

# James 2:18-26

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Preacher: Stuart Cashman

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, James chapter 2, as well as parts of the Bible, which much ink has been spilled over.! A couple of years ago, I got a text message from a friend of mine, for the sake of argument, we'll call Gavin.

Gavin was, is, was, is a faithful minister in a Bible-believing church. He was well-loved by his congregation and by his family.

And I don't recall all the details of the text message, but it basically read like this. He quoted chapter 2, verse 24. You see, a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

I couldn't be reading the whole passage that morning. He said this, Stuart, am I alright? Am I a Christian? Help me. What are your feelings is as you read these words?

James is very stark, isn't he? Verse 17. Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. Verse 20. Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

[ 1 : 05 ] Verse 26. For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, it's also faith apart from works is dead. It's very strange, isn't it? James is not beating about the bush. And that's what got Gavin worried.

That's what got him thinking. And his worry made him text me. He wanted to be sure he was justified. He was forgiven. He was part of God's people. And I think that's exactly why James, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote these words.

He wanted to shake up complacent people. He wanted to shake up his readers. As we read through this book, we realise they were double-minded, as he calls them, back in chapter 1, verse 6. They had spiritual schizophrenia.

They would pray, but not really believe that God would answer prayers. They would love to hear God's word preached, but they'd never actually respond and do anything to obey. They all, chapter 3, verse 1, wanted to be teachers.

They were really into the Bible. But actually, they loved the world. They wanted all the things the world wanted. Chapter 4, verse 4.

[ 2 : 08 ] You ask and you do not receive, because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people. Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?

They would split people. Divided in their thinking. Divided in their hearts. Divided in their loyalty. So James is rattling their cage. For those who know their theology, and say we're saved by faith, we can cross out, fold our arms now.

He wants to get them thinking. And James' main point is the point that my friend Gavin got. That actually faith without works is useless. Now at first sight, this might sound like James is contradicting the Apostle Paul.

So if you compare James, chapter 2, verse 24, you see the person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And then if you read Romans 3, verse 28, Paul writing, For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the Lord.

You might think there's a contradiction there. Well, we'll see. Clearly there isn't. Because the Bible does not contradict itself. We'll see why later on.

[ 3 : 13 ] But first, we need to make sure we understand what James is saying. What James is saying. And he's wanting us to understand the genuine saving faith. What it looks like.

What is the nature of true faith. He's going to tell us three things about it. First of all, it's more than mere profession. It's more than mere confession. But rather it results in transformation.

It's more than mere profession. It's more than mere confession. It results in transformation. Let's put it another way. It's more than merely saying the right words. More than merely agreeing with the right doctrine.

Rather, it's embracing God's promises wholeheartedly. So first of all, true faith is more than mere profession. It's more than merely saying the right words. Look at verse 14.

What good is it, my brothers, is, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have words, can that faith save him? Now the original language is clear.

[ 4 : 15 ] The answer to that question is, no, such faith cannot save you. So the problem James is getting at is the problem of people claiming to have faith, but not actually living it out.

It's just mere words. It's just their talk. People can claim all sorts of things. I can claim to be a great football player. You look at my life, you'll probably see I never was, and never will be. So James says, it's not just what you claim.

Today, many people still claim to be Christian. You know, a census form, they'll tick a box. Or they'll say, I prayed that sinner's prayer on us, as a student, or as a young person at camp.

Or I've been to church, or I've been baptized. James says that, it's more than mere profession, it's more than merely saying the right thing. And that's what his whole illustration here, the point of his illustration, 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. That's actually a prayer. It's actually a prayer.

[ 5 : 17 ] Oh, you're suffering. Be warm, be filled. As in, God fill you, God warm you up. If you say those things, without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? It's an illustration of words themselves being powerless and useless.

You might say the right things, but if you have the resources to help someone, James says, and you're not actually helping them, that's no good. Likewise, faith without any action is no good. Now, this was obviously happening in James' church.

All through this book, we see a division between the wealthy, the haves and the have-nots. So James is using this illustration to, again, to rattle their cage a bit.

And it's quite testing for us as well, as Simon was saying this morning, how easy it is for us to turn away from the adverts on the tube because of our compassion fatigue. And of course, we can't respond to every advert for money on the tube.

But that's not the point. But it's so easy, isn't it, for us to pray for our brothers and sisters around the world in need, but not actually do things.

