

Not by Works Nor by Empty Faith

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I'm going to invite you to turn to the book of James 2 for our text this morning. Let me read it as we begin, not the whole book, James 2, beginning in verse 14. I'll explain in a moment why we are going here this week and probably next. James 2:14 says,

14 What use is it, my brethren, if someone 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 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.

There are a couple of streams flowing heavily and mightily through my heart as I stand before you this morning. One is a continuation of the series that we are doing on the Bible and Roman Catholicism; we need to deal with this text as part of that series. Secondly is a little bit broader, a little bit more personal and direct for those of you that are with us here this morning. And I found, I wasn't looking for it but I found an extended piece by J. C. Ryle that really expressed kind of the realm in which I live as a pastor, kind of the realm in which I live as I think about you, pray for you, preach to you, interact with you. Once in a while you find a man who expresses your own thoughts better than you yourself could articulate them. J. C. Ryle did that. We'll use this as kind of our

introduction to the message here this morning. He said in his book "Old Paths" and I quote, he said, "We ministers are full of fears about many who profess and call themselves Christians. We fear lest they should lose at last their precious souls. We fear lest that arch-impostor, Satan, should cheat them out of salvation, and lead them captive at his will. We fear lest they should wake up in eternity and find themselves lost forevermore! We fear, because we see so many living in sinful habits, so many resting in forms and ceremonies which God never commanded, so many trifling with all religion whatsoever, so many, in short, ruining their own souls. We see these things and are afraid. If I thought there was no such place as hell, I would not write as I do. If I thought that as a matter of course, all people would go to heaven at last, I would hold my peace and leave them alone. But I dare not do so. I see danger ahead and I would feign warn every man to flee from the wrath to come. Do not despise my warning. Examine your own heart and find out whether you are in a way to be lost or saved. Search and see how matters stand before yourself and God. Do not commit the enormous folly of losing your own soul. We live in an age of great temptation. The devil is going about and is very busy. The night is far spent. The time is short. Do not lose your own soul."

Those words are just so appropriate when you remember what the Lord Jesus Christ said in Matthew 7 when he said,

13 Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. 14 For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

One of the challenges in pastoral ministry that I one day maybe I'll figure out, I haven't yet, is to find that balance as you speak Sunday by Sunday speaking to a group gathered in the name of Christ and addressing them as Christians to build them up as Scripture says that a ministry of the word should do, and also being mindful that when a couple of hundred, whatever the numbers are, gathered together in a room like this, that those words of Christ just repeatedly are operating in the background of my mind, "The way is broad that leads to destruction. The gate is narrow and there are few who find it."

So you're in this constant tension as a man preaching the word of God week by week, having the privilege, the great privilege that I do preaching to the same people week after week, living in that tension of having the fear of which J. C. Ryle spoke, recognizing that there are some who display an outward form of religion, an outward form of commitment, but you know simply by mere numbers, simply by sheer mathematics if you did nothing else, that there are some who are deceived and deluded about their salvation. Some of you here today. You don't want to make it a constant ministry of warning and all of that because that's not healthy, but there come times where you have to say these things and address it once again lest you lull people to sleep, you lull them into a slumber and they wake out of that slumber finding that they were not the Christian that they thought they were; that they were one of the many whom Jesus said, "I have to say to you, 'Depart from me, I never knew you.'"

