

Before Christmas, when we began studying this letter from James, I said “If I was to summarise the drive of this letter in one word, I’d use the word “non-passivity”.” And then I had to explain what it means.

Some Christians have a very passive faith – that is, “God has done everything for me. I don’t have to do **anything**” – Christianity gets done **to** me.... Where as James, is saying “That sort of faith – a passive faith,, is a misunderstanding of Christ. That kind of faith is dead; it’s barren; and it’ll do you no good at all, on the day of judgment.”

Because, the Christian life, is a very **active** life, of living; and loving; and serving; and giving; and trusting; and enduring;..... It’s a faith of commitment, which holds fast; it’s a praying faith; it’s a merciful faith; it’s a **doing** faith..... It is a **non-passive** faith.

And you’ve been seeing this haven’t you (as we’ve worked our way through James)? A few people have said to me, “I’m just loving this series on James – it’s such a practical book.

And today, we come to the **pinnacle** of James’ message of non-passivity, when he makes the very blunt, and yet cutting statement, “**faith without works, is dead**”.

Over the last couple of weeks, we’ve been talking about mercy. God has been merciful to us. We must be merciful to others... And now James is showing us how mercy, isn’t just a thing in our minds – it’s something that we do...

Like, if your brother or sister in Christ have nothing to eat,,,, or they have no way to keep themselves warm, on a freezing winters night,,,, If you just say to them, “Keep warm... Keep yourself well fed...”, and don’t give them anything to eat, or any warm clothes, well that’s just useless – actually it’s worse than useless. It’s cruel – that’s not mercy... Mercy is when we do something about it. Mercy, isn’t mercy, until it is actioned.

And faith is the same. Faith isn’t faith, unless it’s actioned.

And James asks us a question about our faith: ¹⁴ **What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?**

Alright, I want to be **very clear**, about the question James is forcing us to consider... And I say this, because many people – well, their theology won’t even let them consider that question. They **downplay** this question, and pretend that he’s not asking it. And so I want to be very clear, about what the question is.

It’s a question about salvation itself. He is asking it, in the context of judgment – am I saved from judgment? In V12, he’s just talked about judgment, and how we should **speak** and ... **act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.** ¹³ **For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.**

It’s a question, about salvation itself.

Now, we know, that we are saved by faith, right? (That's what Salvation is – to be saved)... And I hope that by now, you are very clear on this... We are saved by faith. I cannot save myself, by doing good things. **You cannot save yourself.** I can't save you. You can't save me. No church leader can save us. No Pope can save us. No celebrity Christian can save us. No ritual can save us. No other '**so-called**' gods can save us. We have to trust in Jesus – We have to believe in Jesus – We have to rely on Jesus... That's what faith is... We know this...

If you **don't** know this, then we need to have a good yarn, and get you saved.

And now James is forcing us to consider the question, "Can that faith save me? " What kind of faith is he talking about? A faith (a belief), that is **not** accompanied by works... Alright, so if I believe in Jesus, and even rely on Jesus, for my salvation, but don't have the actions of a disciple of Jesus:

- if my actions are not merciful, after I've received the mercy of God
- if I don't live out a holy life, after I've received holiness from God
- if my actions are not righteous, after I've received righteousness from God.....
- if I don't act as a forgiven sinner – and instead, I act all **self-righteousness**...

"Am I saved? Or am I lost?"

It's a question about salvation itself. It's not a question about rewards I may or may not get – it's a question about salvation

– “Am I saved from hell?” ... On judgment day, when Jesus separates the sheep from the goats, will he say to me:

«Matthew 25:34 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'

Alright, your faith was demonstrated in actions. Be rewarded...

Or will he say:

Matthew 25:41 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Matthew 25:45, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

It's a question about salvation itself.

And as I prepared for this message today, it very quickly became obvious to me, that to be true to the Scriptures, I'm going to upset a few people.

Because many people will answer, “Yes!” to James’ question. They will say, “Yes, if I believe, and only believe, that’s all it takes. That faith **will** save me.” They will say, “It depends **entirely** on what I believe. And what I do, has absolutely nothing to do with it.”....

Where as James, very clearly says “No – belief by itself won’t save me...”

You see, we don’t even have to think about the answer to this question, because James answers it for us. He answers it 7 times in the 13 verses.

1. Firstly, ^{V15} If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ 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?

It’s no good, is it....

And James says, Just like that, **faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.** (it’s no good).

2. In V19, he says ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Alright, demons aren’t saved, are they? They’re the most wicked, evil, vile creatures... When Jesus returns, they’re all going to be cast into the fiery pit of hell. And they know this. They believe in God. They believe in Jesus... They know all about Him, and they quiver in their boots, because they know of the doom that awaits

them...

And a lot of people would say “Yeah, I believe in God. And they think that because they believe in God, they’re going to get to heaven”... Sorry. It doesn’t cut it.

