October 16/17, 2010

Saving Faith Works

Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James

James 2:14-26

Pastor Bryan Clark

Last August my daughter Bobbi and I went skydiving along with five others here from Lincoln Berean. For Art and Corey, they are old pros. But for five of us—Brent and Nicki, Charity, Bobbi and me—it was brand new and it was awesome, something definitely would like to do again. In order to jump solo you have to take a four-hour class and then get geared up and then you go about four thousand feet up and out you go. There is a lot of faith connected with skydiving. When you think about it, you have to trust your instructors who are people you don't even know. You really have to trust the person who packed your chute; you have to trust whoever is putting on your equipment; you have to trust the pilot. A mistake at four thousand feet can be fatal, so there is a lot of faith. But the moment of truth is when, at four thousand feet, the instructor hits the latch on the door and it slams open and this is what you see. This is Weeping Water at four thousand feet. You can say you trust the instructors; you can say you trust whoever packed your chute; you can say that you trust the equipment. But at that moment, if you are not willing to jump, it's just empty talk. Everything up until that moment is just talk. That's the moment of truth. True faith always demonstrates itself in action.

That's actually what we want to talk about this morning. As a matter of fact I would pose to you this question: Is it possible that someone could believe the historical facts of the message of Christmas, that someone could believe the historical facts of the message of Easter and not be saved? Well, if you have a Bible, we want to talk about that this morning. Turn with us to James, Chapter 2. What is the nature of saving faith? Is it possible that I could believe in Christmas, believe in Easter, but not be genuinely saved? In Chapter 1 James talked about the difference between someone who is a *doer* of the Word and someone who is merely a *hearer* only. I think that's what he is unpacking in this text. He's really going to talk about, what is the difference between those two? We pick it up in Verse 14:

> **What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?** (*NASB, James 2:14)

What use is it if someone says he has faith but has no works? The verb tenses would be *continually saying* he has faith but *continually demonstrating* no works. The question is not, "Can faith save?" Look at the text; the question is, "Can **that** faith save?" In other words the discussion this morning is about the *nature* of saving faith. What kind of faith saves? It's really important to keep that in mind as we work our way through the text. He is going to, in essence, answer that question with a little illustration here.

> **If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, then 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?** (Vs. 15-16)

Let's imagine this is November—late November. You live out in the country. There's a huge snowstorm. It happens to be right in the middle of a Husker football game. It's a very tense

game; you're really into the game; the doorbell rings. You wonder who would be out in a storm like this. You go to the door and there you find a single mom with two small children. The car went in the ditch; they're stuck, no cell phone. It's all they could do to make it to your place for refuge. They don't even have winter clothes on. They need warmth; they need food; and they're asking for help. You're a little bit irritated because you want to watch the game, but you have to quickly resolve this. So you say, "Yes, I'd be happy to help." You stand back and, in the most pious voice you have, you say, "Go in peace. May you be warm and may you be full." And then you slam the door and go back to the game. That's in essence what James is saying. What use is that? It's just empty talk that accomplishes nothing. Faith that has no works is like that.

Verse 17:

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

Again this discussion is not about whether or not faith saves. This is about the nature or the quality of saving faith. And the argument James is making is, "*Saving faith is of such a quality that it will always manifest itself in action.*" It's one thing to say you trust the instructors and the parachute but if you are unwilling to jump out of the plane, that faith is useless. That faith is dead; that faith accomplishes nothing.

Verse 18 is probably the most disputed verse in this text, and the dispute revolves around where the quotation marks go. The Greek language didn't actually have quotation marks so the interpreters always have to try and figure that out. It reads:

> **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**."

You will notice that the New American Standard, which is what I use, has the quotation marks all the way through Verse 18. I would suggest to you that is incorrect. Almost all scholars agree that Verse 18 represents the voice of an objector. In other words James is imagining someone hearing what he just said in Verse 17 about *dead faith* and he is imagining someone disagreeing with that, someone objecting to that. So when he says "*Someone says*" he's kind of putting words in the mouth of the objector. And what the objector is saying is, "Hey, some have faith; some have works." So the quotation marks should be around, "You have faith and I have works." It could also be translated as, "One has faith; one has works." I think that's the end of the quotation. Then James re-engages by saying, "Show me your faith without the works." That's very interesting to think about. How do you show someone that you have faith if there's no works, if there's no fruit, if there's no action? Obviously the conclusion is, "You can't!" It's a faith that is useless; it's a faith that is dead. James says...**and I will show you my faith by my works.**" So what follows is James demonstrating that true saving faith is a faith that works. It's a faith that manifests itself. There's evidence that this faith is real and alive.