I would not want anyone under the sound of my voice to be in that miserable position. The thought of someone taking their last breath and waking up. You know, it's one thing as others have said, it's one thing for a man to die and go to hell and know that that's what he was expecting. That's one thing and that's sad and tragic and an enormous unmeasurable loss. It's another thing for a man to die thinking himself a Christian and waking himself up and finding that he had it all wrong; that he was not saved; that he did not know Christ; that he did not belong to him. I say this to all of you, adult and young people alike, I say and I would address you young people particularly here just in this particular moment. I know sometimes I speak to you and I speak kind of strongly, I would want you to understand that it's always out of a sense of love and concern for your souls and what's going to happen to you when you die; for you to find on the front end of life the true path to life and not get more progressively hardened in sin so that your ears become stopped to the Gospel. I realize that as young people you face a particular challenge, most of you that are here as a young person having grown up in a Christian home, and it is so difficult for you to discern the difference whether you simply call yourself a Christian because of your parents' faith or whether this is something that you have embraced on your own for yourself and that you know Christ personally in that way. Well, today I preach for the sake of your souls, all of you here, with that sense of fear, with that weight that never quite goes away as a pastor, being fearful that there would be some claiming the name of Christ and yet waking up in eternity on the wrong side of the divide. That would be tragic, wouldn't it? Can't we all agree that that would be tragic whatever else we think about preaching and whatever else you think about Truth Community Church? We can agree that that would be tragic.

Now, we are coming to this passage in James 2 as part of our series "The Bible and Roman Catholicism." That might seem like a little bit of an odd way to introduce all of that but here's why we're going this way and why we're going to James 2. Last week we saw that justification is by faith alone. Romans 3:28 says, "we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law." That's Scripture. That's what the Bible says. In justification, God forgives a sinner of all of their sins. When they put their faith in Christ, he pardons all of their sins and he imputes to their account the full righteousness of Jesus Christ and brings them into a union with Christ that is a dynamic living relationship that changes them. Justification itself is a legal declaration by God that a sinner has found righteousness in his sight; that Christ's righteousness is given to that sinner and God makes a legal pronouncement in an instant, "You are not guilty of your sins. In fact, I impute to you the full righteousness of my Son," and in the whole multifaceted dimension of salvation, God brings that sinner into his family. That's a glorious place to be, but as Scripture makes plain, it is so easy to be deceived and misled and deluded in your own heart and mind about whether that is true of you or not, and today's text will help us both see through some aspects of Catholicism and also address matters pertaining to the health of our own soul.

It's here in James 2 that whenever Catholics are confronted with the teaching of justification by faith alone, they love to raise a difficulty that is presented by James 2:24. Look at it with me. Go back to James 2. I was in Matthew because I read from there. James 2, just after the book of Hebrews. In James 2:24, you see Scripture saying this,

24 You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Now that's quite a difficulty and you could ask the question: is that not a direct contradiction of the Reformation? Is it not a direct contradiction, on a far lesser scale, of what we looked at and taught just last week? Well, we're going to spend today and next week answering that question. We need to get this right. We need to understand it properly. Let's start here with an obvious fact to kind of set perspective and all we're going to do today, all we're going to do today is help define and clarify the issues so that we can answer things decisively next week. What we need, what you need here today is simply clarity about what is being said and what is not being said. What did James mean? What was James thinking when he wrote that verse under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit?

Well, let's start here. Let's start with this simple premise as we deal with this verse in the context of Catholicism in the 21st century, let's remember something very clear and basic to help us get started: whatever else James was saying, he was not writing to prop up Roman Catholicism. We know that for a fact simply because Roman Catholicism, as we know it today with its tradition, with its pope, with its Mass, with its Mary, did not exist when James wrote the book of James. All of these things were things that were developed by, you might say, by committee over centuries and added on to biblical faith. They did not exist at the time that James wrote his epistle and so you must start there when we are dealing with these aspects of Catholicism, is to realize that Catholicism as this mass of teaching, I realize there is a bit of ambiguity there, a little bit of a play on words, a pun there, all that mass of teaching didn't exist when Scripture was being written. So James was not writing to point us and to tell us that all of that was true because it didn't even exist when he wrote. So we have something else, he must have been doing something else as he was writing.

