What Faith Accomplishes When It Is at Work

James 2:21-26

Introduction

Good morning! Please open your Scriptures to the 2nd Chapter of the Epistle of James. Today we will be discussing verses 21-26. Today we will be discussing the impact that faith accompanied by works can have on the world. This past week the United States had an evening where the President had the opportunity to give his State of the Union address. Every year the President is charged by the Constitution to give an update on the status of the United States. When this speech is given you hear a lot of clapping, but you will occasionally hear some opposition in the crowd. We have a very divided Congress today according to political affiliations. What most Americans say they do not like is when a political leader does live up to the promises they made in their campaign. This is a form of hypocrisy that is not new in the world. Jesus addressed this type of hypocrisy when He called out the Pharisees in the temple towards the end of the Gospel of Matthew. The reason why I am speaking of hypocrisy is because when someone is evaluated for either living out what they say to believe or refusing to, their actions go a long way in confirming the genuineness of their claims. The Apostle James is teaching his readers that being a believer in Christ is much more effective when that faith is accompanied by works. In the passage we are looking at today James will be referring to two Old Testament figures who were known by their faith. Their faith was shown through their deeds, which made their faith genuine, and it also led to their salvation in the eyes of God. As we begin today please read with me James 2:21-26:

**21 Was our father Abraham not justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called a friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 In the same way, was Rahab the prostitute not justified by works also when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.**

**Passage Analysis**

As we begin in verse 21 James starts his discussion about Abraham. With Abraham being the father of the Hebrew nation James is using a figure that his Jewish readers would be extremely familiar with. The account that James refers to is when God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his only son on the altar in Genesis 22. Please read with me Genesis 22:1-14 “22 “Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 2 Then He said, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” 3 So Abraham got up early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. 5 Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey, and I and the boy will go over there; and we will worship and return to you.” 6 And Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. 7 Isaac spoke to his father Abraham and said, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” And he said, “Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” 8 Abraham said, “God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together. 9 Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 And Abraham reached out with his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. 11 But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 12 He said, “Do not reach out your hand against the boy, and do not do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” 13 Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram caught in the thicket by its horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in the place of his son. 14 And Abraham named that place The Lord Will Provide, as it is said to this day, “On the mountain of the Lord it will [e]be provided.”

The part of this passage we need to focus our attention on is verse 12. The Angel of the Lord told Abraham “Do not reach out your hand against the boy, and do not do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” This verification of Abraham’s faith was shown by his works. God saw through this action that Abraham was faithful and not withhold anything from Him. It is this faith that justified Abraham with God.

Moving on to verse 22 James confirms that the faith of Abraham was working with his works and then that resulted in a perfected faith. When we see the word “perfected” here this means that faith, when accompanied by works, is more complete and is a better reflection of the faith that a person has in God. We must be careful and remember that Abraham was not called a perfect man, but that his faith was perfected because he believed God and acted upon that belief. John MacArthur uses this analogy when discussing the relationship between faith and works. When a person lives righteously having faith and exhibiting that faith through works it is just like a tree bearing lots of beautiful fruit. This is why Jesus says that a tree is known by its fruit. Any tree that does not produce fruit is cut down and burned. This is the same way that someone who claims to believe in God needs to behave. If the life of a believer does not bear fruit and show others the faith is real then the faith that was claimed is seen to be fake.

Verse 23 quotes Genesis 15:6 telling the readers that this is why Abraham was blessed by God and made the father of the Hebrew nation. He received all these blessings because of his faith, which was supported by his deeds. The Holman New Testament Commentary makes this statement, which I believe explains the writing of James very well. “James’s great contribution to the Christian life is not on the doctrine of justification, but in helping us to see that true faith is radical obedience.” This supports the conclusion that we came to last week. Man is justified in with God because of faith, but it is the works done by the faithful that represents a disciplined Christian life and sets and example for others. We are called to live in such a manner, not out of obligation but out of appreciation to the Lord who loved us first and gave Himself for our salvation.

