

Part Five: Faith Has a Job

Written by Bob Stone

James 2:14-26

Soren Kierkegaard tells the story of a make-believe country in which only ducks live.

"One Sunday morning all the ducks came into the church, waddled down the aisle and into their pews, and squatted. Then the duck minister took his place behind the pulpit, opened the duck Bible and read, 'Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Use your wings!' All the ducks yelled 'Amen!' and they all waddled home."

Possibly some of you can identify with the ducks in the story. You have heard sermon after sermon, understood and even affirmed the truths as they were spoken. But you have never, or seldom, acted upon what you have heard.

James 2:14-26 contains a vigorous call for believers to put their faith to work. Rather than a phony Christianity that only evidences itself in mere words, James vigorously summons his readers to experience the reality of genuine faith, coming back to the bedrock principle set forth in 1:19-27. In that passage, hearing must be accompanied by doing. So in 2:14-26, **faith must be attended by action.**

There will be no room for a religion that is mere mental acceptance of the truth. Come on, ducks, use your wings. No waddling allowed!

Now, what is genuine faith? Faith can be a vague word. Although we may say "I'm a great believer," the phrase may be wishful thinking, that everything will turn out for the best if we will only believe. But James is far too practical and too concerned to leave us thinking this. In James 2:14-26, he gives us a clear description of faith.

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

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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. 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.

20 You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21 Was not our ancestor 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,"[5] and he was called God's friend. 24 You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. 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?

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

The Mark of Fake Faith

v. 14—"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" The atmosphere of this passage is quite feisty and expressive—even challenging. James has something to say, and he wants to make sure his audience hears it. There should be no question when he's done, what he is trying to communicate.

Verse 14 asks two rhetorical questions. In the Greek language, questions can be formed in two ways: one question expects a positive response, and the other expects a negative response. In both instances in verse 14, the expected response from the questions is negative.

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What good is it?—v. 14a. It's no good! Here is a person who professes to believe, and has given an orthodox account of his faith in Christ. The problem is, this spoken testimony has left something unsaid: he has no works. His claim to faith is not supported by concrete evidence in his life. This is why James says, *"this man claims to have faith..."* His claim might be a correct statement, but the correct statement is not supported by a changed life—a life that evidences faith.

This brings us back to James' original question, "What good is it?" It's like asking, what good is it to have a driver's license if you don't drive? What good is it to be an actor if you don't act? How can you say you are a parent, if you don't parent?

Then James asks another important question: *Can such a faith save him?* No!—v. 14b. **We are justified by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone.**

Genuine faith is accompanied by deeds. Some have asked if this is a contradiction to what the apostle Paul says in Rom. 3:28.

"...a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law."

Paul reminds us we have all sinned and fallen short of the perfect standard of God's law; therefore, nothing we can do—no work or activity—can bring us into a right relationship with God. Man is declared righteous by God's grace, not by earning it through good deeds. This is reaffirmed in all of Paul's writings and, in fact, is woven into the fabric of the entire Bible.

James, however, is not talking about works as a means of salvation in 2:14, but as a proof of faith. Faith that doesn't prove itself in actions is not real faith—it's superficial. Paul is looking at the **root** of our salvation in Rom. 3:28,

and James is looking at the **fruit** of our salvation here.

Since they are looking at salvation from different perspectives, they are not in contradiction. We might say Paul's purpose is instruction; he is theological. James' purpose is exhortation; he is practical.

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What is implied by all this is, if our faith is not producing some change in our behavior, we had better take a look at what we are calling faith.

Well, James does just that—through four illustrations which contain four characteristics of genuine faith.

The Four Marks of Genuine Faith

vv.15-19—*"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?"*

The first mark of genuine faith is it is not indifferent, but compassionately involved with others, especially our Christian brothers and sisters in the church community—vv. 15-16.

A believer is in dire need in this passage. He has genuine needs—not wants. This may have been the actual situation that some were facing in their fellowship.

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- Clothes—actually means naked (a hyperbole).
- Food
- Physical needs—v. 16. ". . .his physical needs..."

