

Faith And Works

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us for a week or two tonight to turn back to the passage that Isabel read in the letter of James. This is a fascinating letter and a fascinating passage because it touches on a big issue in regard to our discipleship as followers of Jesus.

It's an issue that affects every church throughout every age and it's an issue that has definitely been a challenge in our own context over the years.

The issue that's been raised here and that's highlighted in the passage is the connection between what we profess to believe and how we actually live our lives.

I heard a story recently that captured this very, very well. Somebody went to the doctor because they were off work and they were wanting to go to the doctor to reinforce the fact that they weren't fit to work and so they came into the room with a walking stick, unable to walk without the aid of this stick and so very much emphasizing that they were lame.

That was fine. The doctor saw the patient away they went and then the doctor watched the patient walk down the street with the walking stick tucked under his arm.

[1 : 21] No bother. I thought that was a great story and it was a perfect illustration for what James is speaking about tonight that sometimes you can see from the days of James in the New Testament right through to today, sometimes there can be an inconsistency between what people say they believe and the way they live their lives.

I think it's important that we talk about this because it's very serious because it is one of, if not the quickest way to damage a church's reputation.

People are just like that patient when our actions don't align with what we claim to believe. All of this has been highlighted in the second half of chapter two.

In fact, this is really one of the themes that runs right through the letter that James writes. This relationship between faith and works. This is emphasizing that one of the big things he's trying to emphasize is that our relationship with Jesus has got to have an effect on our behavior in our day to day lives.

Throughout the letter, James speaks about various issues, various aspects of our conduct where this issue can arise. In the first half of the chapter that we read, he was speaking about the whole issue of favoritism and he was saying how what you're doing is actually inconsistent with what you're claiming to believe.

[2 : 55] He makes it clear that favoring those who are wealthy and giving them a special seat, pandering to the expectations of the culture around us, that was not something that they were to display as Christians.

Later on, he talks about things like speech, he talks about people quarrelling, he even talks about paying other people for work that they've done and in all these areas, there has to be a consistency between what we believe and how we behave.

All of that is emphasized and highlighted in the teaching that James gives in the second half of chapter two.

He is getting us to think about this huge issue that a relationship with Jesus should shape our conduct and he does this by asking a penetrating question in verse 14, what good is it my brothers if someone says he has faith but does not have works, can that faith save him?

And all of this is raising the connection between our faith and our works. And this question that James asks is targeted at the idea that what we believe can be separated from what we do.

[4 : 18] And that's clearly the issue that's been faced by the people that James is writing to as you read through the letter and you get this description really of people who were saying that they had faith but the way that they lived their lives was contradicting it.

And that should straight away make us all listen because it's still one of the biggest challenges that we face as followers of Jesus. And it can be especially true in our culture today because in the world around us there's such a focus on the individual and there's such a focus on the internal. So my individual identity, my truth, my story, that's what matters most and what I see in my heart is what matters most.

And even as Christians we can think like that, we can think, well the thing that matters is just what's in here. My inward faith is what matters and what I do on a day to day basis is nowhere near as important.

And the result of that is that you can frequently meet Christians and you'll hear them say that they're Christians. And when you look at the way they live, you don't see much that's actually different.

[5 : 34] And what we have to recognize here is that amongst Christians for whom this can be a problem, possibly the people who are in the greatest danger of falling into this trap are Reformed evangelical Christians.

In other words, us. And that's because central to our theology is the rightful emphasis on the sovereignty of God, on the sufficiency of his grace and the fact that we are saved by faith alone. We don't contribute anything to our salvation. And we are right to emphasize that, we're right to emphasize that we are saved by faith alone.

But the consequence of that is that we can fall into the trap of thinking, well I've got faith. I've got my place in heaven, so now I can just do what I like.

And the result of that can be people who will go to church on Sunday and then they'll live from Monday to Friday, Monday to Saturday even, just like everybody else.

[6 : 37] And it's in response to that issue that James asks his readers and us the huge question, what good is it if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

James then answers his own question in the latter half of this chapter and he does it by following a very clear pattern. That's always a good thing to look out for. Whenever you're reading a passage of the Bible, it's good to look out for patterns, especially when you're reading a letter like this.

