

JAMES 2:14-26

A WORRISOME TRUTH

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

“But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”¹

Many people know about God. University and college courses teaching about God offer credit for such studies. Long years ago the Apostle Paul wrote that, “[God’s] invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” [ROMANS 1:20]. Throughout the whole of creation, all people would say that they know there is a God. Moreover, almost all of them would claim to know about God—His nature and His character. However, knowing about God will never deliver an individual from condemnation. Only knowing God through Christ the Lord will suffice to deliver the lost soul from condemnation. Knowing God, an individual is born from above and into the Family of God. Bearing the image of the Lord, the child of God reflects in ever-greater measure the character of the Father.

James powerfully addresses this precise issue, imagining objections from people to whom he was writing. He had called for active faith in those who would read this letter; yet, he knew that some would object that they really believed, even if they didn’t do the things he demanded. Therefore, he confronted the tendency to dismiss the need for faith to be evident through how one lives. In order to bring out the force of James’ argument, I invite you to listen to Eugene Peterson’s masterful rendition of the New Testament into contemporary language.

“Dear friends, do you think you’ll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, ‘Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!’ and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?

“I can already hear one of you agreeing by saying, ‘Sounds good. You take care of the faith department, I’ll handle the works department.’

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

“Not so fast. You can no more show me your works apart from your faith than I can show you my faith apart from my works. Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove.

“Do I hear you professing to believe in the one and only God, but then observe you complacently sitting back as if you had done something wonderful? That’s just great. Demons do that, but what good does it do them? Use your heads! Do you suppose for a minute that you can cut faith and works in two and not end up with a corpse on your hands?

“Wasn’t our ancestor Abraham ‘made right with God by works’ when he placed his son Isaac on the sacrificial altar? Isn’t it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in works? That the works are ‘works of faith?’ The full meaning of ‘believe’ in the Scripture sentence, ‘Abraham believed God and was set right with God,’ includes his action. It’s that mesh of believing and acting that got Abraham named ‘God’s friend.’ Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by faith fruitful in works?

“The same with Rahab, the Jericho harlot. Wasn’t her action in hiding God’s spies and helping them escape—that seamless unity of *believing* and *doing*—what counted with God? The very moment you separate body and spirit, you end up with a corpse. Separate faith and works and you get the same thing: a corpse.”²

James words present—or at least should present—a worrisome truth for modern evangelical Christians. Pastors and teachers have done a masterful job of proclaiming that “the righteous shall live by faith” [e.g. **ROMANS 1:17**]; but we have failed miserably at warning that “faith apart from works is dead” [**JAMES 1:26**]. As a congregation, we must know that it is indeed faith alone that saves us from sin; but we must also know that the faith that saves is never alone. In order to secure this knowledge firmly in our minds, join me in reviewing James’ words.

FAITH IS REVEALED THROUGH LIFE — A cartoon in Leadership Magazine portrayed what many modern Christians seek. The cartoon pictured a conventional-looking church with a large billboard in the foreground advertising its ministry. The sign read:

The Lite Church
24% FEWER COMMITMENTS,
HOME OF THE 5% TITHE,
15-MINUTE SERMONS,
45-MINUTE WORSHIP SERVICES.
WE HAVE ONLY 8 COMMANDMENTS—YOUR CHOICE.
WE USE JUST 3 SPIRITUAL LAWS.
EVERYTHING YOU’VE WANTED IN A CHURCH ... AND LESS!³

Though the cartoon was meant to be humorous, it presents is the unfortunate stained-glass experience of so many who are in the modern church—no awakened conscience, no feeding of the mind, no opening of the heart, no commitment—*no real faith*.

Tragically, contemporary churchgoers appear focused on feeling good about themselves rather than finding and doing the will of God. They seek twelve easy steps to pleasing God so that they can perform a task and get on with their own lives. They really haven’t time to be living out their faith. Hopefully, that does not include any of you listening at this time.

