Faith at the Core  
Message 5 from the Letter of James  
James 2:14-26  
Rev. Jeff Chapman – July 12, 2009 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church  

14What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.  

But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’  

Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.  

Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’, and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.  

Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead. (James 2:14-26, NRSV)  

Let me begin this morning with a question of monumental importance. How can a person be saved? Or to put it more personally, how can you be saved?  

Well, the answer you get to that question depends on who you ask.  

For instance, the Muslim says you can earn salvation if, at the end of your life, the divine scale says that your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds.  

The Hindu will tell you that to be saved you must work over the course of many lives to justify yourself by building up enough good karma through acts of devotion, meditation, good works and self control.  

The Buddhist teaches that salvation comes through a continuous rebirth cycle where you, through progressive meditation on Buddhist principles, are released from the notion of “self” and finally reach Nirvana.  

Our Mormon friends also teach that salvation comes by our good work and by following the beliefs of the Mormon Church.  

Even many people who call themselves Christians will say that a person has to at least do a certain amount of good in his or her life to merit entrance into heaven.¹  

Understand, when we ask the question “How can a person be saved?” we receive many answers. Still, most of those answers will have a common thread. One way or another, they all have something to do with good works, with earning your salvation by the way you live.

In the end, it is only the message of the Christian faith which uniquely proclaims that a person is never saved by good works. Instead, Christianity teaches that we are saved by God’s grace. We’re not saved because of our goodness. We’re saved because of God’s goodness. This is the good news of the Gospel which has been proclaimed by faithful Christians all across this world for 2000 years.²

But it is this very proclamation of Christianity - that we are saved by grace and not by works - which has made our passage from James this morning so difficult for many of those same Christians over the ages to swallow. For if it’s true that we are saved by grace, how can James come along and say that salvation has something to do with good works? In doing so, isn’t he contradicting everything else Christianity teaches?

Well, in dealing with this question, let’s begin by looking at a verse in the New Testament which, as much as any other verse, has been held up as an answer to the question of how a person is saved. In Ephesians 2:8, the Apostle Paul writes these words which some of you, undoubtedly, know by heart: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”³

Paul says here, “A person is saved by grace, through faith. We are not saved by works.” Yet James says, “Faith without works is dead.” Well, how can both these statements be in the same Bible? How can they both be true?

Let me explain it this way.

Scripture is clear, salvation comes to us by God’s grace alone. In Romans 5:8 Paul leaves no room for misinterpretation: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” In other words, Christ did not die for good and deserving people. Christ died for undeserving sinners like you and me. The whole of scripture teaches this.

So if someone ever asks you when you were saved, the proper answer is, “I was saved about 2000 years ago. When Jesus died on the cross, that’s when I was saved.” And that’s the beauty of it. God’s salvation came to us before we were even born. It was totally undeserved, completely motivated by God’s deep love for the world.

However, (stay with me here) though we were saved when Christ died on the cross, we do not receive salvation until we believe, until we have faith. For, you see, though salvation is a free gift from God, it isn’t a gift that God shoves down our throats. We must receive the gift. Or, if we choose, reject the gift. It’s a decision that each of us has to make.

That’s why Paul says in Ephesians that it is “by grace we have been saved through faith.” The grace is a gift. The faith is the receiving of that gift. Follow me? Jesus himself said in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son [there’s the grace part, the gift part], that whoever believes in him should not perish [that’s the faith part, the receiving the gift part].”

Think about it this way. If this line represents the life of a Christian, then that person was given the gift of salvation long before they were even born, when Jesus died on the cross. Still, there is a point in life at which that person places faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and receives that gift of salvation. For some Christians that coming to faith happens over the course of many years. For others, it may happen at one specific point in life. Either way, at some point every Christian receives in faith the free gift God has offered us in Christ. Every Christian comes to a place of saying, “I believe.”

² Again, this is radically different from all those faiths I mentioned and many more I didn’t mention. We must be careful, then, of people who go around proclaiming that all faiths are really essentially the same because, in the end, they point to the same God and teach the same thing. No such thing could be further from the truth.

³ NIV. Italic mine.
What the New Testament teaches us then, is that the Christian is not saved because of any good works which may have come before that point of faith. Whatever good works a person may have accomplished before they trusted Jesus have nothing to do with their salvation. Again, our salvation comes through faith, not through works.\(^4\) With me so far?

