

# Ministry of Grace Church

## James 2:14-26 - Speaker Notes

### Introduction

In this chapter James continues his teaching on what true religion looks like. He deals primarily with two types of behavior here. The first, which we covered last week, is not to treat people based on what they look like. He says not to judge fellow Christians based on their outward appearance or by what you might gain from them. The second matter, which he deals with here in this section, is good works. He teaches us that good works are not the source of our salvation. He says, instead, that good works are the *evidence* of our salvation.

If works of faithful obedience to God are not regularly demonstrated in our walk, then we need to determine if we ever really were saved in the first place. Nothing could be more tragic than someone believing they are saved only to find out when they stand before their God and Judge that they never really were saved.

So, let's see what James tells us about the effects of good works with regard to our salvation.

### James 2:14-16

**What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?**

James starts off, and finishes, this section with a question, "What does it profit." He isn't talking about making money, he means "What good is it." What he is about to teach us is that the purest evidence of saving faith is seen in our works. In other words, our actions are a demonstration of our position in Christ.

Several verses back James introduced the notion of keeping the law. The actions done to satisfy the law are works, but the works done by a true Christian are not to satisfy the law, but to provide evidence of our faith. He also alluded to the Judgment Seat of Christ where the works of Christians will be judged. So, it is a very natural transition for him to now elaborate on Christian works.

But, wait a minute! We're not saved by works. We're saved by faith. This is what the Apostle Paul teaches us in the book of Ephesians:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, *not of works*, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8,9)

Before we get thrown off-track here, notice that James is not arguing against salvation by faith alone, as it might appear if this verse is taken out of context. He is saying, as we shall see in the coming verses, that our works are the evidence of our salvation, rather than the source of it. You might hear me say that again today.

Even though James has just recently taught us that we need to minister to those in our church who have the greatest needs (such as orphans and widows), we often don't even notice those members of our church who have the greatest needs.

James is using a grammatical device called hyperbole (which, in Greek, means "to throw over"). He is stating an extreme case as if it were the general rule. Teenagers are masters of the use of hyperbole, saying such things as "I'm starving" or "You never let me do that."

This verse, like several we have looked at previously, cannot stand on its own. It needs the following verses to fully explain it. James is using an exaggerated example to make a point about the difference between a faith in words and a faith in works. He talks about, a brother or sister who is naked and destitute of daily food. This could be interpreted as:

If one of our fellow Christians should be regularly dressed in shabby or inadequate clothing and does not even have enough food to feed himself, or herself, on a daily basis ..."

This is an example of James' very practical writing style. He doesn't talk about theological concepts in an abstract manner but in a down-to-earth, put-it-on-and-wear-it manner. That's what makes this book so practical. It's Christianity in action!

His point in this section is that true faith in Christ is made evident by what we do, not what we say. Sending someone away with a blessing, someone who has needs that we can fill, is not an act of faith. James is making the case that if we don't put our faith into action then it's lifeless faith.

I was in Chicago one evening walking down Michigan Avenue. There I was approached by a homeless woman asking for some food money for her and her two children. In the past I had not given money to street beggars because they might not really be homeless, and who knows what they are really going to do with the money. So, I politely declined this young woman's request for help and, as I walked away, I thought, "I'll just pray for her that her needs will be met." Boy, did God ever convict me of that! I was rich compared to her, and yet I was unwilling to help her out just because I didn't want to be taken advantage of. James would have been ashamed of me!

Sometime later I was in Portland, Oregon, sitting in my car in a parking lot. There, a man approached my car, so I rolled down the window. He said that he was on his way to Vancouver, that he had run out of gas, and had no money to buy gas. I readily gave him enough money to get well past Vancouver. Did I know for a fact that he was out of gas? No, but I didn't have to deal with the convicting work of the Holy Spirit for being selfish and judgmental. I think James would have been proud!

The thing that these few verses teach us is that it's easy to talk about how spiritual we are, but a living, vital faith is faith in action!

### **James 2:17-20**

**Thus 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 without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?**

"Show me" is translated from *deiknuō*, meaning "to show" or "to display." It is used here in the imperative mood. The subtlety of the imperative mood is that it refers to action that is not taking

place but which needs to occur. This is why it is most often expressed in English as a command. Therefore, James is saying, “Your faith is not showing, therefore show it to me without your works.

