

## ***“The Fruit of Our Justification: Loyalty and Love (Part 1)” – James 2:14-26***

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com).]*

Take a Bible and meet me in James 2...

I hope you had a wonderful Thanksgiving this year, even though the circumstances of 2020, no doubt, created some limitations. Nevertheless, we have much to be thankful for. I hope you have sensed that this week and God’s care in your life. And I hope you will in our time together this morning as well.

We are ready to shift our attention back into the epistle of James. The passage I am about to read, I expecting to take three weeks to unpack. That’s the plan. The Lord may have other plans. But in any case, I’m looking forward to making a start at it with you today. So let’s pick things up where we left off several weeks ago, when we were last in James, which was verse 14 of chapter 2. I’ll read. You follow along. And please remember that this is God’s Word...

*“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, <sup>16</sup> 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? <sup>17</sup> So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! <sup>20</sup> Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? <sup>21</sup> Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. <sup>25</sup> 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? <sup>26</sup> For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”*  
(James 2:14-26)

Before we get too deep into this passage, let’s begin by noting the way James has structured these paragraphs. The opening questions organize the section. He asks in verse 14, first, “*What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?*” The key word there is “*says*”. He is asking about the person who “*says*” with their mouth that they have faith but fails to live a life marked by Christian works. “*What good is*” this person’s claim? The implied answer is that it is no good. But no good for what? No good for salvation. The individual may claim to have faith, but whatever faith he or she claims to have is not saving faith.

Why do I believe the “*good*” that James speaks of is the good of salvation? Because of the second question he asks in verse 14—“*Can that faith save him?*” Notice he doesn’t say “*Can faith save him?*” He is not talking about faith in general. He’s talking about “*that*” faith in particular, the faith that he mentions in the first half of the verse, the faith that exists in a life that “*does not have works*”. James asks, “*Can that faith save him?*” The implied answer to both questions is “no”—no, such faith is not any good because, no, such faith cannot save a person. But the person who makes the claim that he possesses faith seems oblivious or indifferent to these facts.

What does that tell us? It tells us that what a person claims is not always an accurate representation of what that person really thinks or believes. What a person does, on the other hand, is far more telling about what they actually believe. Genuine faith shapes actions in a particular way. If actions are unaffected, then genuine faith may be lacking despite claims to the contrary. This is, as Sam Allberry notes, a “genuinely frightening truth that should give you and me pause.”<sup>1</sup>

“It is possible to claim, *and to believe you possess*, genuine saving faith when in fact you do not. It is possible, in other words, to believe you have things sorted with God—that you will not face his judgment, that there is hope for you beyond the grave—and yet remain under the judgment of God. It is possible, in short, unknowingly to possess counterfeit faith.”<sup>2</sup>

So, as we’ve noted in previous weeks, justification comes through faith alone, but everything that masquerades as “faith” is not necessarily genuine saving and justifying faith. There are plenty of counterfeit faiths. So how do we know if we possess genuine faith or counterfeit faith, living faith or dead faith? Well that is what James is hoping this section of his epistle will help us to discern. He assists us in finding our answer by unfolding four illustrations. The first two depict counterfeit faith and the second two portray genuine faith in action. The first two are hypothetical situations drawn from the present and the second two are historical figures drawn from the Old Testament. He includes four examples because he intends to contrast each example of counterfeit faith with an example of genuine faith, so there is a resulting parallelism to how James has arranged his thought. We could depict it like this:<sup>3</sup>

A—The Passive Philanthropist (15-17): Counterfeit Faith Offers No Service to Our Neighbor

B—The Doctrinal Demon (18-20): Counterfeit Faith Offers No Obedience to God

B’—The Premier Patriarch (21-24): Genuine Faith Offers Costly Obedience to God

A’—The Caring Canaanite (25-26): Genuine Faith Offers Costly Service to Our Neighbor

Taken together, then, we see that his first and fourth illustration are related because both deal with how one engages with their neighbor and the middle two illustrations are related because both deal with how one engages with God. If you are thinking that this sounds a little like the famous “Great Commandments” that Jesus identified, then you have good instincts. When Jesus was asked “*Which commandment is the most important of all?*” (Mark 12:28), He replied,

“*The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’<sup>30</sup> And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’<sup>31</sup> The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.*” (Mark 12:29-31)

Love God and love neighbor. These have been dubbed “the Great Commandments” because they summarize the entirety of the Christian ethic. They also are one of our “3 GCs” (along with Gospel Centrality and the Great Commission), which we are committed to actively pursue together as a faith family at Southern Oaks for the glory of God. But our mission statement says that we “actively” embrace these values. That word “actively” is crucial because it reminds us that we don’t want to just claim that we do and have that claim contradicted by our actions. Our actions should show in concrete ways that we do in fact love God and neighbor. In other words our works—of obedience toward God and service toward neighbor—prove that our claim is genuine and not just empty words.

But what James helps us to see—by addressing our disposition toward God and neighbor in his own way—is that our works in both directions flow out of our faith. They show whether our faith is genuine or counterfeit. So this passage of Scripture is critical for us not only because it helps us to see if we individually possess genuine faith but also if our corporate aims are being faithfully realized. James, however, is focused more on the individual’s faith, so that is where we will dedicate the rest of our time this morning.

