

Faith: True or False?

by Alistair Begg

Alistair Begg's sermon explores the critical relationship between faith and deeds, emphasizing that true faith is evidenced by action.

Duration: 37:42

Scripture: James 2:14-18, James 2:25-26

Topics: "Faith"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on James chapter two, specifically verse 14, which addresses the contrast between true faith and false faith. The preacher emphasizes that true faith is inseparably linked to good deeds, while false faith is barren and useless. The sermon also references Matthew chapter 25, where Jesus speaks about separating the sheep from the goats based on their actions. The preacher highlights the importance of not just having faith, but also demonstrating it through actions of kindness and compassion towards others in need.

Transcript

The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information, visit us online at truthforlife.org. We're going to read from James in Chapter 2. We read from verse 14. What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.

If one of you says to him, Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, You have faith, I have deeds. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

You believe that there is one God, good, even the demons believe that and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor 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 justified by what he does and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. Amen.

As we turn to the Bible this morning, and we're going to pray in just a moment, I want to read a quote from John Newton, the author of Amazing Grace and the minister of the gospel in the 18th century in England. I came across this not so long ago, and I thought it was very good and worth sharing with you. He says to his congregation in the 18th century, I counted my honor and happiness that I preach to a free people who have the Bible in their hands.

To your Bibles, I appeal. I entreat, I charge you to receive nothing upon my word any farther than I can prove it from the word of God and bring every preacher and every sermon that you hear to the same standard. Let us pray.

Father, we thank you for the privilege of turning now to the Bible, and we pray that the Spirit of God will bring the truth of your word home to our lives in a way that is life-changing. For we humbly pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, I encourage you to turn to the passage, or if you've left your Bible open there, that's fine. We're at the 14th verse of James chapter 2. You'll remember last time we had a very long introduction and a short conclusion. And so let me return to the conclusion so that we make sure that we don't do a disservice to the text in any way.

And let us just work our way back down through these verses. It's important to remind one another, as we saw last time, that the contrast that James is addressing here is not a contrast between faith and deeds. It is rather a contrast between true faith and false faith.

A true faith, which James shows, is linked inseparably to good deeds, and a false faith, which James points out, is one that is barren and useless. We noted last time also that this distinction, this contrast, is a crucial contrast because on it hinges matters not only of time, but also of eternity. And therefore the challenge that is presented in the question of verse 14 is one to which we need to pay most careful attention.

Look at his question, What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Here's the individual who is making big boasts and big claims about their understanding of faith, but in actual fact they are good on words and they are absent in deeds. Their lips have much to say, their lives have little to show. They have belief without behavior, they espouse a creed, but there is no accompanying conduct.

And James is making it quite plain that a sincere claim to have faith is not necessarily synonymous with a sincere faith. We can be sincere in our claim and yet be sincerely wrong. Hence the nature of this passage.

In verses 15 and 16 he underscores the useless nature of such a claim when he says, let me illustrate this for you, the futility of mere words seeking to alter the circumstances of the needy. It's quite obvious, isn't it? If somebody says to someone who's in need of clothes and sustenance, well I hope you have a wonderful day and keep warm and are well fed. He ends verse 16 with the way he begins verse 14, doesn't he? What good is it? What good is it? It's absolutely no good at all.

The poor will not thank us for our kind wishes, nor will God thank us for just simply saying that we have faith. If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride. But they don't.

They don't because wishes cannot transform the circumstances. That's the illustration he provides. You might just as well do nothing as stand there and make such statements.

And then in verse 17, the application of his illustration. In the same way, he says, faith by itself, lonely faith, is dead. Lonely faith is dead.

Now, James would have had access to a number of occasions when Jesus, his brother, was the teacher. We know, of course, that James, through much of Jesus' life, did not believe that Jesus was who he said he was. It was only after the reality of the resurrection that he came to believe himself.

But he would not have been unfamiliar with the clarity of Jesus' teaching, and not least of all, in this kind of area. So, for example, he may well have, as a reference point, Matthew chapter 25, where Jesus, in the second half of that chapter, speaks about the separation of the sheep and the goats. It is a classic passage.

