

## JAMES - SOUNDNESS OF SOUL FROM THE INSIDE OUT - Part nine

Teaching #1820 - Sunday, July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 10:00 a.m.

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

### KNOWING HOW ABRAHAM WAS SAVED CAN KEEP YOUR RELIGION FROM BECOMING USELESS

**James 2:14-26** - "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? [15] If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, [16] 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? [17] So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. [Faith lasts without works as long as a body without food] [18] But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. [19] You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! [20] Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? [21] Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? [22] You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; [23] and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. [24] You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. [25] And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? [26] For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. [So first faith without works is a body without food and second it's a body without breath]."

The verses we looked at last week can raise some interesting questions. James said some things that don't sound quite right to us. He stressed the importance of *"fulfilling the royal law"* (2:8), and how *"judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy...."* (2:13).

These words sound foreign to the easy gospel of personal fulfillment of our day. They point to *rewards* being doled out on the basis of our *works*. And we know salvation isn't *by* works. It's by *grace* through *faith*. So *faith* is what *receives* saving grace. Hasn't James read *Paul*? *"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin"* (Romans 3:20).

That's the issue this passage confronts and there has never been a time when its teaching is more urgently needed than today. How does faith manifest itself *operationally* in the one possessing it? Does grace *nullify* moral effort and transformation or *accelerate* it? If I'm concerned about *moral righteousness* am I automatically a *legalist*? Does emphasizing works minimize the preciousness of a salvation that is *free* through *faith*? These are questions to which we simply *must* have the right answer.

So this is where James is taking us today. It's quite a journey. He's leading us to ask hard questions: *"Do you have to be holy to go to heaven?"* Or, *"What role do works have in getting us to heaven?"* One is tempted to say, "None whatsoever!" But it's very hard, at first glance, to hold on to that answer if today's text is read with all its due weight.

Of course, what James is doing in our text is taking his readers deeper into the issue he raised in **verses 12 and 13** - *"So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. [13] For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment."*

*"So speak and so act...."* Those are *behavior* words. They're things we *do*. And then there are those troubling words about *"judgment."* What judgment is this? If we're saved by grace through faith these words about judgment, written to the *church*, are hard to digest. If we're saved by *faith alone* then what judgment can possibly be left for us? These are not slight questions. They cut to the heart of saving faith and *define* the Christian life. James forces these Christians to come to terms with these issues because they *matter*. They matter a great deal.

#### 1) THERE SEEMS TO BE NO SUCH THING AS NEW TESTAMENT SALVATION BY FAITH WITHOUT A TRANSFORMED, HOLY LIFE

**James 2:14-16** - "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? [15] If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, [16] 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?"

There is a right way, and a wrong way to read these verses. The wrong way is to make James say something he isn't saying. James is *not* saying faith needs to be *supplemented* by moral works of righteousness. Works do not need to be *added* to faith. Faith is big enough and strong enough on its own to save, as long as it is *genuine* faith. And that's James' point. He's

not talking about **adding** works to faith. Rather, he's **defining** genuine faith. He's talking about how genuine saving faith **manifests** itself. He's talking about the **inward DNA** of New Testament saving faith.

This becomes obvious when **verse 14** is read carefully - **"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?"** James isn't dealing with the **possession** of faith in this verse but the **profession** of a faith that isn't authentic - **"What good is it if someone says he has faith but does not have works?"** Anyone can **say** he or she has faith.

Then James continues and presses this issue - **"Can that faith save him?"** Please notice - not **"Can faith save him?"** but, **"Can that faith save him?"**

Of course **faith** can save him, or her, or anyone else. But **that** faith - the one that's all talk without a changed life - the one that has nothing of the love and power of Jesus in it - **that** faith can't save anyone because it isn't genuine faith.

