Genuine faith is never a momentary act which brings about justification and then ceases to exist. True faith brings about not only a once-and-for-all “right standing before God” for all eternity, but it always brings about an ongoing hunger and thirst for righteousness and holiness. James’ point is that the necessary evidence for saving faith is always obedience and good works.

To put it in theological terms, James is saying that your justification is inseparably linked to your sanctification. Do you want to know whether or not your faith is the kind of faith that has truly resulted in you being declared eternally forgiven by God? The only way to know is by looking for the evidence of that faith in a transformed life.

How then are we to view those who make professions of faith but continue to show no signs of righteousness? James tells us here that such a faith will not save them. Paul answers that question in 1 Corinthians 6:9 by saying, “Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” But didn’t Paul teach that we are saved by faith alone and not by works? Yes! But he teaches that it is just such a faith that will always manifest itself in a righteous life. Even Jesus told his disciples, “He who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:22).

What are we to conclude when good works are absent from the life of one who says he has faith? James tells us that we are to conclude the corresponding absence of genuine, saving faith. We are to conclude that professed faith does not include all three essential elements of knowledge, assent, and trust. At best, that person has mere knowledge and assent. Such a faith will not save him.

Conclusion

I want to leave you today with two specific challenges from our text.

First, ask God to apply these truths to your life. Does your faith really show itself in your life? I'm not asking, "Are you perfect?" but, "Are you seeing a substantive difference that Christ is making in your life?" Or are you continuing to be involved in certain things that you know are sinful and displeasing to God? If so, do not deceive yourself any longer! Don't fall prey to a false assurance simply because you have made a profession of faith. I care for you too much to let that happen to you. Hear God's voice today and respond with genuine repentance. Turn from that area of your life that you know is in disobedience to God's will. Seek forgiveness from Christ and begin following after him, hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

Second, ask God to show you how to apply these truths to others. I'm afraid that some of you have been wrongly influenced and as a result you have a false assurance of the spiritual condition of certain family members or friends. You love them dearly and yet when you allow yourself to think about them, you have to admit that, although they make a profession of faith, their lives do not give any substantive evidence of knowing Christ personally. As painful as it may be to you, I want to challenge you to stop assuming that they are Christians. And begin to pray for their salvation and reach out to them with the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

I know that these are hard words. And some who hear this will be upset. And I will be accused of not preaching grace but works. That's okay. I had to drop out of the popularity business a long time ago when I was called by God to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. That gospel is a gospel of grace. But that grace is not cheap grace but very costly!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic work *The Cost of Discipleship*, wrote these words: "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our

Church. We are fighting today for costly grace. . . . Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift that must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and yet it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ.”

Alexander the Great was riding on his magnificent horse, Bucephalus, inspecting the sentries posted around the camp one night. Alexander came upon one soldier who was fast asleep at his post. Suddenly, the soldier was startled awake.

“What is your name, soldier?” demanded Alexander the Great.

“My name is Alexander, sir!” stammered the soldier.

“Soldier, either change your name or change your conduct”

If you call yourself a Christian, your conduct should match your name, for I can imagine Jesus himself saying, “Christian, either change your name or change your conduct!”

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, we thank you that the faith through which we have received our justification is a faith that does not lie dormant in our hearts. But it is a faith that is alive. For you cause it to be a faith that stirs us up and moves us to turn from sin and pursue righteousness and obedience in order that we might be conformed to the likeness of your Son.

Lord I pray especially today for all of those listening who have still not come to genuine saving faith in Jesus as Savior from sin and Lord of life. Grant them your grace so that they will turn from their sin and self-trust, and turn to Christ today to save them.

Father, I ask you to show all of us practical ways in which we might grow in our obedience in conformity to the will of Christ. Amen.

CHARGE:

Pastor and evangelist Charles Haddon Spurgeon was once stopped on a London street by an arrogant drunk who said, "Aren't you Mr. Spurgeon? Why, I'm one of your converts!"

The inimitable Spurgeon responded by saying, "That must be true sir, for you surely are not one of the Lord's converts!"

Spurgeon knew that genuine faith is not only more than a mere profession but it also always leads to a changed life. As you demonstrate those deeds that James says are so necessary to the practical Christian, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.