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Faith That Saves, Faith That Doesn't – Pt. 1 (James 2:14-19)

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Up to this point in his letter, James has taken us through several topics that all point to one thing: the test of knowing if one is truly saved. If you are a true believer, you will grow in patience as you go through suffering and trials. You will seek and receive wisdom. You will act and not just hear. You will grow better at handling anger, bridling the tongue and taking care of the needy. Last time we saw that true believers do not treat others with favoritism.

The texts for this week and next week are crucial and very misunderstood. Some would even say that they contradict other places in Scripture. We must take care to know exactly what is being said in the next few verses, because denying or misinterpreting them jeopardizes our spiritual futures.

James 2:14-19 - What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,¹⁶ 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?¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

I. ESSENTIAL QUESTION (2:14)

The last section of chapter two begins with a question – maybe the ultimate question. Just because a person claims to be a Christian, does that make it so? As you watch the life of a person who says they believe and follow Christ, but see them living the same as before, have they exercised faith that will save them?

The Christian life is certainly a mental assent to certain facts. To believe anything (not just Christ) requires intellectual agreement with some set of tenets. But James asks, “Is mental assent enough in itself?” Does saying you're saved mean you're saved?

The reason this is an absolutely massive question in the political arena is obvious. You and I know that public statements of identification with a certain faith are made by politicians all the time. Does the claim make it so? James' intent in the next verses is to clear up some of the confusion in answering that question.

II. EMPTINESS OF WORDS (2:15-18)

To illustrate his point, James gives an example. Words by themselves are inadequate, just as telling a person in need, “Be warm and full”. The words won't make them warm, but giving them a blanket will. Words won't satisfy their hunger, but giving them food will. Good deeds are just that – deeds, action, works. How empty it is to tell someone to have what they need when no effort is made to actually meet the need.

Proverbs 14:31 Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.

This is related closely to what James wrote in chapter one about not just hearing, but doing. For the heart that has been truly changed by the gospel, knowing the Word is not enough. Saying you desire to obey God is not enough. Good works will naturally be evident in the life of a true believer.

Where there is true salvation, where sovereign grace reaches down to regenerate and transform a person from sinner to saint, God will create in the soul of that person new longings to forsake sin and self and gladly serve the Lord Jesus Christ and obey his divine standards of righteousness... Salvation does not produce immediate perfection, but a new direction. The new disposition that hates sin, loves the Lord, and seeks to know him and obey his will begins to manifest itself in behavior.¹

III. EXCLUSIVE SALVATION (2:19)

What a strange verse we move to next, but undeniable in its truth. The Shema was a strong statement in the Hebrew Scriptures and James refers to it here. Deuteronomy 6:4 says, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.” James quotes this to make the point that it is possible to believe that statement and still not be a follower of God. What he is saying is if you agree with the statement, good, but understand that even the demons know and believe certain things about God and it causes them to fear. Obviously, though, they will not follow him.

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Verse nineteen (among others in the Bible) shows us that there is a type of belief that saves and other types of belief that do not result in salvation. Some people who believe they are going to heaven will be surprised at the judgment. Consider these verses that take us deeper into understanding how God looks at our belief.

1 Corinthians 15:1, 2 – Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

Matthew 7:21, 22 – Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; Depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.'

These are sobering verses, but they are explicitly saying that simple intellectual assent that Jesus exists is not saving faith. Nor is it true saving faith if we come to Christ with selfish motives with no regard for living life for His glory. That is why each of us are told to

2 Corinthians 13:5 – Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you--unless indeed you fail the test?

So, what is the test? That's what James is saying right here. True saving faith will result in something. There will be objective, verifiable deeds that spring out of a life changed by the gospel of Christ. It is not possible to be a true follower of Christ without displaying works that are in keeping with repentance.

Faith alone without works is as dead as a body without breath. Deeds are not something extra to be added to faith; they are a necessary constituent part of faith. Without deeds faith is not really true faith – it is only a shadow, a shade, an imposter of true faith.²

James has already shown us examples of the deeds that prove salvation has resulted from belief. If the Spirit of God is with a person, other attitudes and character qualities will be seen.

Galatians 5:22-25 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

Understanding this is key if we are going to interpret this passage accurately as well as the rest of the chapter. The consequences are eternal. Jesus himself taught exactly what we're seeing here in James. Consider these words carefully.

Luke 6:43-45 For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

Then he told this story:

Luke 6:46-49 Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.

We will cover the rest of this important passage next week, but for today, we must understand that true faith that saves a person **results** in good works.

¹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: James* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody) 1998, pp. 125, 126.

² David Nystrom, *The NIV Application Commentary: James* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), pp. 149-50.