Having looked at the passage through the wide-angle lens, let’s now look closer at the particular illustrations that James provides. As we’ve seen, these illustrations contrast genuine faith with counterfeit faith—or as James frames the contrast, living faith with dead faith—so let me highlight four things we can learn about the nature of living (i.e. genuine and saving) faith. Or at least the first of four today...

### **The Passive Philanthropist** ***Living Faith Is Not Merely Sentimental***

We are introduced to the passive philanthropist (or the “armchair philanthropist”<sup>4</sup>) in verses 15 and 16. Look at those verses again...

*“If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,<sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?”*  
(James 2:15-16)

For some reason this reminds me so much of the “thoughts and prayers” comments that you see all the time on social media or hear people say to others who have encountered hardship. Sometimes what we mean is that there is nothing we can do to address the need but to pray for them since God alone will need to intervene. And hopefully we actually *do* pray. At other points, however, “thoughts and prayers” can just be something that people say to shift the needy person from their immediate attention or to assuage their conscience about not actually doing anything about the need that God has given them means and ability to address in His name. The words function “as a religious cover for a failure to act.”<sup>5</sup> If you can’t say “Amen,” it’s okay to say “Ouch!”

Charles Spurgeon, evidently frustrated by those of his day that would talk about Jesus and their love for Jesus while doing nothing to address the suffering they encountered in the world, supposedly said to someone, “If you want to give a hungry man a tract, wrap it in a sandwich.”<sup>6</sup> I’m not sure if Spurgeon actually said that, but it sounds like something he would have said. And he might have said it to someone like this hypothetical figure that James describes.

This passive philanthropist that James depicts for us says things that sound sincere and good. They may even be meant as a prayer offered. But the assumption is that the words were offered as a substitute for deeds that should have been offered. Warm wishes are substituted for warm clothes and a warm meal. The words themselves sound noble enough, but the actions scream, “I don’t really mean this.”<sup>7</sup> The actions (or lack thereof) show the emptiness of the words. The words in no way evidence a living faith. Why? Because living faith is not merely sentimental. That’s James’ point in verse 17...

*“So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”* (James 2:17)

This is very consistent with what James has already taught us in his letter. You might remember, in chapter 1, he told the readers to “*receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save their souls*” (1:21). Then in the following verse, he adds that they must “*be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving*” themselves (1:22). Why? Because the one whom God blesses “*in his doing*” is “*no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts*” (1:25). And then he went on to describe the nature of true religion that pleases the Lord:

*“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”* (James 1:26-27)

We looked at those verses and noted that right religion (i.e., religion that flows from genuine faith) is marked by controlled tongues, cared for margins, and countercultural morals. But the passive philanthropist doesn’t evidence any of that, does he? He doesn’t control his tongue, he indulges it with his idle words. He doesn’t act to care for the marginalized brother or sister in need of food and clothing. And his words are not countercultural, they are literally what everyone does—“Sending you warm thoughts and prayers and good vibes.” This is not right religion. And it’s not right religion because it’s not flowing from living faith. Living faith is not merely sentimental. The response of the passive philanthropist has the stench of death upon it. Dead faith and dead religion. So James says, *“faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”* Which is to say,

“Faith that has no impact on behaviour is not authentic Christian faith. Real faith acts. Real love does. And in particular, real faith serves and cares for others, especially fellow believers.”<sup>8</sup>

James’ teaching here is very consistent with what Jesus taught about genuine faith. Jesus clearly indicated that one of the characteristics of genuine faith is that it looks out for the interests of the poor and that such actions will be brought up when Jesus judges the world. When He gathers His people He will say to them:

*“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? <sup>38</sup> And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ <sup>40</sup> And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”* (Matthew 25:34-40)

These are the kinds of works that mark believers. Genuine faith produces this kind of fruit. The works evidence faith. And the lack of works, Jesus goes on to suggest, evidence a lack of faith and therefore result in condemnation.

*“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ <sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ <sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”* (Matthew 25:41-46)

Now, is James (or Jesus here) teaching us that we need to meet every need that we become aware of? No. You might remember that earlier in our James series, back in August, I introduced a principle called “moral proximity” that I think is helpful for many of us because many of us like to overthink things. Some of us are guilty of paralysis by analysis. We get so overwhelmed by the scope of a need that we end up doing nothing. Or we analyze every possible need we could help with and we end up doing nothing at all because we can’t figure out where our time and resources would be best directed. But people like that probably need to be told, “Just do *something*.” If there is a need and God has made you aware of it, you can honor Him by seeking to meet that need.

