

Faith and Works

DAVE BAST

The Christians James was addressing in his letter seem to have forgotten what real faith was; maybe they never really knew. They tried to practice a counterfeit faith and they ended up being counterfeit Christians. That is why James attacks the issue of faith so hard in the most famous passage in his letter. He is trying to get his readers to see that the faith they are so proud of is a sham, and he wants to help them understand instead what real faith is like. Today on Groundwork, we look at James' description of real faith, and ask how it applies to us. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, we are picking up our little series on the letter of James; one of the catholic or universal letters in the New Testament. We have worked our way through Chapter 1 and part of Chapter 2; and we come today to the most famous, or perhaps infamous, in some people's minds maybe, sections in James, where he talks about faith; and famously he proclaims "faith without works is dead." As many people read this, it almost sounds like James is saying we are actually saved by our works, not by our faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He all but comes out and says that, and as we noted in the first program in this series, this is the part that upset Martin Luther, in particular, but not only Martin Luther, but others have raised questions in Church history; and there has long been some level of debate as to whether there is not an argument going on subtly, behind the scenes, in the New Testament, between Paul and James, because Paul – here is Paul – Galatians 2:16:

A person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So, too, we have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ, not by works of the law; because by the works of the law no one shall be justified. So, there is Paul in Galatians, and you could repeat that many other times in Corinthians and Ephesians and Romans; clear as can be. We are not saved by our works; do not think about it for two seconds, Paul says, but...

DAVE BAST

Right; on the other hand, here is what James says. James 2, beginning at verse 14:

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. Paul says we are saved by faith alone, as Luther famously added, actually. He added the word *alone* in translating one of Paul's sentences in Romans, but Paul certainly implied that. It is by faith alone – apart from works. James says no, it cannot be by faith alone unless you also have works.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; well he says even more...

DAVE BAST

There is the problem, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And even more bluntly a dozen verses later, James 2:24:

You see then, that people are justified by what they do, and not by faith alone. Now, you put that verse, 2:24 of James, up against Galatians 2:16, and it is like, well, that is a throw-down; that is a fight. So, what is going on here? Does...

DAVE BAST

Paul is going to win that one, incidentally.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; but really, what is going on here? Is this, as it appears on the face of it, an argument?

DAVE BAST

Well, I think it is fair to say that James brings out some nuance that needs to be added to what Paul says, and while we tend to gravitate to Paul – and after all, he wrote most of the New Testament; more than anybody else...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, thirteen letters.

DAVE BAST

And James has just this one letter, they both are concerned in addressing the same quite common problem that arises, and that is the problem – really, the human tendency – to kind of want to have it one's own way. You know, to be able to say you believe certain things and get saved or get right with God or however you want to describe it; and then live the way you please; and the technical word for that in theology and in Church history is *antinomianism*; literally, against the Law – rejecting the Law – saying: Hey, I am saved. I believe. I am saved by grace, I can do whatever the heck I please; and Paul comes down hard on that. By no means, he says; we do not sin so that grace may increase more and more; and James comes down even harder, and that is really the issue here, I think.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, there is also a slight difference in a lot of Paul's letters. He is writing to people who are just becoming Christians, to a lot of gentiles who were coming into the people of God through grace, and so Paul had to make it very, very clear: No, you are not saved by your works. So, Paul is kind on the front end of salvation a lot of the time. How do you get saved? Well, it is by faith alone and it is by grace alone. James comes at it from the angle of: Okay, you have been saved; you have been given the gift of faith; but now do I see you living it, or is it just so much talk? So, James' main concern is once faith comes to you – and he would agree, it is by grace – it is by faith alone. It is a gift of God; that you receive the gift of faith – okay; but once it is there, you have to do something with it if it is genuine. If you really received it, it is going to change everything.

DAVE BAST

Right; and I think it is pretty clear here, or at least it seems clear to me, that James is familiar with Paul, and with Paul's teaching.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, we know they knew each other, from Acts.