[ 6 : 21 ] It's much harder to get involved in the Ealing Church's winter night shelter. It's much harder to actually give to Christian organisations. But James is also using this example to remind them of something he's told them.

Back in verses 12 and 13, he reminded them they have to live as those who will be judged under the law of liberty. That is, the law as fulfilled and explained by Christ. He's reminded them there's a day coming when Jesus will come back and judge his people.

And in Matthew chapter 25, Jesus told a story about that day. The parable of the sheep and the goats. And Jesus tells that he will come back as a king on his throne and divide the people of sheep and goats.

And James is actually using words from that story. Here. Because in that story, Jesus says to the sheep, to those who are his people, to those who are going to be accepted into the eternal kingdom, he says this, Come you who are blessed by my Father.

This is Matthew 25, verse 34. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food.

[ 7 : 31 ] I was naked and you clothed me. And in the parable, the sheep then say, When did we see you hungry? When did we feed you? When did we clothe you? Jesus says, What you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me.

James is picking up on the words of that parable inserting it here. You see a brother or sister? You don't feed them? What kind of faith is that? He says. Remember, judgment is coming.

The Lord Jesus will sit on his throne and judge. Your faith should be seen in your deeds. I notice it's not that the good works in that parable saved the people. Those sheep didn't even know they fed the Lord Jesus.

When did that happen? Rather, it was their faith worked out and practiced in their lives that led to those actions. It was that transforming faith, the genuine faith they had that showed they trusted in Christ and resulted in being new people.

James is reminding his readers of this. True faith is more than merely saying the right words. True faith is more than mere profession, we might say.

[ 8 : 41 ] It's more than just saying the right words. But secondly, true faith is more than merely agreeing with the right doctrine. It's more than merely agreeing with the right doctrine.

Look at verse 18. James comes back with an imagined objector. 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.

You believe that God is one, you do well. even the demons believe and shadow. See, the demons have great theology.

There was a lady in our last church who was actually into witchcraft. She was a Satanist. She introduced herself as a Satanist. And she was miraculously saved and came to the Lord. One of the interesting things she told me was actually all the Satanists fully understand that they're on the believing team.

That's part of the doctrine. They do know that Jesus is one and they persist in their rebellion.

They've got great theology just like the demons who knew Jesus was Lord.

[ 9 : 46 ] They believe and shudder. The danger is we can be like them. We can believe the right things and yet we don't actually respond.

There's no real change in our lives. Even the demons, James says, shudder. They do respond in some way. It does affect them a little bit. But what about you, James says? Does it affect you? I think it's a real problem for churches like the churches I've lived in, grown up in and served in.

Churches like us. Where we are rightly concerned for white doctrine. We're rightly concerned to hold to what the scriptures teach. But so often we can think that is sufficient.

You know, I've heard people saying not about this church but about a number of churches. Yeah, we're a gospel-centered church. We love people by sharing the gospel with them. We're not into social action.

You can feed people all you like but that won't save them from hell. Well, yes, that is true to an extent but it's a false dichotomy. For if we have faith in Christ our lives will be transformed.

[ 10 : 53 ] Our lives will be different. If it's merely intellectual then it's not genuine faith. That's what Paul's saying, what James is saying. True faith is not merely agreeing with the right doctrine.

At the end of a Christianity explored many years ago a friend of mine, an old colleague of mine from my old childhood come along turned to me and said so what are you saying? All I need to do is believe this and that's all.

Is it really that simple? Of course, the answer to Thomas' question isn't really that simple is yes and no. Yes, it is that simple. We simply trust in Jesus Christ.

That's all we have to do. But simply trusting in Jesus Christ isn't merely agreeing with the doctrine. The demons believe the doctrine but it doesn't change them.

That's a danger for us, isn't it? I was never taught the catechism growing up. I wish I was. It would be a great thing to have learned when I was young. But there's a danger, isn't there, that we think that teaching the catechism to our children makes them good believers and that's it.

[ 12 : 02 ] I'm so glad I learned many memory verses when I was a child. I should encourage my children to learn more memory verses. But even just knowing the memory verses doesn't change it, doesn't save it.

Intellectual assent, agreeing with the right doctrine, isn't genuine faith. As one commentator perceptibly put it on this verse, it is a good thing to possess accurate theology it is a good thing to possess accurate theology but it's unsatisfactory unless that good theology possesses us.

It's good to possess the right theology but does our theology possess us? Are our hearts gripped by it? See, true faith is more than mere profession.