As you see patterns, you can see the kind of structure of argument that is being presented. And you get a very, very clear example of it here. In verses 14 to 16, you see a very clear pattern whereby four times James makes a point and then gives an example.

Then he makes another point and gives an example, another point gives an example. I've set it all out in a slide here so that you can see it. Verse 14, he's asking the question about whether faith without works is of any good.

And in verse 15 to 17, he gives the answer. Sorry, it's a bit small, but hopefully you can still read it okay. And he gives the example of saying, you know, if somebody is poor and lacking in food, if you say to them, go in peace, be warm, be filled and then do nothing to help them.

[7 : 49] What good is that? And so James here is really just describing a hypocrite, somebody whose words are empty. And he's echoing the parable that Jesus told of the two sons who they were both asked to work in their fathers vineyard.

One said, yes, I'll go, but then didn't go. The other said, no, and then did go. And it was that one, the one who actually went, who did the father's will. It's the actions that ultimately count in all these examples.

Then verse 18, he makes another point. Someone will say, well, you know, you've got faith, you've got works, I've got faith, as though you choose one or the other.

And the response is that is to say, show me your faith apart from your works. I'll show you my faith by my works. And then he uses the example of demons to say that, you know, you can't make this separation because, because faith alone, in a sense, being described here is, is not enough.

It's not a guarantee of anything. It says, well, you say that you believe that you believe that God is one. So do demons. And they shudder. They're in verse 19.

[9 : 01] The pattern continues in verse 20. He tells him that faith without works is useless. And he uses another question to make the point. Do you want to be shown that you, do you want to be shown that faith apart from works is useless?

And he proceeds to then do just that. His example is Abraham showing how Abraham's actions demonstrated his faith when he went to offer his son.

And again, James is making the point that you cannot separate faith from actions. It's through Abraham's actions that his faith is demonstrated. Then he ramps it up even further.

Verse 24, he says, you see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And his final example is Rahab. Rahab who was the prostitute in Jericho, who met the spies who had come from the Israelite army and she had protected them when the residents of Jericho were trying to catch them and she sent them another way.

And she avoided condemnation by aligning herself with the Israelites or the people of God. She didn't just say, I believe the Israelites. She showed that she believed through her actions.

[10:19] And so again here, James is not making an either or choice between faith or works. He's not saying that we're justified by works and not justified by faith, that faith doesn't come into it.

He's saying that we are not justified by a faith that exists in isolation and that has no effect on our lives. And he sums it all up in verse 26 where he says, for as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

And so over this whole passage, you've got an argument being built up by James, starting in verse 14 whether asking whether faith without works is any good. And he concludes in verse 26 to say the answer is no, faith without works is not good.

It's actually dead. And the point that James is making is that faith which has no effect on our lives is not genuine faith.

And it's so important that we recognize that because this is one of the easiest passages to misunderstand in the whole of the New Testament because we can easily think that James is drawing a sharp contrast between being justified by works and being justified by faith.

[11:41] And this can confuse us because it can almost sound like it's contradicting other parts of the Bible. You go to Paul's writings in Galatians 2 and he writes, we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.

So we have also believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law because by works of the law no one will be justified. But then James says, you see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone and you think, what's going on?

It sounds as though they're contradicting each other. The key thing you have to recognize is that Paul and James are addressing different questions.

In Galatians 2, Paul is asking the question, how are we saved? And the answer is that it is only by grace through faith.

In James 2, he is asking the question, what does saving faith actually look like?

[12:49] And the key thing we need to recognize is that James is not drawing a contrast between salvation by works, salvation by faith, the contrast that James is making is between counterfeit faith and genuine faith.

And to show this, it's maybe helpful to substitute the word works for the word effect. The ESV actually does that in James chapter 1. When it says here, let steadfastness have its full effect. That word there is exactly the same word, it's the word works. And steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfectly complete, lacking in nothing. And the same word appears in the words of our text in verse 14 and it's helpful if we say it.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but it does not have any effect? Can that faith save him?

Faith that has no effect on our lives is not genuine faith. And the great point that James is making is that when we say, you know, yeah, I'm a Christian, I believe, and then it has absolutely no influence on our lives whatsoever.

[14:03] When we live as though Jesus is a total irrelevance and when our lives look identical to everybody else's, then our faith probably has a question mark against it.

Genuine saving faith is always going to have an effect on the way that we live. Now, that not for one second means that we're perfect.

