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“Faith and Works”

Sermon Series: “Complements,” No. 1

October 26, 2025

James 2:14-26

14 What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? 15 Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, 16 and you say, “Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well”—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

17 So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

18 Now someone may argue, “Some people have faith; others have good deeds.” But I say, “How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds.”

19 You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. 20 How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless?

21 Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was shown to be right with God by his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete. 23 And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: “Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith.” He was even called the friend of God. 24 So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone.

25 Rahab the prostitute is another example. She was shown to be right with God by her actions when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road. 26 Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.

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What are some of your favorite complements?

I don't mean the, “You look nice,” or, “Great job in the game!” kind. [those are compliments]

I mean the kind where two things come together and make each other better.

[Peanut butter and jelly]

This is the kind of complement I mean.

[Peanut butter and chocolate]

Or this kind...even better! [Reeses]

[Salt and pepper]

Or this kind.

[Coffee and cream]

Or this kind.

I seem to have chosen all food examples here, so you can tell where my mind is, but there are complements of other kinds too.

[Shampoo and conditioner]

Annette suggested shampoo and conditioner. I don't even know what those are.

[Congregation laughs heartily ... Pastor Diddle has a shaved head.]

Some *colors* are complements, right? They just go together.

Some *designs*, some *fashions*, some pieces of *furniture*.

In music, some notes, chords, instruments.

Some *people* just fit perfectly together...they bring out the best in each other and together, they're better than they are by themselves.

They complement one another.

Well, there are complements in the Bible too...concepts, ideas, themes, images that just go together. Some may not seem to on the surface, but they really do, and if we miss their connection, we miss the bigger, more accurate message of Scripture.

That's what we're looking at over the next few weeks – some of the complements in God's Word...beginning today in the book of James, chapter 2.

Look there with me, if you would. **James 2, verses 14 through 25.**

This text here is considered quite troublesome for many of our Christian brothers and sisters...for our theologically reformed friends especially...which takes in a lot of people.

A big chunk of American Christians are at least one point Calvinists, whether they know it or not.

But that's why...when you look at a book or commentary or you see some article or blog on James' comments on faith and works in particular, chances are good that what you're reading was written by someone trying hard to manage what they see as a great *conflict* between James and the Apostle Paul regarding the nature of salvation and the places of *faith* and *works within* salvation.

And this is the passage, more than probably any other, that troubles those people.

This is the passage that crawled under the skin of Martin Luther centuries ago to the degree that it caused him to...let's say *dislike* this whole book of James...largely because of these words here about the place and importance of *works*...our own *engagement* in redemption.

Now of course, we have to remember Luther's context.

Martin Luther was standing against the huge Roman Church machine...essentially the only church of his time, which based a person's eternal salvation on what that person *did*...what they *accomplished*...and even, at times, what they were willing to *pay*.

Luther, by himself, stood up to years of church practice that he knew was totally unbiblical, so he wound up pushing the theological pendulum, if you will, which the church had institutionalized to be way over here...Luther, in an understandably reactionary way, wound up pushing it way over here.

Yet there is a via media...a middle way...a way to understand this issue of faith and works that...well, that **works!**

The fact is, it was the way of the early Church fathers. It was the way of the church for hundreds of years...especially before Augustine.

Those believers of the Church's first several centuries understood and wrote about faith and works, allowing for a healthy correspondence...a **complementary relationship** between them that diminishes neither.

So, like them, we don't have to be anti-Paul or anti-James.

In **fact**, we **have** to be **pro**-Paul **and pro**-James in order to **really grasp** the **whole** of the Scriptural message on the nature of salvation. Paul and James are complementary.

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So...what are the words of James that seem so difficult for so many?

Well, the whole passage here has given some people heartburn, but especially two places here...at the end of verse 17 and again at the end of verse 26, where James just flatly states, "**Faith without action...faith without deeds, is dead.**"

Now, is James saying that faith is not important or necessary for salvation? Of course not. Nowhere is he suggesting that works without faith can save us.

What James **is** saying is that there is an **active element** to faith that **has to be present** in order for faith, itself, to be **real**.

The question is **not** whether or not faith is the key element to salvation. The Bible is overwhelming clear that it **is**.

The question is...what is involved in **truly Biblical faith**?

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You see, particularly for Western, post-reformation, post-enlightenment minds, it is very easy to understand faith in a **purely cerebral sense**.

Belief, to us, is having faith...up here in our heads.

But simple, cerebral **assent** is not, by any stretch, what the Bible calls "faith." To make some decision in our minds about Jesus that we then file away and forget about until we need it at death...that has nothing to do with **Scriptural** faith.

There is **way** more than **that** to what the **Bible** calls **faith**, and the key to understanding it is to realize that faith, in the Bible, is an **active**, and **not a passive, term**.

Faith is not something to be kept or held, like you'd keep something in your pocket.

Faith is an *act*...an *action* that, by *definition*, speaks of *something happening*.

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Other Biblical concepts work that way too – like love.

Or trust.

No one actually carries around...holds in their hand love or trust for someone.