Verse 19 has a sort of a shock factor to it. He says:

> **You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe and they shudder**....or they tremble.

The phrase, **you believe that God is one** is what was known to the Hebrew people as the

Shema. Now again, remember he's writing to disbursed Jews. So this would have been a creed they were very familiar with and found in Deuteronomy, Chapter 6. It's their creed that our God is one God. Now that may not sound radical to us but, in the ancient world, virtually all of the ancient religions were polytheistic; they believed in many gods. One of the things that made the Hebrew belief system so unique, so distinct, was they believed there was only one God and so the Shema was their creed; it was their declaration, "Our God is one God." It was a significant thing that James was saying, "You believe your creed." And he says, "You do well but you need to understand that demons also believe that creed," obviously implying that the demons do not have saving faith. We could reframe the discussion just a little bit. It would be fair to say demons believe the historical facts of Christmas. You explain to me everything that Christmas is about. The demons would say, "Yes, we agree." You explain to me everything that Easter is about; they would agree. They agree to the extent that they tremble; they shudder. They really get it! There would be no such thing as a skeptic, agnostic, atheistic demon. They get it; they know it's true—true to the degree that it makes them shudder, makes them tremble. It's not enough to just mentally assent to the details of the gospel. That's the equivalent of demonic faith.

Verse 20:

> **But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow...**

That word **foolish** there is pretty rare in the New Testament. It's a very derogatory term. It means *empty* or *shallow*. It's pretty strong statement.

> **Are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?**

Faith without works is useless. Again the nature of the discussion is the quality of saving faith. Is it possible to have faith alone, faith that never manifests itself in fruit, in works? Is that a saving faith? The obvious answer is that it's not. It's the same level of faith that the demons have. The famous reform theologian, John Calvin, I think captured what James is trying to say. "We are saved by faith alone but the faith that saves is not alone." In other words the quality of saving faith is such that it will always manifest itself in evidence. It will always manifest itself in works, in fruit, in a demonstration. It is one thing to say, "I believe all these things," but if I'm unwilling to jump out of the plane, then my faith is dead; it's useless. There has to be action connected to the faith. One of the ways to process this, which I think is very sobering, is to realize I can believe totally the story of Christmas. I can believe totally the story of Easter. Someone could ask me the question, "If you were to die tonight and stand before God, what would you say?" I can get the answer to that question one hundred percent correct. If you were to give me a quiz, I could get every answer right. That does not mean you have saving faith. That's the danger of a question like that. It tells us, as long as I get the answer right, *I'm in*. James is saying, "*You're not in if there isn't evidence that your faith is a saving faith*." It's a very sobering discussion. He's going to use two illustrations that would be very relevant to a Jewish audience.

Verse 21:

> **Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?**

Now again it's really important to take these verses in their context. You pull these out of their context and they can be very misleading. The word **justified** is never a reference to the *means* of salvation. It's always a reference to the declaration or the *result* of salvation. The discussion that Paul is having in Romans is whether or not you can be saved by works. And so Paul is debating this belief that you can be saved on the basis of the works of the law. So his argument is, "You're saved by faith alone—no works." He's very clear about that. James would agree with that completely. But James would add to that, "But the faith that saves you is a faith that works. It's not dead. It's not useless. It will manifest itself in works, in fruit, in evidence." When the text is saying that Abraham was justified—declared to be righteous—when he offered Isaac, it's tying back to a verse that James will talk about in two verses, Genesis 15:6. Everybody agrees that was the moment of salvation for Abraham. The Old Testament text says, "And Abraham believed and it was credited, or reckoned, to him as righteous." The verb tense means he believed at that moment and, at that moment, was declared righteous.

If James is correct that a saving faith always manifests itself in works, then we should be able to look at the life of Abraham and find evidence that that statement was indeed true. That's what he's saying. Thirty years later Abraham was willing to obey God by faith and offer his son Isaac on the altar—his beloved Isaac. What James is saying is that in doing that, it validates the claim that was made thirty years before. He publicly declared himself to be righteous, that truly he had a saving faith. Here was a work that clearly gave evidence to a saving faith thirty years previous.

Verse 22:

> **You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected.**

Faith was completed. Faith was manifested. His faith was validated. Any of those interpretations would be correct. It's a bit of a play on words. His faith was working with his work. What he is going back to is his statement, "*I will show you my faith by my works*". So that's now the nature of his argument. It was declared that Abraham had saving faith in Genesis 15:6. Thirty years later there was overwhelming evidence that that was indeed true because faith was working with his works in order to give public testimony, in order to manifest the life of his faith.