DAVE BAST

Right; and even some of the language that he uses by speaking about faith – his concern is not to teach that salvation is by works; his concern is to expose a false view of faith; a kind of a hyper-spiritualizing of faith, or intellectualizing of faith that is divorced from any kind of behavior or any response on the way you live. So, really, the issue here is what is true faith?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And James is not averse, throughout this letter, to use what we call *hyperbole* – exaggerations – to make the point; and so, he does that in this very chapter, in James 2:15-16; and so, he says:

¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and 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, this is a little absurd, right? This is a little bit of exaggeration. You see somebody who does not have a coat and it is cold; somebody who has not eaten in a day and a half and he is hungry, and you say, “God bless you,” and then walk away. He is still cold – he is still hungry. What did you do? Nothing.

DAVE BAST

Or, “I’ll pray for you.” We can turn our piety and our faith into a kind of hypocrisy and indifference to people’s real needs, and that is what James is against; and in that, he stands in a long line of biblical prophets who... Think of the famous passage from Amos, who, in the Lord’s voice, thunders against this kind of hypocrisy, where God says: I hate, I despise your feasts; I take no delight in your solemn assemblies; but let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream...

So, worship that is all words with no actions – yes, that provokes God and it provokes James.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the Christian faith is not about ideas and knowing the right stuff. So, a little later in verses 18 and 19, again, an example of hyperbole, perhaps, but James says:

¹⁸But someone will say, “You have faith, I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by my deeds. (And now, this great line.) ¹⁹You believe that there is one God, good. Even the demons believe that – and shudder! So, in other words, saying: Hey, just knowing the right thing – if it never leads you to do the right thing, something is not right because...

It reminds me of the old TV show, *Mash*, and there was a doctor – a surgeon – on the show, set during the Korean War – Frank Burns, who would always be sanctimonious about the value of marriage and the sacred covenant of marriage, and he was such an advocate for marriage; but everybody in the camp knew he was having an adulterous affair with Major Houlihan. So what that you know the right things about marriage if you do not do them, and do their opposite; what good does the knowledge do? It is empty.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, another of the things that James is warning us about is kind of playing the little game of faith being simply intellectual. It is just about what I believe – what doctrines I hold to. Even when he says, “You believe there is one God; well, yes, good. That is an echo of Israel’s great confession of faith in the Old Testament, the Shema: The Lord our God is one. We might say in our terms, you believe in the Apostles’ Creed: I believe in God the Father, and Jesus, and all the rest... Well, that is fine, James says; even the devils believe that. There are no atheists in hell! They all know the truth, they just do not allow it to change the way they live.

The great preacher, C. H. Spurgeon, once said: Faith that does not change your behavior will never change your destiny; and I think that is a point that James wants to make.

Scott Hoezee:

So, there is something false and hollow about knowing the right things and never doing them, and James has more to say about that, and we will look at that next.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, and today we are really wrestling with James Chapter 2, and what James says about faith and works, or actions or deeds, is the way some translations put it; and we have been wrestling with the apparent contrast or contradiction with Paul – the Apostle Paul – who says we are saved by faith alone; and James says, no, we are not saved by faith alone; we are saved by faith plus works or actions or deeds; and we are trying to dig down to the bottom of this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Where we get into trouble, particularly what we are talking about in the first segment, Dave, about Paul versus James – is that a thing? Where we get into trouble is if we do try to turn this into a math equation. How do we get saved? Faith alone, or maybe it is faith plus deeds equal salvation; in which case, it sounds like 50% was God, 50% was us; so we do contribute to our salvation. It is not a math equation for James. For James, it is not math, it is poetry. For James, it is more to say: Look, if you truly receive the gift of faith, and it does come only in one way, grace alone; he would not disagree with Paul; but if you really have it – if it is really in you – you cannot hide it. It is sort of like that old song: If you are happy and you know it, it is going to show, right?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If that is deep inside of you, truly, there is no way it cannot come out.

DAVE BAST

Yes. Well, real faith, we might say, in James' terms, as opposed to make-believe faith or pretend faith, or phony faith, real faith is always transformative. It is life transforming. So, James says in verse 18: I will show you my faith by my deeds. Words are all nice; words are well and good. We can stand up and sing songs. We can profess our faith, as we say; but it is going to be made real only when you act upon it. Because everybody believes something, and it is only the way they live that will indicate what their deepest, most genuine beliefs are.

