The Saving Power of Works: The Fruit of a Strong Faith

James 2:14-20

**14 What use is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? 17 In the same way, faith also, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.**

**18 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.” 19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. 20 But are you willing to acknowledge, you foolish person, that faith without works is useless?”**

Good morning to you all. Today we are continuing our study of the Epistle of James. As we begin our study today we are beginning to enter the main major teaching and application aspects of the epistle. The title of this series as we have been working our way through James has been titled “The Epistle of James: Our Works Show That our Faith is Real.” That title is restating the main idea of this epistle which is that followers of Jesus Christ must not only have faith in Him as their Lord and Savior, but that faith must be accompanied by works. What we will discover today is that works are the fruit by which the faith of a follower of Christ may be proven.

So far in the epistle James has addressed the importance of facing trials with joy and not allowing those challenges to steal the hope we all have in Jesus Christ. This was essential to address with his readers because the church was facing a lot of persecution at this time in the form of many Caesars in Rome who were hostile towards the Christian faith. Keeping the joy of the faith in such tough times was the goal of James in chapter 1. In chapter 2 James addresses another issue that the people of his day were facing. The temptations of showing favoritism towards the wealthy and the neglect of the poor. All these issues have been dealing with the actions of those who believe in Christ and want to faithfully be followers of Him. What we need to wrestle with today is the question of whether it is faith alone that saves someone or is it a combination of faith and works?

Starting in verse 14 we have James asking two very important questions. The first question is “Is it useful to have faith in Jesus Christ if that faith is not supported by works? Another way of asking this might be “Is it enough just to believe in Jesus Christ alone for salvation?” This question is very important because it is at the heart of the gospel message. We will be answering this question in just a few moments. The second question he asks is if a faith like that alone is enough to save someone from hell? Is it enough to just believe in God, accept the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as atoning for sin without ever acting upon that faith? If we take a quick peek at verse 17 we will get our answer to the question. The answer is an emphatic NO! James is arguing that it is not faith alone that saves someone. Now, I am aware that this may sound very alarming because the Apostle Paul makes the case in his letters that seem to contradict what James says. Today our goal will be to reconcile that supposed contradiction and make this teaching of James very practical in our lives.

In verses 15 and 16 James uses a scenario to illustrate his point. Basically, if someone you know does not have the necessities of life and they seek help from the church, just wishing them well without providing any help to them is worthless according to James. What is important to note here is that James uses the terms brother or sister meaning that anyone who is in need is a brother or a sister to us. Their position in the church is not a requirement for them to receive help from the church.

In verse 17 the main idea of this passage is presented being that faith without works is a dead faith. Upon reading this is might seem that James is making a unique argument that is not seen anywhere else in the Bible. This, however, is not the case. When John the Baptist began his ministry he also taught that actions in addition to faith was essential to being a faithful follower of God. In Luke 3:7-14 we have recorded for us these words “**7**So he was saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? **8**Therefore produce fruits that are consistent with repentance, and do not start saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham *as our* father,’ for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children for Abraham. **9**But indeed the axe is already being laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” **10**And the crowds were questioning him, saying, “Then what are we to do?” **11**And he would answer and say to them, “The one who has two tunics is to share with the one who has none; and the one who has food is to do likewise.” **12**Now even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they said to him, “Teacher, what are we to do?” **13**And he said to them, “Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.” **14**And soldiers also were questioning him, saying, “What are we to do, we as well?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone, nor harass *anyone*, and be content with your wages.” This talk regarding the production of fruit consistent with repentance is the same action that James is referring to in this passage. Someone who has really repented will prove that repentance with action.

In verse 18 we are introduced here to someone who might oppose to the message James just shared in the previous verse. This other voice being presented in the verse is saying that it is difficult to show faith in God without works. There is a challenge being posed in the statement. It is possible to read the verse this way “Show me your faith without works, I don’t think you can, but I can and will show you my faith through my works.” This challenge being made is making the point that it is impossible to show others that your faith in God in real unless you prove that faith with action.

As he continues in verse 19 James is emphasizing this point that just because someone believes in God and knows who He is, that is not enough to guarantee salvation. He mentions the demons of Satan and says that even though they believe in God and fear Him, they are not saved. This attitude of accepting the message of the Bible, knowing who Jesus Christ is and even admiring Him is not enough to earn someone salvation. Salvation through Jesus Christ is received by repenting of sin, placing total trust in Christ for salvation, living in obedience to the Word and growing in the knowledge of the Lord until either He returns or we are called to join Him after our death. We must understand and accept that knowledge of Scripture is not enough to guarantee salvation. This knowledge must be accompanied by action and a living out of that faith. We will return to this when we discuss our applications.

Finally in verse 20 James concludes by confirming that faith without works is a useless faith. He gets a little aggressive in this verse because he makes the statement that it is foolishness not to accept this essential teaching. What we need to do at this time is now take what we have discovered in these verses and make them applicable to our daily lives.

