

Faith and works

Good morning. Today, I have been asked to speak on James 2:14-26, in which James deals with the thorny issue of the relationship between faith and works. I call this a thorny issue because it has divided Christians. Those who want to be sure that no one tries to earn their salvation find this passage in James quite difficult. Martin Luther, for instance, wrote in the preface of his 1522 German translation of the New Testament,

St. James's epistle is really a right strawy epistle, compared to these others [Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 Peter, and 1 John], for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.¹

It's true that Luther removed this line from later editions, but it isn't clear that he ever really changed his mind about James' letter - and part of his concern was over the passage we're looking at today.

On the other hand, many of us are, quite rightly, concerned that there are altogether too many Christians who 'speak Christianese' very well - they know when to say, 'Amen!'; when to stand and when to sit; when to get their Bibles out; when to sing - but as Tom Wright might put it, they are not fluent in the language of God's kingdom: their characters are not reformed, their love does not grow, their righteous deeds do not abound increasingly, and you would not know from their dealings with others that Jesus had any purchase on their lives.

James speaks directly into these concerns, and what he has to say is of fundamental significance to what it means to be a Christian. In fact, I think it is justifiable if I say that if we stray too far to one side or the other of what James says, we might find that we're lost.

So inevitably, what we're talking about this morning is really the subject for a sermon series. We shouldn't just be looking at James. We should be looking at Paul, too - at least most of his letter to the Romans - and really, this all plays into the whole story of God's relationship with his people. What James says is central to the story of redemptive history.

But we don't have time for all of that. So instead, we're going to look very closely at what James has to say, and then perhaps you will have the opportunity in your house groups to discuss this further, and to ask: what does this mean for me - for us?

James opens this section with three rhetorical questions. He gives no direct answer to the questions - because he trusts his readers to be able to see from everything that he has to say that the answers are 'none', 'no', and 'none', respectively.

1. 'What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?'

The implied answer: none. It is *no* good if someone says he has faith but does not have works. It is no good thing, there is no goodness in the situation, and it does the person who says, 'I have faith' but does not have works no good.

That sounds a bit tame. We use the phrase 'that's not good' to mean all sorts of things. James explains just how little good there is in this situation in his next question.

2. 'Can that faith [which is not accompanied by works] save [the person who says he has faith but does not have works]?''

The implied answer to this: *no*. And here we see an important truth: James identifies a *kind* of faith which is not accompanied by works, and which does not save the believer. I'll make more of this point later on, but for now, remember that James is very clear that there is a *kind* of faith which does not save.

¹ David Mathis, 'The Gospel of James - Open Letter to Martin Luther' <<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-gospel-of-james>>.

3. 'If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?'

The implied answer: none. If we say to our brothers and sisters, 'Go, be blessed,' but take no steps to actually bless them, we do them no good. We have given them words - very religious words - but no actual provision.

So James tells us: faith without works is bad for others, because it means that we do not practise love towards them - we fail to provide for them, we fail to love them, we fail to help them stay strong in faith, we fail to help to them to grow, we do not tell them of Jesus. If our faith is without works, it is bad news for others.

And: faith without works is bad for us, ourselves, because it cannot save us, and the wrath of God - which faith saves us from, Paul would tell us - remains upon us.

We see, then, that this question of how faith and works relate is crucial to our own salvation, and to the salvation of others.

Now come a strange few sentences:

¹⁸But 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. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!²

I have to confess that I had to turn to a commentary for this, but I think the commentator got it right. James is saying, 'Someone will object to what I am saying, and they will object by saying, "You have faith and I have works."'

How is that an objection? How is it an objection to say, 'You have faith and I have works' when James says that faith without works does not save? Well, the only way it could be an objection is if what John was saying was, 'Having faith and having works are as good as each other - it doesn't matter whether you have them both or not'.