3. Thirdly, in V20, he becomes quite scathing in his remarks: He says ²⁰ **Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?** Alright, it’s foolish to think otherwise.
4. And so he gives us a couple of examples: Abraham. Abraham was justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?

You see, Abraham could’ve said “Yes, Lord, I believe in you. I believe, if I **were** to take my son, Isaac to the mountain that you will show me, and if I **were** to put him on the altar, you would save him... And so I’m going to stay here, and believe it in my heart, and I offer Isaac to you in my heart....

It was the fact that Abraham went and did it, that his faith was real. And he got to the point where he was about to kill his only son, because God had told him to, and God said “Stop”...

5. And then he gives the example of Rahab the prostitute, who helped the spies escape out of Jericho, and she was saved because she feared God... If she had of caved in to the king of Jericho, rather than actually hiding those spies and helping them to escape, that wouldn’t have been

faith...

6. And again in V24, James says ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.
7. And again, in V26 he says: ²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

So, the question he's forcing us to grapple with – this question about salvation itself – he answers it 7 times. He even gives us some examples. And he tells us it's **foolish** to believe otherwise...

So, how do **you** answer that question? if someone says he has faith but does not have works.... Can that faith save him?

Coming from a protestant tradition, (I'm going to be blunt for a moment).. Amongst us protestants, there is **sometimes** an ugly arrogance and (strangely enough) a legalism, over grace against works.

And because of this ugly, judgmental arrogance, over something which is supposed to be so beautiful and wonderful and merciful and loving.... Sometimes we're afraid to even consider the place of works, in the scheme of salvation.

I get together, with some of my minister friends, and I'm **afraid**, to even mention the place of works when it comes to salvation...

Why is it like that???? Why can James, so very clearly say, “Faith without works, is not a faith that will save you....” And the teachings of Jesus say exactly the same thing... And yet many of my minister friends would string me up as a heretic, and accuse me of preaching “Legalism” if I was ever to suggest, that our actions have **any** kind of bearing on our salvation...

There is a **major** discrepancy here. But where does this discrepancy come from? How does this miss-mesh, come about?

And I believe, this is a very important thing for us to understand. Because, if we **don't** grasp it – if we don't get the **gravity** of the situation:

- the fact that our salvation depends, on whether our faith is active or not
- the fact that our salvation depends on our faith coming alive in the good deeds that we do...

If we don't **get** this, well it **has** led to the **ugly** side of evangelicalism – the easy-believism of a church that makes it all about what we believe, and neglects the place of good deeds that accompany a living faith. And we end up with a church who believe in Jesus, but the way we live, is no different to how people of the world would live. And I don't know about you, but when I read the Gospels, it just glares at me, that the one thing that Jesus hates (more than anything), is hypocrisy... A people who believe, but their actions don't go with what they believe...

And to get to the bottom of it – to understand it, I’m going to have to give both, a brief history lesson, and a bit of a Bible study.

So first, a bit of history. In 1517, Martin Luther wrote “*Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*”, And he nailed it to the door of the All Saints’ Church in Wittenberg, challenging anyone to debate him. And thus began the reformation.

Three slogans of the reformation were: (in Latin)

- Sola Fide – by faith alone
- Sola Gratia – by grace alone
- Sola Scriptura – Scripture alone

And these slogans, were to address a raft of problems, within the Catholic church of the day. At the time of the reformation, there were some gross distortions of the faith, happening within the Roman Catholic Church... And some time after the protestant reformation, the Roman Catholic Church had its own reformation, to sort some of these problems out.

What were these problems? Well, there were lots of issues, but the main presenting issue, that brought it all to a head, was the selling of ‘indulgences’. As a means of funding the renovation of St Peter’s Basilica in Rome, you could buy a certificate from the Pope, granting the forgiveness of sin, or the reduction of penalty for sin. You could even pay money to the church, and that would get Great Granny Gertrude out of purgatory and into heaven...

"As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

Within the church (at its very highest levels), there was a gross distortion of the faith; Gross corruption; Gross deception, and a terrible abuse of power...

And Martin Luther, who earnestly studied the Bible, realised the error of what was going on. And so began the reformation.... And these were the slogans:

- Sola Fide – by faith alone
- Sola Gratia – by grace alone
- Sola Scriptura – Scripture alone

So, the Scriptures alone, were returned to their place, as the source of authority. It **had become** the Pope. But not any longer – they were going back to their Bibles. And of course, when Luther read the scriptures, it was obvious – you can't buy salvation. The church were trying to sell, something that Christ has given us for free. It is by the grace of God alone that we are saved. And it is by **faith** alone we are saved – not by what we do.

And so the statement "By faith alone", has become one of the pillars of the Reformed church – it's one of our core beliefs. How do we reconcile this, though, with what James says – that faith alone will not save us???

