

Saving Faith is Never Alone: James 2:14-26
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
Sunday, July 20th, 2008

In our study through the letter of James, we have come to this very important passage concerning faith and works. We've looked at it for 2 Sundays now, and I want us to consider it once more this morning. The passage is James 2:14-26. Two weeks ago we looked at the difference between dead faith and demon faith, on the one hand (which James describes in verses 14-19). And, on the other hand, active faith (which is described in verses 20-26 in the examples of Abraham and Rahab). Last week we focused on verse 24, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone," and compared that to what Paul says in Romans 3:28, "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law." And as we studied the context of each of those verses, we saw that the two verses do not contradict each other, but rather they serve to complement one another by opposing different errors. Paul's words in Romans 3:28 confront the false idea that we can earn our salvation by working for God. And James dispels the notion that a person can be saved by an empty profession of faith. We are saved by faith alone (that's the point of Romans 3:28), but saving faith is never alone (that's the point of James 2).

What I want to do this morning, in our last study of this passage, is to show how the teaching of James 2 is not limited to James 2. The truth that good works will always accompany saving faith is not unique to James, and I'll point us to many other verses that teach the same thing. Then I want to ask the question, How does saving faith produce works? What is it about faith that necessarily produces obedience to God? Because here the relationship between faith and works teaches us a great deal about the nature of saving faith. And then, finally, I also want to draw out some of the implications of this teaching—some very practical ways that this truth should affect our lives.

One reason why this passage is so important and so relevant is the presence of so many nominal Christians in our land—individuals who are Christians in name only. They say they are believers. They profess to have faith in Jesus Christ. They know some things about the Bible and about the Gospel, but it is a dead, useless faith. It's a faith without works. They haven't been changed. But they go on thinking that they are saved when in reality they are not.

That is such a dangerous position to be in. It is far more dangerous, I think, than being a complete pagan. Because pagans don't claim to be Christians. They understand that they are outside of the Christian faith. That's one thing at least that you don't have

to convince them of. But in the case of nominal Christians, they are blinded by the assumption that “I’m already in—I did what I needed to do, and now my eternal destiny is secure.” This is why the message of James 2 is immensely important. And I find great hope in God’s sovereign power to save pagans and to save nominal Christians. And I believe God will use passages like this in order to remove the blinders from those who profess to have faith but are not yet truly changed. That’s my hope and prayer in these weeks as we dwell on these verses—that God would be pleased to save individuals who thought they were already saved, but were not.

As we have already seen, James is teaching very clearly and boldly that dead faith cannot and will not save. There is such a thing as dead, useless, demon faith. There is a kind of “faith” that is mere words. It is accepted in the mind, but not in the heart. It is professed with the mouth, but the hands and feet remain motionless. And the person who has this kind of faith will not be saved. There are individuals (and some may be sitting here this morning) who claim to know Christ, who agree to the truths of the Gospel, who think they are right with God because of their profession of faith, but they are unregenerate. Their hearts have not yet been changed by God’s sovereign grace. God is exhorting you in His Word here, “Don’t put any hope in a dead faith!” Dead faith will not save.

The faith that saves is faith that produces works. And, again, this is not a contradiction of justification by faith alone. Rather, what this passage helps us understand is the nature of true faith. Yes, we are saved by faith alone. And then we have to ask the question, What is faith? And what we learn from the Bible is that there is a certain quality to faith—there is something about the nature of faith—that radically changes those who possess it. And the connection between saving faith and radical change in a person’s life is such that if there isn’t change (if there isn’t obedience to God, if there aren’t good works, if there isn’t any sanctification going on) then the only legitimate conclusion is that there isn’t real faith.

Passages that Teach the Necessity of Works in the Christian Life

And now I want to show you some other places in the New Testament where this same truth is taught. There are dozens of passages that demonstrate the necessity of works in the Christian life, but I’ve chosen just a few.

[You don’t have to turn to all of these; you may just want to jot down the references and look at them later.]

