

“The Fruit of Our Justification: Loyalty and Love (Part 3)” – 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.]

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

I'm delighted to see you all this week and I'm excited to get back into the text of James. It's been a while. How did we get to this text? Back in 2020 we began to systematically work through this very practical epistle written by James, the half-brother of Jesus. As we inched along, we came to this section of chapter 2, which is famously the most controversial section of the entire letter because it is here that James says some things that, at least at first glance, appear to be in conflict with some of what Paul has written elsewhere in the New Testament. Some have wondered as a result if James and Paul had a different understanding of the doctrine of justification—which relates to how a sinful person can be declared righteous before a holy God. As it turns out, I do not believe that James and Paul contradict each other. I think they are quite compatible, once their respective contexts and audiences are understood.

In order to show that, we paused to consider one representative passage in Paul's writings where he articulates his understanding of justification (and how it relates to faith and works). That passage was Romans 3 and 4. There we saw a number of truths—which, incidentally, related to the five *solas* of the Reformation. In chapter 3 of Romans, Paul made it clear that the source of our justification is God and His grace (Rom. 3:21-24), which reminds us that salvation is by grace alone (*sola gratia*). He explained how the grounds of our justification are found in Christ and His cross (3:24-26), so we must acknowledge that salvation comes through Christ alone (*solus Christus*). He made it clear in 3:26 that we are not saved by means of our works, but through faith alone (*sola fide*). And since our justification (and any other aspect of our salvation) is found by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, then God deserves all the glory for it (*solī Deo gloria*) and we have no reason to boast in ourselves (3:27). Then in chapter 4, Paul attempts to show by appealing to Scripture—and, in particular, the story of Abraham—that God's way of salvation has always been this way and it has always centered on Christ. Settling the argument with Scripture and asking the question that Paul asks at the beginning of that chapter—“*what does the Scripture say?*”—reminded us of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice (*sola Scriptura*).

So in a sense that was kind of a series within a series. With a greater understanding of Paul's teaching, we pivoted back to James to compare, but we didn't get too far as the holiday season was upon us. We paused again for a several week hiatus—from Christmas to Epiphany—to consider Matthew 2, where we find the story of the magi journeying to Bethlehem to worship the infant Jesus. That break made sense because of the holidays, but it means that we are coming back into James mid-thought. I mean, we have been on a ride. A series within a series within a series. It's starting to feel like Inception. But now we are back to James, wrapping up our consideration of this doctrine of justification with hope of finishing this letter.

So let's read the section we are resuming in its entirety for context and then we will zero in on a couple of verses in particular. I'll begin reading in chapter 2, verse 14. Follow along as I read. Remember, 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? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ 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? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ 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. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 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? ²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.’” (James 2:14-26)

Because it has been a while we need to review and I want us to have a soft landing for this reentry, considering one simple idea that we touch on fairly regularly. But let’s refresh our memory first on the care with which James has arranged this section. His concern here is identifying the nature and evidence of real and saving faith. There are a lot of counterfeit faiths out there. So how do we know if we possess genuine faith or counterfeit faith, living faith or dead faith? That’s what this section is about.

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:¹

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

B—The Doctrinal Demon (18-19): Counterfeit Faith Offers No Obedience to God

B’—The Premier Patriarch (20-24): 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. It has a “Great Commandments” feel to it because the sections relate to our love and actions toward God and neighbor.

Now given the way James has set this up and given that we were planning on considering this for multiple weeks, we tackled the outside sections and have been working to the center. So we began with a sermon on...

The Passive Philanthropist
Living Faith Is Not Merely Sentimental

That’s the lesson we see in verses 15 to 17. Then we considered the other “neighbor” illustration in verses 25 and 26...

The Caring Canaanite
Living Faith Is Markedly Hospitable

What a contrast we see in these two sections. What an example we saw in Rahab's costly and sacrificial hospitality. We don't have time to rehash all of that this morning, but you can review it online. Today, however, with the rest of our time together, I want to consider a third illustration that James offers us. Let's call this one...

