



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

James 2: 14-26

Summer 2021

"Faith That Works"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning. We are continuing our studies in the Book of James. We're in chapter 2 and we're going to finish the chapter. We're going to look at verses 14 through 26, a very interesting passage; a passage of great theological import. James, as I said in the introduction, is not known for its theology, but there is a great deal of theology in the Book of James and this is one of those texts that has some history in terms of interpretation along those lines. We'll begin with verse 14. James writes,

<sup>14</sup> What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that? <sup>17</sup> Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself.

<sup>18</sup> But someone may *well* say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."

*(Now I want to make a comment here because I'm reading from the New American Standard Bible, and this is an objection that James is giving that perhaps he had heard. The question is, 'What is the extent of the objection?' According to the New American Standard Bible it is the whole quote that he gives from "you have faith and I have works," and all the way to the end with the response that's given. Well, I think that if you have a New International Version or you*

*have an English Standard Version, they have the better quotes there. The Greek text doesn't have quotation marks, and so that's for the translator to interpret. And so I think what this is to be understood is, the objection given is, "You have faith and I have works." And then I'll elaborate on that in the lesson. And the response of James is, "Well, show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works." So I'll talk about that somewhat in the lesson itself. I won't be following the New American Standard Bible in this phrasing of it.) Verse 19,*

<sup>19</sup> You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. <sup>20</sup> But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? <sup>21</sup> Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; <sup>23</sup> and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. <sup>24</sup> You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. <sup>25</sup> In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? <sup>26</sup> For just as the body without *the* spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

James 2: 14-26

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word and our time of studying it together.

*(Message)* The Book of James is "An epistle of straw"; that's what Martin Luther said. He didn't think it should be in the Bible, because, he said, "It had nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it." Luther loved Paul. And like the apostle, Luther was a firm believer in God's grace and the doctrine of justification by faith. Faith alone was one of the great watchwords of the reformation.

In fact Luther famously, or infamously to the Roman Catholics, added the word *alone* to Romans chapter 3, verse 28 when he was translating the Bible into German. It's not in the Greek text. Paul simply wrote, "We maintain that a man is justified by faith

apart from works of the Law." But to make that very plain, beyond dispute, he, (*Luther*), translated it, "A man is justified by faith alone apart from the Law." So when Martin read James chapter 2, verse 24, "...a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.", he thought there is nothing of Paul in this. The Book of James is really, "an epistle of straw." "Away with James." he said, "I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove." But again, he didn't find grace in James like he did in Paul.

In fact, he was so convinced the two were in contradiction that he once said, 'He would give his doctor's beret to anyone who could reconcile James and Paul.' Well, I think there are a lot of people since the time of Luther who, if they had lived 500 years ago in Wittenberg, would have gotten a free beret. Because if we study James in its context, and according to its main lesson, it's really not hard to reconcile them.

James was not disputing the fact that a person is saved, is justified, is put right with God, by faith alone. He disputed that such faith, saving faith, is alone. It's not faith plus works—but it is a faith that works. Paul agreed with that. He taught it. He told the Philippian church in Philippians chapter 2, verse 12, "...work out your salvation with fear and trembling;" In other words, you are a new creation: You have a new mind; you have a new heart; you have new abilities; you have new affections; you have the Spirit of God within you to enable you to do things—to enable you to live an obedient life.

'Therefore', Paul was saying, 'make every effort to bring out the fullness of salvation by your obedience in the righteousness and the deeds that should be characterizing your life as a child of God.'

Well that's what he was saying to the Philippians in the Book of Ephesians in chapter 2, verse 8 and 9, a passage I'm sure most of you are very familiar with. Paul put it very plainly. He said, "We're saved by grace through faith and not by works." It really can't be any more plainly stated than there in Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 8 and 9. But then he added, in verse 10, that we were "created in Christ Jesus for good works..." He even said those good works were predestined to us, "...prepared beforehand so that we

would walk in them." Now that's grace—that's sovereign grace. James didn't cross swords with Paul. He was completely consistent with Paul.

But James was correcting an error in the church. Maybe some Jewish converts who had turned from Law keeping to receive the Gospel of salvation through faith alone had gone to the extreme of thinking that works were no longer needed—no longer necessary. Now that's been suggested as the reason for James's instruction here. But really, there are lots of reasons people get distracted from living a fruitful life, from pursuing a fruitful life. Or simply reasons for people assuming that they have faith...when they really don't.