It's more than saying the right words. True faith is more than mere confession, agreeing with the right doctrine. True faith embraces God's promises wholeheartedly.

And that's James' point in verses 20-26. And this genuine faith results in transformation when we embrace God's promises wholeheartedly. And that's why James uses these two examples in the Old Testament.

[ 13 : 12 ] One is Abraham, the ultimate insider, the great father of the faith. The other is Abraham, the ultimate outsider, the Canaanite prostitute.

And James is using these two extreme examples to say that it doesn't matter whether you're the best of people or the worst of people, true faith will be shown in your actions, not merely your words and assenting the right doctrines.

So let's look at these two examples. God had promised Abraham an heir. In Genesis chapter 15 God had promised a son from Abraham's own body who would be his heir through whom God's great promises to Abraham would carry forward.

In Genesis chapter 15 verse 6 Abraham looks up at the stars in the sky because God had said God has made descendants of stars in the sky. Abraham believed God in verse 6 of chapter 15 of Genesis we're told Abraham believed God and God credited it to him as righteousness.

Then over 30 years later when that son had been born and Isaac had been born God chided Abraham in Genesis chapter 22 said go sacrifice Isaac your only son whom you love take him and sacrifice him.

[14:26] That was to test his faith. It was a trial just as James' readers were undergoing trials as we read in chapter 1. But Abraham did that. He set off with his servants he set off with Isaac and with fire to go up onto Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son.

Why did he do it? Well here's because he embraced God's promises wholeheartedly. Here's how the writer of the Hebrews in the New Testament puts it. By faith Abraham when he was tested offered up Isaac and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son at whom it was said through Isaac shall your offspring be named.

He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead from which figuratively speaking he did receive him back. In other words Abraham believed God's promises he embraced God's promises wholeheartedly.

So he figured I don't understand what's going on here but I believe if I take my son up this mountain to sacrifice him God can bring him back from the dead if necessary. God will do what he's promised.

Abraham embraced those promises wholeheartedly. See faith isn't merely about doing good things. That's not James' point is it? James isn't saying do good things because you believe.

[15:42] He's saying embrace God's promises wholeheartedly as Abraham did. See faith is in that sense well it's not irrational it's super rational super irrational bigger than reason.

Abraham did what seemed completely irrational because he trusted something better than human reason. He trusted the word of God he trusted what God had promised. And that's what we see with Rahab as well this other example.

So Rahab lived in the city of Jericho you can read the story of Joshua chapter 2 and chapter 5 and Joshua had sent some spies in to check out the city and they had hidden themselves at Rahab's house where they'd gone to Rahab's house Rahab had hidden them in the roof of her building.

The king of Jericho sent soldiers around to get these men and Rahab lied sent the soldiers off in the opposite direction and then got the men down from the roof and said to them this I know that the Lord has given you the land and the fear of you has fallen on us.

How did she know that? She knew it because she'd heard how God had rescued them out of Egypt. She'd heard how they'd come across the Red Sea. She'd heard as all the people of Jericho had how God had defeated the Amorite kings.

[16:57] She'd heard how Israel had come across the Jordan River or would soon come across the Jordan River. So she believed God's great promise that he was going to give that land to Israel.

Even as a complete outsider someone who worshipped other gods she still believed God's promise. And so because she rescued those spies when the Israelites came over and destroyed under God's orders destroyed Jericho she was saved.

That was the sense in which she was justified. She was rescued from God's just judgment against that city because she had shown her faith by saving the spies.

She embraced God's promises wholeheartedly and so she was transformed she was completely different to everyone else in Jericho who did not believe. See by these examples James is demonstrating that for everyone true faith has the same effect.

It's shown in actions it leads to a transformation in our lives. It's not merely about profession or confession it's about embracing God's promises wholeheartedly.

[18:09] Now that's the conclusion there's a bit of detail we need to go into if we look at verses 20 to 23 because James tells us more about the quality of this true faith as we look at the details of his argument.

So verse 21 was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works and faith was completed by his works 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.

Now at some point this seems like a contradiction doesn't it? Romans 4 Paul says Abraham Paul uses this Abraham as the example of being justified by faith not by works yet James seems to say exactly the opposite Abraham is justified by his actions not by faith alone.

How does that work out? Well we see the difference between the two situations that these writers are dealing with and also what they say. So Paul is writing about the chronology of faith the timing of it so Abraham's faith came first that was where it all started whereas James is writing about the quality of Abraham's faith he's showing how that faith played out in the rest of his life.

