

# James 2:14-26

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, please turn back to James chapter 2, picking things up this morning at verse 14.

! I came across an interview this week in a podcast with a relationship expert.! That's how he described himself. I should say I didn't go looking for it because of any problems, but maybe I should. I don't know. But I came across it and found the discussion, the interview quite interesting. The chap is called Paul Brunson. I don't know if you know him. I don't know anything about him. But he was talking about how he tries to help people find love. And he says the process that he goes through will begin by him asking them some questions about their values. So, tell me, what do you value? And he said, they'll say things like, well, I'm religious and I'm a very caring person and I care about health and I'm very disciplined. And he'd stop them and he'd say, you said you had a day off last Saturday. Tell me about your day off. What did you do last Saturday?

Oh, it was amazing. I went out. I pigged out all day. I ate all day. I went to this concert. I stayed up most of the night. Oh, it was great. Brunson says, what we say we value, chances are we don't really value.

And the host at this point chips in and he says, so true. So true. I've thought about this a lot recently, about how what I say should be reflected in how my calendar looks. That is the evidence of me living my values and really what I do value. And there was this kind of strange thing where they were both saying these things that I could relate to and that they were both sort of quite ashamed of in the way that they were engaging with each other. What they were discussing was the gap that they see between what people say about themselves and the values that they hold and how they live.

The all too familiar gap between life and lip. And it's this issue that James takes us to this morning in our passage. He asks his hearers about their values. And they say, can you see there verse 14, they say, we have faith? And by the way, verse 19, it's orthodox faith. We believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We confess the Apostles' Creed. But there's a problem because James says it is possible to say this, and yet for their faith, look at verse 17, it's absolutely shocking for their faith to be dead. Oh, verse 20, it doesn't get any better.

[ 2 : 57 ] Their faith is useless. So much so that James could describe them, verse 20, as you foolish people. They're fools. We have faith. We're orthodox in what we believe. It's possible to have dead, useless, foolish faith. And to press the seriousness of this problem, I want us to see that James has the leaders of this scattered, victimized, persecuted group of Christians, particularly in view.

We'll see this more next week, Lord willing. But have you noticed that as we've gone through from the very beginning of the letter, he keeps referring to brothers. Chapter 1, verse 2. Chapter 1, verse 6, verse 19. Chapter 2, verse 1. Verse 14. Brothers, brothers, brothers. Now, some English translations have gone with brothers and sisters here, but that's not in the original. But presumably, James could have written brothers and sisters if he wanted to, as he does in chapter 2, verse 15. Now, James has the leaders of this group of Christians in view, and he's challenging the provocative rhetoric that this leadership is stirring up amongst the people. The leaders who should, in fact, be, 1, verse 19, slow to speak, because, as we've seen, their angry speech, their rhetorical kind of stirring up of this group doesn't bring about the righteousness of God. And in fact, if this rhetoric is the sum total of their faith, it's no good, verse 14. It's dead, and it's useless. So, here's the point.

Real faith, real Christian faith is visible. James says, it doesn't matter what you say.

Verses 14 to 17. What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? You can say what you like, James is saying. How you live tells me what's really going on in your heart? Saying, I'm a Christian, doesn't make you a Christian. Saying,

Jesus Christ is Lord, and I won't stand for the way that God has marginalized in our land, doesn't save you. It's true, but it doesn't save you. Nor, James says, the saying, blessed things to someone in need. Look at verse 15. If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 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? What good is it? It's no good. Like chapter 2, verse 2. Up at the beginning of the chapter, James uses another parable here. These Christians, remember we've been saying they're persecuted, they've been driven from their homes, they've been scattered, and they've had to leave everything behind for naming the name of Christ. They need other people to help them. But those other people in this group are also struggling, so they want to hold on to what they have. Now, they're not necessarily, I don't think they're necessarily being callous. I don't think it's a go and be warm and well-filled, and like they're looking after themselves, I don't care about you. I think it's more subtle than that. I think what's going on is they're actually just looking out for their own needs. They're anxious themselves. So, they just gave that needy person a blessing.

[ 6 : 31 ] I really feel for you. May God give you peace and provide for you. I'll pray for you. James says, it's not enough. It doesn't matter how sincere, it doesn't matter how holy those words sound, if they aren't accompanied by some kind of practical help, James says, no good. It doesn't matter what you say. It doesn't matter what you know as well. You notice that, verses 18 to 19. Someone will say, you have faith and I have works. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I'll show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one, you do well. Even the demons believe and shudder.