² Eugene H. Peterson, **The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language** (NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO 2002)

³ Leadership, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Summer, 1983) pg. 81

Works do not save us; but if we are saved we do work. The grave danger for many is that they imagine they can perform these works without being transformed, only to fail miserably. Where do works fit into the picture, then? The answer is given by Christ as he answered some Jews who were inquiring about good deeds that God might approve. Jesus responded to their query, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” [JOHN 6:29]. An unsaved person thinks first of working in her desire for salvation. However, Jesus says the first “work” is to believe. After this, true faith works and works and works and works! Before salvation, an individual fruitlessly pumps and pumps from a dry well, but when he is saved the water of life becomes within him “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” [JOHN 4:14].

This is exactly what happened with John Wesley. Before he was a believer he was a minister and a missionary who worked with all he had. He memorised most of the Greek New Testament. He had a disciplined devotional life. As a missionary to the American Indians, he slept on the dirt to increase his merit and hopefully so he would be accepted by God.

But then came that liberating day when he trusted in *Christ alone* for his salvation. It was then—when faith at last began to energise his labours—that he began a works-filled life that would have warmed the heart of James. The rest of the story is well known. He preached in Saint Mary’s in Oxford; he preached in the churches; he preached in the mines; he preached in the fields and on the streets; and he preached on horseback. He even preached on his father’s tombstone. “John Wesley preached 42,000 sermons. He averaged 4,500 miles a year. He rode 60 to 70 miles a day and preached three sermons a day on an average. When he was 83, he wrote in his diary, ‘I am a wonder to myself, I am never tired, either with preaching, writing or travelling!’”⁴

The Christian Faith has never been the same. Wesley’s disciples—Francis Asbury, for one—were mighty powers in the evangelisation of the American frontier. Wesley and his circuit riders demonstrated amazing love for Christ and a tenacious love for lost souls. Their lives constituted one of the most glorious accounts of the advance of the Christian Faith.

As a young monk, Martin Luther almost destroyed his body through excessive fasting. Later, he would say, “If ever a monk got to heaven by monkery,” exclaimed Luther, “I would have got there too; all my brothers will testify to that. For if it had gone on much longer, I would simply have martyred myself to death with vigils, prayers, reading and other work.”⁵ Then, he discovered God’s Word, which boldly states, “The righteous shall live by faith” [ROMANS 1:17]. In similarly futile efforts, there are men in the Philippines who actually have themselves crucified at Easter each year in a bloody ritual that they hope will make them holy.⁶

Overarching this portion of James’ letter is the fact that what is believed is demonstrated through the way one lives. At a somewhat superficial level, you know that if a person is distrustful of others, she will tend to seek out the worst in others and accuse them of all sorts of evil, questioning motives and doubting what is said. Conversely, if someone is trusting, he is willing to accept the word of another, at least until they are proved deceptive. If an individual is an angry person, she can never be placated by assurances that others may offer; she will seek the worst in others and her imaginations will tend to the worst possible scenario. Gentle people, in contrast to such hurtful individuals, seek the best in others and think the best of them.

⁴ William Barclay, **The Letters to the Corinthians** (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA 2000, 1975) 259

⁵ Gerhard Ritter, **Luther: His Life and Work**, trans. By John Riches (Harper and Row, New York, 1963) 53, cited in S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “The Unchanging Truth of the Gospel: An Exposition of Galatians 2:1-10,” *Emmaus Journal*, Vol. 11, pg 41, Summer, 2002

⁶ See John MacArthur, Jr., “Mortification of Sin,” *Master’s Seminary Journal*, 5:17, 1994

The same truth holds in the spiritual realm—belief is revealed through one’s life. Undoubtedly, you have at some time heard the old saw, “Your life is shouting so loudly that I can’t hear what you are saying.” It is the same as saying that how one lives reveals what is believed despite what may be said. Don’t tell me what you believe—show me!

Jesus taught His disciples, “You will recognize [people] by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits” [MATTHEW 7:16-20]. To recognise someone is to assess accurately who they are. Jesus said that who we are is revealed through our fruits.

He followed that instruction by issuing a sobering warning. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” [MATTHEW 7:21-23]. So, it is not what we say that counts with God, but whether we have anything backing up our profession.

Have we forgotten that God redeems us so that we will be changed into the image of His beloved Son? Paul has taught us, “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” [ROMANS 8:28-30].

