

Becoming a Community of Mercy (Part 2)

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[0 : 00] Let's read together from James chapter 2, verses 14 to 26. And one of our elders is going to come and read for us.

George, come and read for us. What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

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. 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 that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe and shudder.

[1 : 04] Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 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 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. 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?

For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of his own precious and most holy word.

All right. Last week, James, the little brother, the little brother biologically of Jesus Christ, performed surgery on us as we try to become a community of mercy.

[2 : 26] So what he said last week was that we have to cut out favoritism, partiality. So in order to become a people, a community that show mercy, we have to root out any sense in which we look at other people and value them as less than based on social hierarchies like race, ethnicity, performance, economic status, anything like that.

So last week he told us what we've got to put away. This week he comes and says, as we long to become a community of mercy, what to put on. So this is a positive vision of how to become people of mercy.

And it's rooted in chapter one, verse 22, 23, where he told us, pure religion is this, to visit the widow and the orphan in their affliction, so mercy, and to keep oneself unstained from the idols of the world, obedience, holiness.

And so today he gives us a positive vision. If you've rooted out partiality in your heart, how do you then become a community that's full of mercy? And it's mainly through becoming a people full of good works.

And so all throughout that passage you'll have heard that there's this call to good works. There's a recent book by a theologian named Tom McCall, and he says at the very beginning that good works, a theology of good works, a call to good works, is the most neglected aspect of theology focus in all of Protestant thought.

[3 : 55] And that may be true, I'm not sure, but it's important that we can sometimes forget about good works. And this passage says that in order to live out the vision of James 1, becoming a community full of mercy is to become a people full of good works.

And so let's think about it together. Four things to see. Justifying works, dead faith, living faith, and the root of living faith.

So first, what sounds contradictory, justifying works. So, let's deal with the hardest thing first. In chapter 2, verse 24, we have a verse that has confounded Christians for centuries, and has even split denominations many, many times.

And it's 2.24, read it with me. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Now, that sounds like a direct contradiction to the Apostle Paul in the book of Romans.

So, Romans 3.28, Paul says, a person is justified by faith alone, not by works. And then, James 2.24 says, a person is justified not by faith alone, but also by works.

[5 : 12] And so, that has been such a text that's proved so difficult for Christians for the last couple thousand years that we've been around. Has the Bible contradicted itself?

It sounds like it. And the answer is, surprise, no. No. Said contra. We rebut. It has not contradicted itself. No. Instead, what's going on here is that the scholars, the theologians, the commentators, the saints of old recognized that there are two different uses to the word justify going on between Paul and James.

So, when Paul uses the word to justify, justification, he's using it in the sense of getting right with God. So, justification for him means reconciliation.

It means, how can you stand in the presence of a holy God while you need justification? It's getting right with God, being able to enter His presence. And so, if you imagine, Paul, the metaphor Paul's thinking of is the courtroom.

It's a legal concept. And in the courtroom of justification, imagine that you have committed a great crime and the judge stands up and says, you have been pronounced not guilty even though you did it.

[6 : 30] And in the eyes of the court, you have been set free. Before the law, you are reconciled to the law. You are good with the law. You are in right standing with the law.

And so, when Paul uses the word justification, he's got that sense that before God, He has pronounced you forgiven, acquitted, legally, clean, before the court of His justice.

So, how do you receive that? Do you receive that by works? No, no, never by works. You receive God's pronouncement of justification only by grace through faith in Christ alone.

That's Romans 3.28. But then James comes and says, but wait, no, justifying faith is not alone. You don't just need faith, you also need works.

Well, he's using the word justify in a different sense. And the word, the sense that he's using it is in, is the way we use it very commonly today. Most of us don't use it in the way Paul is using it in normal speech.

[7 : 28] But we use justify in the way James is using it, and that's to demonstrate something or to prove something, right? So, imagine that you, you imagine a mechanic, a mechanic, there's a, there's a auto, auto shop hiring a mechanic, and the mechanic sends in his CV, and it's a very good CV.

