

## 'Faith and its Works'

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*Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ*

*No place is left for any human pride in the presence of God. If any one must boast, let him boast of the Lord. – 1Cor.1,29.31*

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Collect:

Almighty God, you created the heavens and the earth, and made us in your image. Teach us to discern your hand in all your works and to serve you with reverence and thanksgiving; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen

**I am trusting in You, O God,**  
in the power of Your name;  
and I know that as long as I wait for You  
my hope will not be in vain.  
There may be problems,  
there may be pain,  
but my hope will not be in vain.

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Reading: **James 2, 14-26**

Sermon:

Dear friends

A well-known critic of the Christian faith has once made his point by asking: "What good has the Christian faith (Christianity) ever done for anyone?" One of the reasons for dismissing the Christian faith and declaring it useless, in his view, is the fact that no good deeds can be claimed for it, that nothing good has come from it.

Now, James would not agree with the hidden premise in this statement that no good deed can ever

point to faith as its source (why would anyone?), but he does agree with the notion that a faith failing to give rise to good deeds/works is dead and useless – it is not a live thing. The truth is not that faith does not cause good deeds; the truth is that it is *only faith if it does*. Insofar as the words of the critic can draw attention to this, James agrees.

And indeed, he is not alone. There is in fact no sharper or more uncompromising critic of the deedless faith (faith without works) than God himself, through the voices of the prophets and indeed Jesus Christ. Is the point, for instance, made with more authority than in these words which Jesus spoke to his disciples: *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. ... Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the Kingdom of heaven ... For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of heaven"* (Mt.5,7-20)? Or is it made to a more sobering effect than in the parable of the sheep and the goats, about the Final Judgment? In the words to those who receive eternal life: *"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me"*, and in the words to those who go away to eternal punishment: *"Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me"* (Mt.25,31-46)?

James, then, is addressing the issue that some believe that genuine faith need not be understood to be connected to good works like a cause is connected to its effect. Faith is one thing, they might have argued, and stands alone, it is about Jesus Christ, about what God has done for our salvation. Works don't come into it, they mustn't: We are saved by faith, not by works. And good works, the dos and don'ts of practical living, are another thing and something separate from faith, which *alone* we are saved by.

But James sees that the way they exclude good works from their definition or understanding of faith is defective and leads to practical consequences which are contrary to faith (as in the illustration he uses!).

We must realise here that James is not trying to rescue good works/doing good from being forgotten or neglected by the faithful; he is trying to rescue faith from the misunderstanding of it by the faithful! We are saved by faith alone (as I have often taught!), but not – and this is what James insists on – by faith which remains alone. He says: *"Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."*

James wants his readers to know that he is surprised at having to argue this point. It should be clear, so clear in fact, that he considers "foolish" the Christian who fails to grasp it! Is he right? Why should it be clear? And why should they who don't grasp it deserve to be called 'foolish'? The answer: Because of Scripture and its authority in these matters; because the truth which calls forth faith is revealed in Scripture.

This is a crucial point. Perhaps we can be helped to understand where James is coming from when we remember that God's promises in Scripture envision a different *practice* (godly, holy) as the result of an inner change. Take, for example, Ez.36: *"I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."*

Therefore the question that James' harsh words give rise to for us, is whether they apply to us too – whether we need the evidence of Scripture to guard us from mistaken ideas about faith too. And I

think, while it may not apply equally everywhere, the answer reflecting the state of Christianity today (particularly in the West) is ‘yes’. It is not rare to find the kind of faith that has divorced itself from the works of faith in a way that changes the nature of one’s works – which are no longer the “*good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do*” (Eph.2,10!), but which are a different thing.

I’m speaking of how normal it is now viewed to be to have faith in God (believe that you are saved) and to decide in matters of how we should live, to decide moral and ethical matters, according to not whether a thing agrees with the will of God but whether it agrees with the majority view or even whether it agrees with our own will. It is now a widely held opinion in the church, widely practiced, that faith in God sanctions one’s own will and what it chooses, regardless of whether a thing agrees with God’s will: Yes, it is good if it does, but if it doesn’t, so much the worse for God’s will (time and culture bound as God’s Word is...) and so much the worse for all those who think that it must, narrow and bigoted as they are.

But is it right? Are we justified to separate faith from works and works from faith in this way? Are we justified in saying that we believe in God and have faith in Him when agreement with God’s will matters not in what we approve of and what we seek, what we call good and what bad, matters less than what points in the ways of our desires?

No, we’re not, says James, and we mustn’t think that we are, because the outcome is one that contradicts what God’s Word says faith must and will accomplish. And it is in order to show this that James adduces his evidence from Scripture.

Look at Abraham. Was he justified to prepare his son Isaac for sacrifice and lift the knife to do him? Scripture says he was. Why? Because what he did was done in agreement with God’s will for him. How could he? He trusted the promise of God, even that He would raise his son from the dead if necessary in order to keep it.

And look at Rahab, the prostitute who sheltered Israelite spies in Jericho and helped them escape, leading to Jericho’s downfall. Was she justified to do so? Would she not have been justified to believe the men were in her hands for another purpose? But the reason she acted the way she did, was that she knew it agreed with the will and purpose of the living God and hoped – rightly! – it would embed her and all her family in the promise and blessing of this God.

Dear friends, both Abraham and Rahab are witnesses to the truth that faith is the source of consequent works. Where there is faith there are the works of faith. And only by these works of faith do we know that faith is, and that it is not dead, like we know of electricity only by its effect, apart from which we would not know its properties.

Let us seek to be confirmed and grow in the faith which gives rise to those deeds that belong to it. We have such faith not in our ownership ever, but we have a Lord, Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose for our justification, and who gives faith to those who ask and is himself through the Spirit its very life.      AMEN

Lord God, we praise you, for you are holy. And you have made a way for us to reflect your holiness in how we live. Forgive us when this goal of your redeeming work in Jesus Christ slips from the consciousness of our faith. We long for the freedom to say to you with ready joy and eager love: “What can we do? What must we do? What may we do?” And we know that only by grace shall this be. Have mercy upon us and grant us so to understand where we are before you that we seize in

faith upon our Lord Jesus Christ who is the manifestation of your love and of grace for sinners and also of the holiness to which you call us. Grant that we find our all in him in the fulness of your Spirit, to the praise and glory of your name. Amen

- time of prayer / intercession – [ what concerns we have on our heart we pour out before God and seek in thanksgiving the gifts of His blessings;  
we ask to discern His judgments and for a spirit of understanding and repentance, for mercy and an end to the spiritual ignorance whereby we fail to reject and abhor sin and wickedness;  
we plead for the lost, the broken, the lonely, the abandoned, the persecuted, the suffering...;  
we think of the victims and the ongoing trouble of terrorist activities around the world and pray for those who put counter measures in place to keep people safe and for a spirit of reconciliation...;  
we pray for the authorities and those in leadership, for our communities;  
we thank God for His guiding and keeping, for all the ways in which we discern his helping hand;  
we pray:]

***'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen'***

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*Now may the peace of God which passes all our understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

*And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you. AMEN*

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