But then along comes James. And he says that faith *without* works is dead! Well, doesn’t he then contradict everything else the New Testament teaches us?

Not at all! For when James talks about works, he isn’t talking at all about works *before* we were saved. He’d agree with Paul; those have nothing to do with salvation. Rather, James is talking about works, or actions, *after* we are saved. And these works, of course, don’t lead to salvation. How could they, since they come *after* salvation? Instead, these works—and this is the key—*demonstrate* that a person’s faith which leads to salvation is a genuine faith. As it has been said before, we are not saved *by* good works, but saved *for* good works.

Confused? In a nutshell, here’s James’ point. We are saved by grace through faith, period. But if you say that you have faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, a faith that has led to salvation, but that faith does not then lead you to do the things Jesus taught you to do, then how can you say that you have faith in Jesus?

To make his point he uses an example. If you meet an old friend on the street one day who is half-starved and dressed in rags and you say to your friend, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” but you don’t even lift a finger to help him find food or clothing, then what good is that? Are you truly concerned that he go in peace? No. You don’t care. Because if you really did care, if your compassion was genuine, you’d do something about his situation. Talk without action is nonsense.

This isn’t complicated stuff. We all understand how this works. If a politician goes around making grandiose campaign promises, but then gets into office and makes zero effort to fulfill any of those promises, we know that she just said those things to get elected. She didn’t really mean them. If a man goes around talking about how devoted he is to his family, but then spends most of his time in the office and away on business trips, we all know what he’s really devoted to. And it’s not his wife and kids.

The best indicator for true belief is always true action. That’s true for politicians and fathers. It’s also true for Christians. If you say you have faith in Jesus Christ, but then you don’t seek to follow him with you life, then you don’t really have faith in Jesus Christ. In James’ words, “Faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead.” Faith and works always go together.

C.S. Lewis once said that to ask which is more important, faith or works, is like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is more important.\(^5\) William Booth, the founder of The Salvation Army, said it this way, “Faith and works travel side by side, step answering to step, like the legs of a man walking. First faith, and then works; and then faith again, and then works again—until they can scarcely distinguish which is the one and which is the other.” Faith and works are, in Christianity, inseparable.

Now some people will argue—and James alludes to this in verse 18—that not everybody has to have both. In other words, a person might say, “Well some people have faith and some people have works. Each to his own.” In our day you might hear this argument come out like this. A person will say, “I believe in God. I’m a Christian. I’m just not really practicing my faith right now.” Have you heard people say that? People say that all the time.

To which James says in verse 19—and not without a little sarcasm in his voice—“Good for you! Even the demons believe in God. Even the demons believe in Jesus. And it scares the living daylights out of them.”\(^6\)

When polled, most Americans say they believe in God. A vast majority of us even say we believe in Jesus. Well, so does the devil. In fact, the devil has pretty good theology. He knows exactly who God is. The problem is that his belief

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\(^4\) This means, by the way, that we have no room to boast. Since we are not saved because of *our* goodness, we can’t pat ourselves on the back. We are saved because of the grace of God. Period. And all the glory goes to God alone.


\(^6\) The word “tremble” here refers here to uncontainable, uncontrollable, violent shaking from extreme fear.
doesn’t lead to good works. It doesn’t lead to trusting and following Jesus with his life. And so while his belief is alive, his faith is dead.

Imagine people making the following claims. I love my family very much, I just don’t like to spend time with my family. I really believe that we should care for the poor, I just don’t actually want to help the poor myself. I am a lifelong devoted Sacramento Kings fan, but I really only like to watch them play when they are winning.

That’s nonsense. Right? We would quickly dismiss any claims of somebody who talked like that. And so, in the same way, the person who says “I believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, but I don’t really give my whole life to following him”, well, the claims of that person should be equally dismissed. Because it’s just talk.

If I am a Christian, if I say I believe in Jesus, then my faith, if it is genuine, will result in a life that is dedicated to following Jesus and doing the things he taught us to do. Forgiving others, even our enemies. Serving the poor. Spending time studying the scriptures. Devoting ourselves to prayer. Loving our enemies. Giving away our material possessions. Facing death with peace. And so on.

I think that one of the things James is challenging us with here is to make an honest examination of our own lives and ask ourselves what sort of faith we have. Do I have a faith in Christ that is real and genuine and leads me to do, with God’s help, good works? Or do I have a faith that is in word only, a dead faith which never leads to a transformed life?