Either way, the answer James gives to minimizing works is one Luther would have agreed with; that we are saved by faith alone but not a faith that is alone. Genuine faith, saving faith, is always accompanied by works. We may not be able to distinguish those works. It's not for us to be judging people along those lines, being what some people call 'fruit inspectors'. We can't see all that's going on within a person's heart. Sometimes that proof is hidden within the affections that a person has and the prayers that a person has. God can see all that. But what James is saying is that genuine faith is a working faith and there will be fruit.

That's the main lesson of the book of James. He stated in chapter 1, verse 22, "Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers..." The Christian faith is more than merely a mental acceptance of truth. And to make that point, in verse 14 James does that by making it in the form of a question where he really lays out the problem that he was correcting: "What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?"

James doesn't say that the man 'has faith', rather, he says that, 'he "says" that "he has faith." ' Anyone can claim to have faith because faith itself is invisible. We can't see it. Someone can make that claim. But if it's real, there will be evidence of it. And so he asks, 'Can this faith, this hypothetical faith which has no tangible evidence, no works,

can it save?' And the implied answer is, 'No!', (that's grammatically, the response that is expected.) No, that faith cannot save.

The works James has in mind here are not legalistic works as a means of salvation, but ethical works; deeds of social concern—like showing mercy or no favoritism as he emphasized in the previous passage. And that's clear from what follows where, to illustrate his point, James gives what has been called 'a parable in a picture of human need', of people with insufficient food and clothing. Verse 15, "If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace. Be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that?" Well of course, it is of no use. Words without supporting actions are worthless.

And what makes this especially bad is these are fellow believers, a brother and sister, who are turned away—and turned away with a kind of warm farewell that really cloaks a callous response. The idea of the two commands, "be warmed and be filled" is, let someone else feed you and warm you. Or the idea may be, 'God will take care of you.' So, that's a kind of pious platitude.

God does take care of us. He has lots of ways of doing that. But generally it's through the saints, it's through believers. He saves the elect through the evangelism of the saints. He meets our needs, very often, through the generosity of the saints.

And so James gives a concrete example of how genuine faith operates and proves itself. A person has faith, if he does, if a person has faith, he or she will help others, particularly Christian brothers and sisters. That's what Paul encouraged us to do at the end of the Book of Galatians. In Galatians, chapter 6, verse 10, he wrote, "...while we have opportunity..." (I think it's very important to underscore that, while we have opportunity—that's the providence of God giving us the opportunity to do what He then says we should do) "...let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." Don't miss the opportunity.

We're to be generally helpful but certainly we are to help our brothers and sisters in Christ. But the point of the illustration here, (of the missed opportunity), is made by

way of analogy. Just as 'words without actions' are of no use, so too 'faith without works' is of no use. That's James's conclusion in verse 17, "Even so...", in the same way, "...faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself." Action is the obvious evidence of life. And, in terms of faith, it's the fruit of faith: Deeds, action, obedience.

Jesus spoke of this in Matthew 7, verses 15 through 20 when He said that a person's spiritual condition is known by his life and illustrated by a tree: 'A good tree bears good fruit, and a bad tree bears bad fruit.' And so this kind of faith, 'fruitless faith', faith that is professed only, is lifeless. And so it's unable to save. It "is dead *being* by itself", James said.

It's been suggested that what James meant by that is not to deny that such a person has faith. What he denied is that he had adequate faith, the right kind of faith. This is professed faith but fruitless faith—and therefore it cannot save. Now that's a possible interpretation, and I don't dismiss it, because I think verse 19 and the example of the demons believing would give some support to that.

But I'm more inclined to think that what James is doing here is he's being charitable in recognizing this man's claim to faith, but denying the reality of it. Dead faith is no faith. That's his point.

And in verse 18, James develops his argument to support his position. He does that by giving an objection to it, which he then quickly answers, (this is what we considered during the reading of the text.), "But someone may *well* say, "You have faith and I have works." " (vs18a). Well, this is how James responds to that, "Show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." (vs18b).

The words, "someone may say," are similar to Paul's way of introducing an objection or an objector to what he has been teaching. You see that in Romans and in 1 Corinthians, "you will say," or "someone will say." That's how Paul introduces an objection—and that's what is being done here by James. But the problem is, here it seems to reverse the view so that James has faith and the objector has the works. Well James does have faith, but the objector does not have works.

James was probably speaking generally and the idea is, 'one person has faith, another person has works.' And that's the objection that is offered to James, that faith and works are not necessarily related to one another. A person can have faith without any works. Some people are gifted with faith, others are gifted with works. It's possible for one to be without the other.