Paul was dealing with a situation where people thought their own works were all important what they do is all important that their works make them right with God so they were rejecting the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice alone and falling into the trap of legalism of trying to do the right things to be with God to be God's friends.

[19:53] So Paul's dealing with a situation where works are all important James is dealing with a situation where people think works are of no importance they can just let go and let God so they were emptying the cross and resurrection of Christ of its power in a different way they were emptying of its power to change lives to transform them make them new people their temptation was not legalism but license anything goes I believe Jesus died for me I can do whatever I want so James is talking about the quality of Abraham's faith the quality of genuine faith that truly trusts in Christ in his death and resurrection to make us right with God three qualities he draws out verse 22 first of all it's active not passive verse 22 you see that faith was active along with his works in the original language it's literally faith works together with his works faith was the fuel the power how does a car move well it's because it's got an engine but it's got fuel that goes in the engine there's no fuel it won't go anywhere the fuel works together with the engine to make the car move so faith works with Abraham's works it is active it drives action faith is not passive

God pleasing works do not happen without faith and in the original language as well it's this sense of this was an ongoing thing throughout Abraham's life faith was constantly active with his works not just a one off thing so faith is active secondly genuine faith matures as it works look at verse 22 faith was completed by his works that word completed is often translated perfect or mature and with maturity the idea here is of the faith developing as it is used as it is exercised a bit like muscle matures as you exercise as it grows or sometimes you hear football commentators talking about a young player being a bit naive in what he did I don't know when they say that such a misuse of the word naive anyway very naive there he needs to be a bit more mature and as he gets more experience he gets more mature it's the same way with faith faith matures as it is used as it is exercised so a young footballer matures as he gets more experience see Abraham had faith when he believed in God's promise but faith became more mature throughout his life as he exercised it through ups and downs and it came to his most evident maturity in the test of sacrificing Isaac and with the idea of maturity there's an idea of a purpose there isn't it something to be mature means it has to have a goal have a purpose and so it is faith is meant to mature it's meant to grow and it grows as it is exercised and the ultimate goal is transformation so back in chapter 1 verse 18 maybe over the page in your

Bible James said this of God's own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures see God's goal is transformation that we should be different we shouldn't remain static and unchanged we should mature as our faith is used and developed over time see faith is completed and matures as we exercise it so it's active it matures and thirdly it finally results in justification look at verse 23 the scripture was fulfilled that says Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness now in what sense was that scripture fulfilled there are at least three ways the Bible can talk about scripture being fulfilled we might talk about things being fulfilled in our own lives it can be a promise being fulfilled and that certainly happens it's not quite what James means here or secondly a pattern or a role can be fulfilled so if you think back as far as

Christmas which is not long ago we often have that reading don't we from Matthew chapter 2 this was happened to fulfill what God had said through the prophet Hosea out of Egypt I called my son there Jesus was fulfilling an Old Testament pattern that as Israel had been in Egypt and was called

out of Egypt so Jesus as God's perfect son was down in Egypt and brought out of Egypt for his ministry so you can fulfill a promise or fulfill a pattern or this is what James is doing here something can be fulfilled in reaching its ultimate significance so Jesus says that I haven't come to abolish the law and the prophets Matthew 5:17 but I've come to fulfill them in other words I've come to bring them to that ultimate significance to do all that was written in the past to fulfill to bring it to its greatest significance and that's the way James is using the word here God had said 30 years earlier that Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness now that reaches its full significance as we see this man

Abraham prepared to sacrifice his own son on the altar but he's been so transformed through his faith in the living God as life goes on and what's the final result of that what's Abraham called at the end of verse 23 a friend of God a friend of God so James is using justification in a slightly different way to Paul when Paul talks about justification he's always talking about the initial declaration by God of our innocence before him when we trusted him but justification is used in a number of ways in the Bible James uses it in a different way and here he's talking about the final declaration the public declaration by God of our innocence before him when Christ returns we can see that because that's the whole context here back in verses 12 and 13 James has been saying judgment is coming he's alluded to the parable of the sheep and the goats where people are finally publicly justified their faith demonstrated by their actions it's clear from the example of Rahab she was justified in that judgment she was saved from that judgment as the

