

A Faith That Works

James 2:18-26

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Randy Lovelace

Church, this morning we continue in the book of James. As we've gone through this series Wisdom, Faith, and Practice, we come to what is perhaps the focus of so much debate among theologians and even among the history of the church as we unpack wisdom and faith and practice and, specifically, a faith that works. We turn our eyes to this brief portion of scripture.

But before I begin reading it, I want to share with you a little bit that we will take a break from the letter of James for just a little bit as we prepare ourselves to go into the season of Palm Sunday and Easter. You'll be hearing more in the coming week about the services and ways in which we will gather digitally as we seek to celebrate the resurrection of our savior, the giving of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross for our salvation. You will be hearing more about this celebration and this season as we go through these next few days. We'll take a break from the letter of James and go through the Easter season. And you'll be hearing more about what we plan to do afterward. I look forward to gathering with you and sharing with you more in the coming days.

With that said, we come to this passage this morning. And I want to just pause and share briefly about why I considered whether I should continue preaching in this text. I wondered this week whether I should continue with this passage or should perhaps pick another passage which might seek to comfort us in a different way. I wondered even up until this morning as I came to the church to prepare for this livestream, should I even be preaching this text? And I was reminded by pastor PD Mayfield and, of course, in the writing which I had done in preparation for this week that oftentimes the passage which we will read this morning becomes the neighborhood for theologians and seminarians, it becomes the neighborhood for Sunday school classes, but rarely does it become a neighborhood that we actually go to as a gathered church. We debate in books. We debate in seminary. We debate in different ways on what does faith and works actually look like? And in the midst of that debate, it's very easy to forget the season in which James wrote. James was writing in a season to those who had become converted to Christianity coming out of their Jewish faith. And he was writing in a season in which they were experiencing great persecution and suffering.

So at one glance, it might seem like the territory for theologians and not the territory for a group of people, even for a nation, that might be suffering through a pandemic. But as I dug deeper, as I saw the application to the season in which James was teaching, I saw the way forth that the Holy Spirit was guiding me and I hope guiding you to see how this can very much be applied to our lives even now and even today.

Hear now God's word, James 2:18-26.

But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. May the Lord bless the preaching of His word.

To understand a faith that works, as I was preparing for today, I was reminded of a very different story yet the same sort of idea that came out of this week in preparation for all the proposed cures and possibilities and medicines that might help us in this pandemic. It is the problem of scientific discovery. You see, a science that works is a science that first begins in theory and hypothesis. But for a science to work, that theory must be replicated in practice. It must be shown that it actually works not just once but multiple times and be reviewed in different environments.

Two years ago, Julia Strand, an assistant professor of psychology at Carleton College, published a paper in the *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review* about how people strain to listen in crowded spaces. In some ways, she was studying the idea of how when we're surrounded by a lot of noise and trying to attune our ears to something we're trying to hear, the mental strain to hear almost feels like our ears are squinting. And so she developed a theory that there might be a way to increase speech recognition while at the same time reducing the mental strain that is required. She said, "We planned our follow-up studies, and the data was absolutely gorgeous. It was impeccable. And it was also repeatable." And so she was able to design an app for use in clinical settings. She wrote and was awarded a National Institute of Health grant, her very first one that would actually fund the work.

And as you can probably tell where this story is going, several months later, Dr. Strand in a follow-up study to replicate and extend the effect of what they had discovered, she was surprised that under very similar conditions, the finding did not replicate. The difference wasn't just slight. It was massive enough that she was confident that this must be a fluke. You don't go from a hundred percent of the participants showing an effect to zero percent of participants showing no effect. She said, "The effect we thought was discovered was in fact perhaps a programming bug." And then late one night, she identified the error. She was shocked. She said, "I felt physically ill. I had published something that was objectively unquestionably wrong. I was celebrated in its finding, presented it at conferences, published it, and had gotten a federal funding to keep studying it. It was, now I realized, completely untrue."

You see, for a science to work, for a theory to work, it must be shown in practice repeatably that it is reliable. It's not enough to have a mere theory. It must show itself in actually working.

This is what James is doing in this passage. In this passage, what we will see is that he's describing a complete faith, verses 18-23. He then looks at the heart of the matter in verse 24. And then he gives us a powerful analogy in verses 25-26. A complete faith, the heart of the matter, and a powerful analogy.

First, James wants us to see a complete faith. In verses 18-23, what James is doing is creating a person or recalling a real person that he had had this conversation with. But it could also very well be a rhetorical method that he's seeking to create this possible argument with this person, and he's trying to demonstrate what is for James a necessary thing for understanding the life of faith. And that is faith is not merely belief. It is not merely knowledge. It has to show itself in actual fact, in demonstrated action, in demonstrated obedience.