We use that illustration or that phraseology in life, many of us not realizing that it is a biblical picture. We talk about separating the sheep from the goats. It is, of course, a rural picture, but made famous by Jesus.

When, identifying the work of a Palestinian farmer or shepherd, separating those that were to be in one place and those that were to be in another, Jesus, on one occasion, says, that's how it's going to be when the Son of Man comes in his glory. When he comes and sits on his throne, all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people from one another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. I'm quoting Matthew chapter 25 and verse 31 at this point.

He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. So, it's a very straightforward picture, isn't it? Anybody could understand what Jesus was saying. They would routinely have known that experience, either by doing it themselves, from the realm of shepherding, or as a result of seeing it take place in the course of a week.

But what Jesus goes on to point out, is that those who enter into his kingdom will be those who have done certain things. And this is what he says. I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat.

I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me in. I needed clothes, and you clothed me.

I was sick, and you looked after me. I was in prison, and you came and visited me. And then, the righteous will answer him, Lord, when did we see you hungry? I mean, seriously.

The 18th century Christians are going to be able to reply. We weren't there in 1st century Jerusalem. We weren't there in Galilee.

When did we see you? When did we see you as a stranger, invite you into our houses? Or when did you need clothes, and we gave you clothes? And the king will reply, I tell you the truth. Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. And then he flips to the other side, and he says, and the people who will be separated from me and cast into hell, will be those who saw people needy, and so on, and did nothing about it at all.

It's a staggering statement. It's a somewhat chilling statement, isn't it? James says, Faith by itself, lonely faith, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. Now, of course, it would be possible for us to jump to a false conclusion on the strength of Matthew chapter 25, and also on the basis of James 2, 17.

And some do. And this is how they understand it. They say, well, I read Matthew chapter 25, and apparently the way that you get to heaven is by giving clothes to people that don't have clothes.

Or by welcoming them into your home if they don't have a place to stay, and so on. Because that's what Jesus said in Matthew chapter 25, isn't it? Yes. But it's the same person who, when a religious, almsgiving gentleman by the name of Nicodemus came to see Jesus under the cover of darkness, that Jesus said to Nicodemus, I tell you the truth, you will never see the kingdom of God or enter the kingdom of God unless you are born again.

In other words, that which is referenced in Matthew 25 is not the ground of entry into heaven, for that ground of entry into heaven is the work of Jesus. But those deeds are evidence of the fact that a man or a woman has been made new by the work of Jesus. Now clearly, it is possible to do those things without any reference to Jesus at all.

And many people do, even today. All around the world, there are all kinds of humanitarian agencies that are dealing with AIDS crisis and poor people and giving out different things and so on. And it is all very, very good humanitarian work.

But it is not, in any sense, related to Jesus. Many of the people would deny an existence of God and certainly would have no interest in Jesus of Nazareth whatsoever. So that is why you see what James is doing is of such pressing importance.

He is making it clear that the presence of these deeds cannot be used to argue the presence of faith, but the absence of these deeds may be used to argue the absence of faith. You see, you and I this morning cannot claim to have a valid, eternally significant relationship with Jesus if we choose constantly to sit lightly and easily to the needs of people around us. We understand, I think we do, as a congregation, that the need to be right with God outweighs the need for physical sustenance.

But the fact that we understand the priority of the gospel of a man or a woman being put in a right relationship with God does not allow us to sidestep the clear instruction of James here nor the instruction of Jesus in Matthew chapter 25. We are not relieved of the responsibility of caring for the needy simply because we understand the nature of the priority of the gospel. It is indeed the priority of the gospel which gave rise to the great work of Wilberforce in dealing with the slave trade in England.

It is the priority of the gospel which led to the development of so much work amongst orphans and widows and the development of so many hospitals throughout the entire world. It was because God had gone to such lengths in coming to save that it seemed incomprehensible to those who were redeemed by the compassionate love of God that the outworking of that should not reveal itself in the cares that are expressed to those who are in need. Spurgeon is reputed to have said, If you want to give a hungry man a tract, wrap it in a sandwich.

