

## Peek-a-boo faith

### James 2:14-26

Last week my sermon text ended with one of the greatest declarations expressed anywhere in Scripture when it said: **"Mercy triumphs over judgment!!"** And part of why that's such a tremendous declaration is because of what **preceded it**.

*"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful."* (James 2:12-13 (NIV))

Now I can't speak for you, but as for me – I'd much rather fall under God's mercy than His judgment. But God's mercy triumphs, God's mercy wins, God's mercy trumps His judgment. And the full extent of God's judgment was poured on Christ when He died for you and my sins on the cross. And now God's offer of mercy is extended to anyone who accepts His Son as their Lord and Savior. And the way you accept Christ's sacrifice is through a thing called **"faith"**.

Now, before we jump into our text this morning, I want to warn you that this is a pretty controversial text in that many have accused James as presenting an opposite view of faith from what the apostle Paul says faith is. It's this text that caused Martin Luther to rigorously pursue the removal of James from the Bible. Although in some of his later writings he appears to have come around to James' point of view.

Out of respect for God's Holy Word please **stand** as I read **James 2:14-26**. You may be seated.

This concept of "Faith" is a pretty big deal, in the Bible, especially in the New Testament.

In the **Old Testament** the word "Faith" is only used **16 times** in the NIV translation.

However, it's usage explodes in the **New Testament** where it's used a whopping **254 times**. **James** alone uses it **14 times** in this short 100 verse letter.

The structure is such that James makes 3 powerful statements about faith. At the beginning, in the middle and then at the end. And in between these he tries to illustrate what this "faith" is and isn't.

#### Faith without deeds:

- **...Can't save us** (vs. 14)
- **...Is dead** (vs. 17 & 26) just like if you remove the spirit of life from a body it's dead – so if you remove deeds from faith it's also dead.
- **Is useless** (vs. 20) It might as well be thrown away.
- **...doesn't result in righteousness** (vs. 24) Which is precisely what we need for mercy to triumph over God's judgment. But a faith without works doesn't result in mercy. It still leaves us vulnerable to God's judgment.

Let me next show the dilemma that many claim exists between the apostle Paul and James' words

On the top of the powerpoint:

**James 2:24** *You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.*

**Romans 3:28-29 (NIV)** *For we maintain that a person is justified by **faith apart from the works** of the law.*

**Romans 4:5 (NIV)** *However, to the one who **does not work** but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.*

Perhaps even more interesting is the fact that both Paul and James appeal to the life of Abraham to prove their points.

**Romans 4:1-5 (NIV)** *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? 2 If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. 3 What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. 5 However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.*

But consider James’ reversal of that in our text this morning:

**James 2:21-24 (NIV)** *Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 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. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.*

**Paul:** *However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.*

**James:** *You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.*

This seeming difference is one of those passages that critics of the Bible point to in saying that the Bible is filled with contradictions. Or is it?

Many see a picture similar to two gunslingers standing a distance from each other firing rounds at each other. And I can certainly see how they’d come up with that image, since their definitions of faith seem so opposite from each other.

However, I think the visual picture that one author uses is much more useful. He puts it this way: *“James and Paul are not soldiers of different armies fighting against each other, but soldiers of the same army fighting back to back against enemies coming from opposite directions.”*

**Paul** is fighting against those who claim that we are saved by God’s grace plus works. . Our salvation isn’t complete until we do a bunch of stuff for God – such as obeying the Law with all it’s commandments and regulations.

**James** doesn’t disagree with Paul but James is fighting against those individuals who would claim that we are saved by intellectual acceptance. And many seem to practice that today. Only about ½ of all individuals in America who claim to be Christians actually bother to show up on Sundays. And their argument would be that I don’t need to since I’m already saved by believing in Jesus Christ and accepting him. There’s nothing more required of me and when I die I’ll gladly go to heaven. To that individual both Paul and James would say that if all that’s involved in your faith in Jesus Christ is merely accepting him in your mind but not in your heart, then you don’t have faith.