Verse 23 then quotes the Scripture I've been talking about.

> **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.**

When it says**...the Scripture was fulfilled...**we might also translate that, the Scripture was *validated*. He was declared to be righteous in Genesis 15:6. That is the verse that is quoted here in James. Thirty years later was the overwhelming evidence of that. There were many things along the way, but this was the apex. This was the moment when Abraham clearly demonstrated he believes—by his willingness to be obedient to God. Verse 24:

> **You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.**

Again, pull that verse out of its context and it would be very misleading. But track the context. This is not a discussion about whether we are saved by faith or saved by works. That's Paul in Romans. This is a discussion about the *quality* of faith. What type of faith is it that saves us? And the argument is it's a faith that will always manifest itself in works. It's a faith that is alive; it's a faith that has energy; it's a faith that bears fruit. The idea again of justification is to be declared righteous. When we act out on our faith, when we manifest our faith, when we give evidence of faith, we are publicly declaring ourselves to be righteous. We are giving evidence. That is what James said. **I will show you my faith by my works.** The second illustration is quite different than the first.

Verse 25:

> **In the same was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works, when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?**

Rahab never loses the distinction, Rahab *the harlot*. Go back and find her in Joshua; go back and find her in Hebrews 11; find her in this text. She wears that label continually. Rahab *was* a harlot. She was a prostitute, involved in everything that you think of for a prostitute. Rahab would have been a very different illustration. Abraham was the pillar of faith, Rahab quite scandalous. In an ancient world, in a place like Jericho, most of her business would have come through travelers and so it was very likely that travelers coming through talked about this Hebrew God and what this Hebrew God has done—to the extent that somewhere along the way she believed that the God of all gods is this Hebrew God.

Then she finds out that the armies of the Hebrew God are right outside the wall and they're going to attack the city. The evidence that she believed is that she was willing to act on that faith. If you go back and you read the story in the early part of Joshua, there is no place in the text where the spies pull Rahab aside and say, "Hey, Rahab, you haven't thought about this but, if you were to die tonight, do you know for certain that you'd go to heaven?" They have no discussion like that. The only thing that we know is that she took the spies in. She kept them safe and she snuck them back out and, when the city was destroyed, she was rescued. In other words this makes a great illustration. By her works there was great evidence that she really believed. If Jericho had won that battle, she would have been executed. She knew that. She had made her choice. That's what landed her in Hebrews 11, the *Faith Hall of Fame*. James is making the argument, "If you really believe, it's got to go beyond talk. There has to be action; there has to be evidence."

Verse 26:

> **For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.**

My body ...*without my spirit*...is dead. It's lifeless. It cannot do anything. In the same way my faith...*without works*...is useless. It's dead. It's demonic faith. It accomplishes absolutely nothing. There's a sobering reality to the fact that the difference between someone who is an atheist and someone who would say, "I believe in Christmas and I believe in Easter and I can recite the gospel," but who has never really surrendered or submitted to the truth of that message, the difference between those two is very little. Whatever faith is there, it's just talk. It's dead; it's useless; it has no saving effect. The difference between demonic faith, the

difference between someone who just gives intellectual assent to the details and someone who experiences saving faith, is the willingness to surrender to that truth. It's not enough that, "Yes, I believe that happened," but recognizing that that was for me! I need to surrender my life to that truth. In brokenness and humility I acknowledge I need a Savior. That was for me and it becomes real and it becomes personal and there is a change that takes place. I'm no longer the same person. My life is now lived out of that new creation in Christ.

There's a lot to think about from this text. There are significant ramifications for how we share The Gospel. How many people do you think are out there who are convinced because they came forward at a service, because they repeated a prayer, because someone said, "Just say these words and you get your ticket to heaven," that they are truly believers? But for them it's nothing more than intellectual assent. You ask them the questions on a quiz; they would get all the answers right. But that doesn't mean they ever really surrendered their lives to the truth of that message.

