

Acting on Faith \* James 2:14-26

May 13, 2018 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

Our passage this morning is one of the most controversial passages in the whole of the Bible; controversial because it seems to say something that contradicts one of the most central doctrines of the Christian faith – Paul says quite rightly [that people are] ~~28 For we maintain that a person is justified~~ by faith apart from the works of the law (Romans 3:28) – we are saved by faith alone - and yet here in James, James writes: ~~24 You see that~~ a person is justified by works and *not* by faith alone. (Jam 2:24 ESV).

Well boy, which is it? Are we made right with God by faith alone or are we made right with God by what we do?

That apparent discrepancy led no less a giant than Martin Luther to call James ‘the epistle of straw’ and he suggested that he would quite like to throw the whole book of James into the stove (Platt, CCEC).

Now I have to admit that Luther could be a bit of a drama queen and on this point, he IS being a little overdramatic because Luther himself would acknowledge that works DO play a significant role in the life of a believer.

So what I want to do this morning is think with you together about how faith and works and salvation fit together. Are we saved by faith? By faith AND works? How exactly do faith and works relate to each other? How does this all work?

To answer those questions here this morning, I want to use this passage in James to show you three things:

1. We are saved by faith alone.
2. Our faith is not belief alone.
3. Belief in action is saving faith.

Let’s start with the first one:

We are saved by faith alone.

Paul says that in Romans - ~~28 For we maintain that a person is~~ *justified by faith* apart from the works of the law (Romans 3:28).

Jesus says it time and again - 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (Joh 3:16 NIV). Not ‘whosoever works hard enough’– but whoever BELIEVES will have eternal life.

And James says it too, if you look closely enough. Look at James 2, verse 23.

23 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 (Jam 2:23 NIV).

James pointing us back to a really big event in salvation history. Way back in Genesis 15, God says to Abraham "I am going to bless you and make you into a nation that can bless others. I will make your children more numerous than the stars in the sky and you will be big time blessed." Now that sounds awesome, but there's a problem. Abraham has no children. For YEARS, he and his wife had been barren. All of his past experiences have told him – there's no way you can have kids – but Abraham chose to put more faith in God than in his circumstances. And what does it say happened?

Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

That is, Abraham believed God and God favoured him because Abraham trusted Him.

That's a defining moment in Abraham's life and not his alone. His experience becomes the paradigm for the life of faith.

Just as Abraham received God's favour by faith, we receive God's favour by faith. And Paul neatly pins it down – the fullest expression of God's favour is salvation – and we are saved by faith.

When Paul says that, he was writing to people who thought that they could gain God's favour by what they did, but in Romans, Paul points them back to Abraham and says – wait, what was HIS experience? Abraham was not favoured by God because of what he did, God favoured him because Abraham trusted him. Abraham BELIEVED God and God made Him righteous on the basis of that belief.'

*(What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter?*

*2 If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about--but not before God.*

*3 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.")*

The fact that James points to this very same event in Abraham's life means that he understands that saving faith is rooted in belief. He quotes that very line – 'Abraham BELIEVED God' and God favoured him. Paul and James agree - we CANNOT make ourselves good enough for God; it is only by faith that we are saved.

But hold on – you might say. Doesn't James say the exact opposite in the very next verse?

Verse 23– Abraham believed God and it was credited to Him as righteousness; (24) you see that a person is justified by what he does and NOT by faith alone. What's going on here?

Well, here's the thing. When Paul says 'we are saved by faith alone' he's talking about how people are saved. By faith, not by works.

When James says 'we are saved by what we do and not faith alone,' he is talking about how saved people act – saved people naturally put their faith into action.

In the words of Frances Gench, Paul is talking about obstetrics (how life begins) and James is talking about obstetrics and geriatrics (how life matures) (Blomberg et al, 139).

Paul is talking about how people are saved; James is talking about how saved people live.

And James says – yes, saved by faith – but faith is not belief alone. Faith is not simply ‘believing.’

Go up to verse 14 –

14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

James is quite bluntly asking us to consider that faith that limits itself to belief alone may not actually be faith. Can that sort of faith – one not expressed in action – be saving faith? What good is it?

And he illustrates the point with this hypothetical situation. Verse 15 -

15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.

16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Faith is not simply belief – a sentiment that says – oh I believe that God is good. Faith is action that backs up that sentiment. Faith *believes* that God is good AND extends the goodness of God into the world.

Like if somebody’s house burned down in our community, and I came out to your house and looked around the smoldering rubble of your home and then said ‘well, God bless, stay warm and well fed’ then I wouldn’t have done much, would I? The sentiment is there – I wish you well – but it’s not backed up by action that will help you to do well.