The Bible never asks you to ask the question, are you perfect? Because we're never going to be. But it does want you to ask the question, are you different?

Are there changes, even little ones, but are there changes? Genuine faith will have an effect on the way that we live. Now, behind all of this, James is pointing us to a very important theological concept that I want to suspend a couple of minutes thinking about.

It's a concept that lies at the heart of Christian theology and it also lies at the very heart of this issue that we're talking about tonight, the issue of faith and work. The theological concept is what we call distinct but inseparable.

[15 : 15] Distinct but inseparable. In Christian theology, there are many, many of these distinct but inseparable aspects of what we believe. So you think of the wonderful truths that lie at the heart of the gospel, the Trinity, the creation, the incarnation, the atonement, the church, the law, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the attributes of God, the Person of Christ, covenant theology, all these things that lie at the heart of the gospel.

They're all distinct, but they're all inseparable. And even within these individual doctrines, you have the same emphasis.

In God, you have the distinction between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but these are inseparable. He is one God.

You think about Jesus, He has divine nature, He has human nature. They're distinct, but they're inseparable. And in our conversion stories, we have various aspects.

We have justification and adoption, regeneration. They're all distinct, but they're inseparable. They all fit together.

[16 : 26] You can't isolate one in distinction, in complete isolation from the others. So although you might be able to identify something that has a distinctive role, you can't separate it from everything else.

The truths of Christianity are distinct, but inseparable. And that concept isn't actually confined to theology. You actually see it everywhere. Even if you look at your own mind, you can think about your emotions.

You can think about your will. You can think about your conscience. They're all distinct, but they're inseparable. They're all part of your mind. Even something as simple as a sandwich.

It's got distinctive ingredients, but once they're part of a sandwich, even though you can distinguish between them, for that to be a sandwich, you can't separate them. You've got to keep them together.

The example that I love to think about, and you're probably not going to be remotely surprised to think about, to hear this, the example I like to think about is a machine or an engine. A machine or an engine is full of distinctive parts, but in order for the machine to be the machine, these parts cannot be separated.

[17 : 37] And I want you to use that image of a machine to help us think this through a little bit more so that we can hopefully really fully grasp the emphasis that James is making in regard to the relationship between faith and works.

So I'm going to show you a picture, and this is the picture of a machine. Now there are maybe times when I have been able to present you with very neat, precise, orderly diagrams.

Tonight is not one of those nights. So this is not my most magnificent work of art, but hopefully it'll be helpful. So here we go. Here is our machine.

Lots of bits to this machine, but we're going to explain them all one by one. This machine is a picture of the Gospel.

Now like any illustration, it's not perfect, obviously not perfect, but any illustration is a simplification. So please just always bear that in mind. It's just an illustration, but still I hope it's going to be helpful.

[18 : 45] And I hope it's also relevant because you are in that picture. You're in the machine. This is you right here. This is you.

And you are on a path to death. That's what this is. You are on this pathway to death like everyone in the human race, born with a fallen nature, born under the grip of sin, born on a path to death.

And the great message of the Gospel and the great purpose of the Gospel is to take you off that path to death. And everything changes when this machine kicks in to action.

In other words, everything changes when God intervenes in your life. The first thing that happens is what we call regeneration, which is like a switch where the Holy Spirit comes into your heart and changes your heart from being spiritually dead to being spiritually alive.

And there's beautiful imagery in Ezekiel chapter 36 about that, where a heart of stone is turned into a heart of flesh. And you can see here, and this is a little light bulb.

[20 : 08] So you can see when regeneration is off. There's no light. The light comes on. You can see and you recognize your sin and you hear God's voice speaking to you.

We go from being spiritually blind to being able to see. We go from being spiritually dead to being spiritually awakened and alive. The immediate result of that regeneration of that new birth, as it's also described in scripture, is faith.

And faith is portrayed by this magnificent lift cradle assembly that you have portrayed before you. And I think that's a helpful illustration because in terms of faith, in terms of the gospel restoring us and taking us to a new level, we don't do anything.

It's not a staircase that we climb. It's just a lift that we fall into because we are relying on everything that Jesus has done. He's going to excuse us from the path of death.

We cast ourselves onto him through his son, Jesus Christ. And the result of that is that we're taken from the path of death and brought into the path of life.