Which is quite an interesting thought, isn't it? But maybe, and we want to be careful about second-guessing Spurgeon, but maybe he should have said, If you want to give a hungry man a sandwich, wrap it in a tract. Because in all of our giving and in all of our going and all of our sharing, the

cause of the gospel must remain at the core. It is very, very possible to collapse a biblical understanding of the gospel into an amalgam of charity and morality.

And indeed, the history of the church and the history of organizations bears testimony to what happens when an individual or an organization or a church congregation or a denomination takes, as it were, its focus from the work of Christ on the cross in the gospel and attaches it to that which emerges from that truth, but dare not supplant that truth. And it could happen as easily here at Parkside Church as anywhere else. That, incidentally and tangentially, is how groups who do not believe the essentials with one another, Jews and Christians, or Jews, Christians and Muslims, can be involved together.

The only way they can be involved together is if they collapse their central, core beliefs into charity and morality. But if we are prepared to hold true and central to that which comes to us from the scriptures, then we will be forced to recognize that the gospel is the great divide. Well, verse 18, someone will say, you have faith and I have deeds.

And James is going to say, no, we're not going to be able to play that game. We're not going to be able to separate them from one another. This 18th verse and perhaps even the 19th verse proves to be a challenge insofar as the punctuation is very, very difficult.

We have to remember that there was no punctuation provided for us in the original text. Therefore, in translating, the translators have had to decide who's who in this little dialogue. Is this a hypothetical dialogue? Who is the someone? Who is the you of the personal pronoun, you have faith? Who is the I of the personal pronoun, I have deeds? Should the punctuation, should the quotes simply surround you have faith, I have deeds? Or should the quotes extend to show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do.

Essentially, it can keep you up all night trying to punctuate this. I've spent way too much time on it and this is what I finally decided. I'm going to leave you to have fun with it by yourselves at home.

Because if we stand far enough back from the text and ask, what is the main and plain thing here? Irrespective of whether it's a hypothetical conversation, irrespective of if James is the first pronoun or the second pronoun or whatever it might be. What is James doing? The answer is that he is dealing a healthy blow to any attempt to suggest that faith and deeds may be separated. That's what he's saying.

Somebody says, well, we can perhaps parse it out and you can have one and I can have the other. Perhaps that's the way we ought to do it. No.

The person says, why don't you go ahead and provide me with an example of real faith that is not accompanied by deeds and I'll be happy to show you the reality of my faith on the basis of my deeds. Now, the idea of faith being simply an orthodox assent to certain truths is also dealt with in the 19th verse. You believe there's one God? That's jolly good.

But even the demons believe that and they shudder. James again would have known that when Jesus came into an area, oftentimes it was the demons who were able to identify him. Mark chapter 1, Jesus' teaching in the synagogues and they're amazed at his teaching because he has such authority.

And then a man in the synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God. Was the demon a believer? Was the demon trusting in Jesus as a Savior? No. He knew who he was.

He had an orthodox understanding of Jesus. And James is pointing out, you can have an orthodox understanding of the Godhead, but you won't be any better than the demons if you do. So, in other words, information plus a little perspiration is not the same as the transformation that God brings about when he gives us birth through the word of his truth and turns his people into those who are producing first fruits.

That's verse 18. We needn't stray very far from it. In chapter 1, he chose to give us birth.

And that's God's initiative, remember? Through the word of truth. That's God's instrument. That we might be kind of first fruits of all he created.

That's God's intention. He produces this in us. So, James is tackling the individual who says, Well, I actually have an orthodox view.

I do believe there is a God. Well, that's very good. And I even actually believe that Jesus was the Son of God.

That's also very good. But you haven't even got beyond the demon's classroom yet. And the person may be prepared to say, And not only do I believe in a God and believe that Jesus is the Son of God, but I also believe that it is very important to do certain things like feeding people and giving clothes to folks who are cold at night.

All of that put together is now what James is referencing here in terms of saving faith. You see, what the Bible makes clear to us is that we're not in need of an educator. We're in need of a Savior.