He's got lots of skills on paper, and he gets the job, and on day one, the boss comes and says, now here's the spanner, and there's the engine, and I want you to do surgery, beautiful surgery, that only a skilled mechanic could possibly do on an engine like this, and you see, what does he have to do in that moment?

He has to justify his CV. He has to demonstrate, he has to prove, he has to show that what he has claimed to be true of his identity, a great mechanic, is actually true in real life.

That's how James is using the word. And so Philip, there's a Lutheran that followed Martin Luther, he was kind of the next theologian after Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, and he has formed this phrase that has been famous, that sort of captures how you put Paul and how you put James together.

And here's the phrase that Melanchthon gave us. We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that remains alone. We're saved by faith alone, we're justified by faith alone, but never by a faith that remains alone.

[8 : 56] So another way it's been said is you are saved by faith alone and Christ alone through grace alone, but that faith never fails to demonstrate itself over time.

So that's what Paul, James means, faith without works is dead faith because living, justifying faith, reconciling faith with God the Father will prove itself to be real faith through change, through good works, through works of mercy and works of obedience.

Now, I need to move on. This is not some abstract, this is not just a discussion for Edinburgh Theological Seminary or New College. This is not abstract theology.

And we know that because James brings this whole situation so close to home because he starts out in verses 15 and 16 by giving a situation and saying there are brothers and sisters in the local church who are coming and saying, I'm hungry and I'm thirsty and I'm cold.

And people in the local church at the time are simply saying, well, peace be with you. I hope it goes well. But they're not supplying clothing or food or drink.

[10:02] And he's saying, you see, this is not abstract because he's calling out the church and saying, if this pattern continues, then it is showing that your faith is dead faith. So faith actually works itself out how in meeting needs, mercy, the works of mercy is how close to home, real life that James is bringing this for us.

Now secondly, he takes us to really see that, to get that down into our hearts. He takes us into a deeper dive into what is dead faith. And he does that in verse 19. So you'll see in verse 19, he says, you believe that God is one, you do well.

Even the demons believe that and shudder. Now he's saying, he's quoting from Deuteronomy 6, that God is one, the Shema in Hebrew, hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.

And he said, you believe that doctrine, that is very good, you need to believe that doctrine. But he said, you know that the demons believe that as well. And so he's pointing out the fact that the demons live in the spiritual realm and in the spiritual realm, they know all about God and they believe correct doctrine about God.

They even shudder in his presence. They even tremble when they are in his presence. They fear God. And he's saying, so you say you have correct doctrine, but the demons have correct doctrine.

[11:23] But you pass by the believer, the brother or sister, who is naked and hungry and you don't feed them or clothe them. He's saying, even the demons believe as much as you believe.

But without that faith proved, it's proving itself as dead faith. And of course, the demons have dead faith. They're lost. Now what he's doing here is he's pointing us to the different one of the different ways to have dead faith.

And let me give you three. There are more than this, but I think these three are the primary ways that dead faith happens. Number one is decisionism.

And decisionism says, I once prayed a prayer at X time asking God into my heart. And I did it secretly in my soul to hedge my bets.

I needed, I know that, I won't say it out loud like this, but I know that I needed fire insurance. And so at X time long ago, I asked God, I made a decision that I wanted God into my heart so that I would know that if whatever else happens in my life, at least I'll have that to lean on.

[12:34] And just notice that when we say that, we're saying it's my decision to accept the Lord into my heart. Or another one would be moralism. Moralism says, I believe that at the end of my days, I've done more good things than bad things.

And so in the great scales of justice in the heavenly courtroom, God will put my good works on one side and my goodness will outweigh my badness. And again, when we say that in our heart, we're saying one day God will judge my performance and he'll see that it was good.

It was good enough. Or, in the case of the demons, it's the problem of intellectualism that produces dead faith. I agree with correct theology. You know, he's saying here that even the demons can say yes to the truths of the apostles' creed as they're written on paper.

And in that say, you know, I do believe, I assent to the right doctrines, therefore, I believe God will accept me. And that's called intellectualism. And in that case, we're saying it's my knowledge that earns me the right.