This entire section of the book of James is a very strong treatise on the proof of faith through action. Here he gets right to the point. If you claim to have faith and yet your actions don’t demonstrate godliness or Christ-likeness, then you don’t really have faith.

“But,” you may argue, “James doesn’t say the faith doesn’t exist, simply that it’s dead. So, I don’t have to do good works as long as I have genuine faith.” To that let me ask, if you have a pet that dies, is it still your pet? No. It was your pet, but now it is dead. It has ceased to be a pet.

There are some Christians who believe that you have to do deeds as penance for bad things you have done in the past, but that’s not what James is talking about. He is not talking about deeds of contrition. He is saying that doing good deeds is the proof of your salvation, not the repayment for your sins.

Let me repeat what I have said before: James is not claiming that we are saved by works or that works are necessary to make up for sins we have committed. He is teaching that works are the evidence of our salvation, rather than the source of it.

In order to show that he means that faith cannot exist apart from works, James carries the discussion one step further. He assumes that the reader is arguing that salvation is by faith alone. That is, faith and works are separate and faith is the only thing. James states very clearly here that the works are the evidence of the faith. He is not claiming that we are saved by works, rather once we are saved, he says that our actions and deeds will be the evidence of that saving faith.

James now uses a hypothetical person to make the challenge:

You think that faith is the only important thing in the Christian walk and works have no place in salvation. Therefore, show me the evidence of your faith in something other than works, and I will show you the evidence of my faith, which is my works.

The Apostle John expressed a very similar thing in his first general epistle:

**But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? (1 John 3:17)**

Once again, let me state very clearly what James is and isn’t teaching. He isn’t teaching that we are saved by works, for we cannot earn our salvation; we are saved by grace through faith and faith alone. But if we are genuinely saved, the evidence of that salvation will be the way we treat other people, especially those brothers and sisters in Christ who have needs that we can fill.

He also wants to show that simply having faith in something (believing in something, in anything), even something as noble as the idea of a single, all powerful God, is not enough. There are many Jews and Muslims who believe in a single, all-powerful God. There are even many church goers around the world who believe that God exists. But they do not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that, as a man, He died on the cross to pay for their sins.

According to James, even demons have faith. They believe that there is one supreme God, and they tremble in fear because they know that he is a vengeful God, in addition to being a loving God. But even though these demons believe in the one all-powerful God, they are not saved. They are destined for Hell. Having faith in God is important, even necessary for salvation, but it is not

sufficient in order to be saved. A person has to also believe that he or she, as a sinner, has been saved by the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

James' thesis in this section of his letter is that faith is good but what you believe in is important. He is also saying that genuine saving faith will be evidenced by works of love (good works).

Back in verse eighteen, James started this path of reasoning by using a hypothetical argument against a faith which is not accompanied by works.

But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."

The Greek word translated "without" really means "separate from." James is emphatically declaring that true faith does not exist separate from good deeds. A genuine saving faith in the blood of Jesus Christ will *always* be accompanied by good works. The good works are the evidence of salvation. He simply states once again that faith without the evidence of works is not saving faith (it does not produce new life in Christ). It is dead faith, a faith that doesn't work, a faith that doesn't exist!

In the next few verses James is going to give a couple of examples of people who proved their faith through their works. In these verses, notice that neither Abraham nor Rahab chose the works that became the evidence of their faith. These works were chosen by God.

### **James 2:21-23**

**Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS ACCOUNTED TO HIM FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS." And he was called the friend of God.**

This is James' first example of someone who was "justified by works." In Genesis chapter fifteen, we see Abraham having just rescued the people of Sodom, including his nephew Lot, from the armies of Chedorlaomer. That night, God spoke to Abraham in a vision. Abraham responded by complaining that God had not yet fulfilled His promise of a son for Abraham. God then reiterated His promise to Abraham that he would, indeed, have a son born to him and He took Abraham outside saying:

"Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." (Genesis 15:5)

As I have said many times, the words translated "count" and "number" can also be translated as "recount," that is, "telling the story of." Then in the following verse we read:

And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness. (Genesis 15:6)

That was the point in time when Abraham was saved, that is, declared righteous before God. However, it wasn't until about fifteen years later that God finally blessed Abraham with his son, Isaac. Then, when Isaac was a teenager, God told Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah. When Abraham was about to slay Isaac on the altar, God stopped him, having seen that Abraham was willing to be obedient to Him even in offering up his most cherished son.