**Apostle Paul** focuses on the **root of our faith** (our acceptance of Jesus Christ with all of our being) **James** focuses on the evident **fruit of our faith** – if there’s no evidence of your faith then you don’t have Biblical faith. And that evidence of faith, James calls fruit.

After James initial question of how can a faith without the fruit of deeds save him he suggests a very practical illustration to prove how ridiculous and totally worthless that type of faith would be.

**James 2:15-16 (NIV)** *Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?*

The apostle John made a very similar point:

**1 John 3:17-19 (NIV)** *If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

John is agreeing with James here in calling into question whether the love of God can really be inside of a person if there is not fruit of love on the outside.

In **Matthew 25** Jesus says the same thing in regards to your faith showing up in the form of fruit which takes care of those who are in need. Jesus says that as often as you've fed the hungry and gave drink to the thirsty and provided hospitality to the stranger and clothed the naked and visited the prisoners you've demonstrated Christ's love and you've done it to Jesus. To those who showed their faith through actions he will welcome into heaven and eternal life but to those who claimed to have faith but did nothing about meeting the needs of others he will rebuke and send away to eternal punishment.

The late great illustrator, Charles Schultz, used one of his cartoons to illustrate this truth in one of his Charlie Brown cartoons.

To those who claim to have faith without any evidence of it in their lives, James says you're on the level of faith with the demons. For they believe in God as well – but they at least quake in their boots.

**James 2:19 (NIV)** *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.*

Often in their encounter with Jesus the demons recognized the identity of Jesus and were afraid. Remember when Jesus encountered the man that was possessed by a multitude of demons. The leader of the demons was named Legion – and he begged Jesus again and again not to send the out of the area and instead asked to be cast out of the man and into the pigs nearby – which Jesus obliged and did.

How many Christians live in fear of God's power and wrath. You see we've gone to the other extreme where we become quite comfortable with who God and Jesus are – so much so that after many Christians accept Jesus intellectually they don't really give Him a lot more thought. They figure that once they've verbally accepted Jesus and demonstrated it through the act of baptism, then they are set for their whole existence. And yet, both Paul and James would say that you don't really have the biblical definition of faith and therefore aren't saved. Even the demons have a greater depth of faith than many Christians do. We've attempted to make accepting Jesus as easy as possible so as to not offend anyone and get as many converts as possible. I challenge you to find in Scripture where those who wanted to accept Jesus Christ were simply told to bow their heads and silently ask Jesus to come into their hearts and lives. You'll be hard pressed to find this. Instead, you'll find that consistently throughout the book of Acts, that once someone came to a point where they wanted to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior that they were immediately baptized. They didn't wait until the quarterly baptism service or tell them it's alright that they weren't baptized. They did it immediately, even in the middle of the dessert and at midnight. It was that important to follow Christ's clear command in Matthew 28:18-20 that a key part of making disciples was to baptize them. Now, many Christian leaders argue that baptism is a work and we're not saved by works therefore we shouldn't require people to be baptized. But if it was good enough for Jesus to command it and the early church to practice it then I'm pretty convinced that we ought to follow it.

Next James uses two examples to show that faith must include works to be real faith. And these two examples are about as far apart from each other on the spiritual hall of fame as you could get.

**Abraham** (the father of the Israelite nation) and **Rahab** (the harlot in the heathen town of Jericho).

**James 2:20-24 (NIV)** *You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 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 a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.*

God called Abraham before he was 70 years old and he told Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation. However, 25 years went by and still no child. But God appeared to him once again and repeated his promise of Abraham being the father of a great nation. And God illustrated this to Abraham by having him go outside and look up and see the millions of stars in the sky and said that's how many descendants Abraham would have. It was at this point when Abraham believed God and he was declared righteous by God (**Genesis 15:6**).

