

“Dead Faith”
James 2:14-26
July 23, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

James is having an imaginary conversation in this passage with a debating opponent. It is a theological discussion about a matter of great significance—the nature of true, saving faith. The word “faith” appears 16 times in this letter, 11 of which are in this passage. In eight of those eleven times, “faith” is used in a negative sense. It is a dead or counterfeit faith. James’ imaginary debating opponent is defending the position that saving faith is merely believing the right things, embracing theological orthodoxy. James disagrees and says that such faith is dead. Real faith, on the other hand, is made evident by its fruit of good works.

James may be engaging an imaginary opponent in this debate, but the sad truth is that both in James’ time and our own there are many who believe exactly as did James’ debating opponent, with deadly consequences. Living in the second most churched city in the nation, we in Birmingham encounter many people who will confidently claim that they are Christians. But if we probe a little more deeply, we will often find that they almost never go to church, don’t give to a church more than in a token manner, and may even be living lives that are openly defiant of God’s law. If you ask them why they think they are Christians when they are living in a way contrary to the life of a disciple as portrayed in the Bible, they will often answer something like this. “When I was ten years old I prayed to receive Jesus. All that’s required for entrance into heaven is to believe. Right?” Four times in our passage James calls that kind of faith “dead faith.” It’s the kind of faith that was made fun of in a pastoral journal I used to receive called *Leadership Journal*. Years ago, I remember reading a cartoon portraying a marketing sign for a church. “The Lite Church. 24% fewer commitments, home of the 7.5% tithe, 15-minute sermons, 45-minute worship services. We have only 8 commandments—your choice. We use just 3 spiritual laws. Everything you’ve wanted in a church...and less!” In light of how common is this counterfeit faith, let’s consider more carefully what James teaches about it.

I. Illustrations of Dead Faith – v. 14-19

The theme of this passage is made clear by repetition. Four times James speaks of the kind of faith that won’t save a person. The first time is a little obscured by the English translation of verse 14. As in English, Greek has a way of asking a question that anticipates a negative answer. We might ask the person who is accepting the offer of banana pudding for dessert, “You’re not

going to be keeping your diet today, are you?” Similarly, when James asks about a faith that is not accompanied by works, **“Can that faith save him?”** it is a question that anticipates a negative answer. This kind of faith cannot save. He goes on to say three more times that this kind of faith is dead.

There is a danger that needs to be acknowledged when we talk about a kind of faith that cannot save. The danger is that the people who need to hear it won't, and the people who don't need to hear it will think that it applies to them. Those who have a dead faith will think that surely this applies to others, while those with genuine faith but a tender conscience will be filled with doubts. James seeks to counter this danger by giving examples both of dead faith and true faith, giving two examples of each one.

The first example of dead faith is someone who encounters another Christian who is poorly clothed and who lacks daily food. It is likely that the poor clothing refers to the lack of an appropriate outer garment, so that the person has only that garment intended to be a type of underwear. So this condition would result in both shame and the discomfort of being cold. This would be made worse by the lack of daily food. So the church member with dead faith encounters another Christian who is cold, hungry and feeling shame. He answers this need with words only: **“Go in peace, be warmed and filled”** (v. 16).

There are two things wrong with this response to the needs of the poor. The first, and most obvious thing, is the lack of any real help. James assumes that our well-wishing church member has something that could be given to relieve the desperate need of this poor Christian. But out of selfishness, he prefers to keep his money for himself. His heart is unmoved by the desperate plight of another. Imagine three people in a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean. If they are careful, they calculate that they have enough food and water onboard to last about a week. But one night when the other two are asleep, the third person fills himself with about a third of everything left. Such an action reveals a selfish heart that cares little for others.

If this person doesn't want to help, why doesn't he just say “No”? This brings us to the second thing wrong with this response. Words are used to cover guilt. It would produce too much of a guilty conscience to say the truth. “I'm not going to help you because then I would have less money for myself. I value the size of my checking account more than your needs.” He wants to have it both ways, to save his money for himself but also to be able to think of himself as a good, generous person. So his words are a form of self-salvation. Instead of covering his guilt with the blood of Christ, he wants to cover it with good intentions and words. Several years ago, a missionary visited us who had never before been to the Deep South. While here, a family graciously entertained him at their beautiful house, which included a swimming pool. As he was leaving that home, the woman of the house said, “So good to have you.

Come back anytime.” He remarked to us, “That woman was so nice. She told me I would be welcome anytime.” We had to explain to him that she didn’t really mean it, that she was just trying to be nice. If he showed up unannounced the next afternoon, with swimming trunks and towel, she would be shocked. I don’t mean to suggest that this woman had a false faith, only to point out that we sometimes use words in order to think of ourselves in a certain way. The well-wisher of our passage uses words to deceive, but the biggest victim of his deception is himself. His words cover the true condition of his heart, and if that true condition were better seen he would be driven to Christ for help.

The second example of dead faith, surprisingly, consists of Satan’s demons. **“You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder”** (v. 19). James points out the theological orthodoxy of the demons. They are monotheists and they believe all the right things about God. Their faith is even enough to produce an emotional response. They believe God and they are terrified by it. But theirs too is a dead faith. Why? Their faith drives them away from God, not toward him. In their terror, they want to run from him. True faith draws us closer to God and gives us a greater love for him. **“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear”** (1 John 4:18).

