

James 2

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Preacher: John McIntosh

[0 : 00] Would you turn with me now to the passage you read in James, James chapter 2, and in particular to verses 20 to 24, and what we might, I think, call the subject of what is real faith.

Just wait while the Bible classes come in. James chapter 2, verses 20 to 24, and the subject of what is real faith and the example of Abraham.

Now in this section, or at least from verse 15 on, I suppose, James is talking about this subject of the interrelationship of faith and works.

He says in verses 15 to 17, works are not an added extra. He says that works, or deeds, if you like, and faith are not separate spiritual gifts.

Verse 19, he tells us that demons can affirm right doctrine and remain in perdition. And he says basically, men can hold right doctrine and go to perdition, go to hell.

[1 : 22] And he's highlighting, I think, something which is all too prevalent in the churches of our day. And that is that in the lives of many churchgoers, not just in this country, but I think all over the world, there's a sort of yawning chasm between profession on the one hand and action on the other, between professed faith and actual deeds.

And the chasm gives the lie to people's claims to faith. I would say in my own experience, I don't know whether this is the case with yourselves, but it's certainly the case in my own life.

I've come across more people who, when you ask them why they won't give consideration to the Christian faith, they tell you, because I know this person or that person or a whole stack of people who do this and they do that, and how can they possibly be Christians?

That's the same problem that James was facing here and seeking to address. And I think there's another problem also which is very important. And that's this, that there is the question, how can we be sure, in view of what James has been saying, in view of these facts, how can we be sure that my faith and that your faith is a real faith, is true faith, and that we do in fact have real peace with God. And I think the implication of verse 18 is precisely that, that there is a way of certainty, and it is to do with the performance of good deeds, actions in accordance with God's commands by his people.

[3 : 04] That's the implication of verse 18, when James says, I will show you my faith by what I do. And that's a very important issue.

I don't know what the dates of your communion seasons are, but there will be people before any communion season who will be actually grappling with that precise issue. How can I be sure? And they'll be looking at themselves, and they'll be trying to assess the strength of their faith, and whether they still feel there's sin in their lives, and all sorts of things like that. And here's the answer I would suggest that James is suggesting for that particular problem as well.

Look at what your life is like in terms of your deeds, and then you will see whether you have a real faith or not. So James takes up this line by, in verse 20, posing a pretty aggressive sort of question. You foolish man, he says in verse 20, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? You foolish man, he says. The word in Greek actually means, you empty man.

[4 : 11] You know, there's nothing by way of content in your mind and this issue on your life as well. Do you want evidence that faith without works is useless?

And the answer comes in the way James uses the story of Abraham. I want to suggest that James uses the story of Abraham in a way that no other of the New Testament writers actually use it.

So here's the outline of it. He states this proposition in the first part of verse 21a, Abraham was justified not by faith, but by works. And people have picked that up and they've said, ah, something wrong here.

We all know justification is by faith, not by works. What is James actually doing here? You know, Martin Luther, the great reformer, actually couldn't get over that particular problem in the book of

James.

He described it as an epistle of straw. Had no time for it. But it's actually hugely useful, hugely important. Never ever follow Luther down that path, by the way.

[5 : 18] The book of James has all sorts of really crucial teaching. But he says, Abraham was justified by works. He says that in the first part of verse 21. And then he looks at the particular work in question, which he's highlighting in the second part of verse 21.

He was considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. And then in verses 22 and 23, James explains it. He says, you see.

And he says in verse 24, he restates it, you see. So that's what we're going to look at this morning as we were enabled. The first thing I think we need to notice, or the first thing we need to do, is to follow the sequence of events and what that sequence of events teaches.

Now the sequence begins way back in Genesis 15 at verse 6. And it concludes in chapter 22 at verse 12. I left out other bits of the story of Abraham, but the bits that we read are the important bits. Now the context of chapter 15, verse 6, where the Lord gives the great promise to Abraham of descendants, is, well, Abraham had been in the promised land 10 years.