James is telling us that it was this obedient action regarding the offering of his long awaited, promised son that proved Abraham's faith. In a very real sense, James says that Abraham was justified by works. That is, his action of obedience was the proof of his faith in God. God did not declare Abraham righteous at this point, because He had already done so, and once a person has been declared righteous by God, that person is forever righteous in God's eyes. Abraham believed that God would bring forth the Messiah from his descendants, and he proved his faith by being willing to sacrifice Isaac, believing that God could raise him up.

When we accepted Jesus Christ as our Savior, we were saved by faith alone. But, as we walk through this life, like Abraham, we are constantly undergoing trials of our faith. Our responses to these trials, our works, are the proof of our faith. As we pointed out in the previous verse, Abraham's salvation, that is his having been declared righteous by God, occurred some twenty to thirty years before he offered Isaac on the altar at Mt. Moriah. So, what does James mean that Abraham's faith was made complete by his works? The first thing we have to ask ourselves is, "What faith is he talking about?" Is he saying that Abraham's salvation, his saving faith, was made complete by works? To answer that question, let's look at what it says in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR SEED SHALL BE CALLED," concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense. (Hebrews 11:17-19)

It is clear from this passage that James is not talking about Abraham's saving faith, but his walking faith; "for we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). When we believe in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ to save us from our sins, it is saving faith. As we walk through life, however, our faith is continually tested by trials. This is our walking faith. During these trials, our faith is tested, and it is proven when we obey through faith.

In response to James' teaching here, John Calvin once said, "We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone."

The phrase "it was accounted" is one that we have looked at before. It is translated from the Greek word *logidzomai*, which is an accounting term, meaning "to make a conclusion based on an inventory." It could be paraphrased as "to make an accounting," or "to mark in a record." Hence, it is often translated as "to reckon" or "to impute." The word is expressed in this verse in the aorist tense and passive voice. The passive voice indicates that it was done **to** Abraham, and the aorist tense indicates that it was done at a single point in time in the past.

You may wonder why such a distinction is being made about tense and voice in these words. The reason is that they show us that even James believed that Abraham had a complete saving faith at the point in time when he was marked as righteous by God and proclaimed as His friend. Notice that it was not Abraham claiming that God was his friend, but God proclaiming that Abraham was His friend. The reckoning and calling were God's doing, not Abraham's.

James clearly declares that Abraham believed God, in accordance with **Genesis 15:6**, and at that time God considered him righteous. That's when Abraham was saved. And, James' point here is that his act of obedience many years later was a demonstration that his saving faith was real. I previously made a distinction between saving faith and walking faith. They're not really two kinds of faith; rather, walking faith is a manifestation of saving faith.

Reading through the fourth chapter of Romans, we see that Paul presents a very strong case that Abraham was not reckoned righteous by God because of his works (his acts of obedience) but because of his faith. The act of declaring Abraham righteous was God's act of grace, not Abraham's act of obedience. Here, James is not arguing against Paul; instead, he is agreeing and proclaiming that Abraham's faith was acted out in works as the proof that his faith was real.

### **James 2:24-26**

**You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.**

The opening part of this section is often taken out of context and misquoted to try to prove that salvation is works based. If you use this verse in isolation of the others and drop the last word you get,

You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith ...

But, James is **not** declaring that we are saved by works. Works cannot save us. There were people in James' day, just as there are today, who claimed to be saved by faith and believed that they can "live like the devil" without reprisal because they are saved by faith and all their sins are forgiven (past, present, and future). But the half-brother of our Lord has clearly articulated that a faith which is not accompanied by works of obedience is an empty, dead faith. He says, "You can't have just faith alone!"

James is in the process of backing-up his argument with a couple of examples, the first of which is Abraham. As a result of his having believed God, Abraham was declared to be righteous. He was saved by faith. James declares, however, that it was Abraham's obedience to God, his works, which proved his faith was real. As we have discussed for several verses now, it is the good works, the godly living, the submission to God's will, that prove our faith to be genuine saving faith.

So, James' conclusion regarding Abraham is that he was justified by works, not by faith *alone*. Without the proof of his works, his faith was empty, void, dead, and not a saving faith.

