

WALK THE TALK**JAMES 2:14-16**

Have you ever noticed that the word “faith” can have very different meanings to people? As followers of Jesus, we automatically think how the word is used in the Bible. But people with no particular interest in Jesus or Scripture use the word “faith,” too. A few examples. “Faith is unquestioning belief.” (Ronald Hopfer) In what or who? “Believe in yourself, and the rest will fall into place. Have faith in your own abilities, work hard, and there is nothing you cannot accomplish.” (Brad Henry) “Keep your dreams alive. Understand to achieve anything requires faith and belief in yourself, vision, hard work, determination, and dedication. Remember all things are possible for those who believe.” (Gail Devers) This isn’t faith in God or Jesus. This is faith in some kind of force floating around that we need to learn how to access. This is faith as positive thinking. This is faith as sunny optimism. This is faith as self-confidence.

We’re taking a journey through the New Testament book of James in January and February. His letter had an abrupt, blunt, very direct style we might describe today as kind of “in your face.” The big, overall theme of James’ entire letter was spiritual maturity. As a key leader in the first 20-30 years of the establishment of the Christian faith, he so wanted to see new followers of Jesus - in his own church and other churches springing up around the Mediterranean world - grow up spiritually and become the people God wanted them to be. Faith is the dominant subject in the section of James we consider today. Faith is a key doctrine for Christians. We believe we’re saved by faith. The Bible says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith— and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Eph. 2:8-9 NIV) We believe we walk or live by faith in Jesus every day. “For we live by faith, not by sight.” (2 Cor. 5:7 NIV) We believe we must have faith to please God. “Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.... And it is impossible to please God without faith.” (Heb. 11:1, 6 NLT)

So what does James add to our understanding of faith? Let’s read what he wrote. Apparently there was considerable confusion among followers of Jesus in James’ day and time as to how to define faith and the relationship of faith to doing good deeds. I believe there’s still a great deal of confusion among Christians about the same subject 2,000 years later, so we need to hear and understand what James has to say. More importantly, if we believe James was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write what he wrote, then we need to live out what he says. First, of all, James was saying loud, clear, and in your face...

AVOID INADEQUATE FAITH.

James had a real problem with Christians who had wrong ideas about faith. Apparently there were those who believed you could get saved, receive eternal life, get right with God, go to Heaven – whatever language you prefer – by just believing the right things about God and Jesus with no observable impact on your actions or behavior. James dismissed that kind of faith here as useless, dead, and unable to save anyone. “So you

see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.... Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works." (Jam. 2:17, 26 NLT) Faith and good deeds are inseparable.

Apparently, there were other people who wanted to have their cake and eat it, too. In other words, they believed you could be saved by faith or you could be saved by doing good works. Both were legitimate ways to get and stay right with God. Just pick the way to God that suits you! James thought that argument was pretty dumb, too. "Now someone may argue, 'Some people have faith; others have good deeds.' But I say, 'How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds.'" (Jam. 2:18 NLT) Because faith and good deeds are inseparable, you can't pick and choose the one you like better for whatever reason.

For James, there was a whole lot of bad theology to avoid when it came to faith. For example, he implies you and I should avoid a merely creedal faith. When he says, "You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you!" (Jam. 2:19 NLT), he implies just believing in one God is not enough. What's a creed? No, it's not the name of yet another "Rocky" movie sequel! It's usually thought of as a formal statement of beliefs. An example of a Christian creedal statement is the Apostles' Creed. Remember, the very first Christians were all Jews, and as such they probably recited what is called the *Shema* at least three times a day even after becoming followers of Jesus. The *Shema* is found in Deuteronomy 6. "Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength." (Dt. 6:4-5 NLT) That was – and I believe, still is – the central or most important creed of Judaism.

Jesus certainly affirmed that creed and then He added another one to it – Leviticus 19:18 (NLT), "Love your neighbor as yourself." Some Bible scholars even call that combination the Jesus Creed – maybe the first or earliest creedal statement that Christians verbalized to each other: Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. Great theology! Absolutely true! Right from the lips of Jesus! But James was concerned about Christians who might go around reciting the Jesus Creed daily, but ignore the needs of poor, needy people all around them and think that was just fine and acceptable to God.