I have to tell this story. Somewhere we need to be sharing this story. Twenty one Egyptian Christians were murdered by ISIS militants – by fanatical Muslim extremists. I was just in Egypt, and I learned from the Egyptians – the Egyptian Christians that I met with – that these were genuine martyrs. These were not just random... These were poor Egyptian men who had gone to Libya in search of work. They were mostly... twelve of them – half of them – were from one village – the same small village; and as they were working there, these Islamists came in and grabbed a bunch of guys and they held them for over forty days and urged them to renounce their faith; and those who did were allowed to go free. So, these twenty one were all people who said, "No, I am a Christian. I will not deny Christ." Now, talk about showing your faith by your actions. That is the ultimate; and that is what a martyr is. That is what the word means: Someone who bears witness to what they believe by even giving their life to seal it; so, that is genuine faith, James says.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is what James would expect of anyone with true faith. Even in the Reformed tradition, in the Heidelberg Catechism that we sometimes refer to as one of the great confessions that came out of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century – the Catechism is very, very firm – the whole second, big section of the Heidelberg Catechism is on salvation by grace alone. You cannot earn it; and yet, in the third section on gratitude, one of the first questions is: Why do Christian people still do good? If it is all God, all grace, all gift, why do good? Among the things the answer says is: Because we are assured of our faith by its fruits. In other words, we ourselves can be reassured: Yes, God has really got ahold of me. God really has me because look at what has grown on the limbs of my life. I am bearing spiritual fruit. I know my faith is genuine because it has changed me. I speak differently. I act differently. I behave differently. And James says: Yes,

that is right; when it is genuine; when it is true, it changes everything.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not perfectly; we do not become perfect, but it sure better make a difference.

DAVE BAST

Well, and he uses a couple of interesting words here in Chapter 2 to describe faith that is non-transformative, if there is such a thing, or faith that does not show itself...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Just head knowledge only.

DAVE BAST

Yes; on the one hand, he says that is useless or empty or idle; and famously, he says it is dead, as well. It is not a living kind of thing; and then, interestingly, he appeals to the example of Abraham to prove this. This is one of the funniest things about this whole chapter, because both James and Paul appeal to Abraham as an illustration of the point they want to make, and they both quote the same verse from Genesis Chapter 15:6: Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. So, again, kind of a strange co-adherence in what they are saying; but they both think that Abraham illustrates the point they want to make.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And James even backs it up a little bit. Before he quotes that verse, he first talks about... in verse 21; so here is James 2:21:

Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son, Isaac, on the altar? ²²You see that his faith and his actions were working together. His faith was made complete by what he did. So, Paul is saying... well, they are both saying the same thing, right? Again, it is just a matter of the ordering of things.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Abraham came to faith because God called him out of the clear blue sky: You are my man.

DAVE BAST

And Abraham simply believed it. He had nothing else to go on. He just accepted it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It was reckoned to him as righteousness; but then, of course, Abraham – if you remember the stories in Genesis – he goes through a series of trials and struggles. He fails a few times. He does not quite trust God's promise. He tries to get ahead of God by having a son with another woman when a son with his own wife is not working out; but he matures, and the faith is real; and so, you get to that climactic Genesis 22: God asks the impossible of him, to sacrifice his son, and he does it – or he starts to do it. God intervenes, of course; but James' point is, that is the mark of true faith, that you would believe that God is going to make this work despite this impossible thing you have been asked to do. That is what faith does; it changes you. Maybe not all at once. For Abraham, it was a long process; but bit by bit, faith makes us more and more and more like the God who calls us, and it is inevitable.

DAVE BAST

Well, and I think we could almost turn around the point you just made. You say faith changes you, which it does; faith affects our actions, but our actions also affect our faith; and what we do will change our faith. It will make it real; it will make it grow; it will make it deeper. Abraham before Genesis 22 and the sacrifice of Isaac story was one thing; Abraham after that was quite a different individual altogether; and his faith, having gone through that experience, was so much deeper and stronger. So, we could say with James, I guess, yes, your actions show your faith. They reveal what it is you really believe; but they also grow your faith; they develop your faith; they deepen it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is such a thing spiritually speaking – there is such a thing as good momentum, right? One good thing leads to another and to another. Nobody, as Frederick Buechner and others have said, nobody gets born a saint. Saints are not born, they are made; and they get to their saintliness through a whole lifetime of failures and struggles; but eventually the good things start to pile up and gain a momentum all their own; and all of sudden, the day comes when so many wonderful things are just second nature to them.

