

Deeds Alone vs Faith Alone?

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[0 : 0 0] and deeds. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, go in peace, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, you have faith, I have deeds. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God, good, even the demons believe that, and shudder. You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 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. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do, and not by faith alone. 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? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. This is the word of the Lord.

Thank you. Good. Please keep your Bibles open at James chapter 2, and let's pray as we ask for God's help to understand his words to us. Let's pray. We thank you so much, Heavenly Father, for the freedom we have to gather around your word together, and we pray, please, that you would help us to understand it, help us to see where it connects with our own lives, help us to have open ears and soft hearts to respond rightly to what you say to us this evening. And this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

If I were to ask you the question, what does a real Christian look like, how would you answer that? If you had to complete the sentence, the real Christian, what would you say? 20 seconds with your neighbor. The real Christian, what would you say? What's the but bit in that sentence? Go, just speak, please. Speak to your neighbor. Excellent. Okay, minor technical issue there.

There are so many ways of completing that sentence, aren't there? In this letter, the answer might be something like this. The real Christian stops behaving disgracefully to other Christians. Now, that's a surprising definition of a Christian, isn't it? And you could be forgiven for saying, well, look, that's so obvious. Why would you need a letter in the Bible to teach you that?

Isn't it obvious that that's how Christians ought to behave towards one another? And the answer to that is, well, yes, it's obvious, but how far do you have to search in this world to find a Christian congregation full of internal conflict? How far? Have a look at the grudges sometimes held within Christian congregations, people who simply can't get on with one another. Have a look at the things that people say about their church leaders over Sunday lunch, you know, roast the pastor, that kind of thing. Wait until you find yourself struggling with hurt at the hands of another believer, and then see how easy you feel it is to just get on well with one another. Well, James seems to be writing to people who are behaving particularly badly towards one another. We don't know all the contributory factors in this letter. In the background, there's a degree of persecution, possibly related. There's financial hardship among some, financial exploitation among others, but in the foreground, a whole set of really bad behaviors. And it's very important at this point to remind ourselves that Christians are not by nature good people. If you're here investigating the Christian message this evening, welcome. It's great to have you here. You're in the bunch of, you're in the middle of a bunch of not good people. These are not good people, but forgiven people. And not made perfect yet, and there's plenty of potential for behaving badly towards one another in the hearts of ordinary Christian believers. And isn't it true, if you've been a

[5 : 09] Christian for a while, that you find that every day you find yourself needing to turn away from your sins and to submit to God's loving rule all over again and to receive his forgiveness all over again?

Well, James wants his readers to do that. Martin quoted earlier on the key verse from chapter 1, verse 21. Just look at that, please, would you? Chapter 1, verse 21. Here's the headline imperative of this letter written to Christians behaving badly. It's basically, stop doing it and believe the Christian message again. Verse 21. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that's so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you. However, he knows that his readers may be resistant to responding like this. How do you deal with the person who says, well, yes, of course I need the good news. And of course I need to repent. And of course I need forgiveness, of course, but continues to think and act negatively towards those who have, like him or her, received mercy. Well, what James does in chapter 2 is to say, look at your behavior. Look at it. No matter what you say, that is not behavior.

That fits with being a forgiven person. Now we're going to look at the second half of chapter 2 today. And the thread that runs through this section is unity and division. And we're going to look at it under two headings. First, the dividedness of dead faith. And second, the unity of saving faith. So first, the dividedness of dead faith. Verse 14. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, go in peace, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about their physical needs. What good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it's not accompanied by action, is dead. Notice he's writing to people who say they have faith.

But, says James, is your faith alive? Or is it just talk? And the example he gives, possibly an example that isn't all that hypothetical, is an example where deadness of faith is demonstrated by a division between knowing and doing. The example is of someone in the Christian family in need and the believer doing nothing about the need. It's a pretty gross example actually, isn't it? Look at it.