Now, to help get at this question, I want to explore something philosopher Michael Novak has said concerning beliefs and convictions. He acknowledges that we all have convictions about what we believe. But those convictions, he points out, can be broken up into three categories. First, some of our convictions are public convictions. These are things that we say we believe even though we really don’t believe them. But we still say them because we want other people to think that we believe them.

Writer John Ortberg gives the following example of a public conviction. He says, “If a certain someone I know asks me, ‘Does this dress make my hips look too large?’ the correct response is ‘No. I didn’t even know you had hips until you mentioned them.’”

We all can relate. Whether it’s to a spouse, a group of friends, our co-workers or fellow students, we all have said things we really don’t believe just to make a good impression. Sometimes this even happens in church when everyone else seems to believe something we struggle to believe ourselves. But instead of say what we really think, we just go along agreeing with everybody else either because we want to fit in, or because we don’t want to make waves. And when we do that, our convictions are public convictions. We say them; we just don’t mean them.

The second kind of convictions are private convictions. These are things we say we believe, and we think we believe, but which we really don’t believe.

Let me use an example from my own life. At many points over the years I have made the statement that I believe in eating healthy. In other words, it’s been my conviction that I am a person who values putting good food, rather than junk food, into my body. And when I have said that, I really think I believe what I am saying. I’m not just saying it to impress my vegetarian friends.

But then what happens? My choices when I stand in front of the fridge or the snack cabinet (or the church potluck line – those things are killer!) often don’t reflect my stated convictions. I say I believe in eating healthy. I really think I believe in eating healthy. But too often, I don’t eat healthy. And my actions, like actions always do, expose my true beliefs.

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7 Again, what James teaches us here is right in sync with the rest of the New Testament. In Philippians 2, Paul writes these amazing words: “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Philippians 2:12-13 (NIV).

They make clear that what I really believe is that enjoying unhealthy food is worth more to me than making sure I’m practicing good nutrition.

Now, sometimes what happens with these sorts of private convictions is that we even deceive ourselves. We so badly want to believe something is true even though, deep down we know it isn’t, that we end up convincing ourselves that it is true. For instance, people with symptoms of a serious disease find ways of overlooking those symptoms. Spouses ignore the obvious evidence of a cheating partner. Doting parents exaggerate their child’s true ability. All those are private convictions. We say we believe them. We think we believe them. But deep, deep down, we really don’t believe them.

Finally, the last kinds of convictions are core convictions. And as you might have guessed, core convictions represent what we truly do believe. And it is through our actions that these core convictions are ultimately revealed. In the end, what we do tells us what we really believe.

Imagine, for instance, that all of us find ourselves at an airport tomorrow about to get on a plane which is going to take us skydiving. But before we board the plane, the skydiving instructor asks us to raise our hands if we have faith that if we put on this parachute, get in this plane, and then jump out at 10,000 feet that we will safely float to the ground. If asked that question, many of us would likely raise our hands. There would be a lot of public conviction in the crowd. Right?

There would probably even be quite a bit of private conviction. Even as we raised our hands, lots of us would think that we really do have faith in that parachute.

But the test, of course, would be how many of us would actually strap that parachute to our backs, get on that airplane and, when the time came, jump out into thin air. By our actions, we would each reveal that day our core convictions, what we really believe about parachutes.

In this passage, James is simply reminding us that when it comes to the Christian faith, all that really matter are core convictions. You can talk all day about what you believe. You can even get to the point where you think you really believe what you’re saying. But it the end, it is your actions which will show whether or not you really believe.

In verse 20, James cuts to the heart of the matter. “Do you want to be shown…that faith without works is barren?” Do you really want to accept that faith without works doesn’t work! In a way, I think he’s asking us, he’s asking you, “Do you really have the guts to examine your faith to see if it is, in fact, true faith?”

Abraham, James points out, is an example of someone who had true faith. He not only said that following God’s will was the most important thing in his life, his actions revealed that this really was his core conviction. For he was even willing to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, if God asked him to do so. Rahab, James also reminds us, demonstrated this same living faith. She put her life at risk by siding with the Israelites because she really did believe that God was on their side. Like Abraham, when push came to shove, her actions showed that she was willing to lay everything on the line.