[ 26 : 34 ] Israelite soldiers came in and enacted God's judgment on the city of Jericho so here James' meaning that through a lifetime of faith will ultimately result in vindication in the final declaration of innocence before God when Christ returns as judge that's why we go on showing our faith in our works he says that's what true faith is like it is expressed in works it is active it matures and it will result in that final declaration of being God's friend so what does faith look like that really embraces God's promises well what did it look like for Rahab and Abraham it didn't mean doing nice things necessarily did it it didn't mean being a nice person it meant taking God at his word it meant doing things that seemed crazy to the world around no one else in Jericho was about to take in

Israelite slaves no one else in Jericho was about to lie to the king and send his soldiers off in the other direction to Abraham's servants who must have seemed mad taking Isaac off to be all to be sacrificed and yet that's because they trusted something better and bigger and stronger than human reason they trusted God's promises now what sort of works will develop in our lives if we're genuinely embracing God's promises from our hearts well think about the week ahead the week of prayer to someone who doesn't believe isn't prayer the most pointless thing I had a great story a while ago about a friend who was a vicar and he was at his desk in his study praying and the window cleaner knocked on the window and said look mate you're not doing anything come give me a hand for a moment he said no I am doing it I'm praying this is the work but naturally we think well the window cleaner don't we praying is pointless you're just doing nothing here's how our faith can lead to action this week we make time to pray to join with others in prayer what about where we put our money and our time see natural human logic would say we put money we got spare money we invest it in good savings and good pension plans and it's not bad to do that it's not wrong to do that but faith embraces God's promises wholeheartedly remembers what

Jesus says about treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy there are treasures in heaven where thieves do not break in and steal and moth and rust do not destroy and so we see with the eyes of faith we invest in what will last forever don't we we invest in gospel work we invest in a building project we might help the gospel be proclaimed for generations to come here we invest in God's family around the world or another example of what faith embracing God's promises from a half means is the illustration James uses here these rich men in James' congregation saying go in peace be warm and filled weren't really embracing God's promises they weren't seeing the poor and needy among them as those to whom they were joined in Christ they're brothers and sisters as they're being selfish rather than giving it practically helping those in God's family who needed it I'm sure we can all think of more examples for our own lives and what would it look like when we embrace God's promises wholeheartedly

James is really putting a question to us all here whose friend are you whose friend do you want to be Abraham had genuine faith it was active it matured through use resulted finally in justification of being God's friend but later on he gives the warning I've already quoted it chapter 4 verse 4 that

these people James is writing to were so double minded they were really friends with the world you are doffrous people do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God so their friendship with the world was seen with their preoccupation with status with wealth with their own plans with ease not with God's ways so James is asking them and asking us whose friend do you want to be to my friend Gavin was unsettled by James words confused even maybe many of us here are tonight well let me be clear let me be clear what

James says James is not saying good works can save us they cannot James has already told us back in chapter 1 verse 21 what can save us therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls only coming to Christ in need accepting the gospel message of salvation through Christ alone of his death on the cross to pay for our sins his resurrection guaranteeing us new life that is the only way to be saved saving faith is never alone because God makes us new people so can I ask you what is your confidence in is it in your theology is it the fact you prayed a prayer once or your baptism James tells us true faith is not a matter of mere words not a matter of mere intellectual ascent but wholeheartedly embracing

[ 32 : 16 ] God's promises maybe some people here feel I'm confident because I'm a nice person I do good things please be clear James does not say good works will save you only faith will save you and that faith is shown perhaps some of us here like Gavin my friend Gavin are concerned how did I answer how would you answer someone a friend who texted you like Gavin texted me am I alright let me tell you how I answered him I pointed out to him the change in his character I'd seen over the years I pointed out his humility I pointed out his desire for godliness I pointed out his sacrificial service to many the warm hospitality he and his family offer I was able to point to his works as evidence of God's work in his life the genuine nature of his faith embracing God's promises and of course I pointed him to our faithful saviour Jesus Christ pointed him to his perfect life his perfect obedience his death on the cross to pay for our sins his gift of the holy spirit to all he turned to him to change us see all of us who claim to trust Christ need to go back need to look at our lives but most importantly look at our saviour and come to him again and again we shouldn't be complacent but we shouldn't be concerned we should put our confidence in Christ bolstered by the evidence of his word in our lives let me close this line from

Matthew Henry the puristy commentator he said this on this passage true true believing is not an act of understanding but a work of the whole heart to have to deny his own reason affections and interests is an action fit to try a believer there is no middle state everyone must either live as God's friend or God's enemy let's pray