

Today we will look at the passage that gave Martin Luther fits! Martin Luther was a devout Catholic. I'll let him tell of his conversion in his own words. *Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.*

*Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.*

Luther was trying so hard to please God with good works, study, meditation, memorization, and living as a monk. Yet, he knew he was still destined for the just judgments of a holy God. It is sad that more people do not experience the same conviction. It was that conviction that caused him to search for the answer in God's Word. He finally found it in Romans 1:17<sup>i</sup>. It is no wonder then that he saw little use for the letter of James, especially this passage which asks if faith can save us. Martin Luther would respond, "You better believe it can!" Anyone who came out of a religion of works to discovering that faith in what Jesus has done for us saves us would probably say the same. But that is not what James is addressing. *Paul's teaching about faith and works focuses on the time before conversion, and James' focus is after conversion. As Douglas Moo has pointed out, "Paul denies any efficacy to pre-conversion works, but James is pleading for the absolute necessity of post-conversion works."*<sup>ii</sup>

James is writing to the churches that have scattered into the Roman world to remind them that the world needs to see a difference in us who have faith. He is also warning those in the church who enjoy the friendship and atmosphere of the church, but who have deceived themselves, for their lives are no different from unbelievers in their cities (James 1:22<sup>iii</sup>). His letter is very applicable to the comfortable, entertaining church in America. He challenges us to ask ourselves if our faith is genuine. Does it result in acting differently from our increasingly pagan culture? Are our hopes set on what this world can offer, or on our Lord and Savior?

*<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, <sup>16</sup> 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?* James 2:14-16 James starts with two questions which in Greek require a negative response. *Can faith save him?* “Yes it can!” cries Martin Luther. But James is addressing the claim to have faith apart from works. He will pair faith and works ten times in this short passage and thoroughly explain what he means. Luther’s transformed life showed that though the question would have irked him, his life was an example of the validity of James’ argument. His changed actions and beliefs showed that works follow genuine faith. If you asked Luther if his attitudes and actions had been changed by his newfound faith, he would have surely answered in the affirmative.

The next question is a very practical one and it points back to the previous passage. *For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.* 2:13 This goes back to the royal law of loving your neighbor (2:8<sup>iv</sup>). If your brother or sister in Christ is poorly clothed and malnourished, and you say, “Have a nice day. I will pray that you get the clothes and food you need,” *“What good is that?”* James asks.

Do you think that perhaps God may have brought that brother or sister in Christ into your life because you have what they need and can be God’s merciful hands and feet to them? Would that not fulfill the royal law? You have an opportunity to be a blessing and to be blessed in the process. Do you believe Jesus’ words, “It is better to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35<sup>v</sup>)? The Apostle John wrote that if we have this world’s goods and we see a brother in need and don’t have compassion, the love of God is not in us (1 John 3:17,18<sup>vi</sup>).

When Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, He implied that the Levite and the priest violated the royal law of loving our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:31,32<sup>vii</sup>). That helpful Samaritan was not considered a brother as in this passage. Perhaps James was bringing up real situations he had heard of in the churches. He did already mention preference of the rich over the poor (2:3,4<sup>viii</sup>).

I want to insert here something that I have benefited from. When you lend to a brother in need, don’t expect anything back. It is good that they repay you if they can, but don’t expect it. It will often be the case that they will not, and you do not want the enemy of our souls to catch you in the trap of unforgiveness. Let mercy triumph over judgement, for the mercy of God has triumphed in judgment in regard to your sins against God.

*<sup>17</sup> So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. <sup>18</sup> 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.* James 2:17,18 Here is James’ conclusion. This faith that does not act has no real life. You could say it is not faith at all. In verse 18 he equates it to belief. Faith and belief are similar words but with different nuances. James is saying that if we think of them the same, and we say to ourselves, I believe in Jesus, we must be aware that even the demons *believe* in Him. The one on the shore of Galilee declared that he knew Jesus is the Son of God (Matthew 8:29<sup>ix</sup>)! That does not mean by faith you have received the forgiveness he merited for you on the cross.

Ron Kess goes up to NAU and meets many students who believe Jesus was a good man who showed us how to live. Some even claim they believe He is the Son of God. But after showing them the gospel right in the Scriptures, they come to have faith in what Jesus did on the cross for them. They go from mere belief to by faith receiving

forgiveness (Luke 24:47<sup>x</sup>). What James is saying is that **faith is believing that accepts and applies God's Word to our lives.** I have heard the testimonies of pastors who believed the gospel but after years of preaching it finally by faith received it.

Hebrews 11 is the chapter on the actions of faith. One of the actions is realizing this world is not our home (Hebrews 11:10<sup>xi</sup>). We can say we believe it, and yet our hope is still in what this world has to offer. Faith longs for our heavenly home, the glorified presence of Jesus, the hosts of heaven, the saints made perfect (Hebrews 12:23<sup>xii</sup>). If that is where our hope is place, we might lose the things God has blessed us with in this world, but we will be at peace knowing we still have what really matters forever.