To God's presence. And you see, in every single one of these, the reason it's dead faith is because it's my knowledge, my performance, my decision that's the basis of getting into God's presence.

[13:48] And instead, what James is calling us to, I don't think he's pushing Paul out of the picture, no, not at all. He's even using Paul's language because he's observing Paul. He knows what Paul said about justification is so true.

And we could sum it up like this. What's the difference in dead faith and living faith? It's this. In the great hymn, we're going to sing it in just a moment, Rock of Ages. When you sing Rock of Ages, you say, nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling, naked I come to thee for dress.

Helpless, I look to thee for grace, foul I to the fountain fly, wash me, Savior, or I die. You see the difference? The difference in dead faith and living faith is my performance, my prayer, my decision, my knowledge versus a heart that has been changed with justifying faith says, nothing in my hands I bring.

Simply to the cross I cling, naked, foul, helpless, I come to thee. That's the fundamental difference between dead faith and living faith. And so the question here is not do I acknowledge the right sentences about God or did I make the right decision at the right time in my life or have I done enough good for God to accept me?

The real question is has God gotten a hold of your heart? Has God gotten a hold of your heart? Not do you accept him but has he reached out to you and gotten a hold of you and turned your life upside down and you say, nothing in my hands I bring.

[15:19] Simply to the cross I cling. That's the difference between dead faith and living faith. There's one writer, commentator, scholar who sees Leslie Mitten. He puts it like this, summarizing this passage.

It's a good thing to possess an accurate theology but it is unsatisfactory unless that good theology also possesses us. Thirdly, deeper into living faith.

Now, the positive vision of living faith, the beautiful vision. Notice that the illustration that James gives us here, the situation that he's addressing when he says that faith without works is dead faith is just this normal situation where in the first century church where we mentioned last week, people really were struggling with genuine nakedness, not having clothes, just tatters to wear or genuine hunger, not having enough food to survive.

And he's saying that in the church community there were instances where the church was gathering on a Sunday and those needs were completely being ignored. Notice how ordinary that would have been for them.

So, in other words, he doesn't say that, here's how you measure living faith. When the church decided to take that mission trip this summer to Timbuktu, did you sign up? You know, did you sign up to the mission trip on the other side of the world?

[16:37] No, he takes something so normal as the needs that are happening in the weekly worship service, people in this room that have needs and saying, are you awake to them?

That devastatingly ordinary as the measure of the difference between dead faith and living faith.

And what happens here is that somebody comes to this person who's hungry, thirsty, thirsty, and in the text, verse 16, they say, well, friend, be well and be fed and may God bless you.

And the commentators say that this is very probably a benediction, a benediction that was being pronounced in churches already. So they're quoting here in the same way that maybe you might know the benediction I give at the end of every service, grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Now, in our instance, we don't have the same situation going on, but to bring this to our moment, this would be like somebody coming up to you in tea and coffee and saying, I can't pay my rent and I'm being kicked out of my flat tonight and I think I'm going to be on the street.

And you're saying, well, just step aside for a second. Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And you're saying, and then your friend later saying, you know, I heard so-and-so was getting kicked out of their flat.

[17:56] They're not going to have a place to sleep tonight. And he said, don't worry, don't worry, I pronounced the benediction this morning over them. It's going to be okay. That's the illustration he's giving. And he's saying, now, benedictions are very good.

But he's saying, that is proving itself to at least be sleepy faith. Faith. In other words, what is living faith? Living faith is looking for needs and meeting them. That's all.

And he gives us two great examples here through Abraham and Rahab. And you'll see that in verses 21 and following. Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?

And then down in verse 25, you see, in the same way Rahab, the prostitute, justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way. Now he takes these two figures, Abraham and Rahab, to example this to us.

And what is he saying? He's pointing us to what is lived faith? Lived faith is the example of Abraham. He's not using Abraham to say Abraham as a hero. No, he's saying he's an exhibition.