How does James fit with the teaching of justification on faith? Let's start by stepping back. All we're going to do today, this might even be a comparatively brief message, a brief message for me could go 50 minutes, but let's just see what the prevailing theme of his epistle is. What is he doing? We're going to see two things that James is doing here today in his letter. First of all, he is giving a warning about eternal judgment. He is giving a warning about eternal judgment. And secondly, he is giving a warning against empty faith. There is a warning about eternal judgment and there is a warning against empty faith and there is a sense in which James was ahead of the curve with J. C. Ryle, and way far ahead of the curve with me in the things that I expressed at the start. James is concerned that his readers have a genuine faith that saves them from eternal judgment. That would be true of any true pastor as he speaks to his people, that he would want them to have a genuine faith that genuinely saves them from a certain coming eternal judgment. That's the issue in the book of James and that is what we want to see here this morning.

He makes a warning about eternal judgment and he warns his readers that judgment is a very serious matter. Look at James 2:12 and 13, the verses immediately before the passage that I read at the start of our time together here today. James says in verse 12,

12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.

13 For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Now, I want you to understand that we are deliberately being very basic and very simple here this morning. I know it's not always like that but we are being very deliberate, we're being very simple, and we're being very basic in what we're saying here today. James is speaking to his readers about the concept of eternal judgment as he moves into this passage that I read earlier, James 2:14-26. Eternal judgment is the context of whatever else it is that he meant by his statement about justification and by Abraham. So there is this big picture perspective, there is this overarching concern about judgment and the fact that it will be merciless on those who reject Christ.

What is this judgment of which he speaks? Well, one lexicon defines it this way: judgment refers to God's activity as a judge, especially on the last day which goes against a person. It includes the idea of condemnation and the punishment that follows.

We have to start with something very simple to remember here as we begin, that as much as we get so preoccupied with the things of life, with our anxieties over work or studies or finances or health or all of that, that all of these things are passing away. They are all temporary. They are not going to even matter, let's say 100 years from now, because we're all going to be gone and all of our trials and anxieties are going to be forgotten simply from a pure standpoint of the passage of time. You must remember and as you are dealing with your soul, as you are thinking about the soul that God has given to you, a soul that lives forever, that the things of life, the things of this earth, the things of the 70 year window of time that God gives you, it's all temporary and it is passing. Your greater concern is what about my soul? What's going to happen to that part of me that lives forever? That's the issue. That's what matters. And I say it in love knowing that I can do the same thing, I fall into it myself, but talking to so many of you over so many years, I would not be faithful as a pastor if I didn't say I fear for some of you, if not many of you, knowing the preoccupations of your heart are totally on earthly matters, totally on things that pertain to this world. Maybe in private there is something about you that goes to Scripture and is earnest about the things of the Lord, but you know, just from what we can see over time, it would be hard to detect that based on what animates your heart and your conversation. The Bible says the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.

Well, what is a person to think, what is a person to think when so rarely does any thought of loving Christ or the wonder of the Gospel come out of a person's mouth? What are we supposed to think about that? What are we supposed to think when five minutes after the service people can be talking about the most mundane aspects of earthly life as if the word of God had never been spoken to them ever, let alone in the immediately preceding 60 minutes. How are we supposed to understand that? Don't you see that that's why we

impart why we fear for some of you? Don't you see that the apparent oblivious nature of your mind and heart and mouth to the things of God's word would make us fear for you? Would make us lose sleep over you at night? Would cause us to wrestle and say, "God, I don't know where this person is at but I commit him to you once more." That's what J. C. Ryle was talking about. That's the life of a biblical pastor. That's the concern that we have for your soul, is that you're so preoccupied with earthly life that it's like you're oblivious to the more important thing that is yet to come, that matter of standing before God and finding out what he does with your eternal soul.

That's what matters. This is what James is talking about in the context. You can see this again in James 3:1 where he says,

1 Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.

So in verse 13, chapter 2, verse 13, he has talked about judgment. In chapter 3, verse 1, he has talked about judgment. This is a judgment sandwich that he has given us. There is bread on the front end, there is bread on the back end, and in the middle James is addressing this whole matter of eternal judgment. That's what he's thinking about. That's the context of what we're addressing and you see the warning aspect of it. He says judgment is going to be merciless for some; that there is going to be a stricter judgment for those who teach. And yeah, I think about that a lot too.