To *have* love or trust...to *possess* love or trust means to *engage in* love or trust...to *think* and *live lovingly* or *trustingly*.

To *have* love is *to love*. To *have* trust is *to trust*.

The same goes for faith.

To *have* faith is *to...faith*.

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In this passage here, James is drawing on the same construction he used back in chapter 1 where he talked about hearing and doing God's word. In verse 22 back there, James warns how *useless* it is to *hear*, but then to not *do*, God's word.

If you really *hear* the word, you *do* the word.

If you don't *do* the word, you haven't really *heard* the word, you see?

For James, *hearing* and *doing* are inextricably connected. They are part of each other. They sound, to us, like they may contradict, but they don't. In Scripture, they actually complement each other.

And so here in this passage, James is saying that the issue is just the same with *faith*. If you have faith, then you will act according to that faith. If you don't act according to faith, then you don't have faith.

Having and *acting upon* faith are inextricably connected, such that, again, you can't have one without the other and have anything of value.

To *have* faith is to *live* faith.

To *live* faith is to actually *have* faith.

If we *have* faith, then faith *must* come out of lives...by the way we live and treat others and the way we invest our time and resources.

So you see, faith is way more than a decision we make in our heads about a thing...about God or Jesus, in this case.

But a lot of people don't understand that.

In fact, there is quite a lot of pressure in our culture, both from within and from outside the church, to take the opposite position.

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The temptation toward a faith of the **head only** has always been with us...and it's rooted in a laziness and a selfishness in humanity that comes from the Fall.

Because of the fall back in Eden, we are all born at least greatly tempted to live according to the ethos, "What's the least I can get away with here? What's the least I can do? What's the easiest way forward? I'll do that so I can get where I need to go with the **least possible investment** or **work** or **cost** on my part."

"What's the least I can do?"

To be kind, let's call that "conservation."

Now, that mindset of conservation...doing what we can to conserve our energy and resources and still get the job done...that's not always a bad thing.

I'll drive slower so I can get more miles per gallon out of my car.

I'll set the thermostat lower so we don't use so much energy or money heating our home.

I'll use coupons and sales so groceries aren't so expensive.

That's all conservation...getting the job done while minimizing the cost to us.

In business, it's normal for two people or companies to try to gain the most, while investing the least, in each other...and as long as both are agreeable, then great.

So you see, in **transactional** or **contractual relationships**, there are times and places for conservation.

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But when it comes to **personal relationships**, **conservation** is a **killer**.

If a couple is standing at the altar on their wedding day thinking, "Hmmm...I wonder...what's the least I can commit to this relationship and still be married in fifty years?" if that's what they're thinking, then they might as well not bother saying, "they do" to someone else, because, really, they don't. That relationship is over before it even begins.

Relationships require **more** from those involved than just the "least possible effort."

In fact, those who are looking to invest the least possible effort are not really engaged in relationship at all, are they? If the woman at the altar is there, wondering, what's the least I can give here and still stay in this marriage, is she really in that marriage to begin with?

Not at all!

Would any of us want to marry someone...would we want our **child** to marry someone...who was thinking **that** on their wedding day?

Of course not, because we all know selfishness when we see it...especially in others. Sometimes we have trouble seeing it in ourselves, but we tend to see it remarkably easily in other people.

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Yet the very same thing is true of our relationship with God, you see? It's **not** a **contract** that we make with Him. It's a **personal relationship** that we're engaged in.

Faith in Jesus is not about giving mental assent to His existence and then asking ourselves, “What’s the least I can get away with here and still keep in His good standing so I can make it to Heaven?”

That’s not relationship.

That’s not trusting.

That’s not loving.

That’s not believing.

Giving mental assent to Jesus’ existence and then trying to figure out the least we can get away with and still make it to Heaven... *that’s not “faithing.”*

That’s not, in any way, exercising faith in God.

I’m afraid a lot of people sitting in churches these days think it is, but it isn’t.

Believing, trusting, faithing in God means choosing to intentionally live out His will, the best we know it to be.

*Having* faith in God means *doing* what God and His word says to do.

This is James’ position...but you know, the truth is, the Apostle Paul says this too, and so does Peter, and the writer of Hebrews, and most importantly...Jesus...they all say...the consistent witness of Scripture tells us that things like belief, trust, love faith are only actual...they’re only real if they’re *lived out*...if they’re *actuated*...if they’re made *manifest* in our lives.

James goes as far as to say here in verse 19 that even demons *believe*...even demons *believe*...in the *cerebral* sense.

The very servants of Satan...even *they* know God is real and that He exists.

But their belief fails to save them...to make real any sort of relationship with God because they don’t make their *belief operative* in their lives.

They have *faith*, in the *cerebral* sense, but they *don’t “faith,”* they don’t live according to what they believe.

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The phrase, “sola fide,” “faith alone,” became the rallying cry of the protestant reformation. Luther wound up popularizing it, and like I said, given his context, we can understand why.

But did you know that the only time the phrase "faith alone" is used in the Bible is when it’s condemned here in James 2:24?