Listen to how each of these passages shows the absolute necessity of good works in the life of the Christian. In other

words, it's impossible that a person could be a Christian and not produce fruit. We aren't perfect, of course, but every Christian will produce spiritual fruit.

We'll start by going to Jesus' words in the parable of the sower. I'll read from Luke 8:5ff: "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." And then Jesus explained the parable to His disciples in this way, beginning in verse 11, "Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard. Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience." It's important to understand that only the good soil represents true believers. Some have tried to say that the rocky soil and the thorny soil also represent believers, but that misses the point of the parable. What we see here is that it's possible to make a start in the Christian life—to do some things that look like authentic Christianity—but then to fall away and thus show that regeneration never occurred. The heart was not changed. There was some excitement and some belief (the kind of belief that James would call "dead faith"), but then it's choked by the trials of this world and the pleasures of this world.

Do you see the implications of this? It's possible to receive the word in some sense, and even to receive it with some sense of joy (v. 13), and to produce something that resembles fruit for awhile, and yet not be saved. But what is the mark of the true believer? What is it that separates the good soil from the other soils? Verse 15, "they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience." In other words, genuine believers will produce true and lasting fruit in their lives.

Jesus made a similarly shocking statement in Matthew 7:21-23, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, *but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven*. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your

name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” Again, we see that it’s possible for individuals to do things that seem like authentic Christianity—even remarkable things that would seem to be unmistakable evidences of God’s work in their lives, like prophesying and casting out demons and doing mighty works. But who will enter the kingdom of heaven? The one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven!

In John 3:36 there’s an interesting connection between belief and obedience. It says, “Whoever *believes* in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not *obey* the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” It’s so interesting that he uses the word “believe” in the first statement and the word “obey” in the second statement. We have to conclude that belief and obedience go hand-in-hand, and likewise unbelief and disobedience go hand-in-hand. The one who believes (and obeys) has eternal life. The one who does not obey, and therefore shows that he does not believe, will not see life.

We also see this truth in Paul’s writings. Last week we focused on Paul’s teaching that we are saved by faith alone. But Paul also clearly teaches that saving faith is not alone—that good works will accompany saving faith. One passage where both of these are emphasized is Ephesians 2:8-10, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” That’s justification by faith alone. But then we keep reading in verse 10, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” So we are not saved *by* good works. But we are saved *for* good works. And in the life of every person who is truly saved, there will be good works that flow from their faith.

Paul also warns us that those who live in continued unrepentant sin will not inherit the kingdom of God. Galatians 5:19-24, “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that *those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God*. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” And in Romans 8:13-14, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are Sons of God.”

Can you see the connection that all of these passages are making between faith and works, between salvation and obedience. And then negatively, there is the connection between unbelief and rebellion, between condemnation and disobedience. On the one hand is the person who truly trusts in Christ (although imperfectly), and their life is characterized by good works—it's characterized by a fight against sin and a hunger for righteousness. And the fruit that is produced in that person's life is the result and evidence of saving faith. On the other hand is the person who remains in rebellion against God. And even if this person claims to have faith, the lack of fruit shows that it is not genuine faith, and therefore the person is in danger of going to hell.

First John 2:3-4, "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him." John is teaching us the same thing. Those who know Him obey Him. And if you claim to know Him but don't obey Him, you're a liar.

The last verse I'll mention here is Hebrews 12:14, which shows us the necessity of holiness in our lives. "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." That means if there is no holiness in your life, you will not see the Lord. You will not go to heaven.

We've seen from several places now this emphasis on the necessity of works in the Christian life. A mere profession of faith will not save, because it's not real faith. Real faith saves, and it also produces good works, obedience, holiness, fruit.

How Does Saving Faith Produce Works?

