

JAMES 2:14-26—THE FAITH THAT IS NOT ALONE

INTRO: Last week, in the first half of **James 2**, we looked at what I call the “sin of partiality”—IOW showing favor to some, and discriminating against others, based on external, nonbiblical characteristics or reasons. We saw how doing this is, in fact, a sin—and it is a far more serious and damaging sin than most people realize.

But most Christians, I think, do not simply want to avoid doing the bad. Most of us would like to positively do good. Wouldn't most of us like to leave the world a slightly better place than the way we found it?

The way that this desire to do good and leave the world a better place translates for most people tends to be through our work and accomplishments. So, many of us want to get a good education. We have goals. We want to achieve success in our careers. When I was practicing law it was important to me to get board certified as a civil trial lawyer and get A-rated from the Martindale-Hubbell rating service. If we are in the corporate world, we want to get promoted.

We all want to do well in whatever job we have. Even in our hobbies: if we bowl or golf we want to get the best score; if we hunt we want to get that 30-point buck. If we are homemakers, we invest ourselves in our children. A mother would not be so crass as to look at her kids as the products she is manufacturing, but we want our kids to do well in school, cultivate their talents, etc., etc., as that is some reflection on us.

There is nothing wrong with any of that. However, achieving our goals is not the biblical definition of a successful life. The issue is one of our *priorities*. Because the fact of the matter is that we are all so busy achieving our goals in work, family, and other areas that God's priorities tend to get crowded out.

Even our faith may get marginalized: we set aside a couple of hours for church on Sunday; we might look at the Bible from time to time during the week; we might pray some during the day, but it's like our faith becomes compartmentalized. It becomes just another component to our already busy lives when, in fact, our faith is to be the primary, driving force that permeates all of our life. The problem is that, for many of us much of the time, our faith does *not* control us. Instead, *we* control, leash, regulate, and tame *it*. But real, saving faith is designed to force us to evaluate the priorities of our lives and may lead us to act in counter-cultural and unpopular ways.

Today's passage of Scripture—**James 2:14-26**—confronts us with *God's* priorities and what real, saving faith looks like. **[READ Jas 2:14-26]** So what is this passage telling us? It is telling us that:

PROP: If we have real, saving faith, our life will show it.

O/S: We will see how our lives *will* demonstrate real, saving faith as we consider: (1) The nature of saving faith; (2) Biblical examples of saving faith; and (3) How we work this out in our own lives.

I. The nature of real, saving faith.

A. Observe that the issue in this passage clearly is the nature of true, saving faith—not just doing “good deeds” to score points with God or earn our way to heaven. Therefore, **v.14** begins, in substance, by asking the question: “What kind of ‘faith’ is truly saving?” And **v.18** makes clear the true relationship between faith and works when it says, **“I will show you my faith by my works.”** This is key, because the issue is not having faith *plus* works or having faith *minus* works. Rather, true saving faith always results in a change of life, a change of habits, a change of “works.” Our works—IOW, how we live out what we say we believe—is the inevitable proof of the reality (or lack of reality) of our faith. As Martin Luther famously put it: **“We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.”**

“Faith” is more than just a mental “belief” in something. “Faith” does indeed include an important doctrinal component. But it also includes just as important behavioral and affective or devotional components. IOW, true, saving faith involves our whole life. We discussed this in a series of 3 sermons last year entitled “The 3 Axes of Faith.” If you would like to listen to or read those sermons, they are posted on the “Sermons” page of the ECLEA website: www.ecllea.net.

We see that faith involves the whole of our lives in v.19. There, the demons are *doctrinally* correct: they know who God is; they know that Jesus is the Messiah. But the demons' *belief* did not change their lives or their behavior. It did not make them love or be devoted to Jesus Christ. They remain followers of Satan in rebellion against God in Christ. As such, their faith is not real, saving faith. They are lost and doomed.

Remember, the question in v.14 that began this whole discussion was, “Can faith without works save a person?” James' answer clearly is “No.” He cements this point 3X—in **vv.17, 20, and 26**—by repeating, **“faith without works is dead (or useless).”** He is clearly equating “dead” faith and “useless” faith. We see that in **vv.16-17** where he asks **“what use is it if you don't help a person in need when you have the ability to do**

so” and then says, “**even so faith, if it has no works, is dead.**” IOW, faith without works is *not saving faith*.