Actually, this isn't a new thought train in James' letter. This is the point he was making, perhaps a bit more diplomatically, in **James 1:26-27** - **"If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. [27] Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."**

**"...Things he is religious...."** That's James' way of saying this person **thinks** he has faith. Please notice, these verses are not a description of what faith **does**. These verses describe what faith **is**. These aren't works **added** to faith. This life-style **is** faith. This faith, according to James, is, in fact, the **only** kind of faith that is **"pure and undefiled before God" (1:27)**. If these actions, and a host of others like them, aren't growing in my heart and mind and hands and feet out of love for my grace-filled Lord, then I don't **have** faith. I'm just **saying** I have faith.

Look at **verse 16** - **"....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?"**

James piles up examples. **If anyone says he has faith.... (2:14), **"....and one of you says to them.... (2:16)**. It's all **words**. James assumes this believer could have and should have done more than offer his pious blessing. But this person used these prayerful words to sooth his conscience and blind his own eyes to what real Christian faith looks and acts like when confronted with human need.**

Notice how James highlights phoney faith in the church. Religion becomes **talk**. It all boils down to the right **words**. It's the **creation of an image. Words**. Think of all the words used in prayers, blessings, songs, sermons, classes, advice, good wishes. All are valid and essential ingredients of strong Christian living. But, says James, all are deadly when used as substitutes for the power and the testimony of observable actions to correspond with those good words.

**1 John 3:17-18** - **"But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? [18] Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."**

## 2) **WORKING FAITH CONTRASTED WITH COUNTERFEIT FAITH**

**James 2:17-19** - **"So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. [18] But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. [19] You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!"**

Notice **verse 17** - **"So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."**

This verse is important because, once again, it underscores James' point. Faith without works isn't just **inferior**. It's **dead**. In other words, this verse helps prove James isn't comparing two **kinds** of faith - faith **without** works and faith **with**. Rather, faith without works isn't faith at all. It's just **talk** about faith, not the real thing. It's not **alive**.

That's what James means when he says works are as important to real faith as breath is important to real life. Take breath away and you aren't just talking about a **lower grade** of life. You're not taking about life at all.

Simply **knowing** the right things isn't faith. And just **agreeing with** the right things isn't faith either. James shows this to be so in one of the most striking verses in the New Testament: **James 2:19** - "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!"

"**Even the demons believe....**" These are very deliberate and planned words from James. He just can't come up with a better picture of the difference between **mental agreement** with Biblical truth and **saving faith**. Demons fully **acknowledge** the truth of everything you and I believe. But they aren't **affected** by what they acknowledge. They aren't **changed** by it.

Write it down. You heard it right here. **Demons are believers**. Demons **hear** the truth. Demons **know** the truth. Demons **agree** that it's the truth. Demons **believe** the truth. If being a **Christian** and being a **believer** are the same thing, you're left with the rather awkward conclusion that demons are all saved. And surely **that** can't be James' point.

His obvious point is quite the opposite. We all **know** demons aren't saved. The Bible tells us they **aren't** going to the place Jesus is preparing for Christians. They are going to a place **prepared** for them, all right, but it's a place of everlasting fire. So we **know** demons aren't saved. Yet they have the **same kind of faith** James saw in at least some of the people in this church.

So, says James, if you want some kind of obvious proof that faith without works isn't saving anyone, you don't have to look very far. Demons know more about God and Jesus than many, many religious people and they're heading for judgment all the same. Verily, verily, faith without works really is **dead**. Demons **believe**. But they don't have **faith**.

### 3) **JAMES USES THE OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES TO PROVE HIS TEACHING ABOUT FAITH ISN'T NEW OR UNORTHODOX**

**James 2:20-26** - "Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? [21] Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? [22] You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; [23] and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"— and he was called a friend of God. [24] You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. [25] And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? [26] For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead."

James picks some examples of living faith from the Old Testament scriptures - Abraham and Rahab. One is known as the great **patriarch of the faith**. The other was a **hooker**. Abraham is obviously picked because he was, as James says, their **"father"** in the faith (21). Rahab probably represents the other end of the spectrum. Far from having any special status, she was an outsider and an outcast. What James has to say about real faith applies to **all** who would know God in a living, saving way.

