

James 2:14-26

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[0 : 00] Amen. Common wisdom has it that you're supposed to start a sermon with some kind of anecdote relating it to current affairs. I don't actually do current affairs very well, so I wasn't able to think of a good anecdote. I did actually have an anecdote, but it was related to Britain's Got Talent. Then I realized I had to do a children's address as well, and I couldn't think of one of them, so I used the anecdote instead. But basically, the lesson that I was trying to get across from Britain's Got Talent anecdote is that we act in accordance with our beliefs, and you can tell something of what a person believes from the way they act. So I couldn't get James chapter, when David asked me to take the service, I couldn't get James chapter 2 verses 14 to 26 out of my head, so I've gone with that, and we're going to look at this passage. Now, this is a passage that has, I was going to say a checkered history, but that's not the right way of putting it. People have tended to look at this passage in a variety of ways. Even the great reformer, Martin Luther, because of this passage referred to the book of

James as an epistle of straw, basically pretty worthless. People have used it to try and undermine the ideas of a precious doctrine of justification, standing right before God through the blood of Christ and belief in Him alone, because James mentions works, and we'll come to the weasel phrase later on. So the contrast between Paul and James, which would indeed be a contradiction if certain things were true. But there is no contradiction. Paul clearly states that, as we saw in Romans chapter 4, and both James chapter 2 and Romans chapter 4, you may have noticed, quote, Genesis 15, exactly the same passage. There's no contradiction. That precious doctrine of being justified through our belief in Christ and what Christ has done alone is equally clearly stated, I would argue, and I think correctly, otherwise there's a contradiction. It's equally clearly stated in James chapter 2 in this section.

In fact, I would say that in terms of a full-orbed understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith, James gives us the clear outworkings of that.

We do need faith, and there are works. They flow from it. Works are not part of faith. They are a separate thing. Reformers and the Puritans used to refer to root and fruit. Faith is the root.

The fruit that flows from that root is our works, the actions we take. And they flow because of our love, the love that we have for Christ and for what he has done for us, our belief in him. It's referred to as the alone faith that is never alone. Now, of course, there is a tendency or has been a tendency in the 20th century. I hear people talking about their faith. My faith supports me. My faith comforts me.

[3 : 25] To objectify faith and make faith its own object, which is, of course, whilst it may give us some self-satisfaction, is not true. The thing that's important in any belief for faith is the object of that faith. My faith does not support me. Any more than my belief in this pulpit that I'm not going to fall through the floor keeps me six feet above contradiction, it's the pulpit itself that is doing that. We are saved not by our faith but through our faith.

It is Christ and him alone that saves us. But given that we believe, we still have duties to perform.

The law of God, James refers to it as the perfect law of liberty or as the law of freedom.

He also refers to that in James chapter 2. Commonly, that could be put in terms of actions speak louder than words. They won't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Or my favorite, so heavenly-minded that there are no earthly use. Which, of course, is a contradiction because the most heavenly-minded person and only heavenly-minded person who has ever walked this earth was Jesus Christ himself. And he was the most useful person who ever walked the earth as well. So, if you're heavenly-minded totally, you should be of great earthly use. So, in James chapter 2, it is actually a very logical section from verses 14 to 26. There's a real flow that starts in verse 14 and ends up with the conclusion in verse 26. So, there's a problem statement in verse 14

with regard to so-called faith.

Then he throws in some hypothetical illustrations, which you can see there's a certain amount of humor. Humor gets points across. It's a satirical cutting humor regarding food and clothing and something that might be related to division of gifts. Then he moves from these abstract hypothetical ones into his very real illustrations, the demons believing Abraham and Rahab. Each of these illustrations has a positive and a negative aspect to it. And then he reaches the conclusion, basically, that faith without works is dead. So, what is this faith? Problem statement. Now, James 2 verse 14 is one of, perhaps one of the most often misquoted verses, or perhaps it's just my experience in hearing people that I've come across misquoting James 2 verse 14. We have to be clear about what James 2 verse 14 does not say. It does not say, if a man have faith but have not works, or they have claimed to have faith.

