

Saving Faith? 2

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bible reading this morning, and we're in the letter of James. Andy Gemmill has been leading us through this letter on Sunday evenings, but this Sunday and next Sunday morning, we're going to be looking at this together. If you have one of our church Bibles, it's page 1012. Otherwise, it's just before 1 Peter that we've been studying, and after the big book of Hebrews. And we're going to read this morning James chapter 2, verse 14 to the end of the chapter.

So James says, what good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 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? So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

But someone will say, you have faith and I have works. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works.

And the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. And he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

[2 : 01] 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? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Amen. And may God help us to understand these words that James, his apostle, wants us to understand.

Well, please turn in your Bibles to James chapter 2. And as you're doing that, let's pray together. Heavenly Father, as we've just sung, we pray again that you would display yourself more and more to us and that we might look forward rightly to the day of your coming in Christ.

Hear us, we pray in his name. Amen. Let me ask you a question as we begin. What does real faith look like? What shape does it have?

If you had to answer, what's a real Christian look like in life? How would you answer that? Well, of course, there are all kinds of ways of answering that. Some true and some not true.

[3 : 31] All sorts of answers given to that question, depending where you are in the world and what background you come from and what kind of preoccupations you have. In some circles, real piety is marked by wearing fancy clothes and engaging in splendid rituals. In some circles, real faith is marked by having a certain lifestyle, being wealthy and healthy.

In this letter, James gives a slightly different answer to that question. It's not the Bible's only answer to that question, but it's a particular answer driven by this situation.

And one has to say that it's probably the core answer. If you want to answer what the Christian life looks like in practice, real faith is shown in love and devotion to God's people, the ones that he has chosen, no matter who they are.

All the way through this letter, James is urging his readers to believe that having been put right with God, that must have consequences in their relationships for one another.

Now let's remind ourselves of the situation this letter is written to deal with. It seems to be a letter written to deal with Christians who are behaving very badly towards one another.

[4 : 59] We don't know all the reasons for this. There's a good dose of being positive towards those who it's advantageous to be positive towards and negative and careless towards the rest.

But whatever the causes are, there are people in this letter, in the background, the readers of this letter, who say they believe the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ, and yet the way they relate to one another shows that that's not real.

It's really awful, some of the relationship to one another in this letter. Carelessness, malice, fighting, hatred, dreadful speech, and it pops up all over the place as you go through the letter.

Now, of course, Christians are not good people. They are forgiven people. And Christians are not made perfect people yet.

We still have plenty of potential for behaving disgustingly towards one another. And Christians still, every day in fact, need to turn away from their sins and need to submit to the loving rule of Jesus Christ over again and receive his forgiveness.

[6 : 14] If you're a Christian, a real one, you will never stop needing today to turn away from your sins and submit again to the loving rule of the Lord Jesus Christ and receive his forgiveness.

It's the normal Christian life. Repentance towards God, faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, issuing forth in love for one another. But James' readers seem resistant to that.

Turn back to chapter 1 and verse 21. This is, I think, the lead command of this letter. It's a command to put away that bad behavior towards one another and receive and believe the gospel all over again.

Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

James says that at the end of chapter 1 and yet he anticipates that the behavioral issues here are too deep-rooted for them just immediately to say and really mean, yes, of course we'll do that.

[7 : 30] Why wouldn't we? In fact, what he anticipates from them is self-deception. That they'll say, yes, of course we'll receive the good news meekly, but still continue in careless, dismissive, pseudo-repentance towards one another.

And that's what chapter 2 is designed to get at. The person who says, yes, of course I believe the good news. Of course I need to repent. Of course I need forgiveness.

Of course I do. But continues to think and act negatively towards those who, like him, have received mercy. And what James does in chapter 2 is to say, look at that behavior, will you?

Just look at that behavior. No matter what you say, that is not the kind of behavior that fits with knowing God. Now there are two examples in chapter 2.

We're going to look at the second of them today. And the thread that runs through this section, the second half of chapter 2, is the theme of unity and dividedness.

[8 : 38] So let me introduce you, first of all, to the dividedness of dead faith, verse 14. What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?

Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food and one of you says to them, go in peace, be warmed and filled without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?

So also, faith by itself, if it doesn't have works, is dead. He's writing, verse 14, to people who say they have faith.