A fellow Christian, one of the church family, a brother or sister, without clothing and daily food. Just not having the ordinary stuff required for life. It's a pretty obvious need if you were to meet it, don't you think? And probably not all that hard to do something useful about. And notice how sympathetic words are spoken, keep warm and be well fed, go in peace. Sympathetic sounding words, but nothing is actually done. The need is recognized.

[9 : 04] It's clear in the words spoken that the person needs food and clothing and shelter, but nothing is done. And James says, verse 16, well, fat lot of good that is.

That sort of faith is just dead faith. You see, the claim to have faith in God in verse 14 is shown to be worthless when fine sounding words are spoken and nothing is done that fits with those words.

Notice there's plenty of talk here, verse 14. A claim to faith in God. Verse 16, a claim to concern for God's people.

Plenty of talk, but nothing is done. And the point that James is making is this. The genuineness of faith in God is shown by the genuineness of your response to your Christian brother or sister in serious need.

Serious, obvious need. Now, let me say, there are plenty here this evening, I'm sure, with sensitive consciences who at this point are beginning to despair.

[10 : 17] Because you find yourself personally unable to meet all the needs in front of you. You know, you meet people in need all the time. And you see needs within the Christian family all the time.

And you think to yourself, oh, I'm trying, but I can't keep up with those. I can't do everything. Folks, that is not the mind that James is dealing with here. The situation in this letter is written to deal with is unrepented of horrible behavior towards one another.

It's not small failures of love here. And this example in chapter 2 is an example of callous hard-heartedness. Good-sounding words, but terrible neglect.

He's talking about the kind of attitude which never intended to do even the smallest thing to help the person. And yet is deceiving itself that it really does trust God.

Folks, it's easy to say things, but if our words towards God's people are as empty as this, it shows that our claim to faith is just as empty.

[11 : 30] It's a gross example. Now, of course, this sort of thing does happen. I came across a letter a little while ago written to a Christian from another person positioning themselves as a Christian.

And the person who wrote it spoke as though they were someone who knew God personally and claimed to be a peaceable person, interestingly, verse 16.

And yet the whole letter, though full of spiritual-sounding speech, was just overflowing with malice. Things untrue, hostile, designed to hurt the person receiving the letter.

all dressed up in the language of piety. Now, James would call that, I'm pretty sure, dead faith. If you speak like that to God and to people, the only person you're fooling is yourself, says James.

It doesn't matter what you say about God. If you hate his people, you hate him. And this letter is full of hatred. Now, folks, this is absolutely typical of James.

[12 : 41] You'll find it all the way through. The way we relate to God's people shows precisely how things are between us and God. Precisely. The dividedness of dead faith, then.

The human need is seen and known. And though pious words are spoken, nothing is done to meet the need. And that, says James, says something about a person's attitude to God.

The dividedness of dead faith. Secondly, he talks about the unity of saving faith. And what James does next is to take us from the dividedness that so characterizes human behavior to the unity of God.

The big unity idea is found here in verse 19. You believe, says James to his hearers, literally, that God is one. Now, let's read verse 17 again.

In the same way, faith by itself, if it's not accompanied by action, is dead. And then, James seems to anticipate a bit of pushback, an objection.

[13 : 54] It's in verse 18. And at first sight, it's a bit perplexing. Let me read it. Someone will say, you have faith, I have deeds. And the thing that's perplexing about this is that you might expect it to be the other way round.

I have faith and you have works. Why? Because all the way through this section, we're dealing with people who claim to have faith, but don't want to do certain things.

Verse 14. What good is it to say you have faith if you don't do certain things? Verse 17. Faith, if it doesn't have actions, is dead.

Verse 18. Show me your faith without deeds if you can. Verse 20. Do you want to be shown that faith without deeds is useless? All the way through the section, he's saying that real faith is shown in doing certain things.

See, you would expect the objection to be, well, I have faith, but you have works. It's not all that easy to know why he says it the other way round. My best guess is that the objector he imagines is saying something like this.

[15 : 06] Well, some people are faith people. Some people are action people. They're both gifts of God, faith and deeds. They don't have to go around together, do they, all the time?