It's really what these two have in common that serves James' purpose. First, **they were both justified by faith**. Paul says so about Abraham and the writer of Hebrews lists both Abraham and Rahab as shining examples of genuine faith. James is writing about faith, so these two characters suit his purpose.

Second, **they both risked everything in stepping out in obedience to do what God was calling them to do**. Abraham's life shines with dozens of examples of this. He left everything and followed God's call, not even knowing where he was going. He set the knife to offer his only son Isaac up to God simply because God told him to. Rahab risked the penalty of treason to hide the spies from Israel in the wall of her home in Jericho (see **Joshua chapter 2**).

Of course, James' point in all this is his words about faith and works aren't just some new twist or spin. This has **always** been the nature of real faith. It isn't **words** and it isn't **concepts**. It isn't **agreement**. It's **actions**. This **is** faith. And it doesn't matter which part of the Bible you use to define it.

Under this point, let me take just a minute to look at an issue people constantly raise between the teaching of James and Paul on the subject of faith. To cut right to the chase, let's put two verses up for examination:

**Paul: "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Romans 3:28).**

**James: "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24).**

What shall we do with these two verses, and dozens of others like them? Do Paul and James teach two different **brands** of faith? And which one will the church accept?

My conviction is not only do Paul and James **not** contradict each other, but **would fully endorse and agree with each other**. A hint that this is so is found in the fact that they **both** use Abraham, the father of the faith, as their example and pattern.

**Paul** writes to Jews who wanted to reject Jesus Christ, standing on the fact that they were chosen in Abraham and were given the law. **James** writes to people who were putting their faith in Jesus Christ and then living as they pleased.

Here's my point. Paul and James each emphasized different aspects of faith because they each had to deal with a very different problem in their listeners.

Look at our two sample verses again:

**Paul: "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Romans 3:28).**

**James: "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24).**

Remember, Paul writes to people who had good works without Jesus. James writes to people who wanted Jesus without good works. Paul's point is **good works without Jesus aren't enough**. James' point is **faith in Jesus without righteousness isn't faith**.

The clue in James' words is found right at the end of **2:24**. The clue is in that single word **"alone."** **"A person is justified by works and not by faith alone."** Faith **alone** won't justify anyone because, as James has been teaching all along, faith **alone** isn't real faith. Faith **"alone"** is the phoney faith James has been exposing all along:

**James 2:14** - "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?"

**James 2:17** - "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

**James 2:26** - "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead."

So here's the conclusion of the matter. You **can** have all sorts of good works without faith in Jesus. It happens all over the planet every day. This is the deceptive danger of morality and all the world's religions. The problem is good works can't save. You must have faith in Jesus Christ.

But, while you **can** have good works a plenty without faith in Jesus Christ, there is something you **can't** have. You **can't** have genuine faith in Jesus without good works.

Always remember, there are **two groups of people** who need to think carefully about this teaching. **First**, there are people who are **good** people - people who **do** good things. They're good parents. They are charitable to the poor. They don't lie or cheat. They have good, faithful marriages. They believe in peace on earth and good will toward all. And that, they assume, will take them to heaven. And if we were saved by good deeds, it would. Good people need Jesus. Good people are eternally lost without faith in Jesus Christ:

**Philippians 3:7-9** - "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [8] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ [9] and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith"

Good people need Jesus if they want to have peace with God.

I said there were **two** groups of people who need to consider this teaching. The **second** group needing this teaching are those who **profess** faith in Jesus. They love Jesus. They sing worship songs to Jesus. They go to church. They memorize

verses out of their New Testament. But they have areas of life where they don't do what Jesus tells them to do.

I'm not talking about the occasional failure of obedience for which all Christians repent with a broken and tender heart. I'm talking about a ***stubborn unyieldedness*** to the voice of conscience, the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. To all who are leaning on a ***professed*** faith in Jesus while not ***listening to Him as Lord***, James has a very haunting question today - ***"Can such faith save him or her?"(2:14)***

You and I both need to have the right answer to that question. It's a misunderstanding about faith that can cost you your soul.