Sorry, it doesn't say they have faith but have no deeds. That faith is dead. It can't save them. Crucially, it says, if a person claims to have faith, can that faith save them. And it's crucial to get that quotation correctly because that puts the whole thing in context. Everything that follows from verse 14 is based on this understanding of faith. So, we could put the word faith here in scare quotes. It's not a real faith. It's a claim to have faith. If a person say he have faith, can that faith save him? If they claim to have faith, can that save them? It's the claim that is the problem, not the actual faith. It's also very common to hear a distinction made between the head and the heart, head knowledge and heart knowledge. That's not actually a biblical distinction.

[7 : 13] Here's a challenge. I don't know of anywhere in the Bible that makes a distinction between head and heart. You can show me I'm wrong later if you want. But there is a clear biblical distinction that is made, and that distinction is between the lips or the mouth and the heart.

It can have a negative and a positive aspect. Negatively, in Isaiah 29, 13, this people drawn near to me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. So, there's a separation between the lips and the heart, what they're saying to God and what they're actually doing in their hearts, believing.

You can have a positive aspect when it comes together. If we confess with our lips that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead, we will be saved.

So, when the heart and the lips are in concord, you're okay. When the heart and the lips are separated, you've got a problem. And here, James is referring only to the lips. And it's this faith of the lips.

So, I'm going to do that occasionally, if I remember to. It's the faith that is off the lips that James is speaking to. We should also note that this idea of being justified by faith alone, in Christ alone, must have been prevalent. It must have been in James's mind when he wrote this. If it wasn't, why would he have written this section? Why would he be dealing with this particular problem?

[8 : 47] That tells us that justification by faith is not an invention of the Reformation. Even if it was wrong, it was obviously around in the New Testament times. Otherwise, chapter 2, verse 14 makes absolutely no sense. So, the target is a worryingly common and fatal misunderstanding, an idea that if I've got faith, if I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, it doesn't matter what I do. There's no connection at all between faith and works. But there is a connection. It was brought out. A book I never actually managed to finish was James Hogg's Confessions of a Justified Sinner. I don't know if it's still read today, but when I was a student, this was one of the books that everyone had to read.

It's all about a person. It was about election, about how if you were one of the elect and you believed in Jesus, it didn't matter what you could do. And this book goes through how this guy's life, he believes he's one of the elect, he believes he believes in Jesus, and he's going to, he ends up murdering people, but still believes he's going to go to heaven because he believes in Jesus.

This is the, that is what James is targeting. So, he does this by, in a variety of ways, but it flows from that problem statement that saying you believe in Jesus and believing in Jesus are not the same thing. So, the first illustration. Slight change of subject. I'm not talking about belief. We'll just talk about something that gets the message across. So, someone needs fed and clothing and you say, great, be fed, be clothed. It's useless. As a story of a man who goes out, asks for a pay increase, comes home, wife says, did you get the pay increase? Well, no, I didn't actually get the pay increase, but they were very complimentary about my work. They say I'm doing a fantastic job, to which the obvious response is, great, let's eat that. Fine words, butter, no parsnips.

That's, is another way of putting it. And it shows the worthlessness of words when practical help is what's needed. And that sets a, sets a context. Similarly, faith without works as barrings, putting it in, bringing it back then into this context. You can see it's almost humor. It's got humor. It's

semi-satirical. The ridiculousness of the situation. Anyone can see that, you know, if you say to someone, go and eat, and you're not actually giving them something, especially if they have neither the means or the opportunity to achieve what they need to achieve. Humor, satire, contrary to what some people think, is a very good way of making a very strong point, especially where you've got a contrast. So then James comes back to a rather convoluted or difficult to understand structure of a verse. In someone, verse 18, someone will say, you have faith and I have deeds, which seems to have got things the wrong way around. Now, commentators say there's two possibilities.

