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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“SAVING FAITH”

James 2:14-26

You have prayed the Sinner’s Prayer and confessed belief in Jesus. You affirm sound Christian doctrine.

? Are you saved?

A lot of people assume that if you check those items off the list, then of course you are. They might quote John 3:16, which declares: **“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.”**

? But what if we are mistaken about *what constitutes belief*?

Besides your Sinner’s Prayer, verbal confession, and correct doctrine you attend church and study Scripture. You do not use the LORD’s name as profanity, you aren’t a murderer, and you don’t (physically) commit adultery.

? Are you saved?

A lot of people will assume that you have gone above and beyond the minimum requirements. They might refer to Romans 10:9, which states: **“If you *declare* with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and *believe* in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you *will be saved*.”**

? But what if we have misunderstood *what is entailed in faith*?

{Mt 7:21} God the Son has warned, **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’”** – who sincerely prays the right prayers and proclaims the Truth with a capital “T” –

“will enter the kingdom ... but only those who *do* the will of my Father.”

? What kind of belief enables us to receive eternal life? What kind doesn’t?

? What kind of faith saves us? What kind doesn’t?

□ {1:1} Inspired by the Holy Spirit, **“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,”** addresses these questions in 2:14-26.

■ Verse 14: **“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them?”**

■ In verses 15-16 James offers an illustration. Someone with raggedy clothes and an empty belly comes to church. **“One of you [tells] them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’”** yet does nothing to make it happen. **“What good is it?”**

• {1:26} Imagine the man who claims to be a Christian, yet does **“not keep a tight rein on [his tongue]”** (1:26). Or the woman who says she loves the Lord, yet neglects to **“look after orphans and widows”** (1:27). **“They deceive themselves.”**

• What about the business owner who stays closed on the Sabbath, instructs their staff to say “Merry Christmas!”, has a very public witness – yet takes financial advantage of their workers (5:4)?

“Their religion is worthless.”

■ No one is saved by *that* kind of belief. Verse 17: **“Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead”** – and that which is dead cannot give life.

It is equally true that action, if it is not coupled with faith, is dead. However, James' original audience does not lean in that direction – nor, for that matter, do most of the Evangelical Christians in the U.S. these days.

■ James anticipates pushback. He answers it in verses 18-19: ¹⁸ **“But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.** ¹⁹ **You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.”**

In a world dominated by pagan religion, the phrase **“there is in one God”** signifies accurate knowledge of the Living God. You believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Good for you! So do **“the demons.”**

■ **“You foolish person,”** (verse 20) **“do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?”**

☑ {Heb 11:1} Consider Abraham. Hebrews chapter 11, which is aptly nicknamed ‘The Faith Hall of Fame,’ devotes more lines to him than to anyone other hero.

The author defines faith as **“being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see”** – then makes it obvious that this is not mainly intellectual agreement and verbal profession.

Hebrews 11:8: **“By faith Abraham, when called to go ... obeyed and went.”** If he had judged God’s words to be true but had not gone, Abraham would not be a model of faith.

Hebrews 11:9: **“By faith he *made his home* in the promised land.”** If he had felt certain God would give him

the land but had not relocated there, Abraham would not be a model of faith.

Hebrews 11:17 ^{19}: **“By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice.”** If he had **“reasoned that God could... raise the dead”** but had not laid his son on the altar, Abraham would not be a model of faith.

■ James 2:21-24:

²¹ **Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for *what he did* when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 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. ²⁴ You see that people are justified by what they do and not by faith alone.**

☑ And consider Rahab. She is in the Faith Hall of Fame, as well: **“By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient”** (Hebrews 11:31).

■ James also cites Rahab’s example. Verse 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?”**

{Josh 2:9-11} Keep in mind that at the time when Rahab saved the spies, her belief was incomplete. She testified: **“I know ... the LORD has given this land to you ... We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea The LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.”**

Though Rahab’s faith was piecemeal, it was completed by her right actions. God credited it to her as righteousness.

■ **Verse 26: “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”** {MSG} What do you **“end up with” “the moment you separate body and spirit”?** **“A corpse. Separate faith and works and you get the same thing: a corpse.”**

★ Belief unto eternal life is belief **“accompanied by action.”** Faith that saves us is faith **“made complete by what”** we do.

? How does this not cross the line into works righteousness? That is a legitimate concern.

📖 {Ro 6:6; II Co 5:7} Works righteousness (or legalism) is struggling against our inmost self (the **“old self,”** which is a **“slave to sin”**) to earn God’s approval. Obedience is cooperating with our inmost self (the **“new creation,”** which serves righteousness) in response to God’s approval.

Allow me to repeat that: Works righteousness is struggling against the **“old self”** to earn God’s approval. Obedience is cooperating with the **“new creation”** in response to God’s approval.

It is, fundamentally, a matter of identity.

{Mt 7:16} Think about it this way: **“Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?”** No! Grapevines give grapes. Fig trees yield figs. It is what they do, because it is what they are.

We do not bear edible fruit, but we do produce deeds. They are our **“fruit.”** **“If [we] *declare with* [our mouths], ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and *believe in* [our hearts] that God raised him from the dead,”** not only will we **“be saved,”** we will **“do the will of [his] Father.”**

■ Good works performed by the **“new creation”** in response to God’s approval always attend saving faith. Not only so, they complete it (verse 22).

• James uses a different, identity-related metaphor in 1:23-24: **“Those who listen to the word but do not do what it says are like people who look at their faces in a mirror and, after looking at themselves, go away and immediately forget what they look like.”**

📖 Ὅμοιος ἦν [homoios ēn] (**“what [one] looks like”**) can refer to bodily appearance. Yet it literally means **“what sort he”** or she is, {KJV} **“what manner of man he [is],”** what kind of woman she is.

This person cannot remember who they are. They have lost their identity, for this reason: **they are deficient in deeds. They have failed to act upon the truth** revealed to them.

{Eph 2:9-10} Immediately after Paul declares that we are saved by grace through faith, he adds: **“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us**

to do.” If we are not doing good works we have, at best, forgotten our identity in Christ. At worst, that has never been our identity.

? Which deeds work with belief to bring eternal life?

? Which actions make faith complete?

- James 2:8: **“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right.”**

{Mk 12:27-31} **“There is no greater command than”** to **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,”** and alongside that to **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”**

★ Last week we discovered that this is **“the royal law”** for three reasons: it is preeminent above all other laws; it is the foundation and the fulfillment of the whole law; and it is the official policy, actual practice, and essential character of the Kingdom of God.

The **“good works, which God prepared ... for us to do”** are concrete manifestations of *αγαπη* [agapē] love in every relationship and circumstance.

You have prayed the Sinner’s Prayer and confessed belief in Jesus. You affirm sound Christian doctrine.

? Are you saved?

You attend church and study Scripture. You do not use the LORD’s name as profanity, you aren’t a murderer, and you don’t (physically) commit adultery.

? Are you saved?

Faith that saves, that opens us up to receive eternal life, is faith that is made complete by deeds of love, which God has prepared for us to do.

James 2:14-26 is the word of the Lord.