The Doctrinal Demon ***Living Faith Is Not Merely Credal***

A "creed" is a statement of belief. What we believe matters, but saving faith is about more than just checking the boxes of right belief. In that sense it's not merely credal. James is concerned that we see that counterfeit faith can be very orthodox—right in its thinking—at least by all appearances. You can hold to sound doctrinal beliefs and yet not be characterized by a life of obedience. The lesson here is communicated in verses 18 and 19. Look there again...

"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. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!" (James 2:18-19)

The first verse pits James against some hypothetical figure who reminds me of a lot of people today. This objector says to James, "*You have faith and I have works.*"² This is that *laissez-faire* kind of person. The kind of person who says things like "live and let live" or "that's good for you, James, but this is good for me." That's the attitude. They imagine that there are people who are more of the works type and then others who are more of the faith type, but, in their mind, they are both Christians.³

But James pushes back. Not so fast. How does your faith demonstrate itself without works? "*Show me your faith apart from your works,*" James says, "*and I will show you my faith by my works.*" Clearly James believes that faith and works are inseparably linked in some sense. He believes, as we have seen, that real faith always bears the fruit of good works. As one author echoes,

"There aren't it's-all-in-my-head Christians and my-faith-is-what-I-do Christians. There is genuine faith and there is spurious faith; and genuine, saving, get-you-to-heaven faith will always be expressed in how we live. There is no other way to demonstrate it. Faith is seen in deeds. No amount of chin-stroking or verbal footwork will get round that. True faith is seen in action. There is no other way to see it. Faith is shown by deeds."⁴

We see this emphasis repeatedly throughout the ministry of Jesus. We see it in His teaching. He said things like, "*You will recognize them by their fruits*" and "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven'*" (Matt. 7:16, 20-21). We see it in His interactions. For example, in Mark 2, there is the story of four men bringing a paralyzed man to Jesus while he was teaching at a home in Capernaum. Because of the crowd size, they go to the roof and start making a hole large enough to lower their friend on a bed down to Jesus. And then the text says,

"And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" (Mark 2:5)

This leads to people accusing Jesus of blasphemy because only God has the ability to forgive sins and they don't recognize the divinity of Jesus. Jesus then heals the man, who then walks out of the place, and everybody's jaw drops in amazement and they say, "*We never saw anything like this!*" (2:12). But here is what I want you to notice. The paralytic and the friends who brought him don't say a word to Jesus in the text. There is no verbal statement of faith. But the text says "*Jesus saw their faith...*" In other words, He perceived their faith through their works. Their sacrifice. Their living actions. The fruit of their actions in bringing their friend to

Jesus, evidenced their faith in Jesus. Their faith, in that sense, was visible. Genuine and saving faith always is. “It is not an invisible way of thinking about God; it is something seen in how people behave.”⁵ It’s not vindicated by what we claim to believe—as essential as that is—but the fruit that those beliefs produce in the lives of the genuinely converted.

This is why we shouldn’t put much stock in national polling related to evangelicals. The word “evangelical” derives from the Greek word for “Gospel” or “good news.” So one would expect that an “evangelical” is a person who is defined by the Gospel of Jesus Christ—the good news “*that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared*” resurrected before many of His followers (1 Cor. 15:3ff). That’s how the New Testament defines it. One would think that “evangelicals” would be about that. But that’s just not the case anymore.

One recent poll found that 65% of Americans identify as Christians. That’s a big number. But that same poll found that when pollsters asked if they believed that “if a person is generally good, or does enough good things in their life, they will ‘earn’ a place in heaven”, only one in three adults disagreed. One in three. Only one in three adults believed that “they will go to heaven solely because of confessing their sins and embracing Jesus as their savior.” What does that tell us? It tells us that the majority of Americans who claim to be Christians are not. Because the majority of those self-professing Christians, if this poll was correct, “also accepted a ‘works-oriented’ means of God’s acceptance”. And that included nearly half of those who identified as “Evangelicals.”⁶

What does that tell us? That tells us that the world is very confused about what true Christians believe. It means people who call themselves Christians are confusing the world about the evangel—the good news, the gospel—in evangelical. And this is a problem. And it’s a problem because people are taking us at our word, without recognizing that people of faith—the real ones—bear the fruit of Christlikeness in growing measure. We are not just people who say, “Jesus saves,” we are people who evidence that Jesus saves in the way we live our lives in the steps of our Savior. Not perfectly. But increasingly.

