

Act by Faith

James 2:14-26

Key Verse: 2:26

“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

There is a story that you might have heard. It goes like this: A man is sitting on his porch as floodwaters rise. A woman floats by in a boat, asking if the man needs help. “No, thank you,” says the man, “I’m trusting in the Lord.” The waters rise higher, sending the man upstairs. A raft full of people floats by his second story window. “Get in,” they say, “there’s plenty of room.” “No thanks,” says the man, “I’m trusting in the Lord.” The floodwaters keep rising, pushing the man up to the roof. A helicopter swoops in, lowering its ladder for the man. “Thanks anyway,” shouts the man, “I’m trusting in the Lord.” Finally, the man is swept away in the torrent and drowns. At the gates of Heaven, the man asks God, “Why didn’t you save me?” “What do you mean?” replies God, “I sent two boats and a helicopter.” The man in that story seemed to have faith in God. He said that he trusted God and he emphatically refused any help from people so that he could rely solely on God. The man didn’t act on his faith; he just sat around waiting until he died in the flood. Acting on our faith is an important part of being a Christian. I mean if we can’t act on the faith that we say that we have, then do we really have faith? If we say that we believe in God, but don’t act like it, then what do we believe about God?

James, the author of this book, had similar questions. Look at the beginning of our passage, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?” (14) Saving faith is a fundamental part of Christianity. If you remember from our Romans and Galatians studies, we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone. (Romans 3:28, Galatians 2:16) Only Jesus can save us from a fate that is worse than death. He died on the cross to take the punishment of our sins, our wrongdoings. He was buried in a tomb and rose from the dead on the third day. Jesus rose to life, because death could not keep its hold on him, and he rose to sit at God’s right hand in heaven. He did this for his glory and he did it for our sake. This is what we believe and have faith in. We believe that Jesus is sovereign and is in charge of everything. And we believe that God is good, he loves his children and he has what is best in mind for them. It is faith in these things that saves us from the fires of hell. But, honestly, what does this faith actually look like? How do we know that we have faith?

We’ve all experienced that uncertainty. We’ve all wondered at some point or another, “what does it mean to really believe?” If you have thought that, then you are not alone. That’s actually the main point of James’ letter. When you look at James’ letter, there are a lot of practical words. It seems to be a lot of do this, do that, and don’t do that. When you read through it, the book looks like it contradicts a lot of what Paul wrote in Galatians and Romans, which are the two previous books that we have studied. All of our sermons are on the website, if you need to catch up. In those two books, Paul writes, like I have said earlier, that we are justified by faith alone. Here, in this particular passage, James writes, “that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.” Those sound like the opposite, but when you think about it, they are complimentary. Paul writes that we are made righteous by our faith, but James writes that we are considered righteous by actions. There is a subtle difference in words that means a world of difference. Paul says “made righteous”; James says “considered righteous”. Some of your translations might say that James uses the word “justified”. The meaning is the same. Paul is talking about how we get justified, and James is talking about how we live justified. Paul is talking about the process of being made right, and James is talking about the evidence that we have been made right.

Think of it like this (this is an example that I have heard): Suppose you are going out to dinner with a close friend. You eat, you have a good time, and you talk. At the end of the meal, when it is time for the check, your friend says, "I got it. Dinner is on me. I'll pay the bill." Your friend pays your debt for the meal in full and you owe nothing. That is what Paul is talking about when we are justified by faith. The price for our sins has already been paid. We don't owe anything any more. Jesus paid the bill. However, if at the end of the meal, you get up and go to the bathroom, and while you are gone, your friend pays the bill. It's the same thing, your friend pays the bill and you owe nothing. You didn't see it happen. So, how do you know that your friend paid the bill? What proof is there that you are not in debt and if you walk out of the restaurant, you won't be considered a thief? Your friend has a receipt and that receipt is proof that the bill was paid. James is talking about the receipt. Like with Paul, Jesus paid the bill, but James is talking about having proof that our faith saved us, and that proof comes from a changed life. I wanted to talk about this early on, because when you have the right view on things, the passage makes a lot more sense.

Let's go back to the questions, "what does faith look like?" or "what does it mean to really believe?" A saved life is different than a life that is not saved. A saved life is changed by the fact that a person was saved. The things that you do are different before you are saved and after you are saved. This past week, three women in Cleveland, Ohio were rescued from ten years of captivity in a house. They were saved. Now that they are saved, these women can and will act differently than they did under captivity. They are no longer confined to that one house, but they are free to move wherever they want. In the same way, a life saved from sin acts differently than a life that is enslaved to sin. A life enslaved to sin is selfish and cares only about himself. They have to look out for number one, because no one will look out for them. A changed life is selfless and is willing to help others.