B. At this point it is important to clearly understand why belief and works are intimately related. That is because faith is first and foremost a work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The order of things is this: the HS first regenerates us; He works in our lives to give us a new heart. As **Eph 2:8-9** says [READ]. It is God who does the saving, not us. *Then we respond* by confessing our belief in Jesus Christ and living a new life. As Paul puts it in **Eph 2:10** [READ]. Our very salvation is “**for good works**” which God prepared for us to do. God is concerned about the totality of our lives. His salvation is holistic because, as **Rom 8:29** tells us, the whole point of our lives and of God’s choosing us and saving us is to “**become conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.**” As that becomes more and more real in us we will more and more have the values and priorities of Jesus and demonstrate that by how we live our lives. This leads us to consider the:

II. Biblical examples of saving faith in this passage.

A. The first example is the hypothetical example in vv.15-16 of a poor person in need of clothing or food. Notice first how this passage flows from the discussion of the rich and the poor in **vv.1-13** that we discussed last week. Today’s passage is like the other side of that coin. In **vv.1-13**, the poor person was being *dishonored*. Here, James begins with the very example of a poor person and points out how real faith works actively to *help the poor* get out of his plight.

This should begin to tell us something. In this example God is revealing *His* values and *His* priorities to us. All over the Bible we will see that God’s priorities are *not* that we “achieve our goals” or become great successes in our lives—although there is nothing wrong with either of those things. However, as we mentioned at the beginning, those things have a way of crowding out that which matters most to God—and what should matter most to us.

And what is that? He has summarized what matters most to God and what should matter most to us both in the OT and in the NT. For example, in the OT, the prophet Micah says [READ **Mic 6:8**]. In the NT, Jesus summarized it like this [READ **Mark 12:28-31**]. That’s the “Jesus Creed” we talked about last week.

Jesus also made very clear what is on God’s heart when he told us the nature of the judgment we will face after we die. [SUMMARIZE **Matt 25:31-46**]. The “faith” of the goats never changed their lives or their relationship with people—particularly the needy. On the other hand, the faith of the sheep penetrated into their heart, mind, and soul and changed their values and lives—and they didn’t even realize the extent to which they had started living like Jesus, because it had simply become a part of them.

Notice something else: When he is talking about the nature of true, saving faith in **James 2**, James uses two of the same examples Jesus used in **Matt 25**—someone who needs clothing and someone who is hungry. When we see things like this repeated, that is a clue that God is revealing what really matters to Him. It is *people*—how we treat people—especially the poor, the needy, the oppressed, the marginalized—that demonstrates whether our faith is real or not.

How do we stack up? That is a question that each of us can only answer individually, or as a couple, or as a family. But we need to look deeply at this question and answer it honestly. The stakes are too high not to.

B. The second example of saving faith is the example of Abraham in vv.21-24 [READ]. In **v.23** the quotation, “**And Abraham believed God and it was reckoned (or counted) to him as righteousness**” is from **Gen 15:6** when God promised Abraham a son and told him to look at the stars and try to count them, because that is how great the number of his descendants would be through the child God would give him. And Abraham, who was an old man, not able to have children, believed God, and God counted that belief as righteousness.

But that’s not the end of the story. James goes on to talk about when God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the son God had promised, and Abraham obeyed, although God saved Isaac. This tells us that Abraham’s faith in the promise of God—that he would have a son and his descendants would be as numerous as the stars—was put to the test. And the truth—the reality—of Abraham’s faith was confirmed by his actions, his works.

James points out in v.22 that Abraham’s obedience “completed” or “perfected” his faith. The word means “to complete, mature, to perfect, to reach the intended goal.” Our faith cannot grow or reach maturity without works, IOW without being lived out. Otherwise, it’s like a stillborn child. Or it’s like Jesus’ parable of the sower of the seeds: some people receive the word, but Satan snatches it away; some fall away because of hardship; some have the word choked off because of abundance and ease. All of those never reach maturity. They are all useless to the sower. Only one group of seeds fell on good soil, and grew up, and bore fruit. That group is the mature—the faithful—those whose works confirm the truth and reality of their faith.

C. The third example of saving faith is Rahab in v.25 [READ]. Rahab's hiding the two spies and then being spared when the Israelites took the city is *not* just an example of "one good turn deserves another." Rather, in **Joshua 2** it says that Rahab confessed her *faith* by saying **"I know that the Lord has given you the land" and "the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath."** The truth of her confession was proved by what she did in hiding the spies. Therefore, **Heb 11:31** specifically links her faith with her actions and contrasts that with those who were "disobedient" when it says, **"by faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace."**

In all of these examples, the works James is talking about are outward, visible *evidence* of faith that flows *from* our inward, spiritual faith.

