

Faith and Deeds

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- [0 : 0 0] I'd like us just to spend a week while looking together at this passage, and we're just continuing our study in James that we're doing in our engine rooms at the moment.
- And this of course ties in with our theme for the year which comes from James, where he tells us to be doers of the world and not only hearers. Tonight we come to the passage that we just read in the second half of chapter two, and here James raises the whole topic of the relationship between faith and works.
- And in many ways one of the biggest themes that runs through the whole of this letter is the fact that our relationship with Jesus needs to have an effect on our behaviour in our day-to-day lives.
- So throughout the letter James refers to various aspects of our conduct. Two weeks ago John was looking at a very clear example of that in the first half of chapter two, the whole issue of favouritism.
- And there James made it clear to us that the kind of favouritism that you'd often see in the culture around you, where people show more politeness and attention to those who are wealthy or important, that kind of favouritism should not be seen in the lives of these Christians.
- [1 : 2 3] And it's all emphasising the fact that the fact that they're Christians should have a direct effect on their behaviour. And later in the letter James looks at other examples, he looks at things like speech and quarrelling, and even talks about paying others, and the whole idea of employment or paying for services.
- But here in the second half of chapter two, James goes from looking at the specific example of favouritism, to discuss the wider point that he's trying to make, the fact that our relationship with Jesus should shape our conduct.
- And he does this by asking a penetrating question in verse 14. What I'll do is I'll just flick back and forth between sharing my screen.
- I don't have my trusty assistant Tom with me tonight, so I don't have quite all my screen capabilities, but we'll just switch between sharing screen and not sharing it.
- If you look at verse 14, we have this powerful penetrating question, where he says, What good is it, my brother, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works? Can that faith save him?
- [2 : 4 2] That question is targeted at the idea that what we believe can be separated from what we do.
- And that was clearly an issue for the people to whom James was writing. It sounds as though there were people who were saying that they had faith, but that really had little or no effect on the way that they lived their lives.
- And of course, that should straight away make us sit up and listen, because this is still one of the biggest challenges that the church faces today. We live in a culture that is massively focused on the individual, and with that comes a huge focus on the internal.

So my identity, my story, my truth is what matters most. And we see that across the whole of society just now, but even with Christians, we can default to thinking that my inward faith is what matters.

My outward day-to-day life doesn't really matter. The thing is, I have faith and that's all that matters. And the result of that is that you can sometimes meet people and hear them say things like, well, yeah, I'm a Christian and they'll say that they are.

[4 : 03] But if you actually observe them and look at them, you don't really see very much that's different about them. And that's a danger that the church has faced for her whole history.

But I think the thing that we really need to recognise is that the Christians who are possibly most in danger of falling into this trap are evangelical, reformed Christians.

In other words, us. Because central to our theology is the sovereignty of God, the sufficiency of his grace, and the fact that we are saved by faith alone.

And we are right to emphasise those things. They are all true. But because we emphasise the fact that we're saved by faith alone, consequently, we can easily fall into the trap of thinking, well, I've got faith, so I don't really need anything else.

I've got my kind of ticket to heaven. I've put myself right with God. No more needs to be done.

[5 : 14] And the result of that can sometimes be Christians who go to church on Sunday, but then just live from Monday to Saturday.

And in response to that issue, James is asking us a huge question. He's saying, what good is it if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

James then answers that question in the passage that we read. As he does so, he follows a very clear. Whenever we read a passage in the Bible, it can be good to look at patterns.

You can sometimes see the way the argument is being developed. And especially here in James and in the other letters, you sometimes look at the structure under which the argument is being put.

So, James is here again. And we'll have a wee look at how James sets out his argument. If you just give me one moment, I'm going to plug it.

[6 : 27] Make sure that my internet is connected. That's right. Put it in. Second ago. OK, so I will share my screen.

Yeah, that is a. James structures his argument. Yeah, it's a. State. He.

At four points, he makes a point. So he makes four big points and after each one, he gives an example. So you can see it on the screen. But 14 makes a point. But 18, 20, 24.