James is having a hypothetical debate here, and he's imagining the other person saying, look, there are different kinds of Christians out there, aren't there? There are word Christians, and there are action Christians. There are Christians who are into their theology, and there are Christians who are into loving people. And James says, don't be daft.

Those can't be separated. What would he think of an adulterous husband saying to his wife, I have love, you have faithfulness. Love and faithfulness can't be separated.

So it is with Christian faith. If you separate what you believe from what you do, all you have is orthodoxy. And do you know who else is orthodox? Verse 19, the demons. You're no better than the demons.

Believing that God is one, it is a beautiful and an essential truth at the very heart of Christian faith. But knowing that simply intellectually doesn't distinguish you from the demons.

[ 8 : 30 ] And it doesn't save the demons. All they can do with that truth is shudder. The devil's servants are orthodox. You know that. We see this in Jesus' ministry. The evil spirits recognize Jesus before the disciples do. Mark chapter 1. Do you remember that story? It takes the disciples ages to believe that Jesus is who He says He is. And yet, right at the very start, when the demons see Jesus, they cry out, Jesus of Nazareth, I know who You are, the Holy One of God.

The demons believe in one God in three persons, but they don't possess real saving faith because they don't serve the Lord. Theology, even true, orthodox, right, beautiful theology, if it remains at the level of simply what you know is dead and useless. And that makes it dead useless.

Now, for all of James' direct and punchy and no-holds-barred approach here, there's something that doesn't feel quite right about what he's saying here, isn't there? It seems to contradict stuff that we've heard elsewhere in other parts of the Bible. It doesn't sound very much like the great apostle, does it? The apostle Paul. Romans 3, 28, for we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Ephesians 2, verse 8, couldn't be clearer, for it is by grace you have been saved through faith, not by works, so that no one can boast. This is what we call the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone. It is the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls. So, what's going on when James says, verse 24, have a look, verse 24, you see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Martin Luther, the great reformer, was particularly offended by this. He called James an epistle of straw because of this. He wanted to, quote, whip little Jimmy out of the cannon.

[ 10 : 45 ] What we need to understand here is that what Paul and James are saying don't contradict each other. They are simply speaking to different audiences who need to hear different things. James is writing a decade or so before the apostle Paul. So, he's addressing believers. You remember these were Jewish believers from a Jewish background who'd been scattered in the persecution after the stoning of Stephen, and he's speaking to them. So, questions about the status

of Gentiles in the Christian community and, quote, works of the law and the place of circumcision and so on that so concerned the apostle Paul, they're not in view for James. That comes later. He is not talking about how you get right with God, the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But he's talking about what will justify or what will vindicate his hearers before God and before their enemies, what will show them to be genuine believers. So, to be very clear, if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, I don't want you to leave with any doubt in your mind. If you will be forgiven of your sin, if you will be reconciled to the

God who made you for a relationship with Himself, there is only one option. You must fall fully and solely on the grace and mercy of God. You must put your faith in Jesus Christ and nothing else. When you do that, His life is credited to you. His death is counted as yours. His resurrection guarantees that you will one day rise again, that death will not hold you, that you will have victory. That is your only hope. Your only hope is Christ. Don't think that you must do anything in order to be saved because you can't. Our sin condemns us before God's holiness. However hard we might try to get ourselves right with Him. The only thing we can do is go to His Son. You must go to Christ and nothing else. If you do that, you will be saved. He will redeem you from your sin. He will reconcile you to the God who made you. You will have a relationship with the living God. You can call yourself Christian.

But when we do this, there's more to say. Look again at verse 24. For the body, sorry, verse 24. Lost my place. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. It's important we see this here. When James is saying, you see, using the words, he's not using the words the way I often do it in a sermon when I preach like this. You see here, the point is this. You see this? You see that? No. He means it literally. You see that the wall is made of bricks. You see that the doors to the old chapel are closed. You see that a person is justified.

[14:01] Not by what they say, not by what they know, but by what they do. The faith we profess, the truth that we know, it must be visible in good works. And in the course of his rebuke here, James provides us, he points us to what these will look like. He doesn't provide a checklist, but he gives us two broad areas in which our faith should be visible.