[6 : 28] This was just after he defeated with his 318 men, the other, the kings. And the four kings. But I think you could say, it's fair to say, that Abraham was suffering a bit of a letdown.

He'd been 10 years in the land. He hadn't seen, he didn't have any heirs. He was still believing the Lord, but I think it's important that he has no heir. And then there's 15, chapter 15, verse 1, and verses 4 to 5.

And then there's verse 6, Genesis 15. Abraham believed the Lord, and he, that's the Lord, credited to him as righteousness. Now can I just say as we pass that, believe is one of the greatest words in the whole Bible.

One of the greatest, it's certainly the most common word in Genesis, chapter 15. And it's worth noting that Genesis 15 is the first use of the word believe in the whole Bible.

That's just on the way through. But chapter 15 emphasizes the permanence, the strength of Abraham's trust. He rests everything on God's word, and he keeps on resting in faith.

[7 : 46] And as a result, he was declared by God righteous, apart from works. His works have nothing to do with it. This was 14 years before Abraham was circumcised, he was circumcised in his household.

Hundreds of years before the law of Moses, Abraham was declared righteous without any reference to the works which he did. So Genesis 15, verse 6, is a divine response.

When God's credited to him as righteous, he accounts it as righteousness to Abraham. That's a divine response to Abraham's faith in Genesis, chapter 15, verse 6.

So Genesis, chapter 22, verse 12, which we read, that's a divine comment on Abraham's faith.

Well, how does all this fit together?

Well, about Genesis 15, at verse 6, both James and Paul agree. God promised Abraham an abundance of descendants.

[8 : 54] Abraham, for his part, recognised that, humanly speaking, that was impossible. Humanly speaking, it was never going to happen. But for all that, there's no distrust.

No distrust, Paul says in Romans, chapter 4, no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God. He grew strong in his faith, fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised.

That was why his faith was recognised, was reckoned to him as righteousness. But then there's a 25-year wait. And as a result of that 25-year wait, Abraham becomes, as it were, distracted from patient trust in the Lord.

That led him to seek an heir along, by human means. That explains why he, in effect, shall we say, married Hagar as well, and had Ishmael.

That's in Genesis 16. There's no real comment about what happens then, but then Isaac's born, after he was promised explicitly.

[10 : 07] And then sometime after the birth of Isaac, Abraham was called by God to the severest test of all. Isaac alone is the promised heir.

Isaac alone is the object of Abraham's deep love, and he sees him as the embodiment of God's faithfulness. The promise of abundant descendants.

To be a blessing to the whole world. And then he's commanded to offer him as a sacrifice. Difficult to imagine what must have been running through Abraham's mind at that point, isn't it?

But Genesis chapter 22 at verse 5, I think, is the key verse which shows the way Abraham's faith is running. It's worth looking at again, because it's the key verse in that respect.

Picked up on by Hebrews as well, of course. Hebrews, Genesis chapter 22 at verse 5. He said to his servants, this is Abraham says to his servants, stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there.

[11:17] We will worship, and then we will come back to you. That's really a fascinating verse. It needs to be looked at. Three times the word we.

It's not actually explicit in English, but it's quite clear in the original Hebrew. It says to his servants, you stay here with the donkey while I and the boy, we go over there.

We will worship, and then we will come back to you. Three times that word we is there, but between the second one and the third one, as far as Abraham knew, Isaac would have been sacrificed.

He would have been killed. His body would have been offered to the Lord. But Hebrews chapter 11 verse 19 tells us how Abraham really saw things. He concluded, says the apostle to the Hebrews, that God was able to raise men even from the dead.

That's what Abraham's faith and trust involved. His faith didn't waver. If this was what the Lord wanted him to do, then the Lord would raise Isaac from the dead.

[12:30] So Abraham's faith, you see, is still standing strong. So I think we need to prove a wee bit more deeply here and ask ourselves, what's happening here?

What's actually happening? And as I said, alone of all the New Testament writers, James makes use of a very curious feature of the Genesis accounts of Abraham's faith.