And after each one, he provides an example. So it's this pattern of point, example, point and then example. So verse 14, he makes a point by asking a question about whether faith without works is of any good, as you can see at verse 14.

And then he gives an example of what he means by talking about about the issue of poverty. He says, if you see somebody who's poorly clothed and lacking in daily food and you say something to them, but don't actually do anything, what good is that?

[7 : 38] Then you have the next point that he makes in verse 18, where he raises the. Between faith or work, so you have this kind of almost this sort of choice between you have faith, I have works as those kind of one or the other.

James says you can't do that and he uses the example of demons to say that, you know, the demons can say I have faith because they believe something as well. But of course, that's not a saving faith at all.

Their belief is something that causes them to shudder and it shows that that that faith, faith on its own is no guarantee of anything.

Then you got the next point in verse 20, where he says, do you not know that faith apart from works is useless? So he's almost kind of up in the rhetoric as he goes on. This time, his example is Abraham.

And he talks about how Abraham's faith was demonstrated very clearly through his works. Again, he's saying that faith can't be separated from actions.

[8 : 49] It's through Abraham's actions that his faith is demonstrated. And then in verse 24, he makes perhaps even the strongest point of all where he says, you see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

And this time, his example is Rehab, the prostitute. And you remember that Rehab avoided condemnation with the rest of Jericho, not because she said, I believe the Israelites and I believe in their God, but because the fact that she believed was shown in her actions.

And here again, James is not making a kind of either or between faith and works. He doesn't say we're justified by works and we're not justified by faith. He's saying that we are not justified by a faith that exists in isolation and it has no effect on our lives.

And he sums it all up in verse 26 where he says, for apart from the body, the spirit is dead, so also faith, apart from works, is dead.

So let me just stop sharing my screen again for a second. So over the whole passage there, James has started in verse 14 by asking whether faith without works is actually any good.

[10 : 11] And then he concludes in verse 26 by saying the answer is no. In fact, faith without works is not good. It's actually dead. And of course, the key point he's making through it all is that faith that has no effect on our lives is not genuine.

Faith. Now, I think it's really important that we recognize that because it's very easy to misunderstand James in this passage. We can easily read this passage and think, you know, is James making a contrast between salvation by faith and salvation by works?

If you look at this verse from Paul in Galatians, he writes, we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.

So we also have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. So he's very clear justified by faith, not by works of the law.

But then James says, you see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And you think to yourself, well, what's going on here?

[11 : 31] Is this kind of contradictory? What exactly are they doing? Well, the thing that's really important to remember, let me just stop shooting my screen again.

The thing that's really important to remember is that Paul and James are addressing different questions. In Galatians 2, Paul was answering the question, how are we saved?

And the answer to that question is only by grace through faith. In James chapter 2, James is answering the question, what does saving faith actually look like?

And so the key thing we need to recognise is that James is not contrasting salvation by faith and salvation by works. The contrast that James is making is between fake faith and genuine faith, or counterfeit faith and genuine faith.

And we'll maybe see this a bit more clearly if we, it's maybe helpful if we, when you see the word works in James, to substitute it for the word effect.

[12 : 41] In fact, that actually happens in James. In James 1, 4, it says, let steadfastness have its full effect. The word effect there is the same word that's used for works later on in the letter of James.

So we could rephrase verse 14 to say, what good is it, my brother, if someone says he has faith, but it does not have any effect in their lives.

Can that faith save him? And the great point that James is trying to make is that any faith that has no effect on the way we live is a kind of faith in inverted commas that has got serious questions arising against it.

Genuine saving faith will always have an effect on the way we live our lives. Now, behind all of this lies a very important theological concept, which I want us just to think about for a couple of minutes, because it's something that I've always found really helpful for lots of aspects of theology.

And I hope that it's helpful for this one. It's a concept that lies at the heart of Christian theology, and it also lies at the heart of our theme for this year to be doers of the word and not only hearers.

[14 : 01] And so if I just share my screen again, I'll be able to show you this. And let me just do this.