Well, these 2 statements, were addressing 2 different issues. Martin Luther was arguing against a different **way** to be saved – an additional way – pay some dollars and you're good to go...

But for James, the issue isn't about the primacy of faith (that's a given) – it's the **type** of faith. What Gospel do you believe? You know, the Gospel that I read about in the Scriptures, is one that challenges me to a changed life. It's one where I **repent** of my old life – my old ways, and Jesus gives me a **new** life. It is to be born again. As one commentator puts it:

Works are not an “added extra” (to faith) any more than breath is an “added extra” to a living body. The so-called faith which fails to produce charitable works, is simply not “saving faith.”ⁱ

But it would be **wrong** to say that Luther's response, was **only** a reaction to a corrupt church. His study of the Scriptures could only leave him with that one conclusion “We are saved by faith alone.” And this is a message that **we** must continue to preach to the world in which **we** live. The greatest **misunderstanding** of the gospel is that you become a Christian by doing good things. You don't. You become a Christian by repenting, and turning to Christ, in faith. There would be no need for grace, if I could be saved by doing good things – there would be no need for the cross. And so, we are saved by Jesus' work on the cross. We are saved by faith in Him.

But some people (because of that pillar of Protestantism – by faith alone), take that slogan too far, and find for themselves, in the Scriptures, what they believe is a contradiction to what James is saying. In Romans 3:28, Paul says ^{3: 28} **For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.**

And there, my friends, is the key difference between what Paul is talking about, and what James is talking about. “Works” vs. “Works of the law”. Now, when Paul talks about the Law, he’s talking about the whole Jewish religious law – from circumcision; to sacrifice; to the cleanliness laws; the Sabbath laws; - this whole religious legal system. He was saying to the church in Rome, you don’t need all that religious legal system – because that’s not what saves us. We are saved by faith alone.

You see, this was at a point in the Church’s development, where it was moving from a Jewish sect to becoming a truly new thing. The **Gentiles** – the **non-Jews**, were becoming Christians. The church had **begun**, as a Jewish sect. But now the **Gentiles** were becoming Christians too. And some of the Jewish religious heavy-weights, were saying, “Well, if you Gentiles want to become a Christian, you’ve got to become a Jew first, and keep all of the works of The Law”. And Paul was very adamantly saying “No you don’t.” “You don’t have to keep the works of the law.”

Jesus has satisfied the requirements of the Law, and we are saved by faith alone. But that doesn’t mean that Paul ever envisaged the Christian faith would be an action-less faith.

In fact, in Romans 2:13, he says:

Romans 2:13 For it is not the **hearers** of the law who are righteous before God, but the **doers** of the law who will be justified. ¹⁴ For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even

though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts.....

Alright, Paul was talking about how the Holy Spirit brings out good deeds, that the Law used to demand. And when we have a real, living faith in Jesus, His ways become our ways.

You see, we're talking about 2 different types of works. The work involved in keeping the Religious law – well we're free of that. Christ has done all of that work for us. Is anybody glad about that??? I am. Praise God....

But a Christian life, is a transformed life. Followers of Christ – true believers of Jesus Christ – Well our faith will be expressed in our actions:

- our good deeds
- our love for one another
- our mercy
- our care and compassion
- our obedience to our Saviour

And so, it appears to me, that probably the **most crucial** thing, for us to understand, is what the Gospel actually is. We can believe lots of things about Jesus, but if we don't understand the Gospel, then we can't be saved. If your faith is a faith that doesn't demand repentance of your old life, and being born again into Christ – if it doesn't include actions, well have you understood the Gospel? And are you actually saved?

The way of the Kingdom of God, is so completely different to the way of the world, Jesus described, that to enter it, we have

to be born again. It is to become so convicted by the Gospel, that I am so sorrowful for who I am and what I have done, that I want to be free of the old sinful life, and want to take on the new Spirit-filled and Spirit-led life. It is to become so enraptured by the Gospel, that we begin to express it in every part of our lives.

It's not a matter of putting together a set of rules or a list of good deeds you have to do to be a Christian. It's simply about a life surrendered to Jesus. It's about "living by the Spirit", so when the Holy Spirit prompts you to do a good deed, you just do it...

Do you have a living faith? Or a dead faith?

If a body isn't breathing, it's a pretty good sign it's dead (if it's not, it very soon will be).

If a faith isn't accompanied by good deeds, it's a pretty good sign it's dead. If it's not, it soon will be.

You can't live in Christ, without doing good deeds. That kind of faith is a dead faith. It'll do you no good on the day of judgment. Any hope you have of salvation, is just a false hope.

And so the message for today, is "Repent of dead faith, and be born again, to a new, living faith – A life submitted to Christ – a life of faith and good deeds.

Are there any questions?

ⁱ Davids, P.H., 1982. *The Epistle of James: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.