[19 : 02] And the exhibition of lived faith is that when God came and said, Abraham, give your only son. Put the knife to his neck. Oh, what a command. We don't have time to explain that command.

We'll have to come back later to that. But when he said that Abraham obeyed, what is lived faith? The example of Abraham. First, it's obedience. So when you read the Ten Commandments, when you read the Sermon on the Mount, the Christian who has experienced justification longs, at least is growing and longing, to obey the commands of God, to obey the Ten Commandments, to obey the Sermon on the Mount.

And then, on the other side, Rahab, the prostitute, welcomed the spies of Israel into her home and protected them when they had great need. So you see what he's doing? He's saying, on the one hand, lived faith is obedience to God's command.

On the other hand, it's Rahab, which is meeting a need when it comes to you, like the spies. And so how do you live your faith out? He's saying you obey the commandments of God and then you look for needs as God brings them to you through other people in your life and you meet those needs. You obey the commands, you meet the needs. James 1, 22, what is pure religion? To care for the orphan and the widow and their affliction needs and to keep yourself unstained from the world by obedience, holiness, those two things.

[20 : 21] Lived faith, pure religion. Now this is what's called a merism. And a merism in literature is where you take two extremes and you put them together to say that, look how wide this commandment goes.

Abraham was the father of the nations. Abraham, the father of the covenant. Abraham, a mighty warrior. Abraham, father Abraham, we say. Rahab was a Gentile Canaanite prostitute that in the eyes of the world no one cared about.

And you see what he's doing? He's saying, look at the great father Abraham and the great Rahab as examples of what it looks like to live your faith out. Both. Both ends of the worldly spectrum of social status and hierarchy.

You see he's saying no favoritism, no. Look, on every end we've got both sides of great examples of what it means to live faith across the Bible. The point is that a heart that God has gotten a hold of lives the faith out by meeting needs and longing to obey God's commands in their life.

Fourthly, lastly, that brings us to the real root of living faith. Now, he tells us here that in verse 15 and 16, which brings us back to last week's passage as well, that dead faith has evidence.

[21 : 43] Dead faith has a tell. Dead faith shows itself up. And that evidence here is in a lifestyle, a pattern of not meeting the needs of people that God puts along our path.

So, dead faith shows itself up over time when we consistently, pervasively don't meet the needs of the people that God puts in our path and give ourselves away in generosity.

Now, notice it's not a lack of doctrine. How does this happen? It's not a lack of doctrine. It's not a lack of willpower. It's something deeper than that. It's something deeper. And what's deeper than that, if we come back to Rock of Ages, we'll see it.

Remember, the heart that has been justified by faith, grace alone, and faith alone, Christ alone, can say, Lord, nothing in my hands I bring simply to that cross I cling.

Naked I come to thee for dress. Foul I to that fountain fly. Now, if you can say that today, if that's your heart, this is the deep, this is how lived faith, it's so deep.

[22 : 44] How it works is that when you look out and you see somebody, you see somebody that is in need, a principle triggers in your soul.

And the principle is, I was that person in need. So when you can say, naked I come to thee for dress, hungry, hopeless, helpless, Lord, I come to thee, you see, then you've got justifying faith in your life, and you've got this principle down in your heart that when you see somebody in need, that principle gets triggered and you say, I want to move towards that person because I am that person. I am the person who God helped. I am the poor beggar who God moved toward. I am the hungry. I am the naked. I am the person in tatters that God showed mercy to.

You see, that's the principle. That's at the deeper root of real living faith. And it's for that reason, I think, that James, to illustrate that, takes us to Abraham. Right?

Because Abraham, in Genesis 22, he was called to take his son, his only son, up the mountain, Mount Moriah.

[23 : 56] And his only son, Isaac, put the wood upon his back that day, carried the wood up the mountain. And as they were going up the mountain, Isaac turned to his father, Father Abraham, and

he said, Dad, where is the lamb?

And Abraham said something very famous and very important. He said, God will provide. You see, Abraham in that moment was not trusting in his obedience. He was not trusting in his performance. He was trusting in God's provision of a substitute. He was trusting that God would provide the lamb for the sacrifice. And you know, you probably know from Genesis 22 that that day, Abraham, his hand was stayed.