But James now takes us about 40 years into the future after Abraham had waited almost 25 years for Abraham to see God's promise to him fulfilled in the birth of Isaac. And then approximately 15 years later, God reappeared and asked Abraham to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice – and amazingly, Abraham proceeded to obey God's command. And James points to this act of willingness that proved the genuineness of his faith, or completed his faith. James isn't saying that Abraham's faith began when he proceeded to offer up his son as a sacrifice to God – but rather that his willingness to offer up his son out of obedience to God was evidence of the genuineness of his faith.

Someone once posed the stinging question: if you were brought on charges for your Christian faith, would there be enough evidence to convict you? James would say that with both Abraham and Rahab the answer would be YES – but with many others, both back then and today, the answer would be NO!!

James is arguing that if there's no evidence, no fruit, in your life that shows your faith then your faith is useless and really only in claim only.

One time Jesus was talking about how to tell the difference between real and false prophets and he said that it's by the fruit in their lives that will divide them. (**Matthew 7:15-20**)

Right after this passage Jesus gets even clearer in distinguishing real believers from those who merely claim to be followers of Jesus, And Jesus says that only those who actually do the will of the Father will be allowed into heaven. Notice, it's not those who claim to know the will of the Father, nor those who are fascinated by the will of the Father, but only those who do the will of the Father. **Matthew 7:21-22 (NIV)** *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*

And just so you don't think or believe that Paul completely denied the importance of deeds in a Christians' life I share the following two verses.

**Galatians 5:6-7 (NIV)** *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*

**1 Thessalonians 1:3 (NIV)** *We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

**Jesus, Paul, James and John all see works as an essential overflow of real faith.**

One person put it this way: *"Faith is like calories – you can't see them but you can see their results."* I like that and agree with that. If there's no evidence of your faith in your life then you don't have real faith and James would say your faith is dead and useless and will not save you.

So, let me close by challenging you to look at your life. Outside of being here at church today, what evidence is there of your faith in Jesus Christ in your life? Do those around you know that you're a follower of Jesus Christ? And if not, why not?

We clearly aren't saved by what we do – but if there's not a change in your behavior then God will be questioning the genuineness of your faith as should others.

Paul states in **Ephesians 2:8-9** that we are not saved by works. But then in **verse 10** he states that we are saved to good works.

**Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)** *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.*

**Ephesians 2:10 (NIV)** *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Remember how I stated at the beginning of this sermon that **Martin Luther** tried to get the book of James removed from the Bible because of this passage and it's seeming disagreement with the fact that we're saved solely by grace. Well at some point, Luther must have come around to James' way of thinking because later he wrote this: *"It is impossible to separate works from faith, yes, just as impossible as to separate burning and shining from fire. Faith is a living, busy, active, powerful thing! It is impossible that it should not be ceaselessly doing that which is good. It does not even ask whether good works should be done; but before the question can be asked it has done them. And is constantly engaged in doing them, He who does not do such works, is a man without faith."*

## Sermon Outline James 2:14-26

Mercy triumphs over \_\_\_\_\_!!

The way you accept God's mercy is through \_\_\_\_\_

### ***"Faith" in the Bible:***

- In the Old Testament \_\_\_\_\_ times
- In the New Testament \_\_\_\_\_ times
- In the book of James \_\_\_\_\_ times

### **Faith without deeds:**

- Can't \_\_\_\_\_ us (vs. 14)
- Is \_\_\_\_\_ (vs. 17 & 26)
- Is \_\_\_\_\_ (vs. 20)
- Doesn't result in \_\_\_\_\_ (vs. 24)

Paul is fighting against those who claim we are saved by God's grace plus \_\_\_\_\_

James is fighting against those who claim we are saved solely by intellectual \_\_\_\_\_.

**Paul** focuses on the \_\_\_\_\_ of our faith

**James** focuses on the \_\_\_\_\_ of our faith.

How are demons faith in Jesus better than many Christian's faith?

What evidence is there in your life that you're a follower of Jesus?

What fruit do others see in your life that you're a follower of Jesus?

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