Point number one, our faith is visible in our compassionate care. Verses 15 and 16, our compassionate care. If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, give them the things needed for the body. If there are basic needs that you can meet, meet those needs. Don't say, go in peace. Don't say, I'll pray for you. Say, what can I do to help?

Say, here, have this. We should have compassion on those who don't have what they need in the life of the church. These practical needs should be met. We want to say, oh, look, it's all very complicated in our culture. There is a benefit system and all of that. It's very difficult. There's nothing complicated about a brother or sister needing food and you cooking a bit more. There's nothing complicated about paying for their car to be fixed or their children to have Christmas presents.

There's nothing complicated about that. If there is a need in the life of the church that you can meet, you can't meet every need, but if there is one that you can meet, show your faith by meeting that need.

I've been very encouraged by how much of this goes on in this church. Quietly, without any fuss, people stepping in to meet needs and to provide for others and to take responsibility for a shortfall.

[16:00] It's great. Many of you have plenty of privileges at your disposal, and the cultural narrative at the moment is that you should feel guilty about that. You should not feel a single ounce of guilt about how God has chosen to bless you. But as a Christian, you should be generous, and generosity is visible.

And in this church, I want to say, it's been a huge encouragement to me. I can see that lots of you are justified, for your faith is visible in the compassionate care that you show. I praise God for that. It's a wonderful thing. Christian faith is seen in compassionate care. It's also seen, number two, in our costly choices, our costly choices, 21 to 25. This is what ties together these two people that James points to as examples of good works from Israel's history. Remember, these are Jewish Christians. He's writing to them. They would have known every twist and turn of the Abraham story, and they would have been very aware of Rahab, this figure, as a beautiful part of their heritage. And in both cases, Abraham and Rahab, their faith was clear to all to see their sacrifice and their courage in the costly choices that they made. Verse 21, was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You remember the story of Abraham when

God promised him a son and an heir when he was old? He was about 75. Sarah, his wife, 65, made this promise to them. But time passed. Chances were looking very slim that this promise was going to come to pass.

Then God showed him the stars in the sky and told him that his offspring would be as numerous as they. And we're told at that point, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Genesis 15, verse 6. Abraham's faith was credited by God apart from works. But then a further 14 years passed before the son Isaac was born.

Several years after that, when Isaac was a young boy, God told Abraham to take him to Mount Moriah and to sacrifice him. After all these years of waiting, the child of promise, and God tells him to go and sacrifice him.

[18:37] Abraham's a hundred-plus years old at this point. What possible hope would there have been that this promise of stars in the sky, of offspring, would have come to pass? But what did Abraham do? He chose, at that point, to trust God and do what God called him to do.

His faith led him to do what God said. His faith in God led him to take God at His word, even though he didn't know how on earth things were going to go.

And he took Isaac up the mountain, and he tied Isaac to the altar, and you know the story as he lifted the knife. Genesis 22, verse 12.

God said, Stop. Now I know that you fear me. Now I know that your faith is genuine. Hebrews 11 tells us that Abraham believed that if necessary, God could raise the dead.

He took God at His word, even when he didn't know how things would work out. Now that story is a remarkable story.

[19:46] Can you imagine being asked to do this? And yet, it was in embracing this costly choice that Abraham proved his faith.

Verse 23, And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it's counted to him as righteousness. What's happened there is the promise, the Scripture of Genesis 15, verse 6, which Abraham believed that was his internal faith in God was fulfilled in his obedience in Genesis 22.

It was his actions that proved the sincerity of his faith. It was what went on outside in a visible way that proved the hidden work of God on the inside. You see that a person is justified by their works. Then there's Rahab, verse 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?

Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute who sheltered God's spies in Jericho. Her story is in Joshua chapter 2. She was saving these men from the king, from his men coming to kill them.

[21:07] It was a very risky move. It could have cost her her life. But she did it because she had come to believe, Joshua chapter 2, verse 11, that the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth below.

Rahab could have said this, and we would never have heard of her. She could have known it in her head, and she'd still be anonymous.

But it was when she made the costly choice to serve God's people, regardless of the consequences for her, that her faith was vindicated. And so it is that those years before she came to put her faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, are reminded to us in Scripture, she's always Rahab the prostitute.

I wonder if she just rolls her eyes and says, can we not get over that? But here we are, Abraham and Rahab, the patriarch and the prostitute, and they are examples of faith that is genuine because it is seen in the works that it produced.