Dead faith seeks refuge in the wrong thing. In the first example, refuge was sought in words. In this illustration, refuge is sought in correct doctrine. Both are powerless. Soren Kierkegaard once told a memorable parable about Duckland. It was a Sunday morning in Duckland and all the ducks came waddling into church to take their customary places in their pews. They sang their beloved hymns, and then it was time for the sermon. The duck minister waddled up to the pulpit, opened the Duck Bible and read: “Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Use your wings!” It was a powerful sermon, and all the ducks quacked their approval. And then they plopped down from their pews and waddled, not flew, home. That is the story of dead faith.

II. The Destruction of Dead Faith – v. 20-26

Dead faith is destroyed by true faith, and James gives two examples of the kind of faith that does save. His first example is an obvious one—Abraham. Of the many examples of faith in the life of Abraham, James chooses his act of offering Isaac on the altar. That act shows that true faith requires getting off the fence and trusting God with everything that is most precious to us. Do you remember the story of Abraham and Isaac? Though God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of a multitude, he and his wife, Sarah, were childless and old. Finally, when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah 90, Sarah got pregnant and gave birth to Isaac. It was an appropriate name, because Isaac means laughter. How else do you respond to the idea of a 90-

year-old pregnant woman? Isaac would be the only child ever born to them. Now God asks Abraham to sacrifice this precious life to God. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Abraham reasoned that God would bring him back to life. But he didn't have to, because God interrupted the sacrifice and provided a ram in place of Isaac. But it was still the case that Abraham was willing to give what was most precious to him.

Sometimes in evangelism a person will say to someone contemplating faith in Christ, "What do you have to lose?" This evangelist will point out that the cost of being wrong for the non-Christian is much higher than the cost of being wrong for the Christian. If the secular materialists are right, then we just cease to exist upon death, and the Christian hasn't really lost much. But if the Bible is right and there is a judgment of eternal damnation, then the cost of being wrong for the non-Christian is immense and horrible. While there is a certain logic to that argument that can't be denied, it has the sad result of making faith like an insurance policy. A person might say some prayer of faith just in case the Bible is right. Doesn't hurt to cover all your bases. But James' statement about Abraham's faith shows this is not the way to think about faith. Jesus gave an answer to those who ask, "What do I have to lose if I pray to receive Christ." He said that you have to be prepared to lose everything. **"Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it'"** (Matt. 16:24-2).

We need to be careful here. James is not saying that faith requires perfect obedience. Abraham is just as noted for his rather spectacular failures of obedience as he is for his faith. At one point he gave his wife to the local king, saying she was his sister, just to save his own skin. But Abraham did believe, and James quotes this famous verse from Genesis 15:6 – **"Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."** Paul used that verse to support the doctrine of justification by faith. That doctrine says that God declares a person righteous by faith alone, apart from works. How then is James not in conflict with Paul? Where Paul says we are justified by faith alone, James says that **"a person is justified by works and not by faith alone"** (v. 24).

Despite appearances to the contrary, these verses do not contradict one another. The word "justify" can have different meanings in Greek just as it does in English. In a theological sense it means to declare righteous. The Bible is quite clear, even here in this passage (seen through the quote of Genesis 15) that a man is declared righteous by God through faith alone, apart from works. But the word "justify" can also mean to authenticate something. We might say, "His performance as the starting quarterback justified the coach's confidence in him." That's the sense of justify as James is using it. Good works authenticate one's faith as true faith.

Paul and James are not contradicting one another, but they do have a different emphasis and a different audience. Paul was writing those burdened with a guilty conscience and he writes of our free and full justification by faith. James is writing those with a false faith but who think they have the real thing. One group needed to be comforted while the other needed to be challenged.

If Abraham is an expected example of faith, Rahab is a surprise. She is a Gentile, and a disreputable one at that since she was a harlot. What's more, she makes only a brief appearance in the story of the Bible. She enters the story when Israel first entered the Promised Land and came to the great walled city of Jericho. Israelite spies were sent into the city, and Rahab welcomed them, hid them and helped them escape, after securing a promise that they would spare her and her family when God handed the city over to them. She shows us two more qualities of true faith. First, faith doesn't play it safe but takes risks in loving people, especially strangers. Second, faith values God's people above one's own nation. It is the end of the kind of nationalism that has long been an enemy of the Church.

CONCLUSION:

Let me summarize the difference between true and false faith like this. The key difference lies in where you look for refuge. False faith looks to faith as a refuge while true faith looks to God. Both Abraham and Rahab looked to God for deliverance. So if you are asked the question, "How do you know that you are going to heaven when you die?" you don't want to say that it is because you prayed to receive Christ when you were ten years old. That is faith in faith, and it is a false faith. True faith says, "I'm going to heaven because Jesus has both lived and died as my substitute, and I trust his promise."

There is a story told about the French emperor Napoleon when he was once standing beside his horse and accidentally dropped his bridle. The horse reared up and put Napoleon in danger, but a corporal standing nearby saw what was happening, stepped in and grabbed the reins and calmed the horse. Napoleon saluted the corporal and said, "Thank you, *Captain*." "Of what company, Sire?" asked the corporal. "Of my guards," replied Napoleon. The young corporal picked up his musket, hurled it aside, and walked across the field toward the Emperor's staff, tearing off his corporal's stripes as he went. When he took his place among the other officers, they objected and wanted to know by whose order he was there. "By the Emperor's order," he replied. That story describes perfectly what saving faith is. It answers all of Satan's accusations and the barbs of a guilty conscience with a bold confidence that when God says our sins are forgiven by the blood of Christ, there is no power in the universe able to reverse that order. Good works don't earn that benefit, but they do proceed from it.