To that argument, James says, 'Show me your workless faith - you can't! There is no way of show that you have faith if you don't have works.' Let's think about this. If I say that I have faith in my friend, then the *evidence* of that faith is not just that I say it, but that I *behave* as if I had such faith. This might be in simple things - I have faith that he will come to see me when he says he will, so I clean the flat and make sure it's ready for his visit - or in great ones - I have faith that he will give me the money without which the creditors will take possession of all I own, and so I don't despair and flee the country, but I wait for him. I act - I behave in a particular way - because I have faith in my friend.

And we see that this is just what James means, because he says, 'I will show you my faith by my works - I do the works that I do *because* I have faith. My faith is the *reason* for my works - and so you see that I have faith by watching what I do. Real faith produces works - otherwise, it's just lip service.'

If I say that I have faith in my friend, but I am surprised when he comes to visit after saying he will, or I do flee the country, then what I said clearly wasn't true. I didn't act on the faith I claimed to have - and so, really, it was meaningless when I said I had faith.

And so James moves on to the theology of his position:

²⁰Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as

² James 2:18-19 (ESV).

righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.³

This is perhaps the most difficult bit of what James has to say in this passage, and we need to look at what Paul says in Romans 4 to see just why that is:

¹What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” ⁴Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...⁴

I think I may have said before that these verses in Romans set out clearly the distinction between Paul and the gospel, and the position the Pharisees held. The Pharisees held that Abraham was justified in God’s sight, made righteous, and therefore able to walk with God and have fellowship with God, by his works; Paul, however, looked at the account in Genesis 15, and he saw there that when Abraham *believed* God’s promise to give him offspring numberless as the stars, God *credited* righteousness to him. Abraham did not *work* himself righteous; no, he *believed* and God *counted* him righteous.

Abraham had nothing to boast about. He had not worked for his righteousness. It was given to him as gift, by God. It was not a wage - he had not earned it. And so it is, says Paul, for all of us, ungodly, sinners, all: if we will believe, rather than working - believe in Jesus - then that believing, that faith, will be counted by God as righteousness, and we, like Abraham, shall be saved. We cannot earn our way to righteousness; we can only be given it.

A lot of what Paul has to say in Romans is said in order to make this point crystal clear: that faith alone saves us.

And now we have James saying in verses 21 and 24, 'Was not Abraham our father *justified by works* when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ...You see that a person is *justified by works* and not by faith alone.' And it would be very easy to say - and some people have thought - that James contradicts Paul, and that he is saying that works make us righteous in the sight of God. In fact, isn't that precisely what verses 21 and 24 say?

No, that's not what those verses say. To read them that way is to ignore what James says before those verses, and what he says between those verses. Let's read them again:

²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³and 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. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.⁵

James stresses that faith was active *along with* Abraham’s works, and that Abraham’s faith was *completed* by his works. In other words, James is *not* drawing a careful distinction between faith and works, and saying that works all that is required. That is precisely the kind of mistake which the 'someone' in verse 18 makes. No, James is saying that Abraham was *acting out of faith* - the offering up of Isaac on the altar was a work which faith was *active along with*. The work of offering up Isaac was the *completing* of Abraham’s faith. And what can this mean except what James has already said earlier on: that the evidence of true, life-transforming faith is to be found in our actions.

³ James 2:20-24 (ESV).

⁴ Romans 4:1-5 (ESV).

⁵ James 2:21-24 (ESV).

Abraham was *not* simply justified because he offered up Isaac, but because in doing that, he was *acting in faith*. And that is why verse 24 does not say, 'You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith,' but, 'You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith *alone*.' The point of this passage is that faith *alone*, in the sense of faith-without-works, does not justify anyone because it is *the wrong kind of faith*. I said earlier on that there is a *kind* of faith which does not save. James is telling us that the kind of faith which does not save is the kind which does not produce works. So he concludes by saying,

²⁵And 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?⁶

Remember the story in Joshua 2? Joshua sent out spies into the promised land, to see what kind of enemy they faced. The spies came to Jericho, where they were seen, and they were hidden by Rahab the prostitute, who lived in Jericho, and she got them safely out of the city. But before they left, she said to them,

⁹...I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. ¹⁰For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. ¹¹And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.⁷

Rahab had probably never heard of Abraham, or God's promise to him. Yet she had heard of what God had done for the Israelites, and she knew that he was Lord of all and had given them the land; she had faith that he had done so, and, *acting on that faith*, she hid the spies - even though the risk to her was enormous, should the others in the city discover what she had done. She acted on what she believed and knew to be true. And so, she was justified; righteousness was credited to her, because she had the kind of faith which resulted in works.