James rejects that division, or that separation, and he answers the objector with a challenge: "Show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." The point is, again, faith is invisible. So a profession of faith without any accompanying works is really begging the question. The proof of faith's existence, the expression of its reality, is made in deeds—deeds of obedience. And so he adds that the reality of our faith is demonstrated in works, "I will show you my faith by my works."

We might illustrate that with a line from *Macbeth*. At the end of the play, Macbeth is about to meet his end. He says to Macduff, "I have no words. My voice is in my sword." Well, I guess it's not the best comparison, a man of faith with Macbeth, but the point is the same, and that is, 'Talk is cheap.' The proof of words is in actions—and that's James's meaning here. The proof of faith is in obedience.

His second argument to support the statement that "faith without works is dead", (vs26"), is given in verse 19. Accepting a creed, believing a creed, accepting it as true, even an orthodox creed—is not enough. The creed he has in mind is the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6, verse 4, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD our God, the LORD is one!" It's the great statement of monotheism. And James says, "You believe that God is one. You do well..." That's good. In fact, that's necessary. There is no salvation apart from truth, apart from orthodoxy. The person's faith must have the right object or the faith is useless. And the right object must be the truth. Then that is what he says is 'good', 'It's good that you believe this about God, that He is one.'

But it's not enough to know the truth and give assent to it. In addition to knowledge and assent, there must be trust—a personal confidence in the truth. Calvin said, "Knowledge of God can no more connect a man with God than the sight of the sun

can carry him to heaven." And James gives conclusive proof of that from, of all things, the devils. They know the truth and believe it—but it doesn't save them, "...the demons also believe, and shudder." (vs19b).

Now that is faith without works. They are in no doubt that God is one. They know that the One God is the Triune God; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And throughout the Gospels and the Book of Acts, they give testimony to their belief. James says they "shudder", which is the result of fear. Because they know that fact: that God is, that God exists, which means they are doomed. Their belief is orthodox and their response is an evidence of genuine conviction—because the thought of God terrifies them. —But it doesn't save them.

So there is a faith that is informed with truth, but it's not saving faith. It is faith of the same kind as the demonic. It is faith that doesn't work. Saving faith is not just a convinced knowledge, it is not intellectual only.; it's deeper than that. It involves the whole man—the mind and the will. And when it is there, when faith is full and genuine, it expresses itself in acts of mercy or acts of love for others.

James introduces the next proof of his argument with a blunt question in verse 20. "But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?" This word, *foolish*, means 'empty', 'vain'. It's used, for example, in Mark chapter 12, verse 3 of a person who goes "away empty-handed." And here it has the idea of being "empty-headed." James is saying, in effect, 'You haven't got a clue! You have no comprehension of theological truth. Do you even want any?' That's his question.

Remember back in chapter 1, verse 19, James advised being "...quick to hear, slow to speak..." Don't pontificate on things you don't understand. Listen and learn. James isn't sure that this person wants to hear the proof—or to learn. But James has the proof of his position and he gives that in the next verses in two biblical examples; those of Abraham and Rahab.

First Abraham, verse 21, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?" This word, *justified*, is the word we find throughout the Books of Romans and Galatians where it means to '*declare righteous*'. It is a forensic, or a legal term. It does not mean, (it never means in this context), "to make righteous" in a subjective sense—to *infuse* a person with righteousness—to actually change their character. That's true of sanctification, but not of justification. It's always used of *declaring* a person to be what that person is, *righteous*.

Now there's a clear example of that and I think this is one of the key verses in understanding the meaning of justification: and that is Deuteronomy chapter 25, verse 1, where Moses gave instructions to the judges of Israel. And what he's basically telling them is, 'Be just judges, be fair, be righteous.' He told them that they were to "...justify the righteous and condemn the wicked." In other words, 'Declare them to be what they actually are. Don't convict the innocent and acquit the guilty.' And that's the sense here. It means to, 'Declare the innocent to be what the innocent are, to be righteous.'

Now this is what troubled Luther because saying that Abraham was 'justified by works' completely contradicted Paul in Romans chapter 4, verse 3, and Galatians chapter 3, verse 6, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness." Justification is by faith alone. It is through faith that we are declared right with God. We are put in a 'right standing' with God, that is through faith, and faith alone.