But, says James, verse 17, is your faith really alive or is it just talk? And the example he gives, possibly an example that is not all that hypothetical for his readers, is an example where the deadness of faith is shown by a division between what people know and what they do.

The example here is of the Christian family in need and the Christian believer doing absolutely nothing about it. The family in need.

[9 : 56] It's a pretty gross example. A fellow Christian, one of the church family, a brother or sister, without clothing and daily food, they just don't have the ordinary stuff of life today.

It's an obvious need and probably not all that hard to do something about. Most people can rustle up, oh, a peanut butter sandwich and a spare shirt or jumper. And words apparently expressing sympathy are spoken, be warmed and fed.

but nothing is done to help. The family in need, the believer does nothing. Nothing is actually done for the need. And it's clear from the words that the need is known.

Verse 16, go in peace, be warmed, I know you need warmth and clothing, be filled, I know you need food. The words express understanding of the problem, but nothing happens more than the words.

And says James, well, fat lot of good that is. That sort of faith is dead faith. Someone might claim to have faith in God, verse 14, but that spoken claim to faith in God shows itself to be dead.

[11:13] How? Well, when fine sounding words are spoken to God's people and nothing is done for them. See, there's a parallel between relating to God's people and relating to God.

There's a claim to faith in God, verse 14, and there's a claim to concern for God's people, verse 16, be warmed and filled, I'm concerned for you.

But, says James, it's easy to say things. However, if your words in the direction of God's people are as empty as this, unaccompanied by real concern, what that shows is that your words claiming faith in God are just as empty.

You see, James won't allow that it's all right for his readers to claim faith in God and continue to behave in a callous way towards one another.

It just doesn't do, he says. Now, in fact, in this letter, it's quite clear that what James anticipates is that those he's writing to claim faith in God and actually despise some of the people he's chosen.

[12:33] And, of course, it's true enough in life to find people doing that. I came across a letter just a little while ago written to a Christian from another person.

The person who wrote it wrote as somebody who knew God. Interestingly, looking at verse 16, the writer claimed to be a peaceable person, and yet the letter, though filled with spiritual-sounding speech, was just brimming with false words, things untrue, things hostile, things designed to hurt, all dressed up in the language of piety.

James would, I am absolutely sure, call that dead piety. Doesn't matter what you say about God, says James, if you hate his people, you hate him.

And only the person who writes that kind of thing is fooled by that use of words. God certainly is not fooled. The family in need, the believer doing nothing.

Now, can I just say, there are plenty here this morning with sensitive consciences who look at themselves and despair because, don't you find yourself personally unable to meet the need that you know around you?

[13:56] You see so many needs around you, and you know somebody ought to do something, and you're giving it your best shot, and you can't reach it. Well, let me say, that is not what James is talking about here.

He's talking about the attitude which never intended to do even the smallest thing for certain believers, and yet is deceiving itself that it has faith in God.

That kind of dividedness is a sign that faith in God is a sham. And what James does next is to take them from this example of the dividedness between speech and action to the unity of God.

Now, if you were here last Sunday evening, you'll know that James did this earlier in the chapter.

He looked at an example of the way his hearers chose between people, and he compared that with how God chooses.

And it turned out in the beginning of this chapter that his hearers choose because what they can get out of people, and God chooses on the basis of his generosity alone.

[15:01] Now, the move here is from the dividedness of people to the unity of God, verses 18 to 19. And the big unity idea is found in verse 19.

You believe that God is one. Now, let me read verse 17 again, and we'll see how this argument works. So also, faith by itself, if it doesn't have works, is dead.

But someone will say, you have faith and I have works. And James says to that person, show me your faith apart from your works, and I'll show you my faith by my works.

James appears at this point to anticipate an objection in the minds of some of the people he's writing to. Someone will say, you have faith and I have works.

Now, at first sight, verse 18 is just a little perplexing. You might expect it to be the other way around. I have faith and you have works.

[16:05] Why? Well, because all the way through this section, we are dealing with people who claim to have faith but don't want to do certain actions. Verse 14, what good is it if you say you have faith but don't do certain things?

Verse 17, faith if it doesn't have works is dead. Verse 18, show me your faith without your works.

Verse 20, do you want to be shown that faith without works is useless?

All the way through this section, he's saying claims to faith are shown by doing certain things. And so you'd kind of expect the objection to be, verse 18, I have faith but you have works.