And so what James does is he uses a familiar passage from Genesis 15 in the life of Abraham and looks at it, and he also seeks to provide a way in which we can understand this relationship between faith and works. In describing the life of faith of Abraham, he says,

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God.

Now, what he's talking about is that by his action, God accredited to Abraham a righteousness that was not inherently his own, but by his actions, God gave it to him and pronounced it upon him.

Often what happens is we believe that James is somehow in disagreement with Paul, but they weren't writing at the same time. In fact, Paul would write later. Are James and Paul in disagreement with each other? Because you see, Paul refers to this same episode in the life of Abraham, but he does it in a different way.

Let me help you understand. Let's look together at this passage that James gives us through an analogy, if you will, in comparing it to how Paul does it in describing a complete faith. And what I hope you will see is they're describing the very same thing. First, we have to focus on this word "justified." Both Paul and James use the word justified. On the one hand, Paul says we are justified by faith alone, and James says that we are justified by our works and not faith alone. And they're using the same person, even the same event, to describe the same thing. How could that be?

I believe the way of understanding this is the way of understanding different kinds of photographic lenses. If we look at what Paul is writing about in the life of Abraham, what we begin to find is that Paul is using a macro lens. A macro lens is a lens that allows you to get up very, very close to your subject to see minute detail. It allows you to create different ways of seeing something so close and in such detail and in such perfect focus that only it can understand absolute detail. And in some sense, what Paul is describing about the work of justification is he's looking at it like, how are we justified? How do we get into a relationship with God? And it is quite true that we only come into a living faith with God by faith and not by the merit of our works. Paul is looking at how Abraham came into a right relationship with God and that was because he believed that God and what He had revealed to him was true, and therefore, Abraham acted. And Paul's looking at the work and the actions of Abraham as a part, as chronologically in the life of Abraham as being at the beginning of his walk of faith.

James, on the other hand, looking at the same event is not using a macro lens. He's not looking at justification about how we get into faith. No. He's looking at justification with a wide-angle lens. He's looking at the life of faith from a much broader perspective. He's not looking at the actions and works of Abraham in this case as the beginning of his faith but rather as one part that represents the whole. In this sense, James looking at it with such a wide angle and saying, we do not come into faith by the merit of our works, but a living faith will show its validity, its genuineness, as it is expressed as we live in faith. And that is the key. James is showing Abraham and how he lived in his faith in demonstrating his belief and trust in God by what he did.

Paul looks at justification of how Abraham came into faith. James is looking at it in how Abraham lived his faith. And so it is not that Paul and James are in disagreement. They actually show us different perspectives of the same thing, that justification is a much fuller thing than just a part of coming to faith. A justification, a saving faith, is something much larger.

And this is what James is demonstrating in verse 24 when he says the following, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." Now, what's interesting is he's telling us something about the nature of not just justification. He's actually telling us something about the nature of something much larger which is saving faith.

I didn't skip over it on purpose. I wanted to wait until verse 24 to help us to understand, why did James bring up this idea of the demons believe that God is one and even they shudder? Again, he's telling us something about saving faith. Let me describe it here briefly, and then we'll put it together as a whole in understanding the heart of the matter.

I'm grateful for the work of the great contemporary theologian Dr. John Frame as he understands the nature of saving faith. And he's quite right as he describes it this way. On the one hand, saving faith first begins at understanding that there is a piece of knowledge, in other words, that we know intellectually that God has revealed Himself, His character and His actions. And so we know about how God has revealed Himself. But second to knowledge is that there is also belief, meaning there is a scent to what it is that we say we know much like Hebrews 11:6, "And without faith, it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek

him.” Hear those words, “For whoever would draw near to God must believe.” So it’s not just to know facts about God and His character and what He has done or His revelation in His word, but it is actually giving a scent. And there, I think we begin to see something about the nature of what James was referring to with regard to the demons. You see, James is speaking to a Jewish audience, and so he brings out the first words of what is known in the Jewish faith as the Shema, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, which was something they were to memorize and to share with their family and with their children, and they were to roll it up on a scroll and have it affixed to the exterior threshold of their homes.

So what he is saying here is if you believe that God is one, then you do well. What he’s saying is, okay, you’ve acknowledged that God has revealed Himself, that the Lord our God is one, and you’ve given some form of assent. But if it doesn’t issue forth in the third part of saving faith, then you’ve simply done what the demons have done. The demons, and even Satan himself, know how God has revealed Himself in His word and to His people and to the world. And Satan actually believes that God is real, and yet he refuses to walk in obedience. He refuses to trust, and in fact has waged war against the works of God, against us, against His church. Demons believe that God is one and they shudder, but they do not trust Him. They wage war against Him.

