

“Authentic: Faith Works”

James 2:14-26

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • April 23, 2017

What is a Christian? How do you become a Christian? What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? People have wrestled with that question for over 2000 years. A lot of people begin by asking the question, “what does it take to get to heaven?” What they really are asking is, “what is the least I must do to get into heaven?” For these people, Christianity is a set of rules or requirements. If I keep most of the rules most of the time, if I do more good things than bad things, if I’m not as bad as other people, then of course I’ll get into heaven. And until then just let me live my life. Religion is a private matter, anyway. This morning we see that James smashes that idea. As John Ortberg points out, nowhere in the Bible will you find the minimum entrance requirements for getting into heaven.

Some people get so caught up in this kind of thinking that they wear themselves out trying to do enough to earn God’s favor. Most of you, I’m sure, recognize the name John Wesley as the founder of the Methodist movement. But you may not know about his struggle with faith. After attending Oxford Seminary, John Wesley became a priest in the Church of England. He usually got up around 4am to pray and read the Bible for several hours. He would then go and minister in the prisons and hospitals in the morning and hold Bible studies and prayer meetings late into the evenings. And for the most part he was a failure in ministry. After about 10 years he came to North America as a missionary. On the way to America his ship was caught in a terrible storm. The wind shredded the sails, waves crashed over the deck, and the ship was in danger of sinking. John Wesley was terrified of dying. On the other side of the ship, though, was a group of men who were singing hymns. Wesley asked them how they could sing when they might die that very night. They replied, “If this ship goes down, we will go up to be with the Lord forever.”

Even after 5 years of seminary and 10 years of ministry, John Wesley didn’t have that kind of assurance. He wrote in his diary, “What more have they done than I have done?” You see, Wesley thought that salvation was based on doing more good than bad. He was chasing a salvation based on works. It wasn’t until he was in an informal worship service back in London where a man was reading a sermon by Martin Luther “explaining that genuine faith trusts Christ alone for salvation, apart from works.”

It’s this kind of works-based religion that the Apostle Paul repeatedly writes about, clearly teaching that salvation is by faith alone, which is a gift from God. In Romans 3:28 he writes, “One is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” In Ephesians 2 he says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

The problem is that some people take Paul’s instructions too far and teach that as long as you have made a profession of faith, saying that you believe in Jesus, your salvation is secure and there’s nothing else you need to do. Today there are lots of people who consider themselves Christians because they have said a prayer or been baptized or have their name on the roll of a church, but they rarely attend. In their mind, faith is something that’s just between Jesus and me. If I have some time maybe I’ll attend a church service if the music’s good and preacher doesn’t expect too much from me.

It’s that kind of thinking, that form of “faith,” that James says is useless. Over and over again in this passage James says that faith without works is dead. At first this would seem to be a direct contradiction with what Paul wrote, but we’re going to see that both James and Paul are saying the exact same thing.

The easiest way to see what I mean is to understand who each one was writing to. Paul

was writing primarily about the *cause* of salvation. So he was very clear that no one *deserves* salvation. There's nothing you or I can do to earn it. Salvation is by faith alone and God is the one who gives us that saving faith. In the theology that's called "imputed righteousness," Jesus imputes or gives to us his righteousness.

James, on the other hand, is writing about the *result* of salvation. He's saying that if God has really changed you, given you new life, it's going to show. And just talking about it isn't enough. He explains this with four illustrations, two about false faith and two about true faith.

"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." Imagine how offensive it would be if you couldn't afford to feed your children or to get them a winter coat, and a member of the church came up to you one Sunday and said, "I understand you're really struggling financially. I suggest you get a warm coat and try to eat more often." James says that advice is worthless. It's not genuine concern. False faith is the same way. False faith doesn't serve other people.

In the second illustration, James envisions someone with a more academic understanding of faith, knowing the right creeds but not knowing God. "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 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?" Sometimes James hits us pretty hard. He says here that even the demons have accurate theology. They know who God is, they know Jesus, but they "shudder," because they don't obey. False faith doesn't obey God's Word.

But then James gives us two examples of true faith. The first example is the Patriarch Abraham. "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."

Here is another place where it seems that James and Paul disagree. In Romans 4, Paul says, "if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'" But again, Paul and James are actually saying the same thing. James mentions the story that we heard part of earlier from Genesis 22. God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac, the child God had promised years earlier, as a sacrifice. And Abraham obeyed God. I think that's one of the hardest stories in all of Scripture to read. Because when we read it we end up wondering if we have that much faith.