One has the gift of faith. Another has the gift of doing. They don't really need to be all that joined up, do they? Rubbish, says James. Show me your faith without your deeds, and I'll show you my faith by my deeds.

And he gives an example. Verse 19. You believe that there is one God? Good. Even the demons believe that. And shudder.

The oneness of God is the big central statement of Jewish faith. Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. This is one of the great glories of the world we live in, actually, folks.

There is one God, and he's a unity. He's one. It's a tremendous relief, because if you know the true God, you don't have multiple powers to please all the time in life.

[16 : 12] There is one benevolent power ruling over everything in your life, even though your life might seem chaotic. And what's more, he's undivided.

He's one. He's always completely himself, true to himself, consistent in contrast with us human beings, who are prone to being two-faced, wavering in our opinions.

You always know where you are with the ruler of the universe, because there's one of him, and he's always himself. It's a tremendous, tremendous truth.

Now, you believe that, do you, says James? Well, bully for you. Great. Wonderful.

How splendid for you. And the tone, I think, is deeply sarcastic at this point. If you really believe that, you do something, because true faith is always united with deeds.

[17 : 13] And the example he chooses here is the example of demons. Look at verse 19. Even the demons believe that there's one God and shudder.

Now, folks, this is a really shocking example. If you're just falling asleep, just slap yourself around a bit and wake up. This is a shocking example. He's comparing these believers unfavorably with demons.

Demons. Here's how it works. You believe that God is one. Well, so do the demons. And they shudder. Demons are not atheists.

They believe in God. And as a result, they shudder. You see, it's not the right response to God. But at least it's a joined-up response.

They believe. And boy, does that have an impact. You guys, on the other hand, says James, you believe that God is one and you do nothing for the believer in need.

[18 : 21] You see the division there? There's no join-up between what you say and what you do, what you believe and how you act. If my thoughts about God and my actions towards his people don't match up, that says something about my thoughts about God.

It shows that I'm a divided person. It does not look as though I have one Lord ruling over all of me. It's like my life is in bits.

The way I think and the way I act, they're not connected. Now, folks, this is important to say. Faith is never merely a matter of the intellect, the thoughts. What we believe is never just what we think.

It's what we fall into line with as beings. For what we actually believe can never just be seen by what we put on paper or what we say with our mouths.

What we believe is demonstrated by what we do and especially what we do in relation to God's people. And so James goes on to talk about the unity of saving faith.

[19 : 29] And he gives two examples from the Bible of people whose faith and actions were joined up. And before we look at these two, let me just say something about verse 24.

You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. And many people have looked at this and said, well, hang on. Doesn't the Apostle Paul say somewhere more than once exactly the opposite of this, that a person is justified not by works but by faith alone?

What's going on? Do they disagree with one another? And pages and pages and pages are written in commentaries about this. Is there a contradiction? If so, who's right?

And so on. Folks, I honestly don't think it's that complicated. Paul and James are writing to very different situations. When Paul says in his letters that believers are justified not by works but by faith alone, the problem he's writing to deal with is people who say that in some measure Gentile believers have to take on Jewish law to be properly right with God.

Dependent trust on Jesus, that's not enough. You have to add law keeping to it as well. And Paul says, no, you don't. Faith alone, that's what it is.

[21 : 01] James is dealing with a totally different situation from that. He's dealing with people who want to say that they have faith in God but are unwilling to love one another. It's a totally different situation.

That is the works that James is talking about. So to the group who insist on Jewish law keeping, Paul says, no, it's faith in Christ alone. That's how you get right with God.

And to people who go on, who appear to be happy to go on wounding one another, James says, that faith isn't real faith at all if it's not accompanied by different behavior.

Do you see there are totally different situations being addressed here. The words sound similar but the context is completely different. Okay, now let's look at these two examples. Two Old Testament examples to show that faith without deeds is dead.

That's where he's heading. Look at verse 26. As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. Two examples then of people who did things because of their faith.

[22 : 07] The first one is Abraham and he's an example of trust leading to obedience. Trust leading to obedience. Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

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. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. Now keep a finger in James chapter two, please.