Paul said to the Romans,

“While you preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. ²⁴ For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” (Romans 2:21-24)

One wonders if Paul were writing to some urban center in America today if he might have asked, “You who call yourselves evangelicals, do you believe the evangel?” And evidently the answer, by and large at present, is resounding “no,” so do we not bear the same indictment as Rome—“*For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you’*” (Rom. 2:24). People are watching. And recent events are sobering for this reason.

We all know what happened at the capitol. We all, I would hope, would condemn the violent actions that took place by that mob. We recognize that the guilty offenders were only a small portion of those who gathered to peacefully express their voice on that day. We get that. But hopefully we all condemn the violence, loss of life, and the aftermath of that tragic day. It doesn’t matter what political opinions you have, that should be an easy one for Christians—left and right of the political aisle. That is wicked and evil behavior, whether it occurs in Portland or Washington D.C.. As Christians, we should be able to say that categorically and consistently without making excuses. As one article I read recently stated well,

“Murder is wrong. Insurrection is wrong. Rioting is wrong. Terrorism is wrong. If someone says in response to the brutal attacks on innocent people on September 11, 2001, ‘Yes, but try to understand the desperation of the people of Afghanistan,’ they are wrong to do so. If someone says, ‘Yes, abortion

takes a human life, but poverty is worse,' they are wrong. And if someone says—when confronted with a violent insurrection on the nation's Capitol, 'Yes, but what about....' they are *wrong*.”⁷

But let me tell you what I grieve the most about the aftermath of that day at the capitol. It was how so many articles and pictures and discussions I've encountered have tried to link that behavior with Christianity because some people present were wearing Christian shirts or holding Christian signs. Now granted, what's often overlooked, is that there were also pictures of Christians praying for the violence to stop when it started up, and the majority of those folks played no active part in the events at the capitol, and some of those people claim to have been at the rally earlier with the intent to share the true Gospel with those gathered. They had every legal right to do so and they acted lawfully. I have no doubt. But not all of them. And the world noticed. When video leaks of criminals removing their hats (and horns) to offer up prayers in Jesus' name within the assembly halls of congress, the world noticed. And it's been blaspheming our God ever since. Russell Moore was right to recently lament that...

“The sight of 'Jesus Saves' and 'God Bless America' signs by those violently storming the Capitol is about more than just inconsistency. It is about a picture of Jesus Christ and of his gospel that is *satanic*. The mixing of the Christian religion with crazed and counter-biblical cults such as Q-Anon is telling the outside world that this is what the gospel is. That's a lie, and it is blasphemous against a holy God.”⁸

And as Christians, that should be our chief concern. This is not a political statement. It's a moral one. A biblical one. Regardless of your politics you will find people bent out of shape when a group of crazies do something crazy and the media starts saying that they represent all of the right or all of the left. But if we are more bent out of shape about what people are saying about our political party after events like that than we are about what people are saying about our God, there's a problem. A big one. And it's our problem. In more ways than one.

An old friend of mine, Brandon O'Brien (who has authored some helpful books on worldview and social commentary), posted something on Facebook recently that struck me. He said,

“Too many times in recent years, American Christians have felt the need to say, 'That thing you see on the news that's claiming to be Christianity is not *real* Christianity.' ...I have to think we sound less convincing every time.”

How sobering the thought. With polling like we considered earlier, it's hard to imagine he's wrong.

But listen, what James says in our text is even more sobering than all of that. Why? Because while there are many in our day (as in every day and age) who claim to be Christians and don't actually understand what Christians believe and thereby misrepresent Christianity, there are also many who would say they believe what the Bible actually teaches and yet are not real Christians. And to prove his point, he turns our attention to the doctrinal demon. Look at verse 19...