But there's no contradiction between the two because Paul and James were referring to two different events. Paul cited Genesis 15, verse 6, when Abraham was initially justified and saved through faith alone. James cited Genesis 22 and an event that occurred decades later that tested the reality of Abraham's faith. His obedience proved that his faith in Genesis 15 was real, genuine faith when the angel stopped Abraham from slaying Isaac. And he was willing to do that, but he stopped him and he said, "...now I know that you fear God..." (vs12). His obedience proved his faith, and vindicated him as a man of faith.

That is how the word is used in other places. For example, in Matthew 11, verse 19, and Luke, chapter 7, verse 35 the LORD said, "...wisdom is *vindicated* by her deeds." Now literally, it is *justified*; it's the same word and the same form of the word that's used here by James. It doesn't mean wisdom was 'made righteous', or wisdom was made 'right'. That makes no sense. It means *vindicated*. It means wisdom was proven to be wise. Wisdom was proven, vindicated; shown to be right.

So James is not defining the method of justification, as Paul was careful to do. He was disproving the notion that faith can be a non-working faith—that it can be devoid of obedience. Abraham's obedience, his works, didn't earn his justification—that occurred many years before. His works were the fruit of his faith and confirmed the reality of it—and validated God justifying him.

Now that's the point James makes in verse 22. "You see," he says, "that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;". Abraham proves that faith and works go together. They work together. It was faith that enabled Abraham to be obedient and pass such a huge test. His faith was working with, or in, his works.

Works are the natural expression of faith. Genuine faith is living; and it produces living things in the form of obedience. So James says that by these works, Abraham's faith was "perfected." That's the goal of faith—works of righteousness that's of obedience. And so saving faith, justifying faith, is made complete—it reaches its goal by works just as an apple tree is made full and complete by producing leaves and fruit.

James then quotes Genesis 15, verse 6, in verse 23, and says that it "was fulfilled" by this obedience in Genesis 22—meaning it was completed. The natural outworking of Abraham's faith in Genesis 15 was his obedience in Genesis 22, so that God's act of justifying Abraham when he believed, was vindicated when Abraham obeyed.

Put another way, Abraham was justified by his faith and Abraham's faith was justified by his works. He was a man of complete faith. And James adds, "...he was called

the friend of God," (vs23b), which is another way of saying, 'He was right with God'. He didn't earn God's favor; he didn't earn or win God's friendship; he didn't make himself a friend of God when this occurred in Genesis 22—he was God's friend all along.

In fact, that's implied earlier in the Book of Genesis in chapter 18, verses 17 and 18, when God took Abraham into His confidence, and He told him what He was going to do to Sodom and Gomorrah, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I'm about to do?"

Now it's similar, that comment of the LORD to Abraham, similar to the LORD's relationship with His disciples in the upper room shortly before He was to be arrested, put on trial, and crucified. In John 15, verse 15 He said, "No longer do I call you slaves... but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you."

Well that's what God did with Abraham. It's what He did as a friend, as Abraham being His friend, He took him into His confidence. Abraham was God's friend long before Genesis 22. Abraham didn't win God's friendship by offering Isaac. He proved his friendship by acting as a friend of God should act—he trusted God and obeyed Him.

James now speaks to his readers and he asks them to draw the right conclusion from the evidence that he has given. This is in verse 24; he says, "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." Well, taken by itself, that would seem to vindicate Luther's concern—but it's not taken in context. James did not deny that faith alone justified; what he is saying is; 'The faith that justifies is not alone.' Faith is the human response to God's initiative. It is our answer to His call, which is always a call to a life of obedience.

So genuine faith is obedience. It's a living, working faith. "Follow me," Jesus would say. He said that to His disciples and they left their fishing nets—or Levi left his booth, and they followed. There's obedience in genuine faith.

Now James might have stopped there but he added another example in verse 25 to show that this principle of faith/works is universal—he cites the example of Rahab.

She was very different from Abraham; a woman, a Gentile, and a harlot. The British commentator, R. V. G. Tasker said, "James seems conscious that in Rahab he is taking an example from the bottom end of the social ladder." I think that's true and I think that could be for a couple of reasons. One is, he takes the example of Abraham who is this father of the nation; this great godly man, this friend of God.

