

FAITH AND ACTIONS WORKING TOGETHER

James 2:14-26

Key Verse: 2:22

“You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.”

In today's passage we find the main theme of the entire book of James: faith and actions always work together. In James' time, there were some people who claimed to have faith without any practical evidence. They thought that faith should be grounded on sound doctrine and that was most important; which is true. But they tended to dismiss action as irrelevant. They claimed to have saving faith without any visible evidence in their practical lives. James refuted this idea very clearly, saying that faith and deeds work together, and that faith without deeds is dead. Genuine faith always produces actions. To help them understand, James gave two examples: Abraham and Rahab. Through today's passage we learn how faith and deeds work together. Let's learn how our faith can grow to make our lives more vibrant and fruitful.

First, faith without deeds is dead (14-20). In verse 14 James asks two rhetorical questions: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?” These questions expect a negative answer. What good is faith without deeds? It is no good; it is empty. However, the teaching that one could have faith without deeds influenced the church, producing an atmosphere of speculation without action. If that teaching became prevalent, the church members could all look like the TV character Spongebob Squarepants, with big heads and tiny hands and feet. More than that, they would all become hypocrites and the church would lose its spiritual influence. So this was a very serious matter. James, as a shepherd, helped them to realize that faith without deeds is dead. In contrast to dead faith, there is living and active faith. In verses 15-20, James tells us two characteristics of this faith.

First of all, living and saving faith is accompanied by action (15-17). In verses 15-16 James raises a supposition. In James' time there were so many poor people who lacked clothes and daily food. James' supposition touched a very real problem in their community. Suppose a poor person came in among them with tattered clothes, looking so skinny that his bones were sticking out. If someone said, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but did nothing to provide clothes or food, what good was it? Recently, Lauren contracted Covid-19 and delivered a baby girl. Suppose many said to her, "Be well, recover soon," but did nothing. What good would it be? It is nothing. Thankfully, many people sacrificially served her and her family by providing carefully prepared food, not to mention praying for them. People in need require more than nice words. They need clothes and food; acts of service without words might be better for them. Due to Covid-19, many brothers and sisters around the world have become sick, lost loved ones or lost their jobs. They need practical support. There are many university students among us, as well as those who serve them. These workers for God's kingdom need encouragement and practical help. 1 John 3:17-18 says, "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." When we hear kind words, they seem to indicate faith. But without action, what good are they? James concluded "...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (17). This means that living and saving faith must be accompanied by action.

Secondly, living and saving faith requires evidence (18-20). In verse 18a, through an imaginary objector, James raises the issue: "You have faith; I have deeds." The implication of this statement is that faith and deeds can be separated. The assumption is that faith is mental assent to the truth and that this kind of faith can save people. But living and saving faith is more than mental assent. It is belief that involves the heart. It is from our hearts that our words and actions spring forth. Proverbs 4:23 says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." Romans 10:9 says, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." James challenges their false assumption, saying, "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds" (18b). To further illustrate the falsity of their claim,

James gives the example of demons: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder” (19). To believe that there is one true God is essential, but it is not enough. This belief must be accompanied by wholehearted love for God and obedience to his word (Dt 6:4-5). In other words, faith includes full commitment to God. Demons have no commitment to God, love for God or obedience to his word. Demons may be great theologians. Some of them were unseen interlopers at the Church Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon.¹ As the gospels tell us, demons recognized Jesus as the Holy One of God (Mk 1:24; Lk 4:34). But they never yielded to him willingly. They never confessed him as their Lord and Savior. They never loved or obeyed Jesus. Instead they trembled because they knew their destiny of eternal condemnation would be decided by him.

Those who think they can have faith without deeds are foolish people. James says, “You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?” (20) Here “foolish” means empty-headed or stupid. It means completely lacking understanding about faith. The word “useless” means that it accomplishes nothing; it is idle or inactive. Faith without evidence does not work at all. It is dead. Faith is not just intellectual assent. It is not static, but is dynamic and grows. 2 Thessalonians 1:3a says, “We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more....” Jesus compared faith to a small mustard seed (Mt 17:20). As a seed has life and grows, so does faith. To grow and bear fruit, there is a condition. The seed must fall to the ground and die (Jn 12:24). This means we must commit ourselves to Christ. Even though we have great potential, without commitment nothing happens. Living and saving faith always flows from commitment. When we commit ourselves to Christ, evidence will appear naturally through our attitudes, words and deeds. This is why James says that faith without deeds is dead.

Second, examples of faith: Abraham and Rahab (21-26). To help his readers understand how faith and actions work together, James gave two examples of living and saving faith: Abraham and Rahab. These two persons are very different from each other. Abraham was a most honorable patriarch of the

¹ Hughes, R. Kent, *James: Faith that Works*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991) p. 101.

nation Israel; Rahab was a most despised Gentile prostitute. Abraham was the friend of God; Rahab was living in Jericho with the enemies of God. Nevertheless, they had one common factor; it was their living and saving faith. The striking thing is that God did not consider any human conditions; he only saw their faith. To God, what really matters is faith.

Let's consider Abraham's faith. Verse 21 says, "Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?" James emphasizes that Abraham was considered righteous for what he did. At first glance, this seems to contradict the teaching of Apostle Paul that righteousness comes through faith alone, and not by works (Ro 3:28). To illustrate his point, Paul gave Abraham as an example and quoted Genesis 15:6. Paul's understanding of righteousness is positional, which refers to our legal standing before God as those who are right and just--not guilty. This is what happens at the initial point of our salvation. When we believe in Jesus, he becomes our righteousness. Though we are sinners, who have no merit of our own, Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." We do not add anything to Christ's work. We depend on what Christ has done 100%. James does not contradict this. His point is different. It is that our faith which justifies also produces works that show we are being sanctified. This is practical righteousness which refers to how we live before God. This practical righteousness has visible effects on our lives; it can be seen through our words, deeds and attitudes. When Abraham offered Isaac to God, it was the evidence of his faith in action.