If we listened to apologists for contemporary theology, we would hear a message that tells us we can believe, continue as we have always lived, and everything will work out in the end because we will then at the end be changed into the image of Christ. However, the Word of God makes it quite clear that the transformation process is ongoing, beginning at the point of salvation and continuing throughout the days of our life and being brought to completion at the return of the Master. For this reason, we are taught that we “have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator” [COLOSSIANS 3:10].

Because the consequences of leaving anyone confused are so great, let me emphatically state that we do not produce fruits in order to be saved, but because we are saved we will produce fruits. Similarly, working without transformation is of no benefit in the Kingdom of God. However, those who are transformed through faith in the Son of God will produce works. Neither should we imagine that the works that are under review here are confined to works of benevolence. Though the child of God will be compassionate, he will evince concern for the vulnerable of society, but he will be even more concerned for the souls of all mankind. A failure to be concerned for the lost is effective evidence of an unregenerate heart, regardless of what is professed. There cannot be a difference between what is professed and what is possessed.

The story is told of a little girl who sought to unite with a congregation in East Texas. The elders were reluctant to receive someone so young as a candidate for baptism, and so they counselled her to wait a few years until she had matured. As the invitation continued, the little girl took her place on the front pew and began to weep silently.

The pastor, noticing her tears, sought to comfort her. Sitting beside her, he said, “Dear, it is not so bad to wait. Time will pass quickly and you will soon enough be received for baptism. Don’t cry.”

The little girl responded, “Oh, sir, I’m not crying because you asked me to wait. My brother is not saved, and I am crying because he is still lost.”

Stopping the service, the Pastor addressed the congregation. “This child is weeping because of her concern for her brother.” And turning to the elders of the congregation he asked, “Should we deny baptism to one who gives such evidence of concern for the lost?”

It is an appropriate question because it demonstrates a great truth. Should we not anticipate that those who are born from above will long for the salvation of the lost? This is a great evidence of new life. However, an absence of concern for the lost reveals that the individual has not known the Master who came to seek and to save those who are lost.

A faith that gives you what you want without transforming you into what you should be is worthless. A faith that fails to demand the best of you is of no value in the Kingdom of God. There is no such thing as a “lite” church, for a “church” which waters down its call for commitment is an imitation. Likewise, there is no such thing as a “lite” faith. Genuine faith is committed faith; it wholeheartedly follows the Master. It reflexively reaches out to those it perceives to be in need. It places its hands on the infections of the ill. It works to meet the spiritual and material needs of all. In short, real faith transforms the one holding that faith, and through that changed individual transforms the world in which he or she lives.

AN UNTRANSFORMED LIFE SPEAKS OF SPIRITUAL DEATH — One of the grave dangers facing preachers in our modern world is the success syndrome. We want our church to be successful. This is an admirable goal, but the danger facing us is that the congregation generates pressure to redefine success according to the standards of the world. We imagine that our church is successful when it has a large congregation, when attendance is growing steadily, when the budget is increased each year and the budgetary goals are exceeded regularly.

The danger of succumbing to the success syndrome is that we are tempted to lower the standards for entrance into the church. Eager to maintain the illusion of success, we invite people to join the church without carefully reviewing their profession. We ask whether those coming into the assembly love the Lord, and without exception they love God. Then, we discover that these “converts” are not eager to invest themselves in the work of the Faith. They attend the services intermittently, if at all. They are stinting in their financial support of the congregation. They do not pray for the needs of the congregation. They remain ignorant of the Word of God. Their life testifies to the fact that they are dead, and we resist disturbing them.

To be certain, no one is saved through his or her own effort. Paul warns that “By works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight” [**ROMANS 3:20**]. He iterates this truth in **GALATIANS 2:16** when he warns that “A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” Nevertheless, life produces activity; eternal life produces deeds.

Recall an incident in the days as Jesus was approaching His Passion. Nearing Bethany with His disciples, the Master was hungry. “Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again.’ And his disciples heard it.” Then, reading a little further we discover the impact of His words. It was the next morning as they passed by that same fig tree, and “They saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, ‘Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered’” [**MARK 11:13, 14, 20, 31**]. The tree had a great show of foliage, but it had no fruit and was therefore fit only to be cursed. In the same way, lives that are barren of fruit are fit for destruction rather than being suited for eternal bliss.