James 4:12, you can see the theme of judgment again. Who is this one before whom you would stand? He says in James 4:12,

12 There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?

He says God is a lawgiver, God is a judge. He is able to save, we praise his name for that, but he's also able to destroy.

Now, you might say someone who perhaps had just walked in off the street, maybe hostile to biblical preaching might say, "You're just trying to scare people. You shouldn't talk this way. We need to be encouraged. We need anything else other than a reminder about judgment and what is to come." Well, didn't Jesus himself say, "Do not fear the one who is able to only destroy the body but can do nothing to your soul"? He said, "Fear the one who is both able to destroy both body and soul in hell." This is a prevailing tenor, a prevailing stream of thought in Scripture to think about the fact that you have an eternal soul, to think about the fact that you are going to be before God in judgment quite soon enough, and to think and wonder what's going to happen to me at that time.

You see, I'll tell you the truth, I try to always do that, but here's the truth of the matter in our modern society, in our modern church: it's not that we lack for teachers who want to encourage us and bump us up and want to say nice pleasant things that are soothing to your soul. You can turn on TV and you can find anyone like that 24/7. That's not our

problem. It's not our problem that we don't have enough preachers trying to build people up. That's not the problem, the problem is that we are too lax, we are too presumptuous, we are too quick to assume, we are too superficial in our thinking and in our approach to life and our approach to Scripture, our approach to Christ. We are too superficial and too quick to assume that everything is okay. "I don't want to hear anything negative. I don't want to hear anything that might dislodge me from my comfortable zone." So people, so to speak, stick their fingers in their ears and say, "Na, na, na, I'm not listening."

Well, you tell me, beloved, in light of a warning about eternal judgment, in light of the fact that Christ himself spoke more about hell than anyone else in Scripture did, is that a sensible way for a person like you with a soul to respond to revealed truth? Is it sensible? Is it in your best interest to be careless about what happens to you? Is it in your best interest to be careless when Jesus says the way is narrow and there are few who find it? When all those things are true, let me ask you this: does it make sense, is it wise for you to be blasé and indifferent toward Scripture? Is it wise for you to just assume that everything is okay when Scripture is filled with warnings to examine yourself, to think, to not assume too much? Because your life, your 70 year window here in life, this is your window of time to deal with it. This is your window of time to earnestly pick up your Bible and say, "God, I need to read this for myself. I need to know your word for myself. I need to know what your word would say about me," and not just be so careless in dealing with your soul. James warns us, says there is an eternal judgment coming.

What is James's concern for his readers about this judgment? That brings us to point 2 where we'll spend most of the rest of our time here this morning. Point 2 here, what is James's concern? He gives us a warning about eternal judgment. What James is doing throughout his letter is he is making a warning against empty faith. A warning against empty faith. You see, James wants his readers, the Bible would have you contemplate the fact that you need to have a true faith, not a counterfeit one. Remember that Jesus said in Matthew 7:21-23, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not...?' And I'll say, 'Depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness. I never knew you.'" People expressing a faith, even calling Jesus "Lord," finding that they are being sent away at the end. Sheer numbers, sheer mathematics would tell us that there are some of you in this room today who are going to be in that position. You know, if 90% of you are genuine Christians in a room of 200, that means 20 of you aren't. If we just went by statistics and just pick a random number, 90%, there are 20 people distributed throughout the room based on that assumption, perhaps claiming Christ who do not truly belong to him.

Well, we can't just make assumptions. James is unwilling to just make assumptions about people, giving you a little bit of an overview and a preview here, he is not willing to make assumptions about people who glibly name faith on their tongue that has no manifestation of reality in their life. That's his concern. He wants his readers to have a true faith, not a counterfeit, and he helps us see how it is that you could know whether your faith is real or you are one who is trying to deal in counterfeit currency. When we say justification is by faith alone, salvation is by faith alone, that's absolutely true. That is biblical truth. Take it to the bank. Your works can earn you nothing before God. But when we say it's by faith and by faith alone, Scripture makes it plain that it's a real faith, a

genuine faith, the real kind, the living kind, not simply something that you thought about one time, maybe prayed a prayer and then moved on from that doesn't have any consequences for the way that you live. James warns people who too easily name the name of Christ on their lips but have no manifestation of Christ in their life and so he is warning against an empty faith.