Saving faith is more than just knowledge. It is more than just belief. It is the heart of the matter for James. It issues forth and must issue forth in trust. Let me quote directly from Dr. John Frame in his *Systematic Theology* when he says the following, “Trust is from the Latin word *fiducia*, is trust in Christ as Savior and Lord. We not only must trust him as Savior to save us from sin and give us eternal life, but we also must believe and trust and draw near to him, and then allow him as Lord to work in our lives.” And he says it this way, “The second element of trust is subjection to Christ as Lord, a willingness to obey, a willingness to show itself as a living faith, an obedient faith, a faith that works.” That then allows us to see when we hear the words of Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount, as we looked at in the fall, as we hear the wise utterings of Proverbs as we studied it in January, it’s one thing to know what God has said. It is another thing to say that we even give intellectual assent to it.

But if we completely ignore it and do not allow it to have effect in our lives demonstrated in our actions, we see here what James says, that a person who is justified by works and not by faith alone, he’s saying in the language of the ESV, which I think is a wonderful rendering of the Greek here, “You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works.” You see, what James is talking about is that a saving faith is by faith, but it is a faith which will inextricably lead to itself working itself out in obedience. It is completed and it is demonstrated by actions. We do not merit favor before God by those actions. Rather, we reflect the goodness of His grace, and the power of His work, and the truth of His word.

It is similar to what Paul said. He said, I can have all the gifts, but if I have not love, I am merely a clanging symbol. We can have all the knowledge of the word of God. We can even give intellectual assent to the reasonableness of His existence. But if we have not given our hearts over to and allowed Him to work in us that which is well-pleasing to Him showing itself in obedience, then our faith is of little use.

But I want you to hear, friends, though it might seem that James is issuing a threat, this is not a threat. It is actually an invitation into the interiors of saving faith. And I dare say it is a scary thing to preach this because as I prepared for today, I could not help but find myself at the end of my preparation in repentance. Even this morning as I was preparing to preach this to you, I recognize even in the last 24 hours how I fail to walk in obedience in showing the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in my responses, in my thinking, in my attitudes. So it’s not a threat. It is an invitation. And when I hear this invitation and I see James bringing us into what it means to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ in the walk of faith, I ask the Lord as I invite you to do, Lord, show me. By your Holy Spirit, you have already demonstrated ways in which I fail to show forth in my obedience the gloriousness of your grace that you mean to work out in me. Lord, forgive me. And by your Spirit, help me to walk a renewed walk of faith and life of obedience not because it earns one ounce of your grace, but rather that I might show the glory of your love. Lord, have mercy. Help us in our unbelief.

But James finishes this passage by looking at a powerful analogy. And while on the one hand, it seemed obvious why with a Jewish audience James would have chosen the life of Abraham, what is beautiful is he chooses the life of Rahab the prostitute who showed the messengers another way to escape that they might not be discovered. What an amazing story that we have for us. What's beautiful in the description of Rahab is that it is glorious that James would pick, if you will, the crème de la crème of the Jewish faith, and looking back over God's revelation in seeing Abraham, but then he would choose this woman who might fall into disregard or whom we might not even remember. But James remembers Rahab and he brings it to our attention, to this Jewish audience that he is teaching who's come to faith. And I think there's a message there, too.

It is not for the high and the mighty to hear that saving faith works itself out in obedience. It is for every single one of us, great and little among us, that the Lord has something for you and me even today. And he says, "Rahab the prostitute," she was "justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead." He's using Rahab and the illustration of Rahab to tell us something very fundamental about what it means to be a human being.

And this, I think, perhaps is why he's using this analogy. He's bringing it home to you and me, taken us from the high watermark of what Abraham did down to the work of a prostitute who showed the messengers of God another way, and then he comes straight to you and me and to our human existence to tell us something about the nature of faith and works. What is he telling us?

As many of you know, I've had to attend to far more funerals than I care to admit. But one thing is a consistent testimony that when we see the body of our loved one as they have deceased, our friend, our brother or sister in Christ, when we see their body laying at rest, the overall response consistently is, I know that that is their body, but they are not here. And I've seen people of faith and people who do not believe in the Christian faith say the same thing. What are they demonstrating? That we are more than just material flesh and blood. While it is fundamental and valuable and beautiful and created in the image of God, we are more than flesh and bone. We are also spirit, and the Lord has given us a soul, a spirit. And when the body is apart from the spirit, it is dead. It is no longer there.