Verses 22-23 say, "You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend." In Genesis 15, Abraham was exhausted after engaging in a war against four kings to save his nephew Lot. He was fearful and had a sense of loss. At that time the word of the Lord came to him in a vision: "Do not be afraid Abram; I am your shield and your very great reward" (Gen 15:1). This is an amazing promise. If the Almighty Creator God is our shield, who can prevail against us? We are in the most

safe and secure place in God. If our reward is the richest blessing from the Sovereign Ruler of the universe, what more could we ask for? But Abraham did not respond with "Amen." Rather, he complained in his heart that God had not given him a son. Abraham was so obsessed with his own plan that he could not see God's great vision for him.

We understand Abraham very well. Still, it is not easy to bear with people and help them grow in faith. Yet, God bore Abraham's weakness and humbly helped him to look up at the heavens and count the stars so that he might see how great and awesome God is. As he counted numerous stars in the sky, God said, "So shall your offspring be." It was beyond imagination or reason. Yet the Bible says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). Abraham's spiritual eyes were opened and he could trust God. Abraham believed that it was impossible with man, but was possible with God. This faith pleased God and Abraham was justified by his faith. This was not the end of faith working in him. When he continued to obey God's words and trust God's promises, his faith grew continually until he received a son, Isaac, as God's blessing and realized that God is the Eternal God (Gen 21:3-4,33). This means that his faith became mature enough to obey God unconditionally.

When Isaac became a young teenager, God tested Abraham's faith to see whether he loved Isaac more than God. God commanded him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham did not hesitate to obey because he fully trusted God and reasoned that God could raise the dead based on his promise, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned" (Heb 11:17-19). Abraham did not pretend to obey. He obeyed fully from his heart with action. God, moved by Abraham's obedient faith, said, "Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (Gen 22:11-12). On the basis of Abraham's obedient faith, God confirmed with an oath his covenant promises to send the Messiah through his offspring (Gal 3:16-17). In this way the Scripture was fulfilled.

Abraham was also called God's friend. This means that God trusted Abraham fully. Abraham could understand the heart of God, who would give

his one and only Son Jesus as a ransom for sinners. Abraham participated in God's salvation work as his friend. This was the fruit of faith--to become God's friend. How can we become God's friend? Jesus said that when we obey his commands, we become his friends (Jn 15:14).

James concluded, "You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone" (24). When Paul said that we are justified by faith alone, this faith includes obedience. That is why he said, "the obedience that comes from faith" (Ro 1:5). So in essence, Paul's view of faith is the same as that of James. Calvin said, "as Paul contends that we are justified apart from the help of works, so James does not allow those who lack good works to be justified."² Faith and actions always work together.

Now let's consider Rahab's faith. Verse 25 says, "In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?" It was the time when Joshua was commissioned to lead the Israelite army to conquer the promised land. Jericho, the first city to be conquered, was an invincible fortress. If they failed to conquer Jericho, it might mean another forty years in the wilderness. In "The Art of War," the ancient Chinese warrior, Sun Tzu said, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."³ So Joshua sent two spies in order to know his enemy. The spies stayed in Rahab's hotel, where so many people came and went. It was a good place to gather information. Unfortunately their identities were discovered and reported to the king. Their lives were in danger; their mission could have failed. At this critical moment, Rahab decided to protect them by having them hide on her roof. When the king's soldiers inquired about them, she was not intimidated by them. Rather, she smiled and suggested with confidence that they had fled in another direction. In this way she protected the spies. If discovered, she would be called a traitor to her people and could face execution, together with her household.

² Moo, Douglas J., *James* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, USA, 2015), p. 148.

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/17976-if-you-know-the-enemy-and-know-yourself-you-need>

How could Rahab do such a thing? When she heard what God had done for Israel by delivering them from slavery in Egypt, parting the Red Sea for them, and giving them victory over kings Sihon and Og, she believed that the God of Israel was the Creator and the one true God (Jos 2:8-11). Everyone who lived in Jericho also heard what God had done, and they fell into great fear. Only Rahab responded with faith and acted courageously. If she had faith but did not act, she would have perished with all the others. It would have been useless faith. But when she acted with faith, she was considered righteous for what she did. Though she was sexually immoral, or a traitor in the eyes of people, to God all that mattered was her faith. God blessed her one act of faith. She and her family were saved (Heb 11:31). Furthermore, she was included in the genealogy of the Messiah (Mt 1:5). James concluded, "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (26).

The illustrations of Abraham and Rahab tell us that one act of faith is important. In both cases, their act of faith was very costly. It was not random or impulsive; it was the fruit of believing God's word and living according to it. Can we do the same? We don't know when the critical moment will come. If an antichristian threatened you, saying, "Deny Christ, or die!" What would you do? This may be an extreme case. What if your antichristian boss threatened to dismiss you unless you compromise your faith, what would you do? If your professor or classmates bullied you for being a Christian, how would you respond? To carry out an act of faith is costly. But it is the proof that our faith is living and saving faith. Such faith will be rewarded with God's abundant blessing. Christ said, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as a victor's crown" (Rev 2:10). We may not be ready to sacrifice to such a degree right now. God knows when the time is right for us to carry out such an act of faith. In the meantime, we can make acts of faith each day that help our faith grow stronger and more mature. We can help one person through Bible study. We can give financially for world missions, or for those in need. We can establish our families through faith in Christ. In this way we can prepare ourselves for God's final test. Let's pray that we may have living and active faith that is proved by our actions, like Abraham and Rahab. Then God will surely bless us and use us in our times.