And I'd like you to turn right back to Genesis chapter 15. Right back at the beginning of the Bible. It's in fact page 15 on your Bible. Genesis chapter 15. Abraham's a very important Bible character.

Important because he trusted God. God gave him a promise and he believed it. Genesis chapter 15. Let me sketch in the situation.

[23 : 19] This promise in fact starts in chapter 12, but I'll pick it up in chapter 15. God makes a promise to bless Abraham and through him the whole world.

And part of the promise is that God will provide Abraham with descendants. Now Abraham and his wife do not have children of their own. So Abraham thinks to himself, how might that promise come true that I'm going to have children?

Perhaps, verse two, perhaps my servant might be my heir. And God says, verse four, no, your very own son's going to be your heir.

He took him outside and said, look up at the sky and count the stars if indeed you can count them. Then he said to him, so shall your offspring be. Abraham believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Those are the key words. Now this phrase is picked up in the Bible as the great example of what real faith is. You don't get right with God by your own efforts. You get right with God by trusting his promises.

[24 : 26] You receive all the blessings God has to give you of eternal life and friendship with God, not by what you do, but by trusting God's promise about what he will do.

Now a few chapters on in chapter 22, God trusted whether Abraham really believed his promise. Now by this time, Abraham's received a child of his very own with his very own wife, something that looked very unlikely years beforehand, but God has made it happen.

Here is the promised child. He's eventually arrived and Abraham's told to go and sacrifice the promised child. Now of course, God's purpose is not to get him to kill the child, but rather to see if Abraham will trust him, to see if Abraham would obey him having believed his promise.

Now go back to James chapter two, please. It turns out that Abraham does have enough confidence to believe God. Look at chapter two, verse 21. Was not our father Abraham considered righteous?

Those words are taken from Genesis 15 for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. Now Genesis 15 says Abraham was considered righteous when he believed God's promise.

[25 : 50] James says that righteousness was brought to fulfillment in Abraham's obedient trust in God's command years later.

What James is saying here in chapter two is that Abraham's trust in God made him willing to obey God even when obedience was hard.

Why is that a good example here? Well, James wants these people to obey God and it will be hard. And so we have an example of someone who not only was said to have trusted God, but whose trust in God led to obedient action.

If I don't do what God tells me to do, it proves that at one level or another, I don't trust him. Don't think he's telling me the right things.

Don't think he's got my best interests at heart or something like that. But Abraham's example is an example of a man whose real trust led to obedience. You see, they were joined together.

[27 : 01] There was a unity there between his faith and his obedience. Second example comes from a little bit later in the Bible and it's the example of Rahab and she's an example of trust leading to loyalty.

Now, we haven't got time to visit it, but you'll find the story in Joshua chapter two. Rahab is a prostitute. She comes from a place called Jericho inside the land of Canaan. The people of Israel are about to occupy the land of Canaan and take the city of Jericho.

Some Hebrew spies come to her house. She shelters them from her own people at considerable risk to herself. And she does it, she says, because she's heard all about the God of the Hebrew people and she believes that their God is the true God.

And her trust in the true God is demonstrated by the fact that she shelters the spies at her own risk.

She does it because of what she believes about God. In other words, her belief in God leads her to be loyal to God's people. Two examples then, two quick ones of trust leading to obedience and a trust leading to loyalty to God's people.

[28 : 32] If I really trust God, I'll do what he says. If I really trust God, I'll act for the good of his people and side with them. And earlier on in James chapter 2, if you were here last week, some of the people there are siding with the oppressors of God's people.

If I won't obey him when he tells me that I'm not allowed to treat my brothers with indifference and hostility, I don't really trust him. If I won't side with and protect and help God's people when they're in need, it shows that I don't really trust him.

Let me conclude then. In this chapter, there are two uncomfortably close to home examples and they're designed to make James' readers think about how their behavior demonstrates an attitude to God.

They're siding with the persecutors when they should be siding with the persecuted. They know the need of the believer, but they're not doing anything about it. Let me draw one or two conclusions from this.