And then the other example is of a harlot. And it's as though you have two extremes. As if to say, 'This is universally true; from the best to the worst, everyone who is justified, everyone who is saved, has this kind of faith—a faith that works, a faith that is obedient.' And it also shows, from this example of Rahab, that saving faith results in a supernatural change; a supernatural change that involves supernatural ability in the life of faith. It's all of grace, verse 25, "In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?" You'll notice James doesn't refer to her faith here but her faith was well known. In Joshua chapter 2, verse 11, she said to the messengers, "The LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and in earth beneath." The author of Hebrews, in Hebrews 11, verse 31, in that great chapter of faith of believing believers and the examples that he gives, she's one of the examples. It says, 'By faith she didn't suffer the consequences of the city of Jericho.' She was spared, so she is a true believer in Yahweh. But her faith was not useless faith. It was not a dead faith, a barren faith. It was fruitful. Her faith created the desire in her heart to further the purpose of the LORD and to help the spies of the LORD. To help the spies of her adopted people because that's what she is doing—she's adopting Israel as her nation. And did that to further the LORD's work by sending the spies out by another way to escape Jericho and escape harm.

James concludes his defense of saving faith in verse 26 with an illustration from the human body, "For just as the body without *the* spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." Inactive faith and intellectual faith only, that doesn't move in obedience and is a lifeless faith, is as lifeless as a dead corpse. James doesn't mean that deeds give

life to faith, but that faith and works are as inseparable as the body and the spirit. Those who are born again will live the new birth.

Again, all of this fits well with our LORD's words in Matthew 7, verses 16 through 20. "You will know them by their fruits." A bad tree produces bad fruit or no fruit, and a good tree produces good fruit. Some trees produce a lot of fruit, some trees, not much fruit. But a living tree, a healthy tree produces fruit.

The problem of faith without works, or the presumption of faith that isn't actually there, is often a problem in orthodox circles where people hear the Gospel often—but never really embrace it.

That's true even in Christian homes. It was true with Rabbi Duncan, so named by his students in Edinburgh where he taught Hebrew. His name was John Duncan, (no relation, as far as I know), and he grew up in an orthodox home. As a boy he memorized the Westminster Catechism. Lots of Scottish children did that. But when he entered university, he declared himself an atheist. Orthodoxy is necessary, but as James shows, it, itself, does not save.

Still, truth learned can take root later. When a minister from Geneva took time with him and reasoned with him from 1 John 5, verse 1, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God...", had a saving effect. He wrote the next morning that, "I became suddenly the passive recipient of all the truths which I had heard and been taught in my childhood. They came and preached themselves to me." I love that statement. These truths, these great doctrines that he had memorized and learned, and that his parents had taught him, suddenly, they came alive and he understood them; and they were like preachers, and they taught him the truth—and he received it and he believed it.

There's a lesson there. First of all, 'Parents, teach your children!' The Word of God is alive and powerful, and while it may not bear the fruit you hope for today, it may, and very likely will, tomorrow—later in life. There are many examples of this very thing. Rabbi Duncan went on to have a great ministry for some 50 years, as a minister in

Scotland, and then among the Jews of Hungary, finally as a professor training men for the ministry. But life was a struggle, and this is another point I want to make; he was often distracted by doubt—doubt about his salvation even though he was a tireless worker for the LORD and lived a godly life. That happens to earnest believers, even Calvinists.

Saints are sinners—justified sinners, righteous sinners. We are not perfect. We're sinners. So we fail and we fall. But by grace we get up and we continue to walk. Be encouraged by James; he shows the way of assurance: It's a fruitful life, not a perfect life, a fruitful life. Discouragement is not uncommon but God never abandons His people. His Word is true and that's what we rely on. James warned the self-deceived who lived a spiritually vacant life; who had a casual claim to faith but no evidence of it. He warned them of that. That's what he's doing here, correcting an error about faith. If that's you, repent.

But if you are striving...Rejoice and strive on! Not to earn salvation, (we cannot earn our salvation), but to live our salvation—which we receive in only one way and that is through faith alone. As John wrote, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." That's Paul, that's James, it was Luther. There is no contradiction between them. We are saved by faith alone: Not by faith plus works—but by a faith that works.

If you've not put your faith in Him, do so. Trust in Christ. He receives all who do, and may, by God's grace, we live a life that's fruitful, one that's active in service and in helpfulness to one another. It's all of God. It's His grace.

Father, we do thank You for the great price that was paid for us, that You bought us through the precious blood of Your Son. We thank You for Him, thank You for the life You've given us and the faith that You've given us: Because faith is a gift, a gift of your sovereign grace, may we work it out in our lives, earnestly, to Your glory. We pray these things in Christ's name.

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And now the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace. In Christ's name. Amen.

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