We're not in need of education. We're in need of salvation. There is an educational dimension to coming to saving faith insofar as there are propositions that are laid out for us in the Bible that are to be believed.

But the believing of those propositions is not to be equated with genuine saving faith. Because it is possible to believe propositions intellectually without consenting to the impact of those propositions in our lives. And we know that from easy illustrations throughout every aspect of our days.

There's no intellectual road to God in the sense that we can simply decide to put the pieces of the puzzle together and get there. No, we need God to do what only God can do. And that is to wake us up to our need of a Savior.

Which is very different from being wakened up to an interest in a deity. Or being concerned to acknowledge that there is an existence of a superpower. Or that there is some great unmoved mover at the origin of the universe.

Or that we're prepared to give credence to the idea of a prophet who roamed the Galilean hillsides. We can do all of that and yet still have no notion of what it means to have our sins forgiven, to have our lives invaded by the expulsive power of a new affection, to be convinced within our hearts that God is who He claimed to be, and so on. There is great potential for a lonely faith.

And a lonely faith, says James, is a dead faith. It is no good. It is dangerous.

It is unhelpful. It will take a man or woman eventually into hell. That's why it's so significant.

Now, he says, what I'd like to do at this point is call a couple of witnesses in defense of my thesis. And so he's going to call first of all, Abraham. That won't be a surprise.

He's the daddy of them all, as it were, we might say. So well known for his place in biblical history. And then he's going to call Rahab a prostitute, which is a little more surprising.

An unlikely illustration. What is he doing in this? Well, he's destroying the pretense of those who imagine that simply their declaring of a belief without evidence in their lives is saving faith. You foolish man.

You foolish fellow. The fool, remember, is the one who said in his heart there is no God. You foolish man.

Do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Let me call two witnesses. First of all, let me call Abraham. Wasn't our ancestor Abram considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? And he goes all the way through to the staggering statement in verse 24.

You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. He's justified by what he does and not by faith alone. What are we going to do with this? Some of you are immediately reaching for your concordance to say that seems like an amazing contradiction.

That seems to be a distinct contradiction to what Paul is saying in the opening chapters of Romans. After all, isn't it Paul who tells us that no one will be justified by the works of the law because by the works of the law can no one be justified. James is apparently saying that Abraham is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

Well, let me answer the question for you and then we can unpack it now and at a later time. Two things will be helpful in tackling what is an apparent but not a contradiction. Number one, recognizing that what Paul is dealing with in Romans is different from what James is dealing with in James.

They're coming from two different starting points. Paul is starting from the point or he's pointing out that works have no value in bringing a man or a woman into a relationship with Jesus. So those who would come along and say, well, I did this and I did this and I did that would God accept me on the basis of that? And Paul says, no, it wouldn't be possible for you could never be good enough or do enough in order to be accepted by God.

Therefore, you'll never be accepted by God on account of what you do. James is not at that point. James is picking up the people who profess to have come to a knowledge of Jesus.

And James is insisting that a genuine awareness of who Jesus is and what he has done will be evidenced in good deeds. And that those good deeds are not the ground of our acceptance with God, but they are the evidence of our acceptance with God. So again, we ended last time in Ephesians 2. It is by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves.

It is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one should boast. Then what does he say in the very next verse? For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works so that they are the evidence of, not the ground of. But James is saying, I don't want to hear from you folks just rabbiting on about what you believe and telling me things that stir around in your heads.

Lonely faith is dead faith. The other thing that we need to recognize, and with this we must stop, is that James and Paul are using justification in two different ways. The verb *dikaio* is used in the majority of times in the way that most of us have been taught to understand it in terms of being declared righteous, not being made righteous.

That justification in that sense is the opposite of condemnation. That in condemnation we are declared guilty. In being justified we are declared not guilty.

But those who are declared not guilty still know themselves to be wretched sinners. How then can those who are sinful people be declared not guilty? On the strength not of anything done by them, not actually of anything done in them, but on the strength of something done for them, so that our acceptance before God is an account of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished. And indeed, until we understand that use of the verb to justify, most of us will make a complete shambles of trying to understand what James is doing here.