**Application**

By way of application today we are only going to discuss one essential question. In answering this question, we will be providing a way to apply this knowledge to our lives. The question we must ask here is very simple: “Is a believer in Jesus Christ saved by faith alone or is it a combination of faith and works?” There have been some church fathers who did not believe James should be included in the Bible due to the discussion of works being so prevalent in the letter. Martin Luther was one of these people. He thought that James was contradicting the Apostle Paul and therefore both teachings cannot and should not both be included in the Bible. Today I will be making the argument that I do not agree with Martin Luther. I believe, rather, that Paul and James agree regarding faith and works. Therefore, both writers need to be included in the Bible and they both present the material in ways that are useful to their readers.

There are three reasons why the works that both Paul and James is discuss are relevant in our discussions today and each Apostle has reasons why they have mentioned those in their writings. The purpose of our application today is to determine what both Paul and James teach regarding works and why the deeds we do in the name of Christ matter regarding our expressed faith in Him. For each of the points I will be raising I will explain what Paul meant by works and what James meant so that we can see they both complement rather than contradict each other.

This first point we will discuss today is the fact that when Paul discusses works he is talking about deeds that are being done in fulfillment of the Law of Moses. In Romans 3:28 Paul writes these words “For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.” When Paul writes these words the prevailing thought at this time was that to be justified in the sight of God the people of Israel had to remain faithful to the Law of Moses and carry it out perfectly. What the people proved over the years after God gave them the law through Moses was that they were incapable of keeping the whole law. This showed them that their depraved human abilities were not able to please God by adhering to the law and that by their own works they could not be saved from their sins. Therefore, Paul reminds the people that with the coming of Christ the need to do works according to the law was no longer necessary and that Christ fulfilled the entire law by living a perfect life.

When James discusses works he is referring to deeds that are done in love by obedience to the gospel, which he has already referred to as the law of liberty. These deeds are not being done to earn salvation, but they are done as an example to others of the sincerity of the faith that a person has in Christ. When we show love, compassion, hospitality, or empathy towards others we are not doing these things to win the approval of God. We do these things out of appreciation for the love that God first showed us through His Son. This is echoed in the words of Paul when he writes to the Roman church these words “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Since Christ showed us such love, we should want to share that love with others to reflect God’s character in the world.

The second point regarding faith and works has to do with the importance of deeds being the completion of faith. If I say that I believe in Jesus Christ and profess Him as both my Lord and Savior that profession will not do myself not anyone else any good if that profession of faith is not accompanied by deeds. Once again, Paul’s major concern is that many people were misunderstanding the purpose of the Law of Moses. The law was meant to show the people that no matter how hard they tried; they could not keep the law. However, God would always remain faithful to them despite their weakness. James is reminding his readers that just professing faith in God and refusing to do works in His name would not result in proof of that faith. Evidence of faith in Christ is essential in the world today because people will notice when someone lives differently than the others in the culture. Standing out in the name of Christ bears witness to the faith that some professes to have. Jesus urged His disciples to have a character in their lives that would be noticed by others. Deeds done in the name of Christ are very important. Here are Jesus’s words regarding this that come from Matthew 12:33-37 “Either assume the tree to be good as well as its fruit good or assume the tree to be bad as well as its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You offspring of vipers, how can you, being evil, express any good things? For the mouth speaks from that which fills the heart. The good person brings out of his good treasure good things; and the evil person brings out of his evil treasure evil things. But I tell you that for every careless word that people speak, they will give an account of it on the day of judgment. For by your words, you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” Jesus is confirming that the words spoken, and the deeds done while on earth either show someone to be a real Christian or a fake claimer to be one. Paul and James both value works, but those works need to be done as evidence of genuine faith in Christ.

Our third and final point today by way of application is that Paul and James believe in the importance of woks, but those works serve multiple functions. Paul wants his readers to understand that no matter how many good deeds they do in the name of Christ they cannot be justified in God’s eyes without faith in Christ. I can be the nicest person in thew world and have the best of intentions, but if I do not place my trust in Christ as my Savior then all those deeds will not do me any good. They may be well intentioned, but they are just like filthy rags in the sight of God if I do them apart from Christ (Isaiah 64:6). If we do good deeds in the name of Christ acknowledging that we are sinners in need of grace and we trust in Christ for our salvation then Paul would assert that those works are appropriate in our lives.

James, on the other hand, wants his readers to know that works are being done to illustrate the sincereness of our faith in Christ. God knows whether we have true faith in Him or not because He can see into our hearts (Matt. 9:4, Luke 5:22-23 & John 2:24) and know where we are at in our faith. Other people do not have the ability to see into our hearts, so James wants us to know that when we do good works in the name of Christ others will see those works and that will testify to the reality of the faith we have in Christ. Jesus says this in His Sermon on the Mount “Your light must shine before people in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Therefore, works are evidence of faith in Christ for other people to see they are not done to earn the approval of God who already knows our heart and whether our faith in Him is real or not.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, let us take a few moments to revisit the three points we have made today regarding the connection between faith and works. The first point we have made is that we are justified before God by our faith, not our works. Point 2 is that works are needed to show other people that our faith is real. And point three is that if we are to be known as children of God and true believers in Jesus Christ we must be known as being faithful to Him through the works we do before other people. If we heed the words taught by James as well as Paul we will find that God is best glorified when His people both profess their faith in Him through their words as well as show the sincerity of that faith through works. May we always be known as followers of Christ who show His love to others in our actions as well as our words. Please join me in a word of prayer.