I bring this up because of what James writes in verses 15-16, "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?" It's kind of an absurd example, but I honestly believe that James loves these absurd examples to prove a point. If you saw somebody who was in desperate need in that they were naked and starving, would you simply just say, "God be with you" or "I'll pray for you"? Maybe. We kind of do it all the time. I've mentioned it before: we all have big problems in our lives. Some problems are very dire and others are less so, although they feel no less dire to that person. We have heard about each other's problems. Our hearts are heavy for them, but what have we done about them? We say that we will pray for each other, but how many people here have actually prayed about someone else's problems? I can honestly say that I don't pray for others very often. I might pray once, but then I forget to do it ever again. How selfless is that?

Think about what James wrote. In response to seeing a naked and hungry person, he wrote that someone might say to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed." Think about it, how is a person who is hungry and naked going to keep warm and well fed? I pretty sure a person in that situation isn't in that situation because they want to be. I don't think that they are hungry and naked by choice. It's like if you got really sick with the flu, and a doctor tells you to keep your temperature down, stop sneezing, and don't be so fatigued. That is the opposite of how you feel, but it doesn't help you. It's not like you chose to have a fever or chose to sneeze or chose to be fatigued. They are symptoms that are beyond your control. The doctor has told you how you should be, but has done nothing to help you to actually to be better. That's a pretty useless doctor. What good is he?

The Bible says, “In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” (17) Just like a doctor who only tells you the problem and that you’ll better if you do the opposite, faith not accompanied by action is useless. It is dead. Ooh, that’s a hard statement that can bring up a lot of resentment. James actually confronts it. “But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’” (18) This statement seems a little confusing. James is writing like there is a third party observing a confrontation. That person is saying that one person has faith and the other person has deeds, with the second person being the author James. The thought is that faith and deeds are two completely different things that have no connection to each other. The third person wants to squash the confrontation, telling the two sides to sit in opposite corners.

But there is a problem with that, as James addresses in the rest of verse 18, “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.” James wants the person who supposedly only has faith to prove it. He says, “If your faith is so great that you do not need deeds, then prove it. Show me, right here and right now, this miraculous faith. I will show you the extent of my faith by my actions.” How do you prove that you can have faith without any actions? The common answer is that you believe in God, that you believe that there is one God. Is that the extent of such miraculous faith? The Bible does mention that it is simply by faith in Jesus that we are saved. There is nothing more that we need to do. Some might think that that is all there is to faith. They think that once you say that you believe in God, then that is all that you have to do and you can live your life however you want.

But there is another problem with that. “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.” (19) To believe in the existence of God is no great achievement. As James points out, even demons believe in one God. Demons recognize that God exists. They know him very well, and the prince of demons knows Scripture better than you do. Just saying that you believe God puts you in the company of demons. On second thought, demons are better than you if you just believe in God. At least demons know to shudder at the mere thought of God. Demons know that God is powerful and sovereign, but most of the time, people who merely “believe” in God don’t give him a second thought. Those people don’t care about his judgment and wrath. That makes them worse than demons. What, then, makes us better than the demons? How can we show that we do believe in God and that we love God? Jesus said, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.” (John 14:23) Obedience to Jesus is what separates believers from demons. Obedience requires action and that action requires faith.

James then points to an example that would be well known by the recipients of his letter: Abraham. Abraham was a man who is considered to be the father of faith. He was a man that the Jews highly respected. God called him from his native land and to go to a land that God would show him. When God called Abraham, he was seventy-five years old and had no children. Abe’s one desire was to be a father and God promised that Abraham would have descendants. After twenty-five years of waiting, his wife Sarah, who was ninety, gave birth to Isaac, the child of the promise. When Isaac became a boy, God told Abraham to go and sacrifice Isaac. God told Abraham to kill what God had promised Abraham in the first place. It is a very grizzly thought. The people surrounding Abraham practiced child sacrifice, but he knew that God hated that practice. Yet, Abraham left early the next morning to go to a certain mountain to sacrifice his son. Abraham tied Isaac to the altar and raised the knife to take action to God’s command. What was going through Abraham’s head? Why would he do this so freely?

James writes, “You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.” (22) It was an act of faith for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. God did stay his hand at the last second, but he proved his faith by his action. The Bible speaks concerning this in Hebrews 11:17-19, “By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.” Abraham had faith to trust God. He might not have known exactly what God was doing, but he knew God’s promise. He was able to act by faith by holding on to God’s promise that Isaac was the child of promise. He reasoned that if God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, then God would simply raise Isaac from the dead. He was certain of it and was able to act on that faith.

James, then, points out that scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Paul also quoted that bit of Scripture and he used it to prove that because righteousness is credited, it is not something that is earned, it is a gift from God because he believed. James is using that verse to show the proof that Abraham believed God. The proof that Abraham trusted God was in the fact that he obeyed God, even when something seemed contrary to God’s promise. In a tough circumstance, Abraham obeyed God and proved his faith by those actions. Now, God stopped Abraham just before the sacrifice occurred and Isaac was safe.