There are churches that try to claim they have works but deny the faith. The author of Hebrews calls those “dead works” (Hebrews 9:14<sup>xiii</sup>). That is what Luther had before his conversion, and the change faith made was works prompted by the Holy Spirit.

James is asking those attending the scattered churches to be sure that they truly have faith. What changes has faith brought about in our lives? Is it real? Has it resulted in a new perspective on our life and values? James says he can show us his faith by his works. That is the evidence that it is real. But he asks us if we can show him our faith apart from our works. No, we can't, for real faith results in works that glorify God.

*<sup>19</sup> You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!* James 2:19 Are you saved if you believe Jesus died for our sins and rose from death, and that He is one with the Father? After all, the Scripture says if we believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved (Acts 16:31<sup>xiv</sup>; Romans 10:9,10<sup>xv</sup>). James says, “Hold on, the demons believe and shudder.” That word shudder in Greek literally means to bristle like a cat in danger. To believe in the fact of who Jesus is, is very different from repenting and accepting Jesus as our Lord (Acts 3:19,20<sup>xvi</sup>), which is the way in which Paul used the word. We can take a single Scripture and wrongly interpret it in a way that contradicts other Scriptures. Romans 10:9,10 tells us that we must believe in our heart and confess with our mouth. Belief is followed by action. That is different from believing in our head a fact of history, or like demons, believe and bristling in terror because you know you are living in rebellion toward your Creator.

James' point is that simply acknowledging something is true does not mean you are born again. But accepting Him as your Savior and the Lord of your life results in changes in the way we think and act. Jews tried to please God by obeying the 613 laws of Moses. Most of them did not realize that it was faith that pleased God, and that the laws were for their benefit to show them their need for a Savior (Galatians 3:22-24<sup>xvii</sup>). They asked Jesus what good work they needed to do to please God. Jesus told them the work of God was to believe in the One He sent (John 6:28,29<sup>xviii</sup>). If they would believe by placing their faith in Jesus, the good works would follow naturally like fruit naturally grows on a fruit tree (Matthew 7:20<sup>xix</sup>).

You have seen people come to the Lord here at Wayside and be baptized. You have watched how their lifestyle changes, even their appearance changes, and definitely what they proclaim to others is totally different. In Christ our mind is renewed by the Word of God and that results in our worldview changing, along with our purpose in living.

*<sup>20</sup> Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? <sup>21</sup> Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was*

*completed by his works; <sup>23</sup> 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.*

James 2:20-23 James asks us if we need proof? Do we want him to show us? He says, “Take Abraham as an example. Was he justified by faith or works when he obeyed God and put his son on the altar (Genesis 22:9<sup>xx</sup>)? Faith resulted in the action of obedience.” The book of Hebrews tells us that Abraham believed God would raise Isaac from death (Hebrews 11:19<sup>xxi</sup>). That is because he believed the promise of God that through Isaac he would have descendants that numbered like the stars in the sky (Genesis 15:4-6<sup>xxii</sup>). Abraham believed God. But if Abraham didn’t take Isaac to Moriah and prepare to slay him, how could we say he had that kind of faith that is counted as righteousness?

Abraham believed God, but not with the head only- “Oh, sure God could raise him,” kind of belief. But the kind of belief that gets up early in the morning and loads the wood and heads for Mount Moriah with Isaac. Before they ascended the mountain, he told his servants that he and the boy would come back to them (Genesis 22:3<sup>xxiii</sup>, 5<sup>xxiv</sup>). That is the voice of faith and the reason he is called a friend of God. He acted on what God told him to do because God is the Lord of his life. He doesn’t just believe that He is, but also that He is to be trusted and obeyed (Hebrews 11:6<sup>xxv</sup>). The faith that obeyed was counted as righteousness. That is what it means to place our faith in God.

<sup>24</sup> *You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.* James 2:24 James clarifies in this verse what he means. Faith alone is not really faith. It may be a belief in your head, but not something you are willing to act on. It is the faith that acts that is genuine. That is the kind of faith by which we are justified. Just as if I’d never sinned. When we truly believe in our heart that Jesus died in our place for our sins so that we could have life in Him, and then let that conviction transform our behavior, then we can be sure we are justified, meaning that we are right with God (2 Corinthians 5:17<sup>xxvi</sup>). When we stand before Him on that day we will not be condemned.

Jesus preached that some would come on the day of judgment and say that they did all kinds of wonderful things in His name. But He will say He never knew them (Matthew 7:21-23<sup>xxvii</sup>). They believed He is the Son of God, but their works were motivated by the desire for the respect of man. The ones that Jesus invited into His joy did not even realize how often they had ministered to Him by helping people in need. They didn’t even realize they were doing the will of their Father in heaven. They acted out of faith in God, real living faith that takes action when a need is presented.

<sup>25</sup> *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?* James 2:25 Just in case we think it can only be righteous people like Abraham that have that kind of faith, James next refers to a Gentile prostitute. Joshua sent two spies into Jericho. They lodged in the house of Rahab who confessed that their God was more powerful than the gods of Jericho. She had heard the testimony of all God had done for the Israelites (Joshua 2:8-11<sup>xxviii</sup>). So, she acted on the faith she had in their God. She risked her life to hide the spies from the officials who were looking for them. Then she helped them escape. Because of that faith resulting in works, she ended up in the ancestry of Jesus.