Genesis 15 tells us that the Lord is already convinced that the faith which has been exercised by Abraham is the real thing.

There's no doubt about that. The Lord affirms that. As a result of that, at once, the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Recognised Abraham's faith as righteousness. God pronounced Abraham to be righteous in his sight on the ground of his faith in God's promises.

[13:34] But there's still Genesis 22, verse 12. There's Abraham standing with his upraised arm with the knife in his hand. And God stops him with the words, Now I know that you fear God.

But hadn't God known that from the beginning? All along? God knows all, of course.

He's bound to have known it all from the beginning. So what's actually happening? Well, can I suggest this? What we have here is the Bible letting us see, as it were, into the very mind of God by depicting him as if he was a human being just like us.

And he does that so that we can see and understand the significance of something. Now that's important because for us to have assurance, for us to have real assurance about anything, we need to see clearly what God thinks about it.

Don't we? Otherwise, we can never actually be quite sure. But if we can see clearly what God thinks about something, then we've come to real certainty.

[14:57] That's assurance. So in effect, in Genesis 15, verse 6, when God credits it to Abraham for righteousness, God is saying, if you like, so far, so good, it's looking good about Abraham's faith.

And then he waits. What will follow? Will there be results? What James calls in the older translations, works, or what we have here, deeds.

But then there's Hagar, and then there's Ishmael. Abraham doesn't seem now to be quite trusting in the God of the promises.

Seems to have abandoned his faith for a faith in his own ability to have a son. But then, wait, there's this altar, there's the knife, there's the precious Isaac, there's Isaac, the sacrificial victim.

But he says to his servants, we will return. He expects confidently that God will bring his son Isaac back to life.

[16:12] That's faith indeed. Now, God doesn't, didn't need that proof. Of course he didn't. This validation. He knew Abraham's faith was genuine from the beginning.

But, he's depicted in Genesis 22 as coming to a final decision, as it were, as it were, about Abraham's faith.

How? Through observing Abraham's deeds. Through observing Abraham's works. And I think that the Lord depicts this in the way that he does so that we can see it from his point of view, as it were.

A true faith is a faith which produces results. Especially that's so, where the result is a costly, trustful deed.

An obedience to the word of God. And it's James alone, out of all the New Testament writers, who brings that up. I think that's remarkable. Can I apply it two ways to you as a congregation, as it were?

[17 : 25] First of all, I think there's a very important parallel between what Abraham's doing there and what the Lord expects his people to do at the time of sacrament. That's one aspect of putting your faith into action.

And that's why the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a strengthening ordinance, ordinance, as we say. It increases faith. You're actually doing what God has commanded.

It's an evidence to yourself that your faith is genuine. Very, very important. And I think that's the first thing. Can I apply it perhaps more narrowly to yourselves as a congregation in your present situation?

The whole church knows about your experience with regard to calls. If you like, the eyes of the whole free church are on the cord free church at the moment.

It may be that there's something similar in the Lord's dealings with you at the moment. I can't speak with certainty, but I do think it's something you should think about. Is it perhaps that there's something similar going on?

[18 : 37] And the Lord is looking to you to demonstrate the strength of your commitment and the strength of your faith and your confidence in Him and your confidence in His providence.

I think that's something that as a congregation you need to bear in mind that the Lord may be, may have been putting you through your difficulties for the last three or four years in order to make a point to a much wider group of His people, the church as a whole and who knows beyond that. So can I just suggest that there are these two ways. You can apply it personally, individually to yourselves and your own, the connection between profession of faith and your own assurance of your faith by virtue of the things that you do.

If you do the things that a believer does, you will find that your faith is strengthened, your assurance will grow. Whatever that happens to be.

And as a congregation, any congregation of the Lord's people has to bear this in mind, I think the way in which the Lord calls them, His people, to be the beacons on the hill and the lights on the candlestick and so on, to actually demonstrate faith to others and of course in a way to Himself as well.

[19 : 58] So we've got these four things. faith promotes or advances works. That's what James says in the first part of verse 22. You see that his faith and his actions were working together.