D. The examples of Abraham and Rahab tell us something else very important about the nature of our works and their relationship to faith. It is this: As I mentioned earlier, real, saving faith is designed to force us to evaluate the priorities of our lives and may lead us to act in counter-cultural and unpopular ways. For example, look very coldly at Abraham and Rahab. What was Abraham willing to do? A: Murder his own son. What did Rahab in fact do? A: Commit treason.

We need to understand something about the example of Abraham. What God called Abraham to do was a unique, "specific" command given to Abraham, not a "general" command given to all believers or Israelites. It was a special typological event in redemptive history that foreshadowed God's sacrifice of his own Son on the cross. Other Scriptures clearly reveal that God is opposed to—and specifically prohibits—shedding innocent blood (see **Exod 20:13; Prov 6:16-17**). The *principle* of the unique story of Abraham which applies to us is *not* "go stab your children," but "be prepared to serve God with everything that is dearest to you."

The examples of Abraham and Rahab are proof that the "works" James is talking about are not simply "good deeds" or even "acts of charity" but are acts of obedience. This is key and we clearly need to internalize it. The reason is that God may put *us* in hard places and put our faith to the test. He has done that down through history, beginning with the first apostles who were imprisoned and flogged for preaching Jesus but **"rejoiced that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Acts 5:41)** and told their persecutors **"we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29)**. It is the times of stress, opposition, hardship, and temptation that reveal what is really inside us. It is those times and circumstances that reveal who our *real* Lord is: Is it Jesus, or is it our own wellbeing?

I urge you to contact VOM and get their free monthly newsletter. Every month it gives examples of Christians around the world who *are* serving God with everything dearest to them. As one pastor in Syria recently put it, "I don't think about the risks and the dangers. I think about Christ."

III. How do we work this out in our lives?

In **Phil 2:12-13** Paul said **"work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."** Notice Paul did *not* say "work *for* your salvation," but "work *out* your salvation." Our salvation, our faith, is designed to be "worked out" in and through our lives. So what can we say? Each of us is unique and has his or her own particular circumstances, friends, neighbors, resources, etc., etc. Therefore, how we work this out will differ from person to person. But here are three general thoughts or suggestions:

A. Assess yourself and your own faith. Do you, in fact, have real, saving faith? If so, there should be markers of a changed life. Ask yourself: "If I'd never received Christ as my Lord, would my life be any different?" If you really can't think of any appreciable difference that Christ has made in your life, then there's a good chance you are not in the faith. Or, consider your response to sin, because none of us is yet perfect. Does it shame you or anger you or grieve you when you sin, or do you slough it off? Your response is an indication of where your heart and soul really are.

B. Look at your priorities. Our priorities will largely be revealed by what we do with our time. How we spend our time is how we spend our life. Last week we talked about applying the "Jesus Creed." Are you doing that? Is loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself becoming a part of your life? Are you looking for creative ways to live that out? How practically are you applying the Jesus Creed? Is *that* starting to turn you on?

C. What are you doing with your money? How much have you budgeted for giving to build the kingdom and help the poor and needy? Do you even have a budget? Do you actually know how much and what percentage of

your income or assets you are giving to build the kingdom and help the needy? Most people in this room—not everyone, but most I think—are able to give more than 10% to build the kingdom and help the poor and needy. Are you?

I travel regularly to East Africa. And I can tell you that most of people in this room live in a palace compared to most of the people I work with. What are you doing with all the resources God has blessed you with? Jesus spoke more about money than about any other subject except the KOG, because He knows that what we do with our money, more than almost anything else, reveals the condition of our heart and of our faith.

CONCL: If we have real, saving faith, our life will show it because, although we are saved by faith alone, the faith that saves is never alone. Real faith is holistic—it affects all aspects of our lives: our priorities, what we think about, how we act, what we do with our time and with our money. Real faith will be put to the test. But the closer we become to Jesus, the easier it becomes to pass the tests. And it becomes easier because, as we mature, we *live* by faith. It becomes second nature to us, like the sheep in **Matt 25**. It becomes more and more real—and people will see the reality of our faith and be drawn to the beauty of Jesus because of what they see in us.