The church can offer words that sound spiritual & kind: "Go, I wish you well. . ." is better translated, "Go in peace. . ." a standard Hebrew farewell. Literally it means, "Get some warm clothes and eat your fill" (A.T. Robertson). A modern paraphrase might be: "Catch you later, pal. I hope things go well with you. Try not to worry. Keep warm. I hope you can scrounge up enough food." The problem is, there's no offer to help, no tangible assistance.

In the words of v. 16, the Phillips translation says: "What on earth is the good of that?" Again, the answer is obvious. James does not call this "limited, or little, or immature." Instead, in no uncertain terms, he makes it clear "this is faith that is good for nothing." It's a worthless facade.

The apostle John says a very similar thing in 1 John 3:16-18—*"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 17] If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need, but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? 18] Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth."*

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This verse in James and the passage from 1 John imply a number of things to us:

1. "Faith is not just an individual thing—it implies a common concern for all God's children."

2. "Faith must be expressed in actions to be good for anything—to be genuine." Cliches and nice words are not evidences of genuine faith. Even compassionate affirmation of another's need is not enough.

3. "Genuine faith cannot stay uninvolved in the presence of genuine need." (Gary Vanderet)

What are some illustrations of the application of this truth?

- A person shares a need with us and we say, "I'll pray for you," but we don't pray, and we do nothing further.

- A single parent is obviously having difficulty making ends meet and caring for his/her children, and we say, "Oh, I'd love to help you," but we don't.

- An abused person begins to remember their past. We say how sorry we are for the traumatic events of their life, but then neglect them and don't help them find a place or a person to bring them to healing/counsel.

- An elderly person, e.g., a grandparent, a church member, has the necessary food, clothes and shelter, but indicate they would love a visit or an invitation to go out and we say, "Isn't that sad. Somebody really ought to stop by and see them." But we don't.

What does genuine faith look like then? In the early church, in Acts 2, there was genuine

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concern for the needs of brothers and sisters. No possession was held back. If there was a "genuine" need and it was in their power to supply it, they met the need. A description of first century Christians to the Roman emperor Hadrian is as follows: "They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother. They don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers, instead, through the Spirit, in God."

This is what James calls "alive" faith. This is what Isaiah 58 spoke of regarding a genuine fast.

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" Isaiah 58:6-7.

This leads to the second mark of genuine faith:

Genuine faith is not independent, but is in partnership with deeds.

v. 17—*"In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."* You can't have one without the other. (You can't have live faith without deeds.) Notice, James doesn't deny that it is faith if it isn't accompanied by action, but he makes it clear it is not the right kind of faith—it is not living faith, nor can it save.

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Faith was never designed to dwell alone. Faith and action work together. (We'll come back to this same point in v. 22.) In summary, genuine faith does not live alone—it is always accompanied by deeds, or it is dead. James develops his argument further by stating the third mark of genuine faith in verse 18:

Genuine faith is not invisible, but on display.v. 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."*

Here the point is illustrated by an imaginary conversation between two people. The word "show" means to bring to light, display, or exhibit. Genuine faith is made known only by what it does in terms of changes in one's behavior and values. We can't say, "Oh, my faith is private." Genuine faith is visible, so it cannot be demonstrated apart from actions.

In other words,

- If it doesn't show, you don't have it.
- "Faith is like calories, you can't always see them, but you can always see the result." (Anybody relate to that?)

In the next verse James offers another argument and the fourth mark of genuine faith:

Genuine faith is not just theology or religious facts, it's a lifestyle.

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v. 19—*"You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder."*

Can't you hear people saying, "how can you judge my faith like that, my beliefs are impeccable—I know I have the faith because of what I believe. The Scripture says, 'if I believe on the Lord Jesus Christ I shall be saved.' I believe, so my faith is genuine."

Or how do you think the Jewish Christians reacted when they read these words? When the Jews saw the words *"you believe...there is one God,"* they would immediately think of Moses' proclamation in Deuteronomy 6, *"Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is One!"* That was foundational! James says, however, that mere acknowledgment of God's existence as a living God is not enough. It takes more than correct theology to prove genuine faith. Why? Listen to this!