Jude describes hypocrites as “fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead” [JUDE 12]. Such people clearly know the language of the Faith, but there is no fruit to match their profession. Examine the life that has no transformation, and you will discover manipulation, a resort to the methods of the world to accomplish what that person desires, deceit and trickery. The untransformed life is a life that expresses rage and malice, a willingness to destroy in order to achieve its own ends. Those who remain as they have always been are focused on themselves and what makes them feel good rather than being intent on finding the will of the Master and pursuing that will to the praise of His glory. For them, the church becomes little more than a private fiefdom to promote their own interests. Such people can only be described as dead.

James describes just such superficial religion when he writes of professed followers of the Lord who see brothers and sisters in need but present only pious greetings or shallow expressions of concern. Such people often stand on their professed faith, but James challenges them to consider that position, following the assessment to its logical conclusion when he writes, “Show me your faith apart from works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” The root being holy produces fruit that is holy. Without the root, there is no fruit.

There is, in the account of the Judgement before the Great White Throne, a stunning statement that informs us that “The dead [are] judged by what is written in the books, according to what they had done” [REVELATION 20:12]. The barrenness of their lives will testify against them that they had no faith; for if they had possessed faith, there would have been deeds to justify their profession. However, without the deeds there is not a scintilla of evidence that they ever believed. How many professed Christians will be stunned at the demonstration of false faith!

Speaking of the Judgement of the nations coming out of the Great Tribulation, Jesus speaks of a judgement based upon whether His people were fed when they were hungry, given water when they were thirsty, given comfort when they were driven away from society, clothed when they were naked, ministered to when they were ill, or visited when they were in prison. Those who are condemned will hear, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me” [MATTHEW 25:41-43]. Concern for the vulnerable is—and will be—evidence of a regenerate heart. Concern to identify with God’s own people is—and will be—evidence of a regenerate heart.

A minister spoke with a man who professed salvation. The minister asked, “Have you been baptised?” “No,” he said, “the dying thief was never baptised, and he went to heaven.” The minister then asked, “Have you joined the church?” “No, I haven’t,” the man replied. “The dying thief never united with a church, and he went to heaven.” At last, the minister asked, “Have you supported missions?” “No, the dying thief did not give to missions, and he was not judged for it” was the reply. Disgusted, the minister said to the man, “Well, my friend, the difference between you two seems to be that he was a dying thief and you are a living thief.”

We often sing, “O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer’s praise,” but we do not even use the one tongue we have. We sing, “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small,” and then we give nothing at all to Him. James says it is faith that saves, but saving faith produces something.

“What good is it,” James asks; and the answer is “None.” “Can that faith save,” James asks, and the answer is “No.” What is at stake is salvation. What good are pious expressions if there is no transformation in the life of the one making the statement? Again, the answer is that pious expressions mean nothing if there is no transformation of life behind what is said.

A TRANSFORMED LIFE EXPRESSES SPIRITUAL LIFE — It is springtime in the Peace Country. We have enjoyed some beautiful weather, and people are actually talking about spring planting. The Farmer's Market will soon have a variety of plants for sale, as will local nurseries. When we buy a tree for the yard, we usually get a pretty bare piece of wood attached to a bundle of roots. We plant the tree we have purchased and tend it until it produces leaves and fruit.

Now suppose that I have purchased an apple tree. At first, it is rather a sad looking affair. There are no leaves and the tree looks like it is not much more than a broomstick. However, I know that because I have planted a root that will produce an apple tree, one day it will produce apples. I do not expect to find oranges growing on my tree. How is it, then, that people plant the root of bitterness and anticipate a harvest of righteousness in their own lives? The root determines the fruit; faith and deeds cannot be segregated. Where there is faith, deeds result. Deeds express the faith. Of course, I am not speaking of occasional deeds that are produced in a spasmodic manner, but I am speaking of the consistency that reveals the presence of the Spirit at work in the life of the child of God.