It's either a supporter looking for clarification. They're just saying, hey, James, could you clarify this about, you know, you've got faith, I've got works. How do faith and works work together? Or it's an opponent challenging him. Then you've got to think about the way, idiom of expressing you and I, so challenging them. But what's interesting is the commentators that I've read relate either the supporter or the opponent idea to the division of gifts. So in, for example, 1 Corinthians 12, where the body of Christ, everyone has gifts. Not everyone has the same gift. Not everyone has the same gift to the same degree, but we've all got gifts and it's all different. So here, this is, this is, this is what he's saying. Everything's different. We've got, everyone's got something, but not everyone's got everything. So you've got, you've got works. I've got faith. My faith will save me. I don't need the works. You've got the works. Oh, wait a minute. If that is correct, then this is actually quite sinister, what this objector is raising. Because if, in the context that James is sorting out, he will know perfectly well that works without faith is dead. So if they're actually separating works and faith in that way, where you say, I can have faith and I'm okay, you've got works and, oh, I can't say you're okay. That's actually a real insult to James. What he's actually saying is, well, your emphasis on works is actually not worth my time. You're actually outside the Christian fold, not me.

[13 : 36] Everyone knows that works without faith is dead. And then James comes back with a very, completely disarming response. And it's perfectly logical. He says, okay, how do you know you've got faith? If you've got nothing to provide evidence for this belief, and it's a matter of psychology, that in any belief, there's going to be some evidence, you will act in accordance with your belief. How do you know you've got belief? What's your basis? What's your confidence in this?

I, on the other hand, yes, I do believe, and I can show you the evidence. My works provide the evidence that I believe. This is simple, logical, profound, and devastating.

Having disarmed this argument, James then immediately goes on to turn the knife. I've read many explanations of why James brings demons or devils into the story at this point, and the fact that it's believing in God, not believing in Jesus. But what we have to remember, as far as I can see, this is a logical flow. This is immediately following on, and it makes sense in the context in which James is talking as part of his argument. Pointing out that it's, oh yes, the demons believe, but they don't believe in Jesus, is really a kind of side issue. It kind of diverts, and I can't quite make it fit. But there's a rather simple explanation of what James is saying, well, to my mind anyway. James turns the tables and has a rather chilling, where the objector has tried to put James on the back foot and make sinister comments about his position. He now turns the tables, having established that evidence of faith can work, but faith without evidence, meh. He says, let's go back to basics. You believe in God. Great. Well done. You hear the sarcasm in his voice. The demons believe. Now here he's not talking about this faith. He is talking about true belief.

The demons do believe in God. They believe in Jesus. Actually, the demons could believe the whole gospel. It wouldn't make any difference because the gospel is not for them. But that's not the point. He's going right back to the absolute minimum that any Christian or anyone else could have, and that is you must at least believe in God. The demons believe in God. What's the evidence that they believe in God? They shudder. They tremble. That's appropriate. They've got nothing else they can do. We know this. When they came across Jesus, they would, what are you going to do? We know who you are. You're the son of the living God. Are you here to destroy us? In Mark 1 24, or the Gadarean swine, sorry, the Gadarean demoniac, please don't throw us out. Put us into the swine. They were in terror of Jesus.

They acted in accordance with their belief, their faith. But James is dealing with a situation where somebody who believes in God and has a faith that doesn't have any works isn't even trembling. Really blasé that they can talk. They can try and they tried to turn the tables on James. Just shows how ignorant of the situation they are, ignorant of their own danger. This isn't the case of saying to somebody, you're on a par with the demons.

[17 : 39] James is saying in this case, the demons are ahead of you. They act in accordance with what they believe. You're not even acting in accordance with what you claim to believe. You don't even give God. Your belief in God doesn't lead to what it should.

It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Never mind Jesus. Just going back to God. Hebrews 10 31. And you can provide no evidence of anything. Why should we accept that you're in anything other than a dangerous situation? You fool. And that's a strong criticism. Foolishness in the Bible is not just Egypt. It is moral degeneracy. So then to lay forward, building on that, showing that this person is so far down the line and so much danger, he turns to some positive demonstrations. Real acts of faithfulness from people who were saints. Two Old Testament saints in particular. Abraham, in Romans, calls us the father of us all.