You see that a person is justified by the works that their lives display. The question we ask is, how are we doing?

[22:29] How am I doing? What sort of faith does your life say that you have? Is a Christian faith the kind of faith that genuinely saves?

If so, you won't just talk a good game. You won't just ace the theology test. It'll be visible in aspects of your life, in all the corners of your life.

We are justified by grace through faith alone. But as Luther said, the faith that justifies is never alone. Have we become complacent?

Yeah, I believe in Jesus, but just leave me alone. It's a private thing. I do it on my own terms. James says, that faith is dead.

It's like a corpse with no breath. The heart has stopped beating altogether. None of us want that, do we? None of us want dead faith. What a useless thing to have. And again, just to be clear, I want to say, in coming to this church not that long ago, I see lots of people making decisions that make no sense in our culture, but demonstrate that your faith is genuine.

[ 23 : 44 ] Decisions that make you unpopular amongst friends and family because you won't deny the obedience that following Christ demands. Decisions that might cost you your career, or at least a promotion.

Decisions that have cost you relationships because of what the Bible expects and because of what it says particularly about sexuality. Decisions that mean that you don't have money to spend on yourself because you've given it to someone else in need.

Obedient sacrifice like Abraham. Courage like Rahab. Of course, not to forget those of you who sacrifice in order to serve all kinds of other needs in the life of the church.

Those of you who, when you were asked if you would serve because there was a need in children's ministry or the music team or the diaconate or on the PA or at the language class or tea and coffee or the welcome rota, all of these things at times can feel a bit thankless.

But you didn't say, go in peace. God bless you. You stepped in and you do it gladly. We can see that you are justified because we see your works.

[ 24 : 59 ] Well, as with last time and perhaps some more times than James because of the way he operates, I want to close with a word to the sensitive among us. James doesn't mince his words.

That's true. So, he can send the more tenderhearted amongst us into a panic. We think, oh, am I compassionate enough? Have I made enough sacrifices? Am I courageous enough?

Maybe my faith's dead. Maybe I'm useless. Maybe I'm not even a Christian at all. Some of us think like that. Well, I want to remind you that James is writing to scattered Christians that have begun to adopt the world's message and the world's methods in the face of their struggles.

He is writing to their leaders that make heated speeches designed to stir up anger in God's name, whose faith is performative and who seek to gain favor with the powerful by political manipulation.

And they are doing this while neglecting the physical needs of those that they're supposed to lead.

Like, imagine, for example, something like this. Standing in front of a church building holding a Bible up for a photo opportunity while neglecting the needs of genuine believers.

[ 26 : 05 ] That kind of thing, I imagine, let's say. James has hypocrites in view. And hypocrites usually aren't worried about their level of sacrifice. So, if you're asking that question, you're probably not the person that James has in view here.

Maybe you want to seek the counsel of friends who know you really well and ask what they see in your life. And remember, there will always be more needs than you can meet, and God has not asked you to carry everyone on your back.

The question we ask ourselves is, is our heart pulled towards others? Is our heart pulled towards following Christ, whatever the cost? It's not about how much you do or how often.

It's about whether you're serving at all. So, it's true that for some of us, today is a day to start making changes that will make our faith visible. We talk about it.

We believe it. We know the true things, but we need to make it visible. We need to start showing mercy to those who need it, to embrace obedience that is sacrificial, to embrace making courageous decisions that our faith in Christ requires of us.

[ 27 : 20 ] These flow from a deep trust in the Lord, where like Abraham and Rahab, we can be sure of the future or the outcomes of our actions. We can't be sure, rather, of the future or the outcomes of our actions, but we do them in faith and we let God deal with the consequences.

It sounds great. How is it possible? Can't do it on our own strength. How is it possible? Well, it's possible when we remember that we can only give mercy because we have received mercy. We can only sacrifice for others because there was one who was sacrificed for us so that we could become God's friends.

And it's as we rejoice in Christ's love for us, in His mercy, in His sacrifice, that we are equipped and empowered to love others.

It is as we rejoice in that reality that our love for Him grows and therefore our faith just finds a way to get out. Living things do that.

Dead things don't work. Their way anywhere. But living things find a way to get going. And it is as we meditate on Christ, as we rejoice in His love for us, that our faith just takes legs and goes.  
[ 28 : 37 ] Living things do that. Let's pray together.