So why don't I just end by at least making an attempt to make sure that we understand what Paul is doing with justify, and then we'll come back to what James is doing with justify. Turn to Romans chapter 3 for just a moment. I'm going to take you on a whistle-stop tour of a few verses.

In Romans, Paul is explaining, chapter 1, that we have exchanged the glory of God. In chapter 3, he is explaining that we have fallen short of the glory of God. And our predicament is such that in verse 19, now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.

And here we are. No one will be declared righteous in his sight, declared righteous in his sight. Notice, by observing the law, rather through the law, we become conscious of sin.

So in other words, our mouths are shut. We have nothing to say in our defense. And when we are called upon to sit in the dock and to give an answer for where we stand before God, the answer is we stand with our mouths closed.

We stand guilty. We stand caught with a sword of rebellion in our hands. We stand lost in our own helpless indifference.

And then in verse 21, he explains how it could possibly be that those who have exchanged the glory and fallen short of God's glory may come, as he mentions it in Romans 5, to rejoice in the hope of glory. How is this possible? Because, verse 21 and 3, a righteousness from God apart from law has been made known. And this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

To all who believe. To all who cast themselves consenting on Christ. What this makes perfectly plain is that you can never be so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace.

And none of us could ever be so good that we are beyond the need of God's grace. That's Jerry Bridges. You can never be so bad as to be beyond grace's reach.

And you could never be so good as to be beyond grace's need. So it covers us all, doesn't it? It covers a person who's sitting here this morning and whose life, as we look back on it, is a royal shambles. Who feel that they have blotted their copy book so severely.

Who have marred their lives. Who have turned their back on God. Who have destroyed things.

Who have wasted his time and wasted their time and invaded others' lives. And harmed them and hated God. And they say, there is no possibility for me.

Look in here. To all who believe. To all who believe.

You are not so bad as to be beyond his reach. And then, the spotlight spins around and catches the smug and the self-confident and the religious and the people who are so secure in their own goodness. And shakes us up and says, listen here.

You're not good enough to get into heaven without a Savior. You will on that day have only one defense. You will only have one plea that you may enter.

And that plea is Christ. Jesus paid it all. He did it.

And I look to him. The wonder of justification by faith is that God has brought into time his great assize. So that when a man or a woman comes to rest in the work of Jesus, that man or woman need never ever fear that God will go and muck around and rake around in that which he has forgiven.

We need never fear that the penalty will be reintroduced. It is forever and for all time. He will discipline us.

The work of God in sanctification is an ongoing work. But the work of God in justification is a finished work. That's why there is no condemnation.

To them that are in Christ Jesus. Does that describe you? In Christ Jesus. Not interested in Christ Jesus.

But in him. Because you have cast yourself upon him. Caught up in the arms of his mercy.

You'll actually know if that's true. Not because of a feeling in your tummy. Although you may have a feeling in your tummy.

But you will know it to be true when even through your own awareness of your falterings and your bumbblings and your bad weeks and your not praying enough and you're not reading your Bible regularly. That even when you are confronted by the fact that there's a way to go. Still when Alan plays that hymn and takes it up a notch on the second stanza if you know the hymn there was a reason to take it up and play it with such conviction because what is it that Spafford says in the second stanza? My sin.

Oh the bliss of this glorious thought. My sin not in part, but the whole is nailed to his cross and I bear it no more. That's the issue.

And my dear friends if you do not have that conviction within your heart if God does not bring it to you despite all of the assailing of the evil one against you. Then you probably need to get down on your knees and cry God be merciful to me the sinner and he will save all who believe and he will bring you into an experience of genuine expressions of his wonderful love and grace. While we left Abraham kind of hanging we'll come back to him.

Father look upon us in your mercy come to those of us who feel ourselves to be beyond the pale of your goodness and pick us up in the arms of your redeeming love and to those of us who like the elder brother in the story of the prodigal have been slaves in your house but have no knowledge of you as a wonderful father and friend pierce the bubble of our self righteous pomposity and bring us down so that we might kneel and then that we might stand with all of our comfort and all of our defense outside of ourselves in Jesus. It's in his name we pray. Amen.

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