James refers to him as our ancestor. And he's writing to the church. They're both writing to the church. So this isn't just within a Jewish context. This is the whole Christian church having Abraham as the epitome of faith. Though he was an idolater to begin with before he was converted. And Rahab.

Rahab is only mentioned briefly in the Bible. But she appears three times in the New Testament. And two of them she's referred to as Rahab the prostitute in the context of being a hero of the faith. This isn't drawing distinctions of persons. This is just showing a spectrum of application of faith.

[19 : 33] Abraham. Abraham receives the promises in Genesis chapter 15. Quoted both in Romans 4 and as I mentioned in James 2. That Abraham believed God and it was accredited to him as righteousness.

And here it's referring to the sacrifice of Isaac. Now, the gap between Genesis 15 where he receives the promise. And Genesis 22 where he goes to Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac is around 30 years. So it's not that, you know, his faith is manifested in this particular event straight away. There's a 30-year gap. And in that gap a lot of things happened. Not all of them epitomes of faithful action. So in Genesis, there's a sequence. Genesis 15, your descendants will be like the stars. Abraham believes God and it's accounted to him as righteousness. This believing of God because he saw Jesus' day. Jesus himself says this, Abraham saw my day and was glad. So when Abraham is promised descendants like the stars, it is through Christ. His faith is in Christ.

Then Genesis 16, next chapter, he lapses. Well, wait a minute. God said, we're getting on a bit. And Sarah says, I'm not going to have any children. How's this going to happen?

Here's my concubine, my servant. Take her as concubine. And Abraham thinks, yes. God says, I'm going to, well, obviously he didn't mean us. It's just me and however that's going to happen.

[21 : 19] So there's a bit of a lapse there. And that, of course, led to the birth of Ishmael. And we all know what problems that has led to. And then Genesis 21, Isaac is born. And again, the promise is made. It is through Isaac, not Ishmael, not just through any one of your seed.

It is through Isaac that the promise will be fulfilled. Your descendants will be like the stars. And then immediately after that, Genesis 22, Abraham is told to sacrifice Isaac. Now, by this point, he has believed God that his descendants will be like the stars because of Isaac. And he's been told to sacrifice Isaac. So how does he act? He acts in faith. He acts in faith. And he goes and does it. Why? Because as Hebrews tells us, he believed that God could raise Isaac. If he went through with this, obeyed God, God could raise Isaac from the dead and still fulfill his promise. That is faith in action. It is the quintessential example of justification by faith alone in Christ alone.

But then you get this problem phrase. Oops. Where's it going?

Verse 24. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. And this is where people have used James to try and undermine that doctrine because the same word is used. And of course, as we know, if you use the same word in two different contexts, it means the same thing.

Not. Justification has, as with any word, it has a range of meanings. And the context tells you what that means in that context. In Romans 4, and in the context of which James is dealing, to stand justified, Paul was talking about how we stand righteous before God. It's an alien righteousness.

[23 : 23] We are covered by Christ, by Christ's righteousness, as Psalm 32 makes clear. Here, James is talking about evidence. The justification here by works is the evidence of our faith in action.

justification. You have things like justifiable homicide. Philosophers get tied up in knots about the idea of justification of beliefs. All these contexts are using justified in different ways. And James

here is using it in a different way. The context makes clear he is not going to be contradicting Paul, but his whole focus is on how may we know that someone has indeed got true saving faith. And we are justified believing that someone has true saving faith, not by them saying that they have faith, this faith that cannot save, but by seeing that their obedience, that their actions are in line with the claims they make in faith. Now, of course, this is not infallible. We can see people doing things that look like they are acting in faith, and subsequently they can fall away revealing that they did not actually have faith at all. But what we can conclusively say is where there are no works to give evidence of that faith, there is no faith. Then, at the other end, a short, and that's a prolonged example of faith in action from Genesis 15 to Genesis 32, 30 years.