That was not because she simply thought the Israelites would win. It was because she knew they would. She placed her faith in their God. She bet her life on their God by her actions. That is living faith!



*<sup>26</sup> For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.* James 2:26 Revelation 12:11 tells us <sup>11</sup> *And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.* Salvation is evidenced by a new creation. When Satan says we really aren't saved, we point to Jesus' blood shed for us. If he insists our faith is not real or effective, the word of our testimony (or works as here in James) is the evidence we are indeed conquerors through Jesus. Our testimony includes not only what led us up to faith, but also how that faith changed our daily lives. As someone has said, **faith and works are like the two wings of a bird. Both are needed to fly. With the wing of faith and the wing of works resulting from faith we can soar.**

James makes this final declarative parallel. If your spirit leaves your body, your body is dead. In the same way, faith apart from works is dead faith. In other words, it is only an idea, one you are not sure of, one that doesn't change your behavior.

I believe there is no such thing as being visited by extraterrestrial creatures other than angels, good or evil. But it does not change my behavior. I do not mind if you disagree with me. It is not an important enough issue to me to change my behavior in the least. On the other hand, I believe that God created me with the purpose of glorifying Him and enjoying Him forever. That changes my whole outlook on life. It changes how act and what I say. It changes my attitude toward every circumstance I face. Because of that I can declare that my faith is alive, like Abraham and Rahab's faith. It is for everyone who will embrace what Jesus has done for us.

In Martin Luther's introduction to Romans, he attests to the very thing that James is declaring here. He wrote, *Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith; and so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question rises; it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them. He who does not these works is a faithless man.*<sup>xxix</sup>

James has challenged us again to see if our faith is real. Has it changed our speech? Has it changed our outlook on life? And what about our attitudes toward others? We all have lots of room to grow! Amen? But has the change begun in you? Can you see a difference since you came to faith? If so, rejoice. Press on! Jesus wants us to join Him in the wonderful things He is doing in the world. If not, know that, like Abraham, you are invited to be a friend of God. In John 15:14<sup>xxx</sup> Jesus tells us that we are His friends if we *do* what He commands. The first command is to believe in Him. Faith trusts in God to do His works through us. And what a privilege it is to be an instrument of God!

Questions:

- 1 Why did Luther think James was a pile of straw?
- 2 What are James first two questions in this passage?
- 3 What is the difference from belief and faith that receives?
- 4 What changes if we are truly born-again?
- 5 How was Abraham saved?
- 6 In the Sermon on the Mount, who was allowed into heaven?
- 7 Why might James have used Rahab as an example?
- 8 What was her act of faith? 9 How does Revelation 12:11 affirm James' teaching?
- 10 How do you know your faith is alive?

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**<sup>i</sup> Romans 1:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

<sup>ii</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *James, Faith That Works*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 108.

**<sup>iii</sup> James 1:22 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

**<sup>iv</sup> James 2:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well.

**<sup>v</sup> Acts 20:35 (ESV)**

<sup>35</sup> In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

**<sup>vi</sup> 1 John 3:17-18 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? <sup>18</sup> Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

**<sup>vii</sup> Luke 10:31-32 (ESV)**

<sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

**<sup>viii</sup> James 2:3-4 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” <sup>4</sup> have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

**<sup>ix</sup> Matthew 8:29 (ESV)**

<sup>29</sup> And behold, they cried out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?”

**<sup>x</sup> Luke 24:47 (ESV)**

<sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

**<sup>xi</sup> Hebrews 11:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

**<sup>xii</sup> Hebrews 12:23 (ESV)**

<sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

**<sup>xiii</sup> Hebrews 9:14 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

**<sup>xiv</sup> Acts 16:31 (ESV)**

<sup>31</sup> And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

**<sup>xv</sup> Romans 10:9-10 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

**<sup>xvi</sup> Acts 3:19-20 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, <sup>20</sup> that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus,

**<sup>xvii</sup> Galatians 3:22-24 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. <sup>23</sup> Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup> So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

**<sup>xviii</sup> John 6:28-29 (ESV)**

<sup>28</sup> Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

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<sup>xix</sup> **Matthew 7:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

<sup>xx</sup> **Genesis 22:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

<sup>xxi</sup> **Hebrews 11:19 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

<sup>xxii</sup> **Genesis 15:4-6 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." <sup>5</sup> And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." <sup>6</sup> And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

<sup>xxiii</sup> **Genesis 22:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

<sup>xxiv</sup> **Genesis 22:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you."

<sup>xxv</sup> **Hebrews 11:6 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

<sup>xxvi</sup> **2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

<sup>xxvii</sup> **Matthew 7:21-23 (ESV)**

<sup>21</sup> "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' <sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

<sup>xxviii</sup> **Joshua 2:8-11 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof <sup>9</sup> and said to the men, "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. <sup>10</sup> For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. <sup>11</sup> And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.

<sup>xxix</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Kregal, p.17

<sup>xxx</sup> **John 15:14 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you.