Look at chapter 1, verse 22. This danger of self-deception is so great that God gave large portions of Scripture over to deal with it. James 1:22. Again, all we're doing here today just by way of reminder, is we are setting the context so that we can see what he means in James 2:24 next week. We want to get simple, clear principles on the table to start with before we do that. In James 1:22 he says,

22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.

They are under a delusion. They are in a self-deception. They think that they are in one state but they are actually in a different state.

Verse 23, James says,

23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; 24 for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.

Their response to the word of God is just like looking in a mirror. "Oh, I see that," and then you turn away and you forget what you saw. There is no follow-through, there is no carry through. There is no impact. Christ has no meaningful impact on the person's life. "Yeah, Jesus is Lord and I'm going to go and do what I want. Jesus is Lord and I don't care really about his word. Jesus is Lord but do you know what? I have sins that I like and I'm going to keep doing them, after all, we're saved by faith alone, right? So I'm just going to keep living the way that I want." And sadly there are more churches than there are the other kind that would say that's exactly right, you go and do what you want, you live however way you want and Jesus still loves you. And maybe those words will echo in the chamber halls of judgment to torment those who treated Christ in a cavalier manner, that rejected him, that gave lip service to him but no heart commitment.

You know this on a human level, don't you? You know people who would speak kindly to you with their lips and yet you have had those same people who have betrayed you behind the scenes, betrayed you, hurt you, stole from you, and you realize the hypocrisy of that. You understand on a human level that's hypocrisy. That claim to be my friend was never true despite what they said. Well, just multiply that by infinity and welcome to the world in which we're talking about, the realm in which we're discussing these things. Hypocrites who name the name of Christ but have no love for him whatsoever in their heart and their life shows it. I've often said, I should say it more often, when a man says with his lips that he loves Christ but his life contradicts everything about that claim, what

do you listen to and what do you believe? You listen to his life, not with what he speaks. Listen to the life, not the lips, and that's the kind of things that James is saying here. He's addressing hypocrites. He's addressing those who are casual and flippant.

Look at verse 26 of chapter 1. He says,

26 If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.

So you can see James is building a case, you can see what's animating his heart. You can see James, as it were, saying, "I am aware that I am writing to people who are deluded, who say one thing but their lives say something else, and I have to warn them that that discrepancy, that lack of connection, that white and black distinction is not the mark of the real thing. It's not real faith. You are on a road to judgment." That's what he's saying.

So he comes back to that theme in James 2:14 when he says,

14 What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?

It's as though faith were in quotation marks. Air quotes. "Can that faith, that so-called faith, can that save him? Can that kind of faith that has no living reality, no living component to it, can that kind of faith deliver someone from God's coming eternal judgment?" The very form of the question in the original language anticipates the answer: no, it can't. James isn't asking for information here. "Can that faith save him, I wonder? Yes or no? Can you help me understand?" That's not the sense of the question at all. The sense of James's question is, you could translate it this way, "That kind of faith cannot save him, can it?" And he leads you and he directs the answer that you must give to it and say, "No, that kind of faith cannot save. There is no power in that saving faith. That is not the kind of faith that comes from Almighty God."

So he illustrates it with an easy example for you to understand, just taking things out of ordinary life, and he gives an example to show how words are useless when they are not accompanied by any action. So in verse 15 he says,

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?