James now finishes his treatise on the works of faith with one more example of faith demonstrated through works. The reference is to the events of Joshua chapter 2. When the Israelites were about to enter into the Promised Land, they sent in two spies to scope out Jericho and these two were protected by Rahab. She was a Gentile, probably a worshiper of pagan gods, a prostitute, and an enemy of the Jews. Nonetheless, when confronted with the truth of Almighty God, she believed, saying:

for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. (Joshua 2:11)

And, she demonstrated that faith by her actions, which put her own life in danger at the hands of the people of Jericho. She welcomed the spies into her home, hid them when the people of Jericho came searching for them, and helped them escape.

Her act of faith is forever recorded in **Hebrews 11:31**. This eleventh chapter of Hebrews is sometimes referred to as the Hall of Faith since it recounts numerous individuals who demonstrated their faith by their actions.

By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace. (Hebrews 11:31)



James claims that her works justified her just as Abraham's did. Not in the place of faith, but they empowered it! And she was further honored by God for her faithfulness in action by becoming the great-great-grandmother of David, king of Israel, according to the first chapter of Matthew's gospel.

James sums up this entire section with a simple statement that expresses what he has been saying for the past ten verses. Just as your own body cannot exist without the life-giving presence of your spirit, so your faith cannot exist without the presence of works of faithful obedience to your Lord and Master. If those works don't exist in your life, then you are not really saved.

There are many churches today that are more interested in the number of converts than the reality of those converts. They say, "All you have to do is believe that Christ died for your sins and you will be saved." They say nothing about submitting to the lordship of God or of turning over control of your life to Him. As soon as someone says the sinner's prayer, they congratulate themselves and record another convert in their membership rolls. What they don't tell the new converts is, "How you live your life after you do this will be the evidence of whether or not your faith is real." As a result, there are many so-called Christians today who have professed Christ at some time in the past, but their post-confession life is no different from their pre-confession life.

### **So what?**

The idea that we are saved by works apart from faith is nowhere taught in the New Testament. We cannot earn our salvation because we can never measure up to God's righteousness without faith. But salvation by faith in Christ does not entitle a Christian to live however he or she pleases. Our manner of life (our works) is the evidence of the saving faith that has already occurred.

Unless you live below the poverty line, you have more riches than 95% of the world's population. The problem with having money is that we never think we have enough. Compared to many others, however, we have great riches. One way of demonstrating our faith is by sharing our abundance with someone who has a lot less.

Each one of us needs to take a good look at ourselves (on the inside) and ask, "Do I do good works?" If the answer is yes, then you need to see if these good works are the result of your appreciation for the salvation that God has given to you, or an attempt to win His favor. If you don't continually do good works, then you need to seriously investigate whether or not you're really saved!

Do you have faith? Do you believe there is one supreme God? If so, that is good. Do you believe that you are a sinner and that you deserve eternity in hell? Do you believe that Jesus died on the cross to pay for your sin? I pray that you do!

Do you ever feel the Spirit of God prompting you to do a good deed? It may be as simple as helping an elderly person who has a physical need, or it may be an opportunity to witness to someone about salvation through Jesus Christ. Whatever it is, your obedience is evidence of your salvation.

Is your faith being tested right now? Don't despair! It doesn't mean that God is mad at you. It means that God loves you and wants to make you more like His son. Give Him thanks for building your faith and show through your obedient works how much you love Him and that you truly believe Him! If you are truly saved, your works **will** demonstrate it to others.

Is there evidence of your faith in your actions? Do your actions demonstrate your faith? Do your attitudes and actions demonstrate that you are a Christian? Or - here's another way of asking the

same question, “If you were arrested today for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

If you are wondering whether your own profession was real, simply ask yourself a few questions. Your answers will make it very clear. Has my manner of living changed since I confessed Christ as savior? Do I have a hunger for His Word? Do I desire to be with my Christian friends more than my unsaved friends? Does The Spirit convict me when I sin? Do I want to know God better and to please Him as much as possible?

It doesn't matter whether you grew-up in a Christian family, hearing the gospel truth from the time you were born, or in a faithless home where God's name was only used as a swear word. Once you believed the gospel message, you became a child of God by faith and your works of faith began. And they will continue until you leave this earthly life.

Remember, works are the evidence of our salvation, not the source of it!

Let's pray.

May Jahweh bless you and keep you,

May Jahweh cause His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you,

May Jahweh turn His face toward you and give you peace.