Verse 24 is a restatement of what James has been saying in chapter 2. A person is justified by works that support the faith they claim to have. When God sees His faithful church who is working to proclaim the message in the world today He needs to see a church who leads by example, speaks the truth, and loves people the same way that He does. Loving someone means that not only must we accept people where they are when they are coming to know the Lord, but we must also speak the truth in love. This means that we must be ready, willing, and able to confront the culture speaking the truth of God’s Word when we are challenged by the fads of the day. We must always speak the truth but speak it in love acknowledging that we are sinners saved by grace. So, as one of my favorite comedy movie lines says, “Our bodies must be able to cash the checks that our mouths are writing.”

Now we shift to our second Old Testament figure mentioned in the passage. This is the harlot Rahab who hid the spies when the people of Israel were about to conquer Jericho. Please turn back to the book of Joshua Chapter 2. Let’s read verses 8-14 together: “8 Now before the spies lay down, she came up to them on the roof, 9 and said to the men, “I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have despaired because of you. 10 For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. 11 When we heard these reports, our hearts melted and no courage remained in anyone any longer because of you; for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth below. 12 Now then, please swear to me by the Lord, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father’s household, and give me a pledge of truth, 13 and spare my father and my mother, and my brothers and my sisters, and all who belong to them, and save our lives from death.” 14 So the men said to her, “Our life for yours if you do not tell this business of ours; and it shall come about when the Lord gives us the land that we will deal kindly and faithfully with you.” Rahab professed faith in God even though she was from a people who worshiped other gods and did not live in obedience to the One true God. However, Scripture teaches that she was able to have her family saved because of her faith. God rewarded her so much that she was also included in the genealogy of Jesus Christ in Matthew’s gospel. Such faith, accompanied by her deeds, showed that God approved of her faith because it was made known through her actions. Her life showed the fruit of a life that reflected true faith in God.

Verse 26 concludes our passage today by making the point that just like faith without works is useless so is the body without the spirit. What makes humans different than the animals is that God created man in His image which means that He gave man the ability to reason and placed a spirit in him so that his spirit would live eternally just like God does. Even though the body will eventually pass away, the spirit will live on either in the presence of God or separated from Him. Just think of how hopeless our lives would be if there were no promise of an eternal life after this life here on earth. If this is all there is then I cannot see where there would be any joy or hope in that. God has enriched our lives with His Holy Scripture and the promises that will come true for those who faithfully live in obedience to His Word.

**Application**

I have two applications that I would like to share today. Firstly, all of us need to take away from our passage today is the fact that our lives need to reflect the faith that we say we have. Every day God puts us into situations where we can share our faith with other not just with our words, but also with our actions. Jesus taught that when those situations arise we need to use them to grow the kingdom of God. Also, He taught that real faith is a faith that manifests itself in the way that we treat others. Not everyone who claims to be a believer in Christ will inherit eternal life with Him. In Matthew 7:21-23 Jesus said “21 “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ 23 And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; leave Me, you who practice lawlessness.’” Not only must we share our faith in words, but let us also be known as the people who put our money where our mouth is. On the other hand, we cannot think that just doing good deeds is going to get us to heaven. The sacrifice of Christ as our Savior is the only road that leads to heaven. Every other road is false and will only lead to our destruction.

Another way this passage applies to our lives today is the fact that Scripture is reminding us continually that to be in the faith we must always be examining ourselves to make sure that we are in the faith. In 2 Cor. 13:5 the Apostle writes these instructions “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?” We can examine ourselves by looking in the mirror and seeing if the reflection of our lives shows our faith in action or not. Let us always examine our lives making certain that we are showing others the good news of the gospel through the things that we do.

In conclusion, may we always be encouraged by remembering that we serve a might God who has given us every good and perfect gift that we need to be reconciled with Him. We are saved through grace by Christ alone. Our works do not save us but allow us to represent a genuine faith that will bring blessing to the lives of others. As we continue in this epistle let us keep in mind that our goal as a church family is to honor the God we serve with our lives both in how we speak and how we act. In all that we do let us be found to be faithful servants of our Lord who has done so much for us. Amen.