He takes somebody who is genuinely in need, someone who is in danger of exposure to the elements and suffering from hunger, and this fine, upstanding, professing Christian man comes to him, "Oh, my child, go in peace. Be filled. Be warm." And then moves along like the Pharisees did in the story of the good Samaritan, passed by on the other side and did nothing. His point isn't that charity will save your soul, his point is that those kinds of words are useless. They are empty. They mean nothing because the real need of

the moment is left unaddressed. You are pretending, he says, this person is pretending with his lips to show care when actually his lack of action shows that he does not care, and that is an illustration to make the point in the invisible intangible spiritual realm, that those who say that they love Christ, those that say that they have faith in a life that is marked by a complete absence of any love for Christ, any sense of obedience, that that faith isn't real. It's empty. It's meaningless. There is no power to it. It can't save you in the end.

And what's his point in saying that? What's his point in saying that? It's joined together with the warning about eternal judgment. He's saying, "My friends, you must understand that when you've just got an empty mouth professing faith in Christ, that has no impact on your life, that's not real faith. And because it's not real faith, it's not going to save you from God's eternal judgment. And because it's not going to save you from God's eternal judgment, you are still under the wrath of God. And my friend, oh," James says, I would say also, he says, "my friend, in that dangerous condition, you are in a position of delusion. You think you're okay but you're not. You are in danger of eternal judgment and I'm doing everything I can." James is stomping his feet trying everything he can to get you to wake up.

So he is describing someone who has a pattern of life, claims to be a believer, but shows no external evidence of faith. Is there any value to that kind of faith? Surely it counts for something, doesn't it? Surely, "Well, but I pray. You know, I called Jesus Lord. And I was at church pretty often." And James says, "No, there is no value to that whatsoever."

Look at verse 17. He says,

17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

Verse 20, he says,

20 ... are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?

Again, his point is not primarily making a point about external acts of charity. That's just his illustration to make the greater point about the fact that real faith, the real kind of faith, produces a transformation of life. And when that transformation of life is missing, then you don't say that you're still okay because you claim faith, you go back to a prior question and say is your faith even genuine? Is it even real or are you just trying to pass off counterfeit money in the marketplace of God? You know what they do with people who pass counterfeit money in the United States, right? They go to prison when they are caught.

People trying to pass off counterfeit faith with God have a much worse fate than that and, beloved, I fear for some of you, that you are in precisely that condition, and when you are told, you just brush it off like lint on a coat. "I'm all right. I'm going to heaven. You leave me alone." And never feel any sense of conviction about your angry spirits, about your

harsh demeanors, about your worldly conduct, your worldly thinking, your lack of love for Christ, and it never even occurs to you that maybe you are one of the ones that James is talking about. Isn't that tragic? Can't we all agree that that's an awful thing to contemplate? That people that we move and rub shoulders with week by week might be one of them? You know, this whole sermon would be worth it if one person heard that and repented, but the numbers, the statistics say, there is probably more than one. I can't tell you, I can't reassure you that you're not one. You have to cry out to Christ. You have to cry out and with the fullness of your heart say, "You've got to save me! You've got to make this clear. That was describing me to a T, indifferent, just going through the motions on Sunday. That's me, Lord. Could it be that I'm one of those deceived ones? Help me! Save me!" Show some kind of urgency.

And for those of us that are in Christ, perhaps having gone through that process in the past and though imperfect, your life is changed, you say, "O God, thank you. It had to come from outside of me because I was so hard and so indifferent." Now I'm speaking autobiographically. "Lord, I profaned your name in awful ways. Lord, I profaned your name with my lack of love for the brethren. I profaned your name with things that I believed and said and did. It's different now. That's by grace alone."

You see, the point that James is making here is that a faith that has no practical outworking in life is not real faith at all. It's not genuine and that is the key to seeing how Paul and James relate to one another. Paul tells the self-righteous man, the boastful man, that his works cannot save him.

Look over at Romans 2:17. Notice the difference in spirit in which Paul is addressing his readers. James is talking to those who are careless, Paul is writing in part to those who boast and in verse 17 he says,

17 But if you bear the name "Jew" and rely upon the Law and boast in God, 18 and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, 19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth,

You see, they are filled with pride. Paul says to them,

21 you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal?