Faith cooperates with works a bit like a senior partner. I know that sometimes when you, I don't know if you experience it, but in many businesses, you know, the head of the business, the boss says, now colleagues, and you think, what's he calling us colleagues for?

He's in charge, we've got to do what he says. But the idea is the business can't succeed without the cooperation both of the bosses and the ordinary workers. It's a bit like that, a bit like that with faith and works.

Faith cooperates with works as a senior partner. That's the first thing James says in verse 22. The second thing he says in verse 22 is this, faith needs works.

You see that his faith and his actions are working together. And his faith was made complete by what he did. By engaging in the activity of the deeds and the works, faith grows towards maturity.

[21 : 09] That's what was completed means. Faith needs works. In verse 23, the scriptures were fulfilled that says Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

It was called God's friend. Faith precedes works. Faith comes first. Faith is the first and the basic reality in a relationship with God.

You must look to your faith first. Without faith, you can't please God, the scriptures tell us. Faith comes first. It's the first, it's the basic reality in a relationship with God.

And then in verse 24, James restates the truth. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. Results prove the living reality of faith and bring assurance that the believer has in fact entered the benefits that have been promised, righteousness and the friendship of God.

I see there's some young people still in the congregation or younger people. Can I tell you a story which highlights this, I think? I don't know how much you know about the Emperor Napoleon, Napoleon Bonaparte, who ruled France from the 1790s through to 1815 when he was defeated finally at the Battle of Waterloo by the, mainly the British army under the Duke of Wellington.

[22 : 37] Story which doesn't tend to figure in the history books. Napoleon used, when he was leading his armies into battle, not just to wear a general's uniform with lots of medals and gold braid and things, he just used to wear a plain brown coloured overcoat.

One of the battles that he was fighting, remember Napoleon's empire spread over most of what we now call Europe. One of the battles, I'm not sure which one it was, his horse bolted.

And you know when a horse bolts it's not uncommon that people can be thrown off and do themselves bad, bad injuries and sometimes even be killed. So there's the Emperor Napoleon's horse running away uncontrollably.

And an ordinary corporal, an uncommissioned officer in one of the regiments that were involved in this battle, dashed out, grabbed the horse's head or the bridle or whatever it is and managed to bring the horse to a stop.

And Napoleon says to the corporal, thank you, captain. And the corporal replies, of what company, sir?

[23 : 48] Of the guards, says Napoleon. By whose order? Said the corporal. The Emperor's order. Now, just think about that story because I think really that describes the difference between a sort of mental assent to the truth and true faith.

The corporal apparently didn't know who Napoleon was. But he didn't doubt him. He didn't say, how can you appoint me a captain?

And he didn't say, I can't go from being a corporal to being a captain. He actually took Napoleon at his word and he acted on it. He wanted to know which company he was appointed to be captain in. And when he heard which company it was, the guards, like the Grenadier guards or the Scots guards or whatever, his question was whose order so that he could tell them who had ordered him to be a captain in that regiment.

Till that point he didn't know whose horse he'd stopped. But he took Napoleon at his word and he acted on it. And that's what we're all called on to do with the Lord.

[25 : 04] We are called on to take God at his word and do it. And that's what James is saying. If you do that, then you know that your faith is true, your faith is genuine.

James, I think, would say that we are justified by faith alone, but not by faith which is alone. Now you know how some people have sort of said that James wrote to counteract Paul and this stress on justification by faith.

In actual fact, James wrote before Paul ever wrote. James wrote first, Paul wrote second. So, they both actually agree.

Paul says, justification by faith, that's the defining thing. Without faith, there's no peace with God. Without faith, there's no way into heaven.

And James says, but remember, it's got to show itself, it's got to demonstrate itself by the way you live, by your actions.

[26 : 13] James says, yes, we're justified by faith alone, but not by faith which is alone. And I have to ask myself, and you have to ask yourselves, is our faith alone, or is it a true faith which actually works?

May it be the case that the faith of every single one of us is a faith which really works, just like Abraham's did.