He did not take the life of his only son. And you see, that place where he did that, Mount Moriah, Mount Moriah, that's one of the hills that Jerusalem was placed upon.

Mount Moriah is a set of hills where eventually the temple would be built. Eventually, eventually, another son, the only begotten son of the father, would go up Mount Moriah, this very same mountain that we see in Genesis 22, the mount we call Golgotha, Calvary, and he would carry the wood upon his back.

[25 : 12] And that day, instead of us saying, but where is the lamb? There would be no substitute. He was the lamb, the son of God, the only begotten. He was the one that was sacrificed in our place.

He came to meet the need of mercy that we have most desperately. See, he chooses Abraham so that we might be able to say something like this.

You don't become a person of good works by doing good works. You become a person of good works by saying, God took my sin so seriously that it cost the life of his only begotten son.

And that he showed me in that moment how much he loves me, how much he wants to move towards me and my need. And then out of that principle, you live your life.

Out of that principle, you live your life. And so, I'll simply finish with this. In verse 22, he says, you see that faith was active along with Abraham's works and faith was completed by his works.

[26 : 17] Now, here's how it all works. Here's how justifying faith and works all fit together. He says that in Abraham's life, he believed on God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

That's what Paul means by Romans 3.28. He believed because in the courtroom of God's justice, God was saying, you're acquitted, you're forgiven, you're not guilty. God was showing him active mercy in that moment.

And then it says, his works, his obedience made him complete, his faith complete. And the word that gets used there for complete is the word that we were so focused on in our first couple sermons.

It's the word from James 1.4. Where James was telling us that in our suffering, we can become complete, perfect. That's the word.

It gets translated in the SVS. Perfect, lacking in nothing. You see, it's the same word, mature. And so here's how it works. When you look to God alone through Christ by faith alone for grace, you receive justifying, justification.

[27 : 19] You receive the gift of forgiveness. And then when you go and you see people in need and you say, I now long to do God's commands as he's given them to me, what happens?

That compassion, that act of compassion and love towards people then completes your faith. Or what does that mean? It matures it. So that maturing faith isn't what's saving you, no, but it is making you more like Jesus.

It's completing you. It's making you whole. It's making you perfect, quote unquote, complete, lacking in nothing, you see? And so sometimes we don't feel like moving towards people in need.

We don't feel, we are Christians and yet we don't have the emotion in a moment to go and show compassion. We don't have the emotion in a moment to take up somebody's need in our life.

And here's what he's telling us. That doesn't mean you have dead faith. No, instead, he's saying, in that moment, remember, count it all joy, remember, consider, remember the principle, God showed me mercy, so I, in the ledger, in the ledger, the intellectual ledger even, I'm going to move towards this person in mercy.

[28 : 29] And that act of mercy is actually going to reignite your faith. See, moving towards people in compassion is what reignites sleepy faith.

If you have justifying faith in your life, no matter how you feel, he's saying, move towards people in need and it's going to give you, it's going to give you faith that you didn't know you could have.

It's going to strengthen. It's going to put you beyond what you thought could be possible. God loved us first. He showed us mercy. Therefore, we are to become a people who show mercy to others.

Let us pray. Father, we don't for a second come today believing that our good works will justify us and instead we hear these words that justification comes by Jesus Christ alone and his work for us. And so, I pray that today somebody in this room would believe that maybe even for the first time that they can receive your forgiveness only through your grace. And then, Lord, would you work in us a heart that longs to move towards people in mercy because of obedience, not on the platform of moralism or intellectualism or behaviorism or decisionism but entirely on the basis that we are people who you love.

[29 : 51] And so, we thank you for your love. Let us rest in it now as we sing. Let us celebrate it now as we sing. As we sing these words, naked we come to thee for dress, helpless we look to thee for grace, foul we to thy fountain, we fly, wash us, Savior, or we die.

And we pray that in Christ's name. Amen.