He goes on in verse 23,

23 You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?

Paul is addressing those who are boasting in their righteousness, Jews in particular in this passage. "I'm a Jew. I have the law. I keep it. All is well with my soul based on what I do." Confident boasting. Paul says, "Don't you understand that your works can't save you and that your works aren't even what you think they are?"

So he goes through this lengthy exposition of the Old Testament in chapter 3, telling them there is none righteous, none who understands, all have turned aside, none who does good, not even one, in order to crush their pride that they would forsake their trust in their works so that in chapter 3, verse 19 he says,

19 Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; 20 because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

Paul is writing to the boastful, to the proud, "Look at what I've done," thinking that they are on their way to heaven based on the fact that they are good enough and Paul says, "You're not good enough," and he silences that and says, "The only way you can find a declaration of righteousness from God is through faith in Jesus Christ. Nothing of your works could ever contribute to that." There is no such thing as meritorious works. There is no such thing as a superabundance of merit that the saints store up as Catholicism so foolishly teaches. Everything about our lives falls short of the glory of God. It's not perfect. Jesus told us and said when it's all said and done say, "I'm an unworthy slave. I've only done what is required."

That's what Paul is addressing. James is addressing something completely different. He is warning the careless that their empty faith cannot save them. It's two different issues completely that are being discussed: salvation by works, salvation by an empty faith. Now here's the common thread to them, those of you that think you're good enough to go to heaven and those of you who are careless, here's the common thread of those two groups: they are both going to hell if they don't turn to Christ. They will both lead them straight to hell. Trusting in your works, being careless and empty in your faith, Satan will gladly have you board either one of those buses and deliver you to the gate. This in part, beloved, is why Jesus would say, "The way is broad that leads to destruction." There is more than one way to get there. There is more than one way to go to hell. You can think you're good enough, you cannot care, but the destination is the same.

In light of this, beloved, do you see why Jesus says that the way is narrow that leads to life, few are those who find it? They are lost for different reasons, and other Scriptures emphasize this to us as well. Turn to 1 John, if you will, as we once again use Scripture to interpret Scripture. 1 John 2, beginning in verse 3. How do you know your faith is real? 1 John 2:3,

3 By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.

True salvation produces a change in life that is marked by a disposition toward obedience. Verse 4,

4 The one who says, "I have come to know Him," ["I have faith,"] and does not keep His commandments, [doesn't care about obedience] is a liar, and the truth is not in him;

Look, is this uncomfortable to hear? Yeah, sure, I get it. I get that it's uncomfortable but is Scripture not clear? "I've come to know him, I've not. This is true, this is a lie."

Look at chapter 3, verse 7. Notice the warning against deception, the same kind of warning that James is giving in a different way. 1 John 3:7,

7 Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; 8 the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. 9 No one who is born of God practices sin, [his life isn't marked by that; his life isn't marked by an unbroken pattern of rebellion and indifference] because His seed abides in him [God changed him, God gave him a new nature in salvation]; and he cannot sin [in that way], because he is born of God. 10 By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.

John says, "Look at your love toward the brothers. Is there a love in your heart for Christians? That's a mark of true faith, true salvation. Look at your doctrine, do you believe the things that are true? Are you oriented toward God's word in your life and thinking? That's the mark of a true thing, the real thing." John says, "Look at your morality. Look at your obedience. Is there at least something of a pattern, something of an inclination toward obedience or is that just off your radar? Is that not on your chart as something that's really important in life? It doesn't matter to me. Sin doesn't really matter to me, certainly not enough to repent. I might dislike it, I might be afraid I'm going to get caught, but vertically toward God, who cares." These are the things that we look for to see the real thing.