Of course, it's important to believe the right things about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, Scripture, and what all it means to be a Christian. Of course, doctrinal correctness is crucial. On the one hand, there's no value in believing what isn't true. Considerable harm can come from it. On the other hand, simply believing in and even professing all the right things is not what it means to be born again by the Spirit of God. There's far more to faith than that says James. Most of us have grown up hearing all you have to do to be a Christian is to "believe." James would probably say it all depends on what you mean by "believe." If it's just a matter of intellectually accepting or agreeing with statements about who Jesus is and what Jesus did (a creed) - and it

stops there - you have an inadequate faith. Maybe it's faith of a kind, but it's essentially a stalled, dead, useless faith. A merely creedal faith doesn't walk the talk.

I also hear James saying avoid a merely emotional faith. His example of why that's inadequate is unexpected. "You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror." (Jam. 2:19 NLT) Demons are James' example of an emotional faith! Demonic beings – spiritual beings attached to Satan - believe in God and they're very emotional about it. But their emotion doesn't mean they love, serve, and obey God. No, instead, they tremble in terror whenever they think about God! Interesting, isn't it? We human beings can choose to be atheists and agnostics when it comes to God, but not demons. James' point? Demons have both an intellectual and emotional "faith" in God, but it does them no good whatsoever.

I love to see someone – anyone – get all emotional about Jesus. I love it when tears of sorrow or gratitude fall from people's eyes as they recognize and acknowledge what Jesus has done for them. But is that faith? I love to hear how people feel forgiven, feel close to God, or feel comforted somehow in their interaction with God. But is that faith? Not necessarily. Emotion is great. We should want and expect our emotions to be deeply touched by any interaction with God. In my experience as a pastor, however, I've learned not to equate the presence of emotion with being born again or having faith. I've learned to wait and see. I've learned time has a way of telling whether someone has real faith in Jesus or not. Acknowledging great truths about God and getting all emotional about it doesn't get you very far, if it doesn't make a difference in your life. A merely emotional faith doesn't walk the talk.

Much has been made among Christians over the last 2,000 years regarding the alleged contradictions between what James wrote here and Paul's letters in the New Testament. And at first glance it does seem like the two men – both inspired by the same Holy Spirit – understood faith – and whatever it means to be right with God - very differently. After all, Paul wrote, "Yet we know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law." (Gal. 2:16 NLT) Paul sounds like he's saying faith alone makes you right with God, while James was saying faith plus good deeds makes you right with God.

I wish I had the time today to explore fully Paul and James' similarities and differences, because it's fascinating and important. But that's another message for another day. Here's a few observations and then back to the point James was making. It's like Paul and James had the same vocabulary, but a different dictionary! They used the same words, but didn't always define them the same way. For example, when Paul used the word "faith," he was usually referring to how a person starts to have a relationship with God, while James was more focused on how that relationship got lived out afterwards.

When Paul used the word “works,” he was usually referring to things that marked you as a Jew – circumcision, keeping the Sabbath, observing Mosaic laws. When James used the word “works,” he was usually referring to doing good deeds more in a general sense, but especially deeds of compassion for those in need. For Paul, Abraham was a great model of faith before any works. For James, Abraham was a great model of faith being completed by works. But both men believed that if you are genuine follower of Jesus, it will inevitably show up in how you live and treat others every day. Both men taught authentic faith walks the talk. Don’t assume James, or Peter, or Jesus taught something that contradicted each other. Now, secondly, James was saying loud, passionately, and in your face...

PRACTICE COMPLETE FAITH.

A couple of weeks ago we heard James say, “Just do it.” It’s not enough just to hear what God wants you to do. You need to do it. Don’t try to separate hearing from doing. They’re two sides of the same coin, so to speak. Yes, you’ve got to hear God’s Word in order to do God’s Word. But then doing God’s Word is the obvious and necessary outcome of hearing God’s Word. Likewise, James said when it comes to being right with God, saved, born again, converted – whatever word or phrase you prefer - don’t try to separate faith from good deeds. They’re also like two sides of the same coin. If you want to be right with God, you can’t have faith without good deeds or good deeds without faith. They’re inseparable.