[21 : 23] Taken out of the old humanity, brought into the new humanity, our circumstances changed and transformed forever. And that salvation that we have through faith is utterly secure, and it's utterly secure for two reasons.

One is because we have been justified. And so the record of death against us has been wiped clean. Our guilt is clear. We are pronounced justified.

We cannot be condemned. And so we're safe. So that's why you're standing behind this safety rail. This thing here is the safety rail on the machine that you stand behind. You can't fall off.

You're secure. You're safe because of your justification. But that's only half of your safety. The justification means you can never fall into condemnation again. But that's only half of it because we're also secure through adoption.

We're safe and secure in our Father's hands. And we become his children. He is holding us. He will never, ever let us go. So that's the amazing transformation.

[22 : 28] We go from the path of death to the path of life, justified, adopted, safe, secure in our Father's hands. But that path of life is not static. We don't just stand there still doing nothing forevermore.

It's a journey that we move along. And that journey is the path of sanctification, which is conveyed by this conveyor belt that you have to the right hand side of the drawing.

That process of sanctification is making us more and more like Jesus. And that's shown by this conveyor belt. And it's an upward, onward movement.

And we're becoming more and more like Jesus through the Holy Spirit coming to work in our hearts. So the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts here to regenerate us. But he remains there.

And he begins and continues this wonderful work of sanctification as we move along life's journey, helping us to grow in our faith. As we are on that journey, we are able to serve Jesus.

[23 : 30] We're able to do things for him. And that's portrayed by this, this thing here is a magnificent control panel full of buttons and switches where you do stuff, where you accomplish purposes.

And so you're moving along and you're doing stuff. You're working. There are works that we do for Jesus as we serve him.

The results of that work that we're doing as we're moving along serving Jesus, the results go in two directions. And that's conveyed by the funnels and the pipes. Out of the funnels, praise, honor and glory goes to God as we serve him in our lives.

At the same time, blessing comes to others. And so the fruit that we display as Christians is of benefit to others.

So when we work with people, when we live with people, when we interact with people, our conduct, our love, our kindness, our gentleness, our generosity, our integrity is a blessing in their lives.

[24 : 31] And our great hope is that that blessing into these people's lives will sow seeds so that in the lives of the people we meet, they too will find themselves here where the light comes on and they too come to faith in Jesus, come up the path of death, come onto the path of life.

The result of it all is that we reach our destination, our eternal home with Jesus, with all our brothers and sisters, all fully conformed to his image.

Now, there's the machine. I mean, at one level it's complicated, at the same time it's a massive oversimplification. The key point is that in this machine, there's loads of distinct parts, but they're all inseparable.

And that is telling us that there is an unbreakable connection between faith here and works here.

They're distinct and in one sense they're a wee bit far apart, but they are absolutely inseparable.

The two belong together.

[25 : 54] But the people that James was writing to, they were trying to detach this faith box so it's as though they were trying to keep it down here.

And it was like, yes, I've got faith, but I don't want any of the rest of it. I don't want to have to have working sanctification change.

I don't want any of that, but I'll keep faith. I've got faith as though they can detach it from everything. But James is saying, if you do that, your faith is not genuine faith because faith and works are absolutely inseparable.

Paul was dealing with a different problem. Paul was dealing with people who thought that you could make your own staircase here. And instead of faith, you could just work your own way up by yourself.

That's the problem that Paul was dealing with. James is dealing with a different problem. James is dealing with people who want to say, yeah, I've got faith, but I don't want to have any effect on my life. When that happens, you end up with a life that looks as though it's just walked straight through and it's no different to everybody else who has no interest in Jesus.

[27 : 15] And the key point that James is telling us is that you can't do that because although faith and works are distinct, they are inseparable. They're distinct, but inseparable.

In other words, our faith should have an effect on the way we live our lives. But as James was said in chapter one, we should be doers of the word, not just hearers.

And all of this goes back, all of this makes sense when we go back to the language that James uses, he says, faith without works is dead. How do you know something is dead?

It's when it doesn't do anything. It's unresponsive. One of my favorite memories is of when one of my children was very, very small and we were getting up very early in the morning and everyone else was asleep.

And I said to them, you have to be quiet. And they replied saying, I'll be as quiet as a little dead mouse.

