

Wisdom for Wholeness: How to Have a Faith that Won't Save

James 2:14-26 (Part 1)

Without a doubt the most important question you can answer is the nature of your relationship to the Creator God of the universe. Are you still under His wrath over sin or have you been saved by grace through faith and been forgiven of your sins and because you are forgiven you will spend eternity with Him?

It's clear from the NT that there will be people who live life fully expecting to be received into God's presence when they die who will hear these words, "Depart from me, I never knew you." In other words, there will be those who are deceived. One of the areas most ripe for deception is in our belief that salvation is by faith alone. It's quite easy to have the wrong understanding of faith and I'm afraid many people do.

We believe the Bible teaches that there is a moment of conversion or new life. Jesus calls it being born again in John 3. Because of this we can sometimes put all our hopes and faith in that prayer to receive Christ or that conversion experience. In the church I grew up in we would have different evangelists come through and preach weeklong revival meetings. Some of these guys would stand up each night and rant and rave and then they would have an extended time of invitation at the end where they would try to talk you into coming forward and praying to receive Jesus. Then, after you prayed they would assure you that you had become a Christian and that no one could ever take that away from you.

I can't tell you how many times I have had people tell me that a loved one, a parent, or a child, or a friend was saved at a young age, but they aren't really following Jesus now, but there's complete confidence this loved one is bound for heaven.

Now, I obviously can't know a person's heart, but I can tell you what the Bible teaches about a profession of faith, or a prayer, or a conversion experience that doesn't produce a changed life. It wasn't real. I'm not trying to be controversial or harsh this morning, but I do think we need to carefully weigh what James teaches in this passage as it relates to friends and family. We can't really care for those we love if we don't take this passage seriously.

Now, before we get to the details of James 2:14-26 let me just point out that this passage is endlessly talked about and written about by pastors and scholars. It's written about because on the surface it seems to say the opposite of what the Apostle Paul teaches and what we, as Protestant Christians, believe; that salvation is by faith alone. Look down to James 2:24. Ok, now listen to the Apostle Paul in Romans 4:2-5.

On the surface those texts seem to be contradicting one another. So, what do we do with this? Clearly, we believe that the Bible comes to us inspired by God and without error and so we must believe there is no contradiction. Of course, we have to be able to harmonize the teaching of Paul and James into a coherent statement of belief. But here's what I don't want to do and what we can be tempted to do. We cannot neuter the force of what James has to say here. James isn't joking when he says that works are necessary for justification and he isn't using that word in a different way from Paul.

So, how do we fit James and Paul together? We can and we will, but we need to follow the logic of James through this whole passage and let the text correct us rather than us correcting the text. Here's what we will be looking at in James 2:14-26 this week and then in two weeks as Pastor Marcell will be preaching next Sunday. **4 Ways to Have a Faith that Won't Save**

1. Pronounce Nice Things without Acting on Them (vv. 14-17)

Once again, we have James beginning a new section. Look at verse 14. His point here and throughout this section is that there is a kind of faith that is useless, it doesn't accomplish anything. Look at his first words in verse 14. Now verse 17. Now look at verse 20 and verse 26. There is a kind of faith that is no good, useless, and dead.

But we need to ask, what does he mean by useless? He defines useless for us in verse 14. It is true that faith saves, which is why He talks about faith throughout this text and the importance of faith. But, there is a form of faith that will not save you. What sort of faith is that? It is a "faith" that does not lead to works. It's a faith that a person says he has. It's a profession of faith, an affirmation of the gospel with words that does not do.

There is not a person here who would not affirm the gospel if I explained it. Most of your friends and family would say that they believe in Jesus and know there is a good. And I don't think they are lying. They may genuinely think there is a God and that Jesus died on the cross for their sins. But saying the right things does not lead to eternal life.

James has given us clear and direct illustrations before, and he does so again in verses 15-16. Look there. Notice here that this person is not just a random person off the street. This is a brother or sister. A member of the Christian community. And this person has serious needs. He or she is lacking sufficient clothes and is most likely dressed in rags. And, this person does not have enough food to be properly fed each day. They lack their daily bread. Imagine finding out about a person like this in the church and responding as we find in verse 16.

These words are spiritual words. You are wishing God's peace upon this person. There's even good reason to take "be warmed and filled" as a spiritual phrase indicating that you earnestly desire God's work to warm and fill them. And the person saying these words really believes that God will provide. The response is very pious and very spiritual. At least it sounds that way.

But James uses this illustration to make the point that these words don't actually do any good. Look at the end of verse 16. You can spout off pious sounding phrases all you want. You can post verses on Facebook every morning and evening. You can talk about doctrine and church life and ministry and Jesus all you want, but when it comes to actually meeting genuine needs of others, saving faith acts. Look at verse 17.

If you truly cared about the person and actually loved them, you would act. You would buy them clothes and go get them some chipotle for lunch. My loved one can say all he wants that he is a Christian. He can look back to the time he walked the aisle as a teenager and the prayer he prayed. But unless there is a changed life, his faith is dead.