One last text in Ephesians 2:8-10 this time. Paul emphasizes the gracious nature of salvation and how it is that we find eternal life, how it is that we enter into it, how it is that we receive Christ: it's by faith and by faith alone, it is a gift of God. Verse 8,

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

It's a gift. I didn't do anything to earn my salvation. God doesn't owe me anything. I am on the receiving end of complete, unmerited, divine mercy and grace and that is why I am saved. But the purpose of that grace was more than simply to alter your eternal destination. Verse 10, the purpose of grace was broader than that, it was deeper than that. There is a package deal to it. Grace transforms the believer in a way that changes his life. Verse 10,

10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works [not because they are meritorious, not because they earn our justification but because they flow from it; they come out of it; they are the fruit that shows that the root is real], which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

His workmanship. Created in Christ Jesus for good works. Not by good works, for them, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

So empty faith, eternal judgment. True faith, false faith. In his book "Are We Together?" R. C. Sproul says this, he says, "If the faith that we profess is a naked faith with no evidence of works, it is not saving faith. It is, as James says, a dead faith, not a living faith. A living faith shows its life by obedience. Such works of obedience contribute nothing to our justification but if the works are not present, that absence is proof positive that justification has not occurred." Justification leads to a life of obedience. You don't get justification by obeying, but when you have been justified by faith, there is a marked manner of life that flows from it. James is saying when that marked manner of life is absent, you need to go back to a prior question: have you been saved in the first place?

Yes, my friends, there are many ways to miss the path to true salvation. Do you see how dependent we are on the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you see how much we need him to save us, to act upon us, to help us? It's no wonder that Scripture says in 2 Corinthians 13:5,

5 Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you--unless indeed you fail the test?

My friends, are you trusting in Christ alone for your justification? Are you refusing to count any merit to your works as contributing to your right standing with God? It's by Christ alone. It's by faith alone in him alone by which you can be saved. Scripture goes on and says but that's not the only issue that you need to think about. Scripture teaches many things, doesn't it? There are many lines of thought in the Bible. Not everything can be reduced to one single statement about one single doctrine. Scripture also says is your claim to faith real or is it empty? Is your faith alive in a way that manifests itself in your demeanor, in your life, in your obedience, in your love for God's people? Is it alive or is it dead and no one would know it was there except for the empty words on your lips? That's what James is asking. Is your faith real or empty, beloved? Answer carefully. Answer well. There is a lot at stake.

Let's pray together.

Father, as we take a moment for reflection, we ask the help of your Holy Spirit to search each heart. It's a narrow road that leads to true salvation, Lord. We can fall off on one side by trusting in our works, we can fall off the path on another side by having an empty faith and living a life by its demeanor that says we know nothing about the fruit of the Spirit, we know nothing of the gracious Christ, our life knows nothing of the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Father, we can't see into each other's hearts and I can't see into the hearts of those that are here. My job is done, O God. I've done what I can this morning and now I plead with you by the power of your Holy Spirit to work and apply in each heart. To the dear brothers and sisters in Christ that are here, Father, affirm to them, strengthen them in a sense of assurance. "My life isn't perfect but it has changed and I do love Christ and I do love his people and I do love his word and obedience matters to me and sin is hateful to me even though I sometimes fall into it." With those like that, Father, flood them with joy in response to a message like this, that you have worked the real thing in their hearts.

Father, for the others whose names are known only to you, casual, indifferent, claiming a faith that is empty and has nothing to do with life, has nothing to do with the motivations or the affections of their heart, just an outward form, going through the motions week after week, month after month, year after year, and nothing changes, thinking that life is within them when there is no fruit on the tree to suggest that that's actually true, for them, Father, may you provoke in them a healthy holy fear of God, a healthy holy fear that eternal judgment might still be their lot lest and unless they would turn to Christ. Help them in that hour. Help them in this hour. Help them in this moment to calculate the eternal issues before us rightly, with discernment, judging rightly their own soul with the help of your Spirit, and if they find themselves lacking, not to fall into a pattern of self-defense or self-justification or attack on the word or those who brought it to them, but rather in humility of soul receiving the word implanted, receiving Christ by faith alone, humbly acknowledging, "I have been a fraud. I have been a hypocrite. I have been a fake all these years and it's time to come truly to Christ." Only you can sort these things out one by one, Lord. I ask you to do it by the power of your Holy Spirit and that we would see fruit as a result coming out of many lives as a result of having sat under your word here today. We commit all these things to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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