So, what is a complete faith? Well, we saw earlier, it’s not merely creedal faith or emotional faith. Instead, a complete faith acts in godly ways. James’ example was showing practical compassion for people in extreme need. Helping people without adequate food, clothing, or shelter. This was probably uppermost in James’ mind for two reasons. One, we know from other passages in the New Testament that the church in Jerusalem that James pastored was full of economically poor believers. That’s why Paul organized a large offering from many of the churches he started and brought it to Jerusalem. James witnessed a lot of poverty every day among his flock so naturally this example would be uppermost. Two, Jews – and James was Jewish - were all about giving monetary or food gifts to people who were poor. Culturally and spiritually, it was a very important spiritual act for all Jews. Ironically, the larger Greco-Roman culture that dominated that part of the world at that time put very little value on helping the poor. All the more reason, James probably thought, to put a major emphasis on helping those who’d been pushed to the margins of society.

Obviously, responding to the needs of struggling people is still something God wants us to do today. Elsewhere the Bible says, “Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone—especially to those in the family of faith.” (Gal. 6:10 NLT) It also says, “If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God’s love be in that person? Dear children, let’s not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions.” (1 Jo. 3:17-18 NLT) I don’t think James would be offended, however, if we

extended the idea of doing good to include other godly acts: visiting prisoners, helping people who deal with some kind of addiction, being a healing presence in times of illness or great loss, being a good listener and a counselor, praying with and for others, and sharing your faith in Jesus. The point is real faith does good stuff.

It might well include things we do around here – reading with kids in local schools, supporting our missionaries with money and prayer, helping kids with their homework, providing a free bed, and giving gifts of food or clothing. The larger truth James wanted to drive home is that genuine faith in Jesus can never be self-absorbed, oblivious to the needs of others, or passively on the receiving end all the time. If your “faith” in Jesus isn’t being visibly demonstrated in some way, it’s dead, useless, and ample proof you’re not really saved. Faith acts. Faith cares. Faith does good stuff. Faith tries to improve the lives of other people in practical, tangible ways. What concerned James wasn’t how having faith in Jesus related to good deeds, but the absolute fact that good deeds are necessary to faith in Jesus. A complete faith walks the talk.

Way back in 1961, MIT meteorologist, Edward Lorenz, discovered that seemingly tiny, insignificant changes in weather data could help produce huge differences as a final result. Eventually, he called it “the butterfly effect.” In 1972, Lorenz presented a scientific paper entitled “Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set off a Tornado in Texas?” According to Lorenz’s theory, the butterfly’s wing-flapping doesn’t actually cause a tornado, but it can start a chain reaction leading to giant changes in world-wide weather patterns. In others words, even tiny, insignificant movements or actions can produce huge changes that affect millions of people. The Bible implies a similar butterfly effect in following Jesus. When we do small things—making a meal, visiting the sick, befriending the lonely, opening our home to a guest, praying with a friend—for seemingly “insignificant” people, it makes a huge difference in God’s eyes. There’s also a likely reverse butterfly effect. When we consistently fail to display godly acts – even small acts of kindness – it means a profound loss of opportunity in the spiritual realm.

If we were to extend the direction of James’ teaching here, it becomes only too clear that a complete faith means spiritual transformation continually. May God save you and me from a stalled faith! If you profess to be a follower of Jesus, but there’s no real evidence of a changed life - your values and behavior are still pretty similar to people who have use for Jesus – what’s authentic about your profession? It’s all well and good to believe all the right stuff, to have been baptized, to be a member of this or some other church, but do you love Jesus? Is the Holy Spirit still gently prodding and encouraging you to be more like Jesus or has He given up trying because it’s a waste of His time? Are you eager and willing to share your faith? Are you looking for ways to follow Jesus better and more intentionally? Are you looking for ways to be a blessing to others?