And then James says, "faith apart from works is dead." And so may I borrow back from Frame? You can have great knowledge of the character and revelation of God. You can know it with such expertise that you could teach at any university including Harvard and Yale or Brown. You could teach at the finest institutions in the world about the nature of how God has revealed Himself in the scriptures. You can have that knowledge. You can even give assent that yes, I believe that what the Christians say about God may very well be true. But without that third step of trust, of subjection to the triune God and the work of His Spirit working out in us faith in how we love and live in that faith, there is something missing, and it is as a body apart from the spirit. It is dead.

This is an invitation to you and me. It is not to cause doubt. It is an invitation that we are called to more to just intellect, we are called to more than just logical understanding and assent. We are called to give ourselves, our very life, to Him who gave His life for us. And He means to do more than merely forgive us, church. He means to restore us in our works, in our actions, in our attitudes that we might be sent forth as instruments in the redeemer's hands to be those who are part of God's restoring work in the world until He returns.

As we consider this passage then of what value does it have for us in the midst of our present suffering, I have two points of application before we finish today. First, this past week, I'm grateful for my colleague pastor PD Mayfield as he shared a quote from Richard Baxter, one of our great forbearers of the reformed faith writing in England. He had a question and answer, a catechism, if you will, as he was directing his church in the time in which he ministered. It's question 109, and here's the question. "May we omit church assemblies on the Lord's day if the magistrate forbid them?" In other words, is it okay for

us not to gather as the church of Jesus Christ here at Columbia Presbyterian Church if the governor or the mayor has told us we cannot? Baxter says the following,

“If the magistrate for a greater good, that is the common safety, forbids church assemblies in a time of pestilence, assault of enemies, or fire, or the like necessity, it is a duty to obey him because positive duties give place to those great natural duties which are their end. So Christ justified himself in his disciple’s violation of the eternal rest of the Sabbath, for the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.”

Friends, you might have heard some Christian teachers and leaders that say, we must continue to meet, and that it would be disobedience to our faith and obedience to the law of the land and not to our Lord if we fail to meet together as the church of Jesus Christ. And I say to you the opposite. I believe that is destructive and hurtful to the church and making vulnerable our churches to the spread of this disease and then also to many others. I do believe we are called because we were not made for the Sabbath, the Sabbath was made for us. And in this time, it is actually, and here I’m quoting the mayor of Los Angeles, “It is literally an act of love for you and me to stay home.”

And so one act of our faith and obedience to the one we say we believe in is to even obey the law and magistrate over us, but that we seek to use all the technology at our fingertips to create and encourage the gathering of His church for the building up of His church. I believe this is not the time in which the church will be hurt, but rather this is an opportunity for the praise of the Lord Jesus Christ in His church to flourish. It is not a time for grandstanding and great actions of Christian faith, but I actually believe the greatest obedience which we are called to by faith from this passage are the quiet small ones. We are to love one another in our families, to serve one another, to care for one another even when we are so annoyed at each other. If only these kids could go to school. If only my spouse could go back to work. But maybe by putting us all together in our homes, there is something we’re learning about what it means to walk by faith and obedience.

The second point is this. I was taught by my church history professor at Covenant Seminary, Dr. David Calhoun, to never waste suffering. And so that is my second point of application. Do not waste this time of suffering, friends. I borrow the words from Dr. Calhoun himself after, in the midst of his suffering with cancer, he came back to the seminary to preach on Psalm 23. I remember that sermon as if it was preached yesterday. I’ve listened to it countless times. I’ve shared it with many of you. But he said this at that time with regard to his suffering.

“I’ve had to learn not only that the Lord is with me always, but also that the time I spend in this valley is not wasted. These last few years have not been a parenthesis in my life. Indeed, they have been essential to the totality of my life. Something has happened in the valley that is for me at this time more important than teaching and preaching and writing books. If I did not have cancer, my life would be a failure forever. Whatsoever comes, the Christian doesn’t despise this life. There are green valleys and quiet waters. But even in the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord is with us. He is our joy and our comfort.”

CPC, friends who are gathering from around the country and around our community, let us not waste our suffering. Learn more of God. Read His word. Pray for our first responders. Pray that the Lord would demonstrate His grace and mercy in great and in small ways during this time. Pray that the Lord would teach us how to go deeper in our trust and saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, that He would equip us in this time of the valley of the shadow of death to walk by faith showing itself in a life of obedience. Pray with me.

Now, heavenly Father, we ask that you would grant us grace and mercy to walk with you, to love you, and to trust in you. Lord, we ask that you would remind us that faith and works go together. Our

works do not earn us anything before you. Yet, they are indispensably the gift that you have given to demonstrate that Jesus Christ and His salvation is working itself out. You, O Lord, have begun a good work in us, and you will bring it to completion. And we as the church of Jesus Christ, the called-out ones, are called to reflect the glory of your name by how we live. Show us, O Lord, how to live in this faith in this time. In Jesus's name. Amen.