[28 : 17] And that was a great example because a little dead mouse is very quiet because if you're dead, you do nothing. How do you know if faith is dead?

If it does nothing, if it has no effect? Or to look at the other way around, how do you know if someone's faith is real? The answer is that it has an effect on their lives or to use the language of the New Testament.

Their life brings forth fruit. This machine is really a fruit machine, not a fruit machine like Las Vegas style fruit machine, but a fruit machine in that it produces fruit, produces fruit in the lives of people who are following Jesus.

And this is one of the things that makes Christianity so, so good. Because if you're asking yourself the question again, how do you know if someone's faith is genuine? The answer is not, oh, because they know a lot or because they never make mistakes or because they're confident or because they've done all these amazing things for the Lord.

That's not what shows that faith is genuine. Even if your faith seems strong, that's not actually the proof of genuine faith. The proof of genuine faith is that the person is bearing fruit and that you see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control.

[29 : 45] These are the things that bring honor, praise and glory to God. These are the things that bring amazing blessings into the lives of others. These are the things that James is appealing for in his letter.

You think of all the things in our culture today that people value that are shallow or transient or empty. And then you look at the gospel and you see that God is calling us to something that's so different, so beautiful, so magnificent.

You bring such a wonderful transformation in our lives. I want to close with a couple of points of application just as we finish up.

The first is really important is to say that none of this, I'm not saying any of this, to unsettle you. So when you read a passage like this, it's easy to think, oh man, faith without works is dead, is my faith dead?

And we can easily be unsettled by these words. You can think, am I bearing enough fruit? Am I really saved? If you are asking those questions, if you're asking those questions, that confirms that you're up there.

[31 : 02] Because people down here don't even ask that question. So this should not upset you, it should not unsettle you. Please don't worry. If you think, oh man, I don't know if I'm bearing enough fruit, that very question shows that the spirit has opened your eyes.

The time to be concerned, the warning sign is when you're going through life thinking, I don't need to show kindness, I don't need to be gentle, I don't need self-control, I don't need Jesus to have any influence on the way I live my life.

So this is not to unsettle you. The second thing I want to say and I want us to recognize is that separating faith and works in the way that's been described in this passage is actually such a tragedy because it's such a failure to recognize just how big and magnificent the Gospel is.

This machine is, you know, it's not really a very good drawing, it's a bit of a terrible drawing, but it's a terrible drawing of an amazing thing. The whole machine of God's salvation is wonderful.

Look at what God is doing, look at how all the different pieces work together, look at how He can make you a channel for His glory and for blessing to be to others.

[32 : 27] It's all reminding us that, you know, in terms of our salvation, God is actually not just looking for us all to be believers, He's actually looking to make us into new creations, those who display the beautiful image of Jesus more and more in our lives.

So we mustn't separate faith and works because it'll detract hugely from just how great the Gospel is.

The third thing though is I think the most important one of all. If you separate faith and works, what you are actually doing is missing out on the amazing potential that you have as a Christian.

And that is such an easy thing for us to do, but this week is a new week. Every week is a new week. We start that new week by meeting to worship together in the name of Jesus and then we go into that week to serve Him.

And this machine tells you that the potential for you in your life this week is amazing because God is doing a wonderful work in you.

[33 : 34] He's doing a wonderful work through you. Your life as a Christian, if you are a Christian or if you become a Christian, your life is not down here.

Your life is up there. It's safe, secure in the reality of justification and adoption. It's moving along this magnificent path of sanctification. One of the weaknesses in that drawing is that that conveyor belt actually should be much, much, much more wobbly because the Christian life is full of ups and downs.

But all the time God is taking us forward on the journey that He has for us. All the time He's using us and building us up and through it all He can do such wonderful things through you. And this week, this week you can be such a wonderful blessing to every single person that you meet.

And that can even just be by the way you speak to them, by the way you pray for them, by the interest you take in them, by the kindness that you show when faith leads on to works.

The potential is extraordinary. The people on this path here that you work with, some of you maybe even live with, the people on that path are thirsty and hungry and bruised.

[34 : 52] And they might be doing a very good job of hiding that. But you are the means through which refreshment and comfort can come to them.

By God's working in you, you can bring many blessings into people's lives. And that's what makes the week ahead exciting.

And that's what makes Jesus worth following. Amen.