So that was the example from James 4. The theological concept is this, what we could call distinct, but inseparable.

That's a phrase that you've maybe heard or maybe seen written in theological books. It's a very important theological concept, distinct, but inseparable.

So as you know, Christian theology is full of many, many, many, wonderful truths. So you've got the Trinity, creation, the incarnation, the atonement, the church, the law, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the attributes of God, the person of Christ, covenant theology, many, many, many more things.

These are all distinct, aren't they? So you could buy a book on each of them, a book on the atonement or a book on the person of Christ, because they're kind of distinct theological topics.

[15 : 08] But even though they're distinct, they are also absolutely inseparable from each other. In other words, they all fit together.

And you can't isolate one truth from all the others. You can't just pick one on its own as though it had no connection to everything else. And so even though you can identify a theological truth in its distinctive role, that distinction does not mean that you can separate it from everything else.

The truths of Christianity are distinct, but inseparable. Now, this concept, of course, is not confined to theology. We actually see it everywhere.

A very good example is the human mind. So if you think about your mind, you have emotions, you have a will, and you have a conscience. They are all distinct aspects of our mental faculties.

So your emotions will touch on how you feel. Your will will express your desire. Your conscience speaks to you about what's right and wrong.

[16 : 18] These are all distinct aspects of our mental processes, but they're inseparable. They're all part of the one mind. You can't kind of lift your conscience out over here or your will over here.

They're all bound up together. But even with things less profound on the human mind, to take a very, very, very day-to-day example, this is perhaps the worst illustration I've ever used.

But if you think of a sandwich, a sandwich has got distinctive ingredients or distinctive layers. And once they're part of a sandwich, you can still distinguish between the bottom piece of bread and the top piece of bread and the ham and cheese that's in the middle.

But if you separate them all again, the sandwich is no longer a sandwich. And so to be a sandwich, they have to be together. Even though there's this distinction, they are inseparable.

So there's lots of data to the examples. The example I like to think about in all of this is of a machine or an engine, which of course probably comes as no surprise given that that was my job before I became an minister.

[17 : 25] And then a machine is full of distinctive parts. But in order for that machine to be a machine and not just a pile of metal on the floor, these parts cannot be separated.

They have to be kept together. They're distinct, but they are inseparable. Now, so with that image of a machine in your mind, you need to kind of embrace your inner engineer.

You've all got an inner engineer somewhere if you just look deeply enough. You need to embrace that inner engineer because I'm going to show you a picture. And it's a picture of a machine.

Now, as I show you this, I am going to crave your patience, both with my terrible drawing skills, because I am an engineer, but not an artist at all.

And also with the fact that this is an illustration. So please, like it's an illustration. It's not a dogmatic piece of theology. It's an illustration. But here, if I can just show you this.

[18 : 32] Here is the gospel portrayed as a machine. And we're going to look at this machine in a little bit of detail together. Now, as I said, this is an illustration.

It's not a definitive explanation of the Christian gospel. It's just an illustration. But let's just look through it together because I hope this will show us a little bit more of the whole idea of distinct but inseparable.

OK, so first of all, this is you down here. OK, so say hello to yourself. You're just down there and you are walking a path that leads to death.

And that continues all the way down here and off the bottom of the page. And there are other people on that path as we're all too aware. And we find ourselves. That's the condition we find ourselves in.

Every human is born in that condition. But everything changes when the machine kicks into gear.

[19 : 30] In other words, when God intervenes in your life. And there's various key things that happen. The first is regeneration. Now, regeneration can be depicted like a switch.

Imagine these big switches that you maybe see on cartoons where they kind of pull down a massive lever and something turns on. Have that image in your mind. That's what this drawing is supposed to be over here. It's a big on off switch.

And when regeneration turns on, something changes within us. So you'll see that there's kind of supposed to be a light bulb turning on here. And and regeneration is a kind of on off thing like that.

It's it's the moment when the Holy Spirit awakens us and gives us new life in our hearts. We go from being spiritually blind and spiritually dead to being spiritually awakened and alive.