“You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19)

Remember James is writing to a group of scattered Christians who have a Jewish background. So when he says, *“You believe that God is one,”* he is almost certainly calling to mind the *Shema*, which is found in a famous section of the Pentateuch, which begins with these words:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might...” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

That first word, translated “*Hear*,” is the Hebrew word *shema*, hence the name. If you were a Jewish person, you would memorize the Shema, you would cite the Shema regularly, you would instruct your family in

accordance with the Shema. One could argue that it is a summary of the Judeo-Christian ethic—“*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*” Every act of obedience is meant as an expression of that love. This was basically a Jewish statement of faith. A creed, if you will. And how does it begin? “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.*” So when James says, “*You believe that God is one,*” in all likelihood he is calling to mind this statement. He is saying, “Okay, so you claim to believe the stuff that God’s people have historically believed. That’s a good thing. You do well.” But then he drops the hammer before we can even reach our back to pat it: “*Even the demons believe—and shudder!*”

Let that sink in. “Oh you believe these things about God, these right things? So do demons. Does that knowledge and acceptance of that truth do them any saving good?” That’s what James wants us asking. And, of course, the answer is “no!” These demons believe a lot of doctrine. I doubt they would quibble about the veracity of our doctrinal statement. They could check off the boxes for orthodoxy in many respects. There are no atheist or agnostic demons.⁹ David Platt was correct in pointing out that...

“Demons believe a lot of things that we believe—they believe in the existence of God, the deity of Christ, and the presence of heaven and hell. They know Christ is the eternal Judge, and they know that Christ alone is able to save. I fear that countless men and women have bought into the soul-damning idea that mere intellectual assent to the truth of God in Christ is enough to save, and the reality is that these people are no better off than the demons themselves.”¹⁰

And yet, they have no place with the Lord on account of any of that knowledge or any of those affirmations. So why would we? “To any who are tempted to reduce genuine Christianity to saying the right things, James points to an uncomfortable yet undeniable truth: ‘The demons believe that’ (James 2:19).”¹¹ That vast biblical knowledge is not that impressive anymore, is it? As one author put it: “If we are ever tempted to congratulate ourselves about our orthodoxy—about having our theology right—we need to remember who we share it with.”¹² Friends, “it is entirely possible to be theologically orthodox and lost.”¹³ So what you know and accept intellectually, does not definitively prove that you are a born again believer in Jesus. Saving faith is not merely the absence of false beliefs about God.

Furthermore, saving faith is not merely the presence of emotions. What does James say about these demons in verse 19? He doesn’t just say they know stuff. He says they have an emotional reaction. They “*shudder!*” “They’re not unaffected by what they know about God”.¹⁴ In fact, they are so “emotionally persuaded of the truth...that they tremble in absolute fear.”¹⁵

So we see that true faith is not evidenced merely by what we believe to be true intellectually, nor is it confirmed merely by emotional experiences. Saving faith is not simply mental belief. And it’s not simply emotional reaction. Those things prove nothing, except that we have something in common with demons. Nevertheless, I don’t think it is right to conclude from any of this that those mental or emotional aspects don’t matter or that saving faith is devoid of them. That’s not the point either. James is simply saying that they don’t verify anything conclusively. It’s important. It’s just not conclusive.

James wants to look not merely to our creed, but for evidence of works that are consistent with our creed. He’s not suggesting that proof of saving faith is found in a perfect life, no longer marked by any sinful acts. No, no. Look at 3:2. He says, “*For we all stumble in many ways.*” He’s not saying Christians are perfect. They are not. In fact the Bible says that claims of perfection actually stand as proof that we are not saved. John said, “*If we say we have not sinned, we make [God out to be] a liar, and his word is not in us*” (1 John 1:10). It’s not perfection. It’s progress. It’s fruit. Jesus said, “*You will recognize them by their fruits*” (Matt. 7:16). “Failure to grow, develop, and bear fruits of righteousness shows that the free gift of God in Christ has never been received.”¹⁶

So what is saving faith then? If it's not merely an emotional reaction and it's not merely intellectually accepting truthful facts about Jesus, then what is it? It's about trust. Kent Hughes once used the metaphor of a plane to make this point. He said,

“It is one thing to say, ‘I believe this airplane will hold me,’ it is quite another to fly somewhere in it.”¹⁷

I could say that I believe it's possible for me to get to the moon on a spacecraft. I can even say that I believe the only way for me to get to moon is aboard a spacecraft. I can even say, “I'm so excited! Elon Musk just invited me to go on the next SpaceX mission! I get to go to the moon!” But that's not the same as boarding the ship willingly and riding it into outer space. To do that requires more than statements of faith. It requires trusting in the spacecraft to get me from point a to point b.