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, we want to bring this home in just a minute by talking about our own faith. We have been looking a lot at what James says, and some of what Paul has said, but what about us? What about our lives? What do our actions show about our faith? That is where we will turn in just a moment.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are wrapping up this program, Dave, today – the third in our series from the letter of James – and we are in the latter part of James Chapter 2, where we have been pondering James' words that faith without deeds is – he calls it dead – it is incomplete...

DAVE BAST

Useless.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; if you have faith, it is going to issue in a life of good deeds and changed behavior; and if it does not, James says, that is exhibit A for James: I wonder if you have really been saved or if you are just saying the right things – just mouthing the words. I am not sure God has really grabbed you. You may not even be a genuine Christian, James would go on to say, because I see nothing in your life that gives the fruits of faith. Show me something, James would say, and I will believe that you are not just saying the Apostles' Creed, you are living it, because it is deep, deep, deep, deep at the core of your being.

DAVE BAST

And I think in this connection of the great chapter of faith in the New Testament, Hebrews Chapter 11; sometimes called the roll call of faith or faith's hall of fame; over and over and over, the writer to the Hebrews brings up these examples of familiar Old Testament people: By faith so-and-so, by faith so-and-so; and it is always what they did; it is always focused on their actions. By faith, Noah listened to God and built an ark. By faith, Abraham and Sarah, when they heard the call went out, not knowing where they were going. By faith, Moses... By faith, and it goes on and on and on. I wonder about myself – if I just focused on my

actions, what would that say about my faith, as opposed to the words? Scott, you and I deal in words; we are preachers – that is our stock in trade – but, what do our lives say about what we really believe? That worries me a little bit, frankly. I mean, by faith, Dave went out and got himself a nice comfortable home and enjoyed himself and went out to dinner, and all the rest of it. What are our lives saying about our true faith?

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is something we all need to look at; and of course, when you look at the roll call of faith in Hebrews 11, I suppose for the average one of us, that can be a little daunting – a little depressing; wow, look at the great things these people did for God. What have I done? Well, probably not that much. We can worry, I guess, am I doing enough? And of course, the conundrum there is that if you worry too much about that, you could actually go backwards and think if I am not doing enough, God is not going to save me; and then you are back to works righteousness after all...

DAVE BAST

Or maybe I do not have faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, which neither Paul nor James would want you to think, necessarily. So, we do not have to be... I think we want to be very clear here. James is not saying you have to be heroic; you do not have to be on top of the world; you do not have to get your name in the Bible, as it were; you do not have to be Noah or Moses. It is just enough for you to be Scott; to be Dave; to be Jill; to be Christie; whoever; and be faithful in what you have been called to do; and recognize that the trajectory of your life is toward service, focus on others and not on yourself; on witnessing to the Gospel in word and deed in quiet ways in the office or in the classroom or in the shop – wherever you spend your life. Faith gets lived out in all of those Monday through Saturday moments; and often in very quiet, unassuming ways; but that is the work of the Spirit, too. So, we do not have to think that for us to past muster with James we have to be walking on water and opening cancer clinics in Sierra Leone or something to qualify as good works. There are all kinds of good works – tons and masses of common, everyday acts of kindness and compassion that we are called to do, and that we do because we have been changed by our faith.

DAVE BAST

Simple obedience, I guess, so that if you can say in all honesty, by faith, Jane went to work every day and... You know, it is the same thing as the great passage from Micah, Micah 6:8: To do justice and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. That is what real faith will look like.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you look at the fruit of the Spirit – James does not have fruit of the Spirit in his letter, but look in Galatians 5, where Paul lists the fruits of the Spirit: It is being kind, it is being good, it having goodness in your heart...

DAVE BAST

patience, yes.

Scott Hoezee: being patient. The fruits of the Spirit are common, everyday virtues that crop up all the time; and when you do them because of the Holy Spirit in you, James would say: Ah, that is your faith and your deeds; and when I see faith and deeds working together, you and I both can be assured of the purity and certainty that God has grabbed ahold of you.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is real. Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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