Now, James is obviously making an argument and building a case here regarding saving faith and the connection to good works and a changed life. One of the best ways to build an airtight case is to imagine what an opponent might say in response to your points. That's what James does throughout this section and he

begins to do that in verse 18 and that is where we find our second way to have a faith that won't save.

2. Partition Faith from Works (v. 18)

One of the difficulties of this whole discussion is the way we normally talk about faith and works. Because we want to make sure we aren't smuggling a works righteousness on board we can be tempted to treat faith and works as two entirely different things with little to no connection between them. James imagines an opponent heading in this direction in response to what he has just said. Look at the beginning of verse 18.

What is this opponent really saying here? This person imagines that faith and works are like gifts given by God to believers and some have the gift of faith and some have the gift of works or actions and that both are acceptable to God on their own. The underlying point being made by this person is that faith and works are entirely distinct, that you can sort of parse them out into two entities.

James challenges this. Look at the rest of verse 18. He wants his opponent to show, to prove the reality of his faith without works. The point is that you cannot do that. But James says that he can show or prove his faith by his works.

Here's the point. Genuine faith always proves itself by actions. Have you ever heard of the carnal Christian before? There used to be this teaching that a person could be saved and not grow. They would remain a baby Christian and not really make much progress in the Christian life. There's no doubt that believers may have moments where they act like unbelievers. The Bible is full of examples of saints who don't act like saints at any given moment. But the Bible also couldn't not be clearer that faith and works cannot be split apart and kept in separate rooms.

Young children in the house mean two things: noise and activity. A healthy baby screams and eats and poops and eventually smiles and walks and plays. When our three-year-old wakes up in the morning he hits the ground running. I am normally the first one up at our house and he's normally second and he brings instant activity into the kitchen dining room area. He's almost always got some toy in his hand and he's ready to roll. At the end of the day he has bumps and bruises, mosquito bites, and scrapes.

Life is active, energetic, passionate, moving, noisy, painful, loud, and eager. Spiritual life is very much the same and the activity, or works, demonstrate the reality of life.

James continues to address this imagined opponent in verse 19 and here is our third way to have a faith that won't save.

3. Profess the Right Theology, Like the Demons do (v. 19)

Look with me at verse 19. Notice what this person believes at the beginning of verse 19, that God is one. This is taken from Deuteronomy 6:4, which says this. Many of you would know that this was sort of the summary statement of the Jewish faith. It's called the Shema and defined Israel as monotheistic. They believed in the one Creator God, who made the world and chose them as His people and redeemed them. The Shema was like a creedal statement of the center of the Jewish faith.

James uses some sarcasm here to make his point, he says "you do well." We know that line is sarcastic because of the rest of the verse. Here's the point. You can intellectually assent to and "believe" in the right creedal statement or the right theology, but that doesn't advance you any further than the demons if that's all it is. Of course the demons rightly understand who Jesus was. Listen to Mark 5:6-7 when Jesus confronts the demon possessed man in the tombs.

There is a full understanding of the true identity of Jesus with theological precision there. They knew who Jesus was.

Now, let me explain something James is not doing here.

James isn't knocking creeds or theology. He's not down on carefully put together doctrines or statements of faith. From time to time you will hear Christians sort of mock and scorn people who are too caught up in the details of doctrine or theology. Often Christians are cautious about Creeds because there is a fear that reciting a creed or the Lord's Prayer can become a mindless duty. That can be a danger, but I would say a far greater danger is to not know what you believe or what the church has believed over the centuries.

James is not arguing that doctrine is unimportant. What he's doing is saying that doctrine, like the Shema, is so important that it must lead to a changed life. If all

you ever do is to affirm words and recite a creed and think you are good then you are no better off than the demons. Being afraid of doctrine or a creed because someone could say it without a changed life is like not driving a car because someone could use a car to speed. The problem is not the car or the creed. The problem is disconnecting that doctrine from action.

The irony of the demons understanding the right doctrinal statement is that their understanding does affect them in some way. Look at the end of verse 19. They shudder. They don't love Jesus or repent of their sins and they certainly don't engage in good works, but at least they have some response to the belief that God is one.

Some people claim to believe that the Creator God of the universe made humans to worship only Him and then sinned against that God who will punish them for their sins in His wrath. Then, that God sent His Son to the world to offer forgiveness and new life through His death and resurrection. They say they believe all of this and call themselves Christians, but then can't be bothered to show up at church on a regular basis or even to be slightly concerned that they possibly should find out how their actions should conform to this God's Word. They don't shudder at all. They don't change at all. They live like the world and imagine that because they "believe" the right things about this God they are safe and good to go. It should be a scary place to be.

Now, we have one more way to have a faith that won't save that we will look at in two weeks, but how should we respond to this passage so far? I don't think you should panic, but I think we should be honest with ourselves and with God. He is gracious and merciful, but here's the point of what James is saying, that grace and mercy will not live you unchanged in your sin. It renews and transforms. Go back to that grace this week and let it move you to action.