Demons have their religious facts straight, and they even shudder, but they don't have genuine faith. A "shudder" is literally a rough, uneven surface. Demons get goose pimples when they think of who God is. They believe in Him. They believe He exists! Their theology is impressive, and they know more about truth than all of us combined. Even though they have correct beliefs, however, their demonic character is unchanged. They do not *love* the only God, whom they acknowledge. Their faith does not produce peace or friendship with God: it produces only fear.

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In verse 20, he picks up another imaginary conversation in which a person confronts what James has just said and demands evidence for his assertions. James is very direct and blunt in his response:

20] You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

The definition of "foolish" is "empty." It refers to a deficiency that is intellectual, moral and spiritual. In verses 21-25 James gives evidence of genuine faith in two examples that were very familiar to all his readers:

Two Illustrations of Genuine Faith

I love these illustrations because he offers two opposite ends of the spectrum: Abraham and Rahab.

Abraham

Abraham's action with Isaac is an example where faith works—not dead but active, **a**
live
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21] Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered

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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 a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. (Do you know the story? Read about it in Genesis 22.)

Several observations need to be made from this. The explanation of verse 21 is in verses 22-24. Don't isolate verse 21 from those verses or you will misinterpret what James is saying. The explanation is: faith and action work together—because they are inseparable. Justifying faith, therefore has a certain quality—a vitality that makes it the producer of good deeds—it's action-producing! (see Gal. 5:6)

Faith, then, is the means of obtaining salvation, but by its very nature it produces deeds. If it doesn't, it is incomplete (v. 22), dead (v. 17), and useless (v. 20). What Abraham did in offering his son in Genesis 22, is the outworking of his faith described in Genesis 15 and proved his faith was complete, alive and useful!

What does that tell us about active faith?

- Principle #1—Active faith is expressed even when there is no logical reason for its expression.
- Principle #2—Alive faith has a pulse that is measurable.
- Principle #3—Useful faith impacts our families, our children, our hopes, our vision.

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Rahab

Rahab's action is quite a contrast to Abraham's and likewise proves faith without works is dead.

v. 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?"*

Although she was a prostitute and unlike Abraham in almost every way, her faith moved her to risk her life to protect the spies. As a result, "even" the prostitute was declared righteous, not because of her action, but because her action revealed her genuine faith. What does that tell us about active faith?

- **Principle #1: Faith that is alive will risk a great deal to do what is right.**
- **Principle #2: It makes no difference where you have gone or what you have done.** If you have genuine and active faith, then you will be lifted to high esteem in God's eyes and be declared righteous. What a prospect!

That brings us to the summary principle: James 2:26—*"As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."*

James gives us one more illustration. The body without the Spirit is nothing but a corpse. Likewise, faith without deeds is as dead as a corpse. In case we haven't gotten it yet,

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James is not implying that deeds are the actual source that gives life to faith, but again reminding us that faith and deeds are inseparable. If there are no acts springing from faith, that faith is no more alive than "the body without the spirit."

This leads us to the final application to us here today:

New converts, my encouragement to you is to get established in the faith and put your new faith to work. Exercise it and it will be strong. Pamper it and it will become weaker by the day.

For those of you who have known the Lord for a long time, but still have not put your faith into action because you are not together or too busy, these verses should speak loudly to you as well. When faith works, it inspires, it enlivens, it puts a person in touch with the resources of God and calls on him to rely on the Spirit. If that is not what you're experiencing, you're missing the best part of your faith.

If you are broken—not together enough to help people on an emotional and spiritual level—my strong advice to you is to put your faith into action by being faithful with a few things. For example, the Scripture says if we are faithful in a few things, God will give us responsibility over many things—many cities (Matt. 25:21,23). Wherever you find yourself, the big question is, does your faith have a job? Is it useful, alive, visible—does it have the marks of genuine faith? Is your faith:

compassionately involved?

in partnership with deeds?

visible?

more than facts and theology, but active?