Years ago I came across a helpful book called, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, by Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert. Greg Gilbert is the author of the book *What Is the Gospel?*, which is available at the exits for you to take home if that's a question you want to dive more into. In any case, toward the end of the first book I mentioned, they discuss that principle of "moral proximity." They explain,

"The principle of moral proximity is pretty straightforward, but is often overlooked: The closer the need, the greater the moral obligation to help. Moral proximity does not refer to geography, though that can be part of the equation. Moral proximity refers to how connected we are to someone by virtue of familiarity, kinship, space, or time. Therefore, in terms of moral proximity Greg is closer to other Southern Baptist churches in town than to First Presbyterian in Whoville. But physical distance is not the only consideration. In terms of moral proximity, too, Kevin is closer to his brother-in-law who lives in Australia than to a stranger who lives on the other side of Lansing... The closer the moral proximity, the greater the moral obligation.... This doesn't mean we can be uncaring to everyone but our friends, close relatives, and people next door, but it means that what we *ought* to do in one situation is what we *may* do in another."<sup>9</sup>

They go on to outline some of the biblical precedent for this principle. There are certainly exceptions to the rule. God can call us to live extravagantly generous toward and sacrificially for whomever He wills and sometimes those people will seem quite random to our senses and to a watchful world. But in general, this principle has served me well. And I think it will you also. It reminds us to start where we are, in the circles God has placed us and the relational contact He has orchestrated. And certainly that means that a good place to start is within your own church.

This is probably why the needy person, who James describes as "*poorly clothed and lacking in daily food*", is also described, in verse 16, as "*a brother or sister*". And recall how Jesus worded it in the verses I just read: "*Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me*" (Matt. 25:40). Brothers. Sisters. These are fellow believers. Those are not all we are called to help, but we do have a higher moral proximity toward them and so it's not surprising that James and Jesus both use our interactions with fellow believers as a litmus test for the authenticity of our faith. And this is true for other biblical writers as well. The Apostle John's words, for example, remind us,

*"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. <sup>17</sup> But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? <sup>18</sup> Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."* (1 John 3:16-18)

Or as Paul told the Galatians,

*"And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. <sup>10</sup> So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."* (Galatians 6:9-10)

You see? Start where you are. Individually and as a church we could never meet all the needs around us. It's overwhelming to even think about. But God doesn't call us to do everything. He does, however, call us all to do something. What that something is will look different for each of us, depending on our context and means. Jesus said, "*Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more*" (Luke 12:48). So do something for the betterment of other people with whatever it is God has entrusted to you. And start where you are.

So we have learned from the passive philanthropist that living faith is not merely sentimental. Next time I'm with you I would like to contrast this figure with "the caring Canaanite" of verses 25 and 26. This is Rahab, the woman whose faith we considered last week.

Take the Lord's Supper unit that you received when you entered the sanctuary today. If you are a believer in Christ Jesus, one whose faith rests in Christ alone for your salvation, and you are sharing the ordinance with us this morning, go ahead and peel back the tabs to gain access to those elements.

The elements of the Lord's Supper—the bread, the wine—are meant to remind us of what Christ did to accomplish our salvation. The bread calls to mind his body that was broken for us on the cross that we might, through faith, be spared the judgment of God that we deserve for our sins. The wine represents the blood that was shed in our place that our sins might be atoned for. His body was broken. His blood was shed. That is what He did for us that all who trust in Him might be set free from sin and death. Three days later, He rose victorious over the grave and secured every believers' place with God. That's what He did.

Isn't it good news that God, seeing our need—our helplessness in sin and trajectory toward hell—didn't meet that need with mere sentimentality? He did something about it. He sent His Son.

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”* (John 3:16-18)

So you see, when God calls us to be hospitable toward others in need, He is not calling us to do something that is foreign to Him. He is calling us to imitate what He has done for us in Christ. The Christian ethic is a cruciform ethic. It is patterned after the work of Christ. One place that shows this is Philippians 2. Paul tells his readers the following:

*“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”* (Philippians 2:1-4)

In other words, don't be a passive philanthropist. But then Paul is careful to show that this is exactly what Christ has done for us. He continues,

*“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”* (Philippians 2:5-8)

This is what Christ has done for us. He looked out for our interests. He stooped to our need. He served. He obeyed His Father, humbling Himself all the way to a bloody crucifixion. And because of that—His work, His substitution, His cross—we have been forgiven, made alive, adopted as His brothers and sisters, and given a place with Him forever and ever. Remember that. Remember that and when you leave this place today, seek to do likewise. Seek to *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...”*

And with Him on our minds and in our hearts, let me invite you now to take, eat, and remember...

Let's pray...

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Allberry, *James For You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 74.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The designations are my own, but similar structural arrangements have also been suggested by J. A. Motyer (*The Message of James* [BST; Leicester, England: Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985], 108) and Daniel M. Doriani (*James* [REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007], 91, 101).

<sup>4</sup> Allberry, 80.

<sup>5</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1995), 239.

<sup>6</sup> Reflecting on this, J. A. Motyer writes, “With great respect, he might better have said, ‘If you want to give a hungry man a sandwich, wrap it up in a tract.’ For the eye of faith sees forward into the endless reaches of eternity, and is aware that the need to be right with God far outstrips the need for earthly amelioration. Plainly our giving must have ‘the cause of the gospel’ in this narrower sense well to the fore. But we are rarely caught by this dichotomy; the limitations on our giving are those imposed by our own cramped affections and concerns.” Motyer, 111.

<sup>7</sup> Allberry, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 183.