Next I want to ask, How is it that saving faith produces works? This is an important question, because this is how the biblical teaching on faith and works teaches us a great deal about the nature of true faith. What is it about genuine Christian faith that necessarily results in obedience? To use the same biblical example that James uses, what was it about Abraham's faith that caused him to obey God's very difficult command to sacrifice his own son? Hebrews 11:19 says, "[Abraham] considered that God was able even to raise [Isaac] from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." You see, Abraham had such a confidence in the promises of God that he believed God would bring Isaac back to life in order to uphold His word. That's faith! That's real faith. And where there is faith, there is obedience. The person who trusts God will obey God.

Think about how faith and obedience relate to each other when you go to see your doctor. Do you trust your doctor? If your doctor diagnoses a problem and tells you to take a certain

medicine, will you take it? If you trust your doctor, you will obey. If you don't trust your doctor, you will not obey. Faith will produce obedience. It's the same in our relationship with God. If we trust Him, then we will know that His commands are for our good. And we will desire to obey Him.

Consider another biblical example of how faith produced radical and sacrificial obedience. I just read from Hebrews 11, how it describes Abraham's faith. Listen also to what it says about the faith of Moses in verses 24-28, "By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them."

Notice what Moses gave up. He gave up the ease and comfort and pleasure of being the son of Pharaoh's daughter. All kinds of earthly pleasures would have been available to him, but he rejected them. And instead, he accepted the hard lot of being identified with his people, the Israelites. He turned his back on all the things this world would consider desirable, and he chose a life of mistreatment and disgrace. And what is the explanation for this? Why did he do it?

Because of his faith! Because he had a profound hope in God, and he saw that the pleasure of following Christ is far greater than the fleeting pleasures of sin. Moses had before him two options. On the one hand, comfort, ease and worldly pleasure. On the other hand, persecution, trials and hardship. Through the eyes of unbelief one would surely be enticed by the pleasures of Egypt. But when you look at the choice through the eyes of faith and hope, the options appear differently. Because through the lens of faith, it becomes clear that the pleasure of sin lasts only for a very short time. But obedience to God leads to a treasure that all the gold in Egypt cannot even begin to compare to.

Do you see the connection between faith and obedience? When a person truly trusts in God, that person will see the pleasure of knowing God and obeying Him. We will recognize that there is far more joy to be found in living according to God's statutes than in living according to the world's ways. This is how saving faith necessarily produces good works. It's because saving faith is not just something that happens in our mind or in our will, but it also reaches down into our desires. And the person who has truly been changed by God and possesses a real faith in Him will *want* to obey, and therefore *will* obey.

Points of Application

The last thing I want to do in this discussion of faith and works is to draw out a couple specific points of application. And the first point of application has to do with a controversy over this point that faith will always be accompanied by works. There are some pastors and teachers today who would sharply disagree with everything I've been teaching from James 2. Their objection would be that I'm teaching salvation by works. They would say if you bring works into the equation at any point then you are denying the biblical Gospel.

Zane Hodges is one person who has written against the idea that saving faith will always produce works. This is what he says about the dead faith described in James 2: "The dangers of a dead faith are real. But these dangers do not include hell. Nothing James writes suggests this. Nevertheless, sin remains a deadly enemy to Christian experience which can prematurely end our physical lives" (*The Gospel Under Siege*). He argues that the word "save" in James 2:14 refers to our physical lives here in this world, not eternal salvation. Dead faith will still save you from hell, Zane Hodges says, but it may lead to tragedy and premature physical death.

In this way, those who profess faith (even if it's dead faith) are encouraged to take the next step in Christianity—to become disciples, to begin obeying Christ as Lord, to move from the level of carnal Christian up to the level of spiritual Christian. Hodges sees this two-stage Christianity reflected in the difference between justification by faith and justification by works. Paul speaks of justification by faith, which is how a person is saved from hell unto eternal life. But then there's a second step. There's another level of Christianity that some, but not all, will attain. And that is justification by works. Hodges says, "When a man is justified by faith he finds an unqualified acceptance before God. . . . When, however, a man is justified by works he achieves an intimacy with God that is manifest to men."