Similarly, it is true that “*God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). And it is wonderfully true that “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). And it is a gift to know that “*if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved*” (Rom. 10:9-10). But in all of these comforting verses the belief or faith in question is not the demonic variety. It's the faith that trusts in Christ and Christ alone. It's the faith that rests all its hope for salvation and life in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It's the faith that comes humbly and spiritually bankrupt before that Rock of Ages for mercy and grace, confessing:

Not the labor of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All could never sin erase,
Thou must save, and save by grace.

Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked come to Thee for grace:
Foul, I to the fountain fly,
Wash me Savior, or I die. ¹⁸

And it brings so much comfort to know that God saves such broken and contrite sinners who trust in Him alone, for it is “*by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*” (Eph. 2:8-9). But the very next verse says, “*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*” (2:10). So God doesn't just save a sinner. He gives him or her a new life. Their lives bear the fruit of faith and repentance in acts of obedience. Those works are not the root of our salvation. They are the fruit. But their absence (and this is James' point) calls into question the existence of the root.

Jesus isn't seeking momentary and fleeting decisions. He calls disciples. So James says, “*Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works*” (James 2:18). We need to dig more into the relationship between faith and works. We are not done yet. But we are done for today. To be continued...

But James' next question, which he asks very politely, is very important: “*Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?*” Hopefully our answer is yes. And if so, join us next week. And if not, join us next week.

I'm going to pray in a moment, but if after the service you want to talk a bit about salvation, or having a saving relationship with Jesus, or the meaning of His cross and resurrection, we can visit. I'll be by those doors after the service. I'd love to visit with you. So if you would like to talk, let's do it.

For now, let's pray...

¹ 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).

² "The wording 'You have faith, I have works' is not quite what we would expect the objection to say. We expect, 'I have faith, you have works.' Perhaps James wants to avoid sounding accusatory, but his main point is clear. Faith is proved by a way of life. James says, 'I will show you my faith by what I do.' When James says, 'Show me your faith,' he means good works make faith visible. Good works demonstrate that faith is real (cf. James 3:13). A claim of faith is vindicated by a life of holiness and good deeds." Daniel M. Doriani, *James* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 87.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 110.

⁴ Sam Allberry, *James For You* (The Good Book Company: 2015), 76.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶ As of the day of preaching, this data could be found at the following website:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/survey-a-majority-of-american-christians-dont-believe-the-gospel/>.

⁷ See https://www.russellmoore.com/2021/01/11/the-roman-road-from-insurrection/?fbclid=IwAR1KkxYYlkea99cKFcYKWYRM6Q-tnGouZztVu4z3UjdPeWSWapCbJPu_6wM

⁸ https://www.russellmoore.com/2021/01/11/the-roman-road-from-insurrection/?fbclid=IwAR1KkxYYlkea99cKFcYKWYRM6Q-tnGouZztVu4z3UjdPeWSWapCbJPu_6wM

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *James: Be Mature* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), 78-79.

¹⁰ David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in James* (CCEC; Nashville: Holman Reference, 2014), 44.

¹¹ Allberry, 77-78.

¹² *Ibid.*, 78.

¹³ Joel R. Beeke and Steven J. Lawson, *Root & Fruit: Harmonizing Paul and James on Justification* (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2020), 52.

¹⁴ Allberry, 78.

¹⁵ Beeke and Lawson, 53.

¹⁶ R. C. Sproul, "Faith and Works" in *The Reformation Study Bible*, x, cited in Beeke and Lawson, 49.

¹⁷ Hughes, 112.

¹⁸ Augustus Montague Toplady, "Rock of Ages." For the complete lyrics, see <https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/1058>.