James summarizes all of this in verse 26:

²⁶For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.⁸

Faith without works is dead. Faith which does not produce works is no faith at all. Note that James does not say, 'Faith doesn't matter'; his point is that faith *does* matter, and it must be the *kind* of faith which produces works.

I think of it like this. Paul, writing to the Romans, and James are not in disagreement. They are answering different questions. Paul is answering the question, 'Can I earn my salvation by working?' And his answer is an emphatic, 'No! You must trust in Jesus' work on the cross for your righteousness; there is no other way.' James, on the other hand, is answering the question, 'What *kind* of trust must I put in Jesus' work on the cross?' And his answer is, 'The kind of trust - the kind of faith - which produces works. The other kind is dead, and can give you no life.'

James takes Paul's point for granted - he assumes that his readers already know and accept what Paul says, as he does. Time will not permit us to see that Paul says much the same as James - for instance, in Galatians:

⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.⁹

⁶ James 2:25 (ESV).

⁷ Joshua 2:9-11 (ESV).

⁸ James 2:26 (ESV).

⁹ Galatians 5:6 (ESV).

Faith must *work* - through love. Faith must give rise to acts of love, else it is not true, living, saving faith.

What does this mean for us, here, today?

1. You will never earn righteousness, salvation, the love of God. Never, ever. You can't. You can only put your faith in Jesus, and see the Spirit move in you, and draw near to God, and accept that free gift of salvation.
2. The faith which saves us is the faith which produces works. And this will make some people uncomfortable, because some of us have probably had that uncomfortable thought, 'I don't know what to do, but I know that this is what good Christians do, so I had better do it' - and you know that that doesn't sound like faith, but like rule-keeping just for the sake of rule-keeping. It doesn't sound like setting aside our own likes and dislikes because we want to grow in, and love, Jesus more, but more like doing things because others expect them of us, without regard for the state of our hearts.

I am very familiar with this in myself - and I am convinced that we need to start from a different point, and ask instead, *why* would faith ever result in works? *Why* would faith in Jesus result in loving other people, in honouring him, in giving up our lives for his glory?

I think the answer to that question is: faith in Jesus would have that kind of effect if we had experienced for ourselves the 'surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ'.¹⁰ I've made this point in sermons here before, but I'm not tired of making it - not least because I constantly need to hear it myself.

If Jesus is precious to me, and dear to my heart - exceeding all other preciousnesses and dearnesses - and if he is, *in our own experience*, the best thing ever to happen to us; if he is the source of our greatest joys and hopes - then *action is inevitable*. If Jesus gives me such great pleasure that he all but pours out of me, how will I be able to help myself but tell other people how wonderful he is?

My point is this: the kind of faith which results in works is, I think, the kind of faith which genuinely prizes Jesus.

We mustn't use this passage in James to say to each other, 'Well, if you *really* loved Jesus, you would serve on this ministry, because faith without works is dead' and so to coerce each other into doing things *whether we truly have faith or not*. That would be great wickedness, because we would be telling others, in effect, that it is their works are required, not their faith. Yes, we must encourage each other to grow in good works - and sometimes we will have to discipline each other and ourselves in that regard! - but never separately from encouragement to know Jesus more deeply, more profoundly, to see him more clearly, be more filled with wonder at him. When Stephen was martyred, it was not because he knew that good Christians offer up their lives - it was because Jesus was everything to him, and he let that be reflected in everything he did.

In C. S. Lewis' words, 'come further up, come further in' - know more and more how wonderful Jesus is, and let your faith in him overflow in works.

On seeing more of God, you may wish to watch <http://www.desiringgod.org/if-you-want-to-see-god-read-your-bible>.

¹⁰ Philippians 3:8 (ESV).