Now, it's not all that easy to know why he puts it the other way around. My best guess is that the objector is saying something like this or James imagines that this kind of objection is going to come back.

Look, some people are faith people and some people are works people. They're both gifts of God. You don't have to go around having them together all the time, do you? One's got the gift of believing and another's got the gift of doing.

[17:18] They don't really need to be joined up, do they? James says, rubbish. Of course they do. Verse 18. Show me your faith apart from your works and I'll show you my faith by my works.

And then he gives an example. You believe that God is one? Well, good for you. Even the demons believe and shudder. Now, this statement, the belief that God is one, is the great central statement of Jewish faith.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. There is one God. It's one of the great glories of true faith. There is one God. And what a terrific relief that is.

Because if you know the true God, the one true God, you don't have to deal with multiple conflicting powers making demands in your life all the time. There's just one God and he rules over everything. And what's more, he is himself one. He's undivided. He's completely straight. He's always completely himself.

[18:28] He's always consistent. In contrast with human beings who are prone to being two-faced, you always know where you are with God and he treats everyone the same.

It's a tremendously reassuring truth that there's one God and he's always the same. You believe that, says James? Well, big deal.

Terrific. Bully for you. How splendid. And the tone, I think, is very sarcastic. If you really believe that, you'd do something.

because true faith is always united with deeds. Verse 19. You believe that? Well, so did the demons and they shudder.

He compares his hearer's faith with the faith of demons and shockingly, the demons come out on top. Now, that's a big surprise.

[19:28] Their faith is better than yours, says James. You believe that God is one? Well, so do the demons and at least they shudder. Demons, you see, are not atheists.

They believe in God and they shudder because they do. They're not on God's side, of course. It's the wrong response. But at least it's a joined-up response. They believe that God is one and they shudder.

It's the right thing to do if you're on the wrong side of the one God. You guys, says James, you believe that God is one and you do nothing.

There's no join-up between what you say and do. Even the demons do it better than you. If there is one God who rules over everything and that God is one completely consistent, how can it be that the believer in the one God has belief and actions that head in different directions?

The true God is God of both thoughts and actions. So what kind of belief is it that has thoughts and actions which conflict and contradict? It's not belief in the true God at all.

[20:48] You see, if my mind and my actions go in opposite directions, what is that a sign of? Well, it's a sign that I don't have one consistent Lord. Faith is never just a matter of the intellect.

What we believe is never just what we think. It's what we fall into line with as human beings. What we think or say is not really what we believe.

For what we actually believe can never be seen by what we speak or what we would write on paper. What we believe about God is demonstrated by what we do.

And James' angle on that is even sharper. What we believe about God is demonstrated by what we do in relation to his people. Saving faith is joined up.

It's a unity. It's a whole person response to the true God. And verses 20 to 26 move from the unity of God to the unity of saving faith.

[21:55] Let me read verses 20 to 26 20 to 24 before commenting. Do you want to be shown you foolish person that faith apart from works is useless?

Well, was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works and faith was completed by his works and the scripture was fulfilled that says Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness and he was called a friend of God.

You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Now, before we get into this, let me say that people have often read this, a person is justified by works and not by faith alone and their alarm bells have rung.

And they've said, hang on, doesn't the apostle Paul insist very strongly that a person is justified not by works but by faith alone. Is there not a massive contradiction here? One says, not by works but by faith alone and the other says, by works and not by faith alone.

What on earth is going on? And pages and pages and pages are given over in commentaries to arguing about whether there's a contradiction and what the nature of it might be and all that kind of thing.

[23 : 11] Let me say, I don't think it's all that complicated. The point is that the same words do not mean precisely the same things in different places.

We all know this to be true in life. One word does not always mean the same thing. Think about the different situations that James and Paul are writing to.

When Paul says, justified not by works but by faith alone, the problem that he is dealing with is people who are saying that in some measure you have to take on Jewish law keeping if you're going to be safe with God in the end.

Trust in Jesus and his work alone won't do it. You have to add law keeping as well and Paul says, no you don't. Faith in Jesus alone is the real deal.

James is dealing with a totally different situation. He's dealing with people who want to say that they have faith with God but are unwilling to love one another. To the group who must have Jewish law keeping as well, Paul says, no, it's faith in Christ alone that does it.