At the root of this teaching is the claim that it's possible to trust Christ for the forgiveness of sin and yet live a completely unchanged life. And these pastors and teachers would say, anyone who says otherwise is preaching salvation by works. It's good to produce works, they say, because then you will receive greater rewards in heaven. But the failure to produce works doesn't result in hell. It just results in less reward in heaven.

This view is commonly expressed in the distinction between Christ as Savior and Christ as Lord. Or it can be put in terms of a distinction between salvation and discipleship. A person is said to have salvation by accepting Christ as Savior. And

then at a later point in time, a person may become a disciple of Christ by taking that second step to make Christ Lord.

This teaching is so widespread that many of us have probably heard someone share their testimony in this way. Or maybe some of you were even taught to use this kind of terminology. “I decided to trust Christ for the forgiveness of my sins at a particular point in time. Then later I made a Lordship decision.” But in light of what we’ve learned from James 2, and from many other verses as well, can you see how misleading it is to speak that way? We cannot divide Christ! He is Savior and Lord, and He cannot be accepted as one but not the other. It is not possible to have faith in Christ without submitting to His Lordship. It’s impossible to trust in Him and yet never obey Him.

[For more on this debate, I would direct you to the following resources which I have found very helpful. John MacArthur’s book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, and John Piper’s article, *Letter to a Friend*, which can be found here: http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByDate/1990/1496_Letter_to_a_Friend_Concerning_the_SoCalled_Lordship_Salvation/]

So as you interpret your own experience and discern how God has worked in your life, please look primarily at the fruit of your life. When did God begin to change you, and how has He continued to change you as you have walked with Him? These are the things we want to share with others. We never want to give the impression that a person can receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ and then continue life as usual. No, if you trust in Christ the changes begin immediately. And there will be ups and downs along the way, but the person who belongs to Christ will continually be in the process of being conformed more and more to the likeness of Christ.

One’s view of faith and works will have a profound impact on the way evangelism is done. If a person just needs to mentally affirm the truths of the Gospel, if one needs only to do some external thing like pray a certain prayer, if all that’s required is a shallow act of the will, then evangelism can become very man-centered and emotional and manipulative. And it can become so dangerous and misleading because individuals are given false hope. But when we understand what faith really is, then we must call people to something much more radical than an affirmation of truth or an emotional commitment or a simple prayer. We must call them, as Jesus did, to take up their cross and follow Him (Mark 8:34).

What we have learned will also affect the way we pray for friends and family members who profess Christ but show little or no fruit in their lives. It may be that there are individuals in your

life whom you assume are Christians because they say that they're Christians. But you've noticed that they live just like the rest of the world. And you've been praying that God would revive that person's heart and strengthen their faith. But the more appropriate prayer may be, "Lord, save this person. Remove the blinders of false assurance from their eyes and grant them real faith."

Finally, as we apply all of this to our own hearts once again, I encourage us: "Examine yourselves to see if you are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). This is such a delicate issue, and I would be happy to sit down with any of you to talk about how this applies to your own particular situation. In no way do I want to cause doubt in the minds of those who are fighting the fight of faith, even if you feel defeated. If there is a repentant heart and desire to conquer these sins that plague you, then you should have great hope that God is at work in your life. And Paul said in Philippians 1:6, "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

At the same time, I want to destroy the false hope that you can become a Christian and continue to live a sinful lifestyle. If your attitude is, "I trusted Christ for the forgiveness of my sins, and I can keep on sinning because grace will abound," then this message is meant to show you that you are not on the narrow road leading to life but on the broad road leading to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14). Don't think that a prayer you prayed in the past, however sincere it was, is your ticket to heaven. Your assurance must not rest on that.

The Good News for you this morning is that those who turn away from sin and trust Christ will be saved. Put your hope in Christ and recognize Him to be infinitely more valuable and satisfying than anything in this world, and you will be saved. Your sins will be covered by the blood of Christ, who died in our place and took the punishment that we deserve. You will be forgiven and counted righteous in God's sight. And then your life will change as you pursue your joy in obeying the One who can ultimately and eternally satisfy your soul.