A very short example is Rahab. Rahab makes a wonderful statement of faith in Joshua 2, 11, where she recounts everything that's happened since the slavery in Egypt right through to them arriving at Jericho, and how people are afraid, and they know that this God is the God of Israel, and she knows this is the God of the whole earth. And how does this work out? How do we know she really believed this? Because she aligned herself with the children of Israel. She took the spies, and she sent them out by another way, as Hebrews makes quite clear. The only mention of Rahab after that is when Jericho is destroyed and she is saved. She actually enters into, eventually enters into the tribe of, the nation of Israel. We're not told that in the Old Testament. The genealogy of David mentions Sam and the father of Boaz, doesn't mention Rahab. It's only in the New Testament, in the genealogy of Jesus, where Rahab appears as the wife of Salmon in Christ's genealogy, and then twice as a hero of faith in Hebrews 11 and in James chapter 2. So, the key thing here that James is getting across is that our faith in Christ is given, is evidenced by our love for him showing forth in the works that we do because of what he has done for us. And sometimes that is a specific act of obedience, which shows forth the faith that we have in the case of Abraham and Rahab. We're not all called in that way to do it, but there is the principle that faith and works go together as root and fruit.

Now, one has to be careful and not become judgmental. You don't have to be overly soft either. There's a story of somebody in a church who was really cantankerous, showed nobody could get on with them, very difficult. Well, eventually somebody else in the congregation went to the minister and said, how can this, this person's a member of the church, but they're not showing any evidence of them being saved, of having moved forward. The minister, yes, simply replied, said, yes, but you should have known them before they were converted. We may, we are only looking at one aspect. Not everyone moves at the same rate at the same time, but there should be some movement. So, James reaches a conclusion.

[27 : 43] This faith, the faith that is purely on the lips, is dead. It is barren. It's going nowhere. And terrifyingly so, so is the person who professes in such a way. Because if their faith is dead, so are they.

And that is something that gives us pause to reflect on in our own lives. So, what do we do with this? How do we go forward? Well, there's rather obvious. If you're an unbeliever, if you aren't making, if you have not made profession, if you do not actually believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you are in a very precarious position. So, the obvious thing to do is to work the works of God.

And to work the works of God, when the rulers of the Jews said, saying, how may we work the works of God? Jesus said, believe on him whom he has sent. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved. That's it. Don't worry about works. You can worry about them afterwards. They flow from that.

But first and foremost, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. And if we are, as professing believers, what are we to do? Well, we have to work the law of love for ourselves, for our neighbors, and for our brothers and sisters in Christ. We mentioned the spiritual gifts. Everyone who is a believer in Christ has a spiritual gift. Our works are, in part at least, to exercise those spiritual gifts. There are lots of examples, lots of ways we can do that. Find out what our gifts are.

And it can be in small ways. Some people can be an encouragement. Some people are able to do evangelism very easily. Some people can empathize and can get alongside people and help them through times of problems. Some people can clean very well. It's a variety of gifts, but we have to be willing to use and to find out what our gifts are and use them in the service of God. But how do we do that?

[30 : 01] Again, it's not by looking to ourselves. It's not by thinking, oh, I've got to do this. I've got to work. I've got to do things on my own. We can't. We have to look to Christ, even in doing the works.

Peter, when he took his eyes off Christ, started to sink when he was walking on the water and coming to Jesus. If we take our eyes off Christ and try to do things in our own strength, we will, barring God's mercy, suffer the same event. Jesus is both the beginning and the end of our faith, the author and finisher, the founder and completer. And what's interesting about that word, finisher or completer, is the same word that is used in James to refer to the completing of Abraham's faith. So basically, we have to work together for the gospel, for Christ. And basically, it is all about Jesus. Let us pray. Lord, we thank you for your great salvation. We ask that again, you would work it in our hearts, that we would look to Jesus in all things, trusting in him, relying on him, seeking his help and enabling to work for your glory and for your gospel. These things we ask in his name and for his sake. Amen.