The immediate result of that new birth is faith. And we can depict faith in this kind of cradle basket lift type thing that we have here. So you've got a kind of wire from your switch.

[20 : 37] You've got a winch here. You've got a rope coming down. And this is like a basket, like the kind of thing that you'd be hoisted up the side of a building in. OK. And God rescues us from this path of death.

And we don't do anything. We just cast ourselves upon him in faith, relying on everything that he has done. And the result of that is that we're saved from the path of death.

We just rest on him and everything that he's done. And we are saved, lifted out of the depths of sin. And we are then enabled to go in a new path, a path of life.

Our position on this new path of life, our position as those who are saved is utterly secure. And it's secure for two reasons. One, because of our justification.

Oh, sorry, I keep pressing the wrong button. I keep right clicking my apologies. One is justification. Let me just clean that line off there, which I've depicted as kind of like a railing. So this is supposed to be like a safety railing.

[21 : 44] I know it's an awful drawing, but just imagine it's not an awful drawing. And the idea is that you can't fall into condemnation again. Condemnation is the opposite of justification.

Our justification means that we cannot fall again into condemnation. We are totally secure because of that. And the other reason we are secure is because of adoption, whereby we are safe in our father's arms.

And I know that drawing the arms of God is probably heresy. Just don't tell anyone that I did it. It's again an illustration. We are secure through our justification and adoption.

But this path of life is not static. We don't just stand there and stay still forevermore. It's a path. It's a journey that we move along.

And that pathway is a path of sanctification. And in our machine, it's portrayed as a conveyor belt. So I wanted to think of this as a conveyor belt going round and it's heading up in that direction.

[22 : 48] We are being made more and more like Jesus. And for that reason, it's kind of an onward and an upward direction that we go in as we become more and more like Jesus.

And while we are on that journey, we are able to serve God. And what I've got here, this kind of strange looking thing here covered in dots, is just imagine that's a giant control panel where you press buttons to do stuff.

And so you're able to work on this machine and contribute to it. And you'll notice that the further along the path of sanctification you go, there's more and more buttons. So here, there's just a few buttons and there's loads of buttons.

And that's kind of to take the fact that as our sanctification progresses, we are enabled more and more and more to die on to sin, to live on to righteousness, to serve God, to develop our gifts, to live for Him, to work for Him, and to serve Him as followers of Jesus.

The results of that work goes in two directions. First, you have these funnels out the top here. And out of these funnels come praise, honour and glory to God.

[23 : 59] So as you're working away on the machine, praise, honour and glory comes pumping out the top towards God.

But at the same time, not only does output go upwards to God, this machine panel also produces something that comes down here.

We produce blessings. And these blessings come out onto the other people. And they may be fellow believers, but very much so, they're also going to be people who aren't believers and who are still on that path to death.

And this means that the fruits of our works aren't just honouring to God. They're also of a blessing to others, which of course is echoing the Abrahamic covenant that God's people are to be a blessing to all parts of the world.

And of course, the ultimate goal we want, the blessings that come out through our works are going to be, for this person, the light bulb moment over here, which puts them onto the same path of salvation as we are on.

[25 : 13] And this process continues throughout our lives until we are eventually taken to our eternal home to be with the Lord forever.

Now, that is very much a simplification. But the key point I'm trying to make is that even though there's all these distinct parts of the machine, they are all inseparable.

And that's telling us very powerfully that there's an inseparable connection between faith here and work up here.

They are distinct, but they are inseparable. And that means that saving faith here is always going to lead on to works that will praise, honour and glorify God, and that will also be a blessing, a wonderful blessing to others.

But the people that James was writing to was trying to separate faith and kind of keep faith in its own little box down here, distinct and separate from all the other aspects of God's saving plan.

[26 : 36] And James is saying, if you do that, your faith is not genuine faith because faith and works are inseparable. Paul was dealing with a different problem.

Paul was dealing with people who were down here. Let me just change my colour. So this blue is Paul. Paul was dealing with people who was down here and they were trying to build their own ladder up here by works.

