

Straight Talk From the Epistle of James: Living Faith

Micah 6:8 & James 2:14-26

October 13, 2019 ~ Pastor Jo Ramsey

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[image #1 gears] This fall, Pastor James and I are preaching our way through the Epistle of James. It's one of my favorite books of the Bible, for obvious reasons, and for some not-so-obvious reasons! I first studied this book in a Youth Bible Study when I was a teenager—and while it's challenging and provocative at times, it's also full of straight talk and practical advice for the life of faith. James pushes us to connect our faith with all aspects of our life---what we say, what we believe and what we do. His holistic approach to faith just resonates with me. And we hope it does with you, as well.

[image #2 struggles] Most of us struggle with our faith at times, maybe most of the time! Do I really believe? Is my faith strong enough? What if I don't accept or agree with other Christians? What if I'm not good enough or religious enough? What if I am filled with doubt or keep screwing up? Well, welcome to the club...you're among friends here! As Michael Cochren sings, church isn't "a trophy for the winners, it's a shelter for the sinners." So, let's see what James has to tell us about faith!

[image #3 writing] To get us started just a quick review about the letter itself: James is considered by many scholars to be one of the earliest, or oldest, books in the New Testament. Interestingly enough, the letter makes no explicit reference to the death, resurrection, or divine sonship of Jesus, but it bears striking testimony to Jesus' own words. It contains at least thirty direct references, echoes, and allusions to the teachings of Jesus found in the gospels.

[image #4 early church] We also should remember that James writes his letter to Jewish Christians who are caught up in the social tensions of the first century. The whole Roman world is in a state of violent unrest, including economic problems, food shortages, and government upheaval. James wants "to encourage Christian Jews not to revert to violence in response to injustice and poverty, but to focus on doing good, staying holy and embracing the wisdom of heaven, not that of the world."

James wants to make it clear that what true faith entails. First, true faith is more than what we say. [image #5 right words] If we say to people who are cold and hungry, "go in peace, be warm and wed-fed," but do nothing, what good is that? It reminds me of the growing frustration with many of our country's leaders who say, "Our thoughts and prayers are with you," to victims dealing with gun violence or severe storms, all the while doing little to address the problems that cause such catastrophes. It's not that these sentiments are wrong; it's that they can sometimes mask neglect and inaction. If our faith is all about just saying the right thing, that's not good enough. Unless what we say changes how we act, we're deceiving ourselves. True faith is more than just saying the right words.

[image #6 right belief] True faith is also more than what we believe. Yes, there are core beliefs that define Christianity--essential truths that form the foundation of our faith. Throughout the ages, the church has spent much time and energy arguing about what those are. But according to James, believing the right things isn't enough. In verse 19 he notes that even the demons believe. True faith is more than just having the right beliefs.

For James, true faith includes right words, right beliefs and right actions. [image #7 right action] Genuine faith changes us, and our lives. It works itself out in action, leads to "works" – acts of compassion, service, kindness, generosity, patience. Sound familiar? These are the fruits of the spirit. [image #8 bear fruit] Not barren or dead, true faith is like a living tree that bears good fruit! Good works are the fruit of a pollinated faith, evidence of the life-giving grace of God at work in us. True faith influences the heart and life, we respond by living in a new, vital way!

[image #9 candle] For James, faith and works are inherently connected. John Selden, who lived more than four hundred years ago, put it this way: I might try to divide faith and works, but "just as with a candle, there is both light and heat; yet put out the candle, and both are gone. You can't have one without the other. [image #10 reflects] We are called to live with a unity of attitude and action; One is not a substitute for another. Instead, our actions reveal our attitudes and make them come to life. Our behavior is an expression or manifestation of our faith. You remember the song, "They will know we are Christians ... by our love?"

James points to two Biblical characters who demonstrate their faith through their actions. [image #11 Abraham] Abraham obeyed God's call to sacrifice his precious son, Isaac, and God rewards Abraham's faithfulness and provides a ram in the thicket. Genesis 15:6 says, "And Abraham believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." Yes, Abraham is saved by his faith in God, but James wants us to understand that his genuine faith worked itself out in action. We are saved by faith, but if our faith doesn't change our life, it isn't real to begin with.

[image #12 Rahab] Then, James shifts from Abraham to Rahab, who assists the Israelites in capturing the city of Jericho by hiding two spies. Abraham is a major Bible figure; Rahab is a minor participant. Abraham is the father of the faithful; Rahab is a foreigner. Abraham is the respected; Rahab is a prostitute. Abraham is a man; Rahab is a woman. Abraham faithfully shares the gift God had given him; Rahab provides welcome to those who God sends unexpectedly. Bottom line for James: It doesn't matter who you are; genuine faith comes alive in what you do.

[image #13 not works] Even still, this tension between faith and works has been around as long as the Book of James itself. As we heard in our Assurance of Pardon this morning, the Apostle Paul makes it abundantly clear that we are saved through faith alone. Period. No questions asked. We cannot earn God's love. So when James writes that we are "justified by works and not by faith alone," people get nervous.

[image #14 formula] But before we get too worked up, we need to remember that Paul and James are not speaking to each other, nor are they addressing precisely the same issue. Paul is adamant that salvation comes from what God has done, not from what we do. We are saved by genuine faith in Jesus. [image #15 demonstrated] But James says that the sign of this genuine faith is a real, measurable change in our lives. Works do not earn salvation; but they show that true faith is present.

[image #16 chicken] Faith and works are like the chicken and the egg. “The golden egg of good works does not win anyone access to God,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor in her book *Speaking of Sin*. “Instead, the egg is God’s free prize to all who want to hatch the gift of new life.” We become chickens through our faith in Christ, and then we are free to lay all the golden eggs we want.

[image #17 lake] If that doesn’t work for you, try this... There was once a Scotsman who rowed people across a mountain lake. On one oar he had carved the word 'faith' and on the other oar he had carved the word 'works'. One day as he was rowing, one of the passengers noticed the carvings and asked him about them. The Scotsman did not reply but pulled in the oar marked 'works' and started to row with only one oar. The boat went round in circles. He then pulled in the oar marked 'faith' and started to row only with the 'works' oar. Again, the boat went round in circles, but this time in the opposite direction. [image #18 boat] Then he resumed rowing with both oars and reached the other bank safely. Before his passenger got off the boat, the old Scotsman said, 'A Christian must row his life using both oars, faith and works. Only then will he reach heaven's shore.'

[image #19 walk] It may feel like you spend a good deal of your journey of faith pecking around the chicken coop or rowing around in circles. But that’s the life of faith— navigating the rhythm of believing and doing.

I like how Martin Luther puts it: “We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that remains alone.” For our faith comes alive in what we say and do. [image #20 workmanship] Our good works don’t need to be done compulsively or out of guilt, to buy our way into heaven or earn brownie points with God. They are a spontaneous response, born of gratitude to God — not to get to heaven but because heaven has already gotten to us. (*Peter Kreeft*). For then our faith will truly be alive!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.