Scripture absolutely tells us we must have faith in order to be saved.¹

First Thessalonians 2:13 says that faith involves assent to God's truth.

Yet *Biblical faith* is far *more* than believing with our mind.

Romans 1:5 and 16:26 tell us that faith requires obedience.

Galatians 5:6 defines faith as working in love.

¹ Hebrews 11:6

In Philippians 2:12, Paul speaks of faith as a life-long process...never as a one-time experience.

Paul also tells us our faith is living and can go through many stages, never staying permanently fixed after a single conversion experience no matter how genuine or sincere.

Faith is a living, active thing.

In the book of Timothy alone, Paul says that faith can be shipwrecked, departed from, disowned, wandered from and missed.²

You see how these are words about relationships and how they work in life?

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We can't save ourselves by our works. We can't work our way to heaven.

But for faith to be Biblical, saving faith, it must be made manifest in our ***lives*** and not simply our ***minds***.

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Of course, Jesus not only lived the perfect example of this, He described for us what it looks like in His sermon on the mount...in Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Right there is our picture of Biblical faith.

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In verse 20 here, James begins, in most of our translations, with the phrase, "***You foolish man.***"

Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson translates that phrase, "O empty man," because this is the condition of those who ***think*** that by their ***thinking*** they're saved.

They think that because of what they ***think*** they're in good standing with God, but in reality, they have no actual relationship with Him.

They don't really know Him because they don't care about what He cares about...

They don't listen to His words...

They don't do as He says to do.

They may ***believe***...like demons believe, but that belief alone is not anything close to the relational, interactive, action-oriented faith that the Bible describes.

So they think they have something, but they don't.

They're empty but don't realize it.

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I think there are a lot of "empty" people in our world today too...calling themselves Christians...thinking they're on their way to heaven because of what they believe in their head about Jesus, but they've not really followed Jesus at all with their lives.

² 1 Timothy 1:19, 4:1, 5:8, 6:10 and 6:21

They have no living relationship with Him.

You actually hear this a lot at funerals...you hear appeals to this “empty” sort of “belief.”

Even though everyone around her knew she cheated people and she was selfish and she was mean and she kicked her dog and everything else...still at her funeral, it will be said, “We know she’s in heaven because she believed in Jesus.”

Well, that’s not Biblically true.

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Did you know that, according to Pew Research and Gallup, between 62% and 68% of Americans claim to be Christian. Maxie Dunnam writes,

“Just think of that for a minute. Do we really think that our nation could be drowning in debt and drugs, wallowing in pornography, allowing millions to go hungry and without shelter, cheering on self-serving governments...do we really think we could possibly be in the mess we’re in today if that many people were truly living out their lives listening to Jesus?”

I don’t think so, and neither does James.

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To reduce the requirements of the gospel to simply giving mental assent to the fact that Jesus died for our sins...in truth, that is to mock the gospel, and according to James, it’s leading people to death.

James says it clearly: “This so-called faith...without the works of faith...is useless.” Five times he warns us...in verses 14, 17, 20, 24 and finally in verse 26.

“Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

And he uses a powerful image...he likens faith without works to a body without breath...which is just a corpse.

There is no life-giving force to animate it, and he concludes nothing less than to say...any faith that is not animated by the works Christ calls for is not faith at all...and leads the ‘believer’ to death.

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So you see...in reality, faith and works aren’t contradictory at all. They’re actually complements. They go together, and even inseparably so.

Just as no person will ever be moved to action on Christ’s behalf apart from faith, no person’s faith is real until it moves that person to action.

So what all that means is this:

First, don’t give in to that fearful doubt or wondering about whether or not our deeds are good enough. We are saved by God’s grace...grace we can never earn by anything we do.

Second, don't give in to that easy believe-ism that's captured so much of the Church in our land...that says it doesn't matter what we do. Oh yes it does matter, because what we do reveals the true character, the authenticity of our faith.

Don't give in to the pendulum swings.

Instead, give in to Jesus. Give all you are to Him and to relationship with Him...to pursuing Him...to knowing and learning His word. His will, His way...and to doing it..

That's real relationship...and that's the relationship that matters, because that's Biblical faith...the movement of both heart and hand that allows us to live with Jesus now and for eternity.

Give in to Jesus.

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**Prayer:** Father, thank you for giving us James, for keeping His word in the canon even when it was threatened to be removed. Thank you for giving us the complete picture of faith and works...how those things work together...how they work frankly inseparably together – and help us to adopt that...to understand it.

And, Holy Spirit, be our teacher so that we know what is needed in our lives with regard to this complement that we find in your Word. In Jesus name, Amen.

**Song of Response:** "Trust and Obey"

**Closing Word and Benediction:**

As we go from this place this morning, we can trust, and we pray that God's Spirit would go powerfully with us to help us understand more and more what faith really is...and what His tremendous gift of relationship with Him really means.

Let us be people whose faith is easily and winsomely seen in our lives, whose faith and works complement each other, revealing Jesus with power and confidence and grace.

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Thanks for coming to worship today. The Lord bless and keep you. Amen.

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