Rather than using the lift of faith, they were trying to kind of climb up themselves in order to achieve their own salvation. And Paul was saying, you can't do that.

Paul was dealing with the problem of people who thought they could bypass the lift of faith and just use their works. James is dealing with a different problem.

I go back to yellow. James is dealing with people who just want to keep faith separate from everything else and just say, I have faith, but I don't want any of the rest of it.

[27 : 32] I want to carry on living as though I'm on the path of death. And for that reason, people say they have faith, but if you look at their lives, it looks as though they've just walked up to faith, walked in here and walked out the other side and they're continuing along the path to death with everybody else and their life has not changed.

And the key point that James is making is that you can't do that because faith and works, although they're distinct, they're inseparable.

In other words, our faith should have an effect on the way that we live our lives, or as James would say, we need to be doers of the word and not just hearers. And all of that makes sense if we go back to the language that James uses when he says that faith without works is dead.

If you think of something that's dead, how do you know it's dead? So if you think of a dead mouse, for example, and I'm thinking of a mouse in particular because it's my son, John's birthday today.

And when he was wee, about three years old, he used to get up really early in the morning and one morning I got up with him early and he wanted some food and he wanted his breakfast and everyone else was still asleep.

[28 : 56] And so I took him through to the kitchen to get his food and I said, but you have to be really quiet. And he said, he said, I'll be as quiet as a little dead mouse.

And the reason he said that was because he had seen a dead mouse on the road the other day. Anyway, think of a dead mouse. How do you know that a mouse is dead?

Because it doesn't do anything. It doesn't do anything. How do you know if faith is dead?

If it doesn't do anything, in other words, if it has no effect? Or to look at it the other way around, how do you know if someone's faith is real?

And the answer is that if it does something, if it has an effect on the way we live or to use the imagery of the New Testament, if it bears fruit. So this machine that I've drawn is really a fruit machine.

[29 : 55] Now, not a kind of Las Vegas kind of fruit machine, but if we kind of mix our metaphors of a machine and a tree, a dead tree doesn't produce anything.

A living one bears fruit. And this is where we are being reminded of one of the things that makes Christianity so brilliant. Because if I ask that question again, how do you know if someone's faith is genuine?

How do you know if your faith is genuine? The New Testament's answer to that is not because they know a lot or because they never make mistakes or because they're confident or because they're able to articulate theological truth really well or because they've done amazing things for the Lord.

And it's not even because their faith is so clearly strong. The answer to the question, how do you know if someone's faith is genuine? Is you know because they're bearing fruit.

And that fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These are the things that bring honour, praise and glory to God.

[31 : 00] These are the things that James appeals for in his letter. He doesn't use the same list that Paul uses, but all these things about favouritism, speech, economics, all that kind of stuff is James is always appealing for that kind of spiritual fruit that prevents these conflicts and differences.

These fruit are the things that bring huge blessings to our families, our colleagues and our communities. So you think of the machine spitting out blessings on other people.

You think of going to work tomorrow. If you are gentle with people at work, if you show kindness and generosity, if you bring joy to the workplace or to a Zoom call, if you are self-controlled, is that going to harm your colleagues?

No, it's going to be an amazing blessing to them. And it's an amazing reminder that, you know, when you think of all the shallow, transient, empty, pointless things that people chase after today, you look at what God is looking for and you think, wow, thank God, his ways are so, so different.

So just as we close, I've got three applications I want to just leave with you. Number one, none of this is being written by James to unsettle you.

[32 : 30] So when he asks these questions about what genuine faith is, about faith that's useless, about whether someone's faith can actually save them, that he's not doing that to leave you thinking, is my faith genuine?

Am I really saved? Am I bearing good enough fruit? If those questions are going through your mind, then that actually is a really good sign, because no Christian that I know looks at their works and thinks, oh, well, I know I'm definitely doing enough, I'm delighted with my output.