This is a text that we use to examine our own hearts. Some of you right now are thinking, "I wish Fred were here. Fred needs this." See that's the danger of a message like this—because you start fruit inspecting Fred's life. You can't do that—nobody knows—God knows! There are several texts like this in the New Testament—all of them are for the same purpose. It's for each of us to examine our own lives. Only we really know what's in there. Only we can answer the question, "Is there evidence I really believe this? Is there evidence of works in my life? Is there some way in which this faith is manifested in my life? Is there fruit that flows out of this?" If you can sin as a way of life and it doesn't bother you, you have reason to be concerned. If you really don't have much of a heart for the things that God is passionate about—God's just someone you visit once a week—you have reason to be concerned. Each of us needs to look deep down inside. What is the evidence I really believe this? For those of you like me that were raised in a Christian home, it's really easy to think that because I know the right answers, *I'm in*. You know that if God were to ask you the question, "Why should I let you into My heaven?"—you know you'd get it right. So you assume that's all it takes. But until you're willing to jump out of that plane, that's just talk. That's dead; that's useless. Until you are really willing to submit and to surrender to that truth and in your brokenness say, "Hey, I need this. This was for me. Jesus died to be *my* Savior." And out of that flows my life. There's fruit. There's evidence. There's works that says this faith is real.

One of the very obvious steps of obedience out of a genuine faith, according to the New Testament, would be public baptism. For those of you who have trusted Christ as Savior—whether you have done that today or whether you did it twenty years ago—if you've never taken that step to publicly declare, "I believe this and I believe that Jesus died for me and I want the world to know *I'm in*," that's your next step. That's a very important step to take. Over the last month and a half we've seen about one hundred twenty people on this stage say, "Hey I'm in. I've trusted Christ as Savior and I want the world to know." January 16 we'll have another baptism service. If you want to know more about that, just simply call the church office. We would love to see you be part of that. If you trusted Christ as Savior and you've never taken that step, you need to take that step. For the rest of us, we need to just examine our own hearts. Okay I know the facts; I get it. I get Christmas; I get Easter; yes, I give intellectual assent to all that. But is there evidence in my life I really believe that? Have I ever really surrendered my life to that truth?

I can sit in that plane all day long and say, "Oh, yes, I trust the instructor. Oh, yes, I trust the

parachute. I really trust whoever packed my parachute." But until I'm willing to jump, it's just talk. Faith always produces action. **What use is it, my brethren, if someone says they have faith but there's no works? Can that faith save him?** Answer? Absolutely not! The faith that saves is a faith that works.

Our Father, we are thankful that You love us so much You tell us the truth. Lord, it's hard to imagine how many hundreds of thousands of people in our country think that because they believe in Christmas, they believe in Easter, that some day when they die everything is going to be just fine. Lord, they have no sense that their faith is dead, that it's useless. It really makes no difference day to day. Lord, I pray that you would speak to our hearts as each one of us examines our own heart, Lord, that You would speak to us, You'd lead us. Lord, help us to understand whether or not we have a true, genuine, saving faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Opening Discussion

1. What percentage of Americans calls themselves Christian? How many of those believe the facts of Christmas and Easter? How many of those have truly embraced the message of the cross?

2. What is the difference between knowing the facts of the Gospel and truly believing the message of the Gospel?

3. How might your answer to question #2 effect how you present the Gospel message to others?

Bible Study

1. How has James described "true religion" so far in 1:1-2:13?

2. Read James 2:14-17. What is the issue James is addressing? Notice the tie between James' illustration and what he said in 1:27; 2:5, 6, 8. How is this then a different discussion than Paul's discussion in Romans regarding faith and works (Romans 3 & 4 for example)?

3. Read James 2:18-26. An objector in 2:18 states that one might have faith and another might have works. How does James respond to that statement?

4. Do the demons believe the facts of Christmas and Easter? To what degree?

5. In Genesis 15:6 we read that Abraham believed and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. 30 years later that declaration is verified by what event? Is James saying Abraham made himself righteous by offering Isaac or that by offering Isaac he revealed he had been made righteous?

6. Compare 2:24 with Ephesians 2:8, 9. Is this a contradiction? Why or why not?

7. Did Rehab's actions make her righteous or reveal that she had been made righteous?

8. What is James' conclusion in 1:26? Is the question faith versus works (or is that Paul's discussion in Romans?) or the nature of saving faith?

Application

1. Faith talk is very common in our culture. Most people believe and celebrate Christmas and Easter. According to James is that enough to be saved? Why or why not?

2. What is the nature of saving faith? These texts are never to be used to determine if someone else is saved (fruit inspection) but rather to ask "am I saved?" Have I just given intellectual assent to the Gospel or have I truly surrendered to the message and embraced Jesus as my Savior? What is the evidence that you truly believe? Can you show us your faith by your works (2:18)?

3. List some of the fruit of saving faith in James 1:1-2:26.

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