Like it was mentioned earlier, “a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.” (24) Again, that term “considered righteous” or “justified” refers to the fact we can’t see righteousness except through the actions of someone who has faith. Actions are the receipt of the fact that Jesus saved you. Jesus paid our bill through our redemption of blood, and what we have to show for it is a life changed by the good news. Like Abraham, we hold on to God’s promises and we don’t let fear and doubt reign in our hearts. Such faith and action is not only for those who are considered great, like Abraham, but also for everyone who believes. To prove this, James brings up Rahab the prostitute.

The Bible says, “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?” (25) Rahab as a resident of a city called Jericho. Jericho was in the land of Canaan, the land that God promised Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites. God promised that he would remove the Canaanites from the land so that the Israelites could take over. The Israelites sent spies ahead to scope out the city, and while they were there, a prostitute named Rahab. Rahab had heard that the Lord had given the land to the Israelites, and she heard what had happened to two kings in the region and she trusted that that was true. Rahab helped the Israelites to evade the officials of Jericho and her life was spared when the Israelites came to conquer the city. Rahab had faith in God and acted on that faith by helping the spies. She was a prostitute, but she was considered righteous based on her actions. She had proof of her faith.

James concludes this section with, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” (26) Faith without action is not faith at all. Faith is living and growing, but faith that does not cause us to act is dead. It is head knowledge of what you know, but not belief that it is true. We can rattle off facts and Scripture, but we don’t truly believe it unless we act on what we know. It is not an alien concept. Jesus speaks about this fact a number of times, especially in Matthew.

On the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has two examples of how action is important to faith. The first is in Matthew 7:16-20, "By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them." Fruit is the result of a tree. If the tree is good, it produces good fruit. In the same way, if we have been saved, then we produce a good life. We change and act differently than we did before. We don't act by fear and doubt, but with certainty.

That certainty is reflected in the second example in Matthew 7:24-27, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." Jesus taught that it is when we put his words in to practice, when we take action, that we will be rock solid even in a storm. We have faith to take action because we trust the promises that were given to us.

Acting by faith can take many different forms, depending on whom you are. At the center of acting by faith is the fact that you have to trust God. There are people who don't want to be active in the church because they think that they will do something horribly wrong. I know someone who didn't want to stand up here and preside because they were afraid of messing up this worship service, but for that person, it is their act of faith to trust God and participate. If they believe in God's sovereignty, then they need to trust that God is more powerful than their mistakes. On the other hand, there are people who are really involved with the ministry and they might feel that if they stop, then everything will fall apart. It's a common issue among leaders, but they have to trust God by not doing everything. Their action is to not to act. By not acting, they are also trusting in God's sovereignty by giving control to God. I vacillate back and forth between these two. There are times where my act of faith is to trust God and act, and other times my act of faith is to trust God and not act. I say this because my inaction, when appropriate, gives an opportunity for someone else to make their own act of faith.

As a ministry, we have our own opportunities to act by faith. It has been a year and a half that we bought the building on Indiana Avenue. My family has been living in the second floor for more than six months, but the first floor is still basically gutted. There are some legal issues that we need to take care of. We can't really renovate the first floor and basement until the zoning problems have been corrected. It is a daunting task to deal with city hall. It will take a lot of work to untangle the cords, but we haven't done much. We haven't been active and aggressive on this stance. If we believe that God gave us this building for his purpose, then why is there a lot of talk of just turning the whole building into residences? Is that an act of faith or words of fear and doubt? We make great strides of faith over short intervals, but then they stop. Daniel showed great faith when he did a lot of legwork to find out who owned the building so that we could begin the act of buying it, but once it was purchased, our prayer and action stopped. We showed great faith to get the second floor renovated when we found out Viola, Ella and I were getting kicked out of our apartment, but again, it stopped. I'm not trying to point fingers at others. I am just as guilty as everyone else. I became complacent since I got a place to live with my family, but it is time to take action now and prove that we have faith to trust in God's sovereignty.

With all this talk of action, it can be easy to start running on the performance treadmill, where we start believing that our performance actually justifies us. We can think that we are great because we do something, like study the Bible with a dozen people. Fortunately, that is not true. Just like faith without action is dead, action without faith is also dead. The Bible says that, “everything that does not come from faith is sin.” (Romans 14:23) Our actions must be governed by our faith and our faith must be proved by our actions. They are codependent on each other. It is not something that you can separate. If you have only either faith or action, then it is like having only one eye, you can see, but you lack a complete field of view. When you have both faith and action, then you can see with depth and correctly perceive three dimensions. This is what James wrote about in verse 22 when he said that Abraham’s faith was made complete by what he did. We need to have complete faith, and complete faith is shown by how we act. Take this week to think about how your faith is. Take the time to perform a real act of faith. It might be different for each person, but take the time to trust God and act like you do.