We forget that we who are born from above "have put off the old self" [COLOSSIANS 3:9]. As result of this, our faith must be ethically tested, and will be so tested continually. We are always revealing the presence of the Master through our response to the world about us. Because we have new life, we want to honour the Master by doing the things that bring glory to His Name. Therefore, we reveal His compassion, speak the truth that is characteristic of His Word, seek to win the lost about us, and make every effort to discover His will in our own life.

Whereas the lost consider how they may serve their present interests, the redeemed think of how they can serve the future. The child of God knows that Jesus has pledged to return. Because the Master is coming again, the true Christian takes seriously the teaching of the Saviour to "Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man" [LUKE 21:36]. The one born from above is concerned that she will "have confidence for the Day of Judgement [1 JOHN 4:17]. Though I caution you against presuming against the Lord, with the author of the Letter to Hebrew Christians, I anticipate in your lives "Things that belong to salvation" [HEBREWS 6:9].

You know very well that there are two kinds of truth. There is empirical truth which states a fact. For instance, I know that $E=MC^2$ as Einstein famously postulated. Or, as an example, I know that all life depends upon nucleic acids to exist, and given the proper equipment, I can prove this. I know that the area of a rectangle is the sum of the length times the height. If I must, I can prove this, but these truths have no immediate effect upon my life.

There is another kind of truth. Five quarters equal a dollar and twenty-five cents, and so I am resolute in refusing to pay more than a dollar and twenty-five cents for gasoline priced at \$1.25 a litre. In this instance, I have accepted the fact resulting from the addition, but I have also incorporated it into my life and into my willingness to pay for the gasoline.

James is arguing against the former truth, whilst arguing for the latter. The demons believe there is a God, and they actually shudder whenever they think of Him, but they do not rest their being on His grace. They do not allow this knowledge to have any influence in their lives. Just so, the lost know there is a God, but they refuse to permit that knowledge to have any impact in their lives. However, the one who is born from above not only knows there is a God, but has permitted the knowledge of God to bring her to the point of embracing Him as Saviour. The twice-born child of God has surrendered control of her life to the Spirit and now lives for the glory of the Saviour.

Faith that honours God is not mere assent to a set of truths; rather it is a vital, vibrant seizure of the life that transforms the possessor from one who was once dead into a follower of the Risen Son of God. Transforming faith empowers the possessor to dream great dreams to the glory of God and to accomplish great things that honour the Master. Jesus said, “Apart from Me you can do nothing” [JOHN 15:5]. Paul echoed these words that the Master spoke when he testified, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” [PHILIPPIANS 4:13].

Jesus continued teaching His disciples as He was approaching His Passion by stating, “If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” [JOHN 15:6-10].

Where there is faith, God is glorified. Faith that receives grace gives back glory. This is the reason Peter urges us to live godly lives among the lost. He writes, “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the Day of Visitation” [1 PETER 2:12].

Understand that you cannot live a life pleasing to God if you have no vital connection to Him. You have no vital connection to Him if you have never been born from above. However, if you have been born from above and into the Family of God, you cannot help but do those deeds that honour Him and that glorify His Name. This new birth result through the exercise of faith in the Son of God. Jesus, the Son of the Living God, gave His life as a sacrifice because of sinful people. Now, He calls each of us to believe this truth, receiving Him as Ruler of our life so that we may glorify Him through receiving the life that He offers.

The Word of God calls on each person to believe this truth, incorporating it into his or her life. Jesus died because of your sin. You are under sentence of death, condemned before God because you are a sinful person. The Son of God took your punishment upon Himself so that you need not face divine condemnation. He did not, however, remain dead. The Good News that we preach is that He was raised from the dead on the third day. He was seen by those who knew Him before He ascended into the heavens where He is now seated at the right hand of the Father. This same Jesus will forgive your sin, set you free from condemnation and place His Spirit in you, enabling you to do those deeds that glorify His Name.

This is the Word of the Lord. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” Then, citing the Prophet Joel, the Word declares, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

And that is our prayer for you. Believe this message of life. Receive Jesus the Risen Son of God as Master of your life. Having believed, walk in this new life that is freely offered to all who are appointed to life. Amen.