The key to understanding what James means, though, is when he says, "and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'" That is actually found in Genesis 15, which takes place nearly 30 years before Abraham offered Isaac on the altar. In Genesis 15, Abraham is complaining to God that he still has no son to carry on his name. God tells Abraham to go outside and count all the stars—that's how many descendants Abraham will have. That's where it says that Abraham believed God and God counted it to him as righteousness. The point James is making is that Abraham demonstrates the validity of his faith by obeying God by offering Isaac. True faith is demonstrated by costly obedience to God.

The final illustration demonstrating true faith is perhaps the most shocking. "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?" Hundreds of years earlier, the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land after

escaping Egypt and wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Joshua sent a couple of spies into Jericho to check things out. They decided that the least conspicuous place to stay would be with a prostitute. But Rahab told them that the whole city was afraid of the Israelites. They had heard how God had parted the Red Sea and how they had defeated several kings along the way. Then she said, "the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath." That's faith. But she proved her faith in God by risking her life hiding the spies from the king and then helping them escape. James tells us that true faith involves costly service to other people.

A number of years ago Tony Campolo, a Christian author and speaker, was invited to speak at a conference in Honolulu, Hawaii. Tony lives in eastern Pennsylvania and so because of the time zone change he found himself wide awake at three in the morning and so he went out looking for a place to get some breakfast. The only place he could find was this tiny greasy spoon diner on a side street. Campolo says he walked in he was the only one in the diner. The "chef," a fat burly guy named Harry comes up and asks, "what'll ya have?" He says at that point he really wasn't as hungry as he had been before arriving and so he says he'll have a donut and a cup of coffee. About that time, a group of local prostitutes come in laughing and carrying on. There were no booths in this diner, just stools along the counter so Campolo finds himself surrounded. The woman next to him tells her friend, "you know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39." Her friend sort of sneers and says, "what do you want from me? A party? A birthday cake? You want me to sing happy birthday to you?" The first woman says, "Aw, come on, why do you have to be so mean? I'm just sayin' it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When the women leave, he asks the fat guy at the counter, "Do they come in here every

night?" "Yeah," he answered. "The one right next to me," he asked, "she comes in every night?" "Yeah," he said, "that's Agnes. Yeah, she's here every night. She's been comin' here for years. Why do you want to know?" Campolo said, "Because she just said that tomorrow is her birthday. Do you think we could maybe throw a little birthday party for her right here in the diner?"

Tony says he'll be back at 2:30 the next morning with some decorations and a cake. Harry says, "No. I'm makin' the cake." At 2:30 the next morning, Tony is back. He has crepe paper and other decorations and a sign made of big pieces of cardboard that says, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" They decorate the place from one end to the other. Harry had gotten the word out on the streets about the party and by 3:15 it seemed that every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place.

At 3:30 on the dot, the door swings open and in walks Agnes and her friend. Tony has everybody ready. They all shout and scream "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" Agnes is absolutely stunned, her mouth falls open, her knees started to buckle, and she almost falls over. When the birthday cake with all the candles is carried out, Agnes totally loses it. Now she's sobbing and crying. Harry, who's not used to seeing a prostitute cry, gruffly mumbles, "Blow out the candles, Agnes. Cut the cake."

So she pulls herself together and blows them out. Everyone cheers and yells, "Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake!" But Agnes looks down at the cake and, without taking her eyes off it, slowly and softly says, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if...I mean, if I don't...I mean, what I want to ask, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don't eat it right away?" Harry doesn't know what to say so he shrugs and says, "Sure, if that's what you want to do. Keep the cake. Take it home if you want." "Oh, could I?" she asks. Looking at Tony she says, "I live just down the street a couple of doors; I want to take the cake home to show my mother, is that okay? I'll be right back, honest." She gets off her stool, picks up the cake, and

carries it like it was the most precious thing in the world.

Everybody watched in stunned silence. When the door closed behind her, nobody seemed to know what to do. They looked at each other. They looked at Tony. So Tony says, "What do you say that we pray?" Tony recalls, "I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her." When he finished, Harry leaned over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice, said, "Hey, you never told me you was a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?" Campolo said, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." Harry thinks for a moment, and says, "No you don't. There ain't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it.

But that's the kind of faith James is talking about. Not just a faith of words but a faith that can be seen. I'm not saying we need to all go to a diner on Leopard street at 3am. That's just one example. But true faith overflows into other peoples' lives. It's impossible to contain. True faith sees the needs of people around us – needs like food or clothes. Needs like companionship or tutoring or a bag of snacks to get a college student through final exams. Because faith without tangible evidence is dead but true faith sees those needs and is moved to action.

Amen.