[24 : 22] To these people who appear not to be willing to do the normal Christian thing of loving one another, James says, well that faith isn't real faith at all. You see, the word faith does not mean the same in both of these situations.

In Paul's writing, it means genuine faith in Jesus Christ. In James here, it is a faith that is, well not the real thing at all, never was, demonstrated by their actions.

Totally different situations being dealt with here. Hence, the language is different. James goes on to give two Old Testament examples of what genuine faith looks like.

In fact, he goes at it the other way around. Two Old Testament examples to prove that faith without loving works towards believers is not really faith at all.

Verse 26, that's where he's heading towards, just as the body without spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. And he gives the example of two people of faith who did things because of their faith.

[25 : 24] The first is Abraham. Now, I would like to flick back to this, please. Go to Genesis chapter 15. Keep a finger in James chapter 2. We'll be back here very quickly. Now, this is a part of this story.

If you want to get the full picture, you'll need to read Genesis 12, 1 to 3, and also Genesis 22, 1 to 18. But I'm going to jump into Genesis 15.

Abraham is a very important Bible character. He's important because he trusted God's promise.

God gave him a promise and he believed it. Let me just read the first few verses of Genesis 15.

After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. Fear not, Abraham, I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great. But Abraham said, O Lord God, what will you give me?

For I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus. And Abraham said, Behold, you've given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.

[26 : 31] And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, This man shall not be your heir. Your very own son shall be your heir. And he brought him outside and said, Look towards heaven and number the stars.

If you're able to number them, then he said to them, So shall your offspring be. And Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness.

Now this is the great seminal example of faith in the Bible. God makes a promise in Genesis chapter 12 to bless Abraham and his descendants.

We're not going to go into that promise in all its details, but part of the problem is that God will give Abraham descendants, and Abraham and his wife have no children. Hence the situation in chapter 15.

Abraham thinks, How might I get descendants? Perhaps, chapter 15, perhaps my servant will be my heir, Eliezer of Damascus. But God promises him, verses 4 to 6, that it will be your very own son who will be your heir.

[27 : 37] And Abraham believes God, and God says, Write with me, believing my promise. And this is picked up in the Bible as the great example of what faith is.

You do not get in the right with God by your own efforts. you get in the right with God by trusting his promise that he will do what he said he will do. And you receive all the blessings of eternal life and friendship with God not by what you do, but by trusting God's promise of what he will do.

In chapter 22 of this book, God tests whether Abraham really does believe the promise by asking him to sacrifice the son, his only son that he now has produced.

It was something very unlikely, but God made it happen. And he's asked to sacrifice him. This is the promised child. And God's purpose in asking Abraham to sacrifice his child is not to get him to kill the child.

And in fact, a way is found around that. But to see if Abraham really did trust God's promise more than anything else. Did he trust God's promise more than the presence of the promised child?

[28 : 51] And it turns out that Abraham does have enough confidence to believe God. Back to James. Look at verse 21 of chapter 2. Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?

Now in fact, the words that God considered him righteous are not used when he offered up his son on the altar, but in chapter 15 when he believed the promise.

But what James is saying here is that proper trust in God's word always makes a person believe God and obey God.

If you trust him, you'll do what he tells you to do. If you don't do what he tells you to do, it proves that you don't actually trust his promise.

That you don't really have faith in him. You don't think he's telling you the truth. real trust leads to obedience. That I think is the point that James is making here.

[30 : 03] Why is it a good example to use here? Because James is telling these people that they must turn away from behaving towards one another as they're doing.

And he thinks they may not obey. And he says genuine believers not only claim faith in God but obey God's commands.

And namely in this situation the command to love one another. It fits the situation perfectly. Real faith leads to obedience. The second example we'll deal with rather more briefly.

The story is of Rahab the prostitute. You'll find it if you want to do some bedtime reading in Joshua chapter 2. Let me fill you in on the situation. The people of Israel have been rescued from slavery in Egypt by a great and miraculous work.

They've wandered around the wilderness for 40 years. They arrive on the brink of the promised land. They send some spies in before they occupy the land and the spies turn up in Jericho and meet Rahab the prostitute.

[31 : 14] She says oh I know about you guys and I've heard about your God. I've heard about all that stuff he did back in Egypt and I know from what I've heard about him that he is the real deal and I want to be on your side and I'll protect you if you protect me.