Number one, such a wonderful and simple and straightforward truth. God loves his people. Really loves them.

[29 : 53] Loves them with a great love. From the greatest of them to the least of them, that love is expressed in precisely the same way.

The giving of the Lord Jesus Christ to be the bearer of their sins. It's a great love and all God's people experience it from the biggest to the smallest.

God's love for his people is even and deep and loyal and committed. And says James, it is so not like the father of the family when the children hate each other or side with those who are persecuting the family.

I can tell my attitude to God through my attitude to the people of God. It's uncomfortable, but true. So let me say three things flowing out from this great and simple truth that God loves his people deeply.

Number one, it is terrible when believers start behaving maliciously towards others. And just in case that might be you now or just in case you might find yourself in that position in the future, if you've been behaving maliciously towards your brothers and sisters, that says something about you and God, not just you and them.

[31 : 25] And those things need to be turned away from. Second thing, flowing from the fact that God loves us, is that we can love God.

It's a wonderful truth. And some of us will feel, especially if you've been going on at the Christian life for some time, am I really able to love God adequately in response to what he's done?

And the answer that James would give would be, well, get on with loving your brothers and sisters. Because it shows whether you love God. And it's something doable.

And the wonderful thing about that is that ordinary sacrificial love, you don't have to be a superstar to be able to do that. You don't have to be super intelligent. You don't have to be a great achiever in the world's eyes.

Ordinary people, ordinary believers can love one another genuinely. So go to it, brothers and sisters.

[32 : 22] Go to it. And do it. Third, God loves his people. We can experience that if we're not yet members of God's people.

If you're here, looking in from the outside, it's great to have you. One of the great joys of being a Christian is being in a group of people who are accepted not because of their performance, not because of their brilliance, but rather because of God's amazing love.

And it's a wonderful thing to belong to that. Not just to belong to God, but to belong to his people. Because the normal struggles of having to compete to get to the top in life don't need to operate in church.

It's a great blessing. Let me say secondly, Christian faith is a joined up thing. Here the example is the join up between faith in God and loving his people.

They go together. And of course, if you know your heart at all, you'll know how divided your heart is. We're all prone to being divided, being double-minded, not being single-minded in response to God.

[33 : 31] And that double-mindedness that we bump into in our own lives is just something that's there. It's there in our hearts, not just something we can free ourselves from suddenly one day. It's not unusual to have to be turning away from division of being to unity of being.

In fact, it's a daily thing if you're a believer. James' remedy is there in chapter 1, verse 21. Get rid of all moral filth, the evil that's so prevalent, the divided heart, and humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you.

That's the invitation to everybody at the start of the Christian life and it's the invitation to every Christian every day all the way through the Christian life. So with that in mind, let's have a moment of quiet and let's respond in our own hearts to what God has said to us and then I'll lead us in prayer.

David writes in Psalm 86, Teach me your way, Lord, that I may rely on your faithfulness. Give me an undivided heart that I may fear your name.

We thank you, Heavenly Father, for this penetrating letter.

[34 : 59] We thank you for James' great concern that his readers should be united in heart.

should behave towards one another with the kind of love that you have shown to them.

We thank you, Heavenly Father, that you are a God of magnificent and generous love. Thank you that you do not treat us as our sins deserve.

Thank you that we are made right with you not because of our own performance but entirely because of the performance of the Lord Jesus on our behalf. We praise you for him and we pray that the love you have shown to us might overflow into our own lives and our love for other people.

We pray, Heavenly Father, you guard our unity as a congregation. We pray that under pressure we might not grow angry with one another or fall out with one another.

[36 : 19] We pray that you would help us to continue to forgive one another, to be kind and generous to those in need. We thank you so much that all through history your people have been marked by kindness and generosity towards one another and towards others.

and we pray that the same thing might be true of us. Heavenly Father, if there are things we need to turn away from today in response to your word, please help us to put those things away and to believe all over again the gospel message that can save us.

These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.