None of us feel like that. The warning signs are not, you know, am I bearing enough fruit? The warning signs are if you start speaking and thinking like the people in this passage and say, I don't need to show kindness or gentleness or self-control.

I don't need works like that, because I've got faith instead. Now, I know that nobody in here is going to be thinking like that, but that's why I'm saying that this is not to unsettle you, and I hope that it doesn't unsettle you, because I hope it actually does the opposite.

And that brings me to the second piece of application that I want to say, that if we go back to my terrible drawing of a machine, if you separate faith and works, if we separate faith here from works over here and the outputs that that results in, to do that is to totally underestimate how big God's salvation actually is.

[34 : 10] So this machine is a bit of a terrible drawing, but it's a terrible drawing of an amazing thing, because the whole machinery of God's salvation to use that imagery, the whole machinery of God's salvation is just amazing, because you have all of these components working together so perfectly, piecing it together across all the ages of history, across all the experiences of your life, bringing you from the path of death down here all the way to eternal life, and God fits all the cogs and wheels and links and conveyor belts together perfectly, and it's the most intricate, spectacular, marvellous machine.

And so if you think that, you know, oh well, I just have faith, that's all I need, you're just underestimating it woefully, and you're just forgetting just how amazing God's work of salvation actually is.

And it's also, you know, showing us that God's plans for us are so much bigger than we think, because yes, faith is central to our salvation, but we must never forget that God is not looking for a church full of believers, he's looking for more than that, he's looking for a church full of new creations, because that's what you really are as a Christian.

You're not just a believer, you are someone who's been transformed by God's amazing, sanctifying, equipping grace, and that brings us to the last thing that I want to say, that if we draw a distinction between faith and works, then we are going to badly on the amazing potential that you have as a Christian.

If you keep your faith box, which my mouse is gone, it's down here, if you keep your faith box kind of down here, like the readers of James are trying to do, and just think, well that's just it, if you keep yourself down here, isolated and separated from all the rest of it, then you're cutting yourself off from the amazing potential that God has for you all the way along here, because as Christians, our good works are not some kind of dull obligations that we have to do as part of our religious duty. Our good works are an opportunity to do amazing things.

[36 : 57] If you ask right now, where are you in this machine? You are up here, you are somewhere on that board working away, serving, producing glory, honor, and praise to God, and bringing out blessings, blessings, blessings in the lives of others, and you might not even be aware of it, but you are doing amazing things, or in fact God is doing amazing things through you to make you into an amazing worker who can bring praise and honor to him, and bring amazing blessings to people around you who desperately desperately need it. When faith leads to works, the potential is mind-blowing, and our great prayer needs to be that more and more and more God would enable us to grasp just how much he can do through people like you who are hearers and doers of his word.

And that's the amazing thing about the great machine of God's salvation, is that, you know, sometimes when you're an engineer, you can go places and you can see awesome-looking machines, and you think, wow, these look incredible, and of course you're not allowed to go near them, because only experts are allowed to use the big, expensive machines. This is where the illustration of a machine falls down, because God's not like that, and thank God he isn't, because for every one of you, you're right at the cold face, right at the heart of that machine, ready to serve, ready to work. You're not on the sidelines, and you're not just kept to one side as somebody who's not qualified God, is pulling you right into the thick of it, and he's saying, you're the kind of people that I'm going to use to bring praise, honor, and glory to my name, and to bring blessings in the lives of all the people that you meet. And that's why the whole emphasis on faith and works sticking together is just such a cool thing to remember.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much for what your word teaches us, and we pray that your word would just shape our thinking more and more. Help us not to kind of just divide things into chunks, and to think, well, I've got faith, and that's all I need. Help us to have a much bigger understanding of just how much you have done for us in Jesus, and help us also to have a bigger understanding of the potential that you have for us as we seek to serve you. We're so aware that our works cannot contribute to our salvation. It's only through Jesus, and we thank you for everything he's done for us.

But we also pray, though, that we would never underestimate just how valuable our works can be as your people, as we seek to serve you and live for you. So may our faith grow, and may our works just get better and better and better for your glory. Amen.