Are you just the same person you were spiritually a year ago or are you more like Jesus? How about 5 years ago? How about 25 years ago? No one can have faith in Jesus and remain the same person I was when I was born again. James says a stalled

faith cannot be a saving faith. That truth might make us uncomfortable. Good. Let it. You've heard the definition of good preaching, haven't you? Good preaching is when you comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. All of us here today need to hear that a complete faith means transformation is happening in our lives continually. We're becoming more like Jesus. A complete faith walks the talk.

When James brought in Abraham and Rahab as examples of a complete faith, he could not have chosen two people who were more polar opposites. It underlined the wonderful truth that a complete faith is available to anyone. Abraham was the much revered father of the Jewish people. Despite the fact he was childless at the time God spoke to him, he believed God's promise that he would have an enormous number of descendants. Finally, he and his wife, Sarah, had a son named Isaac. But then God commanded Abraham to kill Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham was ready to do it, but God stopped him at the last moment, and provided a ram to sacrifice instead.

Rahab was a woman living at the same time the Israelites, on their way to the Promised Land, sought to make the city she lived in, Jericho, the first target of their invasion. The leader of the Israelites, Joshua, sent two spies to check out Jericho's defenses. Rahab ran the Motel 6 in Jericho, so the spies stayed at her place. When Jericho's police showed up looking for the men, she hid them and helped them escape. She told the men she'd become a believer in and follower of Israel's God. Rahab was not Jewish. She was a pagan. Oh, and by the way, she had an interesting second job. She was a prostitute! But when Jericho was invaded, Joshua spared her life. She joined God's people and apparently married an Israelite, because Scripture tells us she became an ancestor of two very notable people: King David and Jesus Himself.

Very different people. But Abraham and Rahab had something powerful in common. Saving faith. Complete faith. What if Abraham had faith when God told him he would have many descendants, but then he refused to sacrifice Isaac at the Lord's command? His faith would have been revealed as useless and dead. Instead, he raised his knife above his head ready to plunge it into the chest of his beloved son, but God stopped him. What if Rahab said she believed in the God of Israel, but then delivered the two spies into the hands of Jericho's police? Her faith would have been revealed as useless and dead. Instead, she risked her life to protect them. Faith might start out as something you believe, but it's completed when you act. Very different people, yes, but they shared a completed faith. A complete faith walks the talk.

Francis Chan is a Christian author and pastor. Some years ago, a missionary came to his church and told a beautiful story about sharing the gospel with a remote tribe in Papua New Guinea. At the end of the story this missionary said, "I really want to give credit to Vaughn, my former youth pastor, who loved me and inspired me to live for Christ and share the gospel with others." The next week another speaker came to Chan's church and he challenged the congregation to start sponsoring kids living in poverty. This second speaker said, "I'm involved in this ministry because of my youth

pastor, a guy named Vaughn." It was discovered these two speakers – who spoke a week part – just happened to have been in the same youth group!

The third week another speaker shared about his ministry at a rescue mission in the inner city of Los Angeles. His name was Dan. After Dan's talk, Francis Chan casually mentioned, "It was so weird: the last two weeks both of our speakers mentioned how much impact their youth pastor, Vaughn, had on them." Dan looked surprised and then said, "Oh, I know Vaughn. He's a pastor in San Diego now, and he takes people into the dumps in Tijuana where kids are picking through the garbage. I was just with Vaughn in Tijuana. We walked around in the city, and these kids would just run up to him. He would show such deep love and affection for them. He'd hug them and have gifts and food for them. It was eerie: the whole time I was walking with Vaughn, I kept thinking, If Jesus was on earth, I think this is what it would feel like to walk with Him. Vaughn just loved everyone he ran into, and he would tell them about God. People were just drawn to his love and affection." And then Dan said this, "The day I spent with Vaughn was the closest thing I've ever experienced to walking with Jesus."

Would anyone in their right mind say that about you or me? "The day I spent with (put your name in there) was the closest thing I've ever experienced to walking with Jesus." Is that what you would want them to say? "Wow, he's a lot like Jesus. Wow, she's a lot like Jesus." Let's avoid an inadequate faith. Let's practice a complete faith. A complete faith walks the talk. When we do that, people might well say "Wow, he's a lot like Jesus. Wow, she's a lot like Jesus."