Faith that stops at belief is the same way – James says. If a person saved by faith limits their faith to belief, then that is in fact a dead faith (verse 17 says). Workless faith is worthless faith.

But again, somebody might interject, as in verse 18 and say – some people have faith and some people have works. As long as I have one, I don’t really need the other, right? That’s not an uncommon thought these days – if people believe in some general sense that God exists, they feel as though they’ve done their duty and there’s no reason to do anything about it.

But James says – whoa whoa whoa – even demons believe in God – and it makes them shudder and tremble – but that doesn’t mean that they are saved. They believe but they don’t do anything about it – that’s not saving faith.

Our actions reveal what we truly believe. “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do” (Jam 2:18 NIV).

Some people, like the person in verse 18, want to think of faith and works as different kinds of apples side by side in the grocery store. You’ve got a red delicious, you’ve got a granny smith – you don’t need them both – as you as you have one, it’ll keep the doctor away.

But that’s really not the best way to think about faith and works; we should probably be thinking of them more like an apple tree and its fruit.

An apple tree by definition produces apples and if it’s not producing apples, then you start to wonder, well, what good is that? If there’s no fruit, is it really an apple tree?

James is showing us here that faith is the same way – faith naturally produces good deeds and if it doesn’t, then you start to wonder, is that really faith?

Faith is not limited to belief alone - BUT – when you put belief put into action, that is indeed saving faith. Belief in action confirms “yes this person has been saved by faith.”

And that’s why James brings Abraham into it.

Verse 21 - 21 Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

Well, let’s think about that. When exactly did ‘Abraham believe God and it was credited to him as righteousness’? Genesis 15 – when he trusted God’s promise. He received God’s favor by faith. But here, with Isaac on the altar, James is talking about Genesis 22, events that happened as many as thirty years later.

To use our language, Abraham was saved by faith in Genesis 15 and then in Genesis 22, his actions demonstrated that he really DID have faith.

That’s what James says in verse 22 –

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

23 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.

That language of ‘and the Scripture was fulfilled’ seems to imply that Abraham had saving faith back in Genesis 15, but it wasn’t entirely complete until Genesis 22. When he ACTED on his faith, obeying God, that faith was made complete. The statement that he was righteous back in Genesis 15 was fulfilled in Genesis 22 - and his faith was brought to maturity.

So James says in verse 24 -

24 You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone (Jam 2:20-24 NIV).

A person receives God's favour by faith alone but if their actions don't reflect it, then you have to wonder if that person has really received God's favour. Our actions authenticate our belief. Because true saving faith is belief that is expressed in action.

And that's the same point that Rahab's experience makes – 25 -

25 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?

Rahab believed that God was coming to judge her city and she believed that God could be merciful and so she acted on that belief and she was delivered. She put her faith into action. That's saving faith.

And so James can say - 26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead (Jam 2:26 NIV).

Faith without works is dead but on the flip side – belief in action is real, living faith.

We are saved by faith alone but faith is not belief alone. Belief in action is saving faith.

To pull this altogether, let me put it like this:

People are saved by faith and saved people put their faith into action.

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No amount of good works will make us right with God. No amount of self-denial or good deeds or charitable giving will make up for the fact that we have all, at various points in our lives, told the God who loves and prospers us that we don't really want to live the way He knows is best. Only Jesus' atoning blood can do that, and the only way to receive that saving gift is by grace, through faith.

If you have never received this grace from God, you can stop trying to impress God, you can stop keeping a subconscious tally of your good deeds vs your bad ones. I remember trying to live like that, trying to balance out my good and my bad, thinking – I'd better start stockpiling some good b/c I've done some garbage. Jesus died on the Cross to save us, not because of the good things that we did, but because of His unending mercy – put your faith in Him and He will save you for eternity. We are saved by faith alone.

But don't stop there.

Let that faith blossom into action. Think about the mercy with which God has treated you and extend that to others. Think about how Christ became poor to make us rich and allow that to impact how you use your money. Don't think only of your own interests, but look also to the interests of others, just as Jesus did. Every day, start the day by praying God, help me to express my faith in the way I interact with the world today.

And if you've called yourself a Christian all your life but never really put that faith into action, I think James pushes us to ask, 'well what good is that? Is that really saving faith?' Salvation IS entirely by faith but saved people inevitably put that faith into action. If God has given you new life, then He has also given you work boots; get your faith into them and put them into action.

People are saved by faith and saved people put their faith into action.

#### BENEDICTION

17. 2 Th. 2:16-17 - Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.