That's basically the story in short. She believes that the true God rather than the God of her own country is the real God and that trust in the true God is shown by the fact that she sides with and protects God's people rather than her own and so when her own people get wind of the spies and come looking for them she says no nobody here though of course they are.

Faith in her case led to her siding with and helping God's people. Back to James chapter 2 why is this example important here?

Because James wants his readers to love one another. He wants his readers to side with and provide for the people God has chosen.

In the previous example we found that his hearers are prone to choosing for and siding with the people the world chooses not the ones that God chooses.

[32 : 39] So look at chapter 2 verse 5. Listen my beloved brothers has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to those who love him but you have dishonored the poor are not the rich the ones who oppress you?

Why are you siding with them? You should be siding with the oppressed ones. You see the example fits the situation perfectly. He wants his readers to side with the right people with God's people to love them not to love the people the world loves.

Two examples then. If I really trust God I'll do what he says. If I really trust God I will act for the good of his people. They'll be my people.

That's how real faith is demonstrated says James and if you won't do it he says to his leaders if you won't read us if you won't obey God when he tells you that you're not allowed to treat your brothers with hostility and indifference if you won't side with the right people when they're in need then no matter what you might claim your faith in God is self-deception.

How does this fit the situation? Well he's trying to convince his readers that real faith is a joined up thing. It's a whole person thing. No good just thinking things about God.

[34 : 08] God wants your being not your thoughts. These people need to obey God when he says you must stop behaving that way. They need to side with and help God's people rather than siding against God's people.

Well our time is gone. let me conclude with two observations. First the most obvious. God loves his people. He loves them with a great and passionate love from the greatest of them to the least.

And that love is expressed towards each one of them in precisely the same way that he has given up the Lord Jesus Christ to be the bearer of their sins from the greatest of them to the least.

God's love for his people is deep and even and thoroughly committed. And says James, it is so not like the father of the family when the children hate one another.

It is so not like him to be like that. So can I say that if you've been behaving maliciously towards your brothers and sisters, the words you've said to or about them, the things you've done or failed to do, today would be a great day to stop doing that right now and start doing differently because the father loves his children.

[35 : 49] second thing to say, Christian faith is a joined up thing. Here the example is the join up between faith in God and loving his people.

And if you know your heart at all, you will know how unjoined up it is. James calls that double mindedness. And of course in this letter it's particularly gross double mindedness and that's why he's writing the letter.

But the seeds of that are just there aren't they? They certainly are in mine. And that kind of dividedness of being is not something we can just straightforwardly climb out of and be free of forever.

It's something deeply rooted in the human condition and something that real believers still have to live with and battle and fight against. I can never say it's gone.

Not for good. Not yet. It will be one day but not yet. And so it is not unusual to have to be turning away from dividedness of being towards unity of being.

[37 : 05] In fact it's a daily thing. I can never think oh that's not going to crop up again that divided heart because of course it is. It'll probably crop up in an hour and a half or something like that.

James's remedy which he applies to these people in a particular situation of gross misbehavior is the same remedy that we all have to share all the time.

Chapter 1 verse 21. Put away that kind of behavior, that kind of dividedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

The gospel says that we have need of forgiveness, that we always have need to turn away from what we thought about others or said about others or done to others or failed to do.

And friends say even if it's not that there's a particularly gross example of sinfulness towards your brothers and sisters, don't ever get tired of confessing your dividedness hearts and turning towards God for a united response and with the prayer that he would give you a united heart.

[38 : 20] On that note, let's pray together. Listen to the words of the psalmist, Psalm 86 verse 11.

It absolutely echoes the kind of concerns in this letter. The psalmist writes, Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth.

Unite my heart to fear your name. Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth.

Give me an undivided heart to fear your name. God, God, we thank you that you are one.

Gracious God, we thank you that you are one. God over everything and absolutely consistent.

[39 : 46] Thank you for the generous, utterly undeserved gift of your son to be the bearer of our sins. From the greatest of us to the least, we rejoice in that same kindness and mercy shown

towards us.

We rejoice too in the love that you show us through our brothers and sisters. We pray that you would teach us your way and give us an undivided heart.

repentance. If we are particularly guilty of mistreating one another, we pray, Lord, for real repentance.

And yet each one of us prays, Heavenly Father, for a united response of being to your word of kindness towards us.

hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.