One way, then, for us to talk about all this is to clarify that there is a big difference between being a believer, on the one hand, and being a disciple, on the other hand.

Think about it this way. There are going to be people who come into every church, including this one, who are merely believers. They say they believe in Jesus. They may even really think they believe in Jesus. But really, all that can be said about them is that they have some mental agreement with a theory about Jesus being the Son of God and Lord over all. Because in the end, their lives, for the most part, don’t really look all that different from the people around them in our culture who make no such public or private claims about Jesus.

These sorts of people talk as if they are followers of Jesus, but they aren’t generous with their money. They don’t even try to treat their enemies with kindness. They don’t do compassionate work on behalf of the poor. They don’t keep their promises. They don’t boldly make a stand for the truth when it means they will be ridiculed for doing so.

There are people like this in every church. There are people like this in our church, people with dead faith.

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9 Ortberg, p. 45.
“But Jeff,” you say, “Don’t all of us, to some extent, fail to practice what we preach. Who among us always follows through with what we say we believe?” And that’s true. I agree. None of us follow Jesus perfectly all the time. I know that’s true of me.

And yet, deep in the heart of every person, I believe there is a leaning towards or away from obedience to Christ. And while I’m not ever in a place to make a judgment on where your heart leans, God certainly knows. And I also think you know. If you look closely enough, if you want to look closely enough, you know whether your faith is alive or dead.

Because when you get down to it, there is a stark difference between the person, on the one hand, who is seeking to trust Jesus in life but, along the way, falls down at times and makes mistakes. And the person, on the other hand, who talks a pretty good talk about following Jesus, but is really just, when it comes down to it, living for themselves. Don’t we all understand this difference?

Our job, then, is not to go around trying to figure out whose faith is alive and whose faith is dead. That, thankfully, is not our job. Our job, rather, is to consistently proclaim that to truly follow Jesus Christ in this life, it cannot just be a Sunday morning commitment. We’ve got to make this clear to folks. Jesus did not tell us to go out and make believers, people who agree with what he taught. He told us, rather, to go out and make disciples, people who follow him and, with his help, live what he taught.

In the end, the Christian faith is not just some mental agreement to some set of doctrines. The Christian Faith, rather, is a commitment of your whole life. Every minute of every day. Every dollar that passes through your hands. Every gift and ability you have been given. Every relationship you have. Every success. Every failure. If our faith is real, if our faith is a faith that truly leads to salvation, then our whole selves, mind, body and spirit are given to Christ.

Again, salvation is offered us purely by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. But that salvation is received only when we have faith. And true faith, faith that is true enough to lead to salvation, always shows itself by what we do.

Help us, Lord Jesus, say what we believe. Also help us believe what we say. Mostly, help us show, by what we do, that what we say we believe is, in the end, what we really do believe.

Amen.

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The Next Step
A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

~ Can you share an example of a public conviction which you have recently declared, something which you said you believed but you knew, even as you were saying it, you really didn’t believe? Why did you say this thing?

~ Read again James’ words about faith and works in James 2:14-26. Also read what Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8. Are these two passages in harmony with one another? Why or why not?

~ Writer Madeline L’Engle once wrote, “Those who believe they believe in God but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, and even at times without despair, believe only in the idea of God, and not in God himself.” What do you think about this statement?

~ Is your faith in Jesus Christ a public conviction, a private conviction, or a core conviction? How do you know?

~ What is one specific way that you would say your faith in Jesus Christ made a difference in your actions this week?

10 See the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20.
~ How do we lovingly respond to people we know who say they believe in Christ but don’t seem to live lives that look any different from others who are not Christians? Do we have an obligation to challenge or encourage them?

~ Challenge Question: As you consider this message on our actions and deeds being consistent with what we say we believe as followers of Jesus, what area(s) of your life does God bring to mind in which there is inconsistency between your faith and your actions? What needs to change?

~ Bonus Life Group Scripture: Read the story of Abraham and Isaac to which James refers (see Genesis 22:1-19). Why do you think James held this story up as an example of true faith?

Further Scripture Readings for the Week:

Tuesday: Ephesians 2:1-10 – Saved by grace!
Wednesday: Matthew 7:15-23 – A Tree and it’s fruit
Thursday: Philippians 2:12-18 – Work our salvation
Friday: Galatians 5:1-26 – Living by the Spirit
Saturday: In preparation for tomorrow’s message, read James 3:1-12.