

James 2:14-26 | David Baumgartner

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[0 : 00] All right. God is good. And all the time. All right. I wanted to make sure you heard at least one good thing this morning from this pulpit. Well, good morning, everybody. We're going to be continuing our verse by verse study in the book of James. So if you have your Bibles, please turn with me to chapter two. We'll be picking it up in verse 14.

It's already been mentioned several times that James is a very practical book. And that makes it very relevant for you and I today. And that's because like most of us, the original audience, which were Jewish Christians, were being tempted by worldliness and economic prosperity.

In other words, their desire for material gain was actually hindering them from caring for the practical needs of others who were less fortunate. I really think it's a shame that the great insights that are taught in this book are completely overshadowed by unnecessary controversy.

If you have your Bible, let's read chapter two, beginning in verse 14. What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?

If a brother or a sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, go in peace, be warm and filled, and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?

[1 : 39] Even so, faith, if it has no works, is dead being by itself. But someone may well say, you have faith and I have works. Show me your faith without the works and I will show you my faith by my works.

You believe that God is one? You do well. The demons also believe and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?

Was not Abraham, our father, justified by works when he offered up Isaac, his son, on the altar?

You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected.

And the scripture was fulfilled, which says, and Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he was called the friend of God.

You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not Rahab, the harlot, also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

[2 : 52] For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. Let's go ahead and go to the Lord in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we are so privileged to be able to come here and to study your holy word. And we're so grateful, Lord, that you have given us your word. Lord, we pray, Father, that in this next half hour or so, that these words would really make sense to us, Lord, and that we could, more importantly, apply what James is teaching here.

We thank you for this and ask that in all that we do, that you are glorified, Lord. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I'd like to see a show of hands, if I may.

How many of you have heard this old proverb, you can't have your cake and eat it too? Yeah, boy, look at that, almost a unanimous show of hands.

My mom used to say that to me all the time. I think it's because I must have been a very demanding kid. Let's say it together. You can't have your cake and eat it too.

[4 : 01] That saying actually goes back to 1538. It was credited to a guy named Thomas. He's the Duke of Norfolk.

And what does it mean? It means that you can't enjoy two mutually exclusive things at the same time. For example, my wife makes these great blueberry muffins.

I have blueberry muffins. But if I eat it, or if I throw it away, which I'm never going to do, then I can't say that I have them.

So you can't have two mutually exclusive things. But let's go ahead and set that saying aside for now. And that's because I'd like to talk about something else that happened in the 1500s.

In 1517, there was this monk by the name of Martin Luther. And he was having these disagreements with the Roman Catholic Church.

[5 : 00] In fact, he had 95 of them. And he nailed those disagreements on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. By the way, we have steel doors, so don't try that yourself here.

Luther's protests inspired, of course, the Protestant Reformation. And that spread all throughout Europe.

Eventually, there were five Latin phrases that were credited to Martin Luther. You know them.

They're called solas. Let me just review those with you.

Sola Scriptura. That means scripture alone. The Bible is the highest authority for faith and practice.

Sola Fide. That means that's grace alone.

That means that we are justified. That means we're declared righteous by faith alone, not good works. Sola Grazia. That means grace alone.

[5 : 59] Salvation is entirely the result of God's grace. It's not something that you and I can earn.

Solas Christus. Christ alone.

Jesus is the only mediator between God and humanity. And then last, Soli Deo Gloria. All glory belongs to God alone.

In short, if you put all those together, salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to scripture alone, to the glory of God alone.

Now, Bethel is not a Lutheran church. But I would say that we have a lot of agreement with those solas. But here's my point here.

There are many who are not in agreement. Here's their position. Let me just paraphrase what they would say. You folks, Protestants, you Bethelites, you say that you believe in sola scriptura, God's word alone.

[7 : 06] But you also say that you believe in sola fide, that you are saved through faith alone. Let's say it. You can't have your cake and eat it too.

Here's their point. We are not saved by faith alone. The Bible does not teach that. It never did. That was fabricated by Martin Luther himself.

Would you like proof? Let's look at our text. Verse 14 in chapter 2. Look with me. If a man says he has faith, but he has no works, can that faith save him?

Obviously, this expects an answer no. Verse 17. Faith, if it has no works, is dead being by itself. Verse 26.

Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. And then verse 24. You see that a man is justified by works and not faith alone.

[8 : 09] Did you know that this is the only place where we see that phrase, faith alone? It's only here in the book of James. And notice, it's not by faith alone.

So, if you say that scripture is your sole authority, then honor what it says, because you can't have your cake and eat it too.

How do we reconcile this with what Paul teaches? For example, in the book of Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 8 and 9.

For grace, by grace you have been saved through faith, and that is not of yourselves. It is a gift of God, not as a result of works, that no one should boast.

Eventually, Protestant theologians came up with a response. Here's what they said. In this passage, James is referring to a false or fake faith.

[9 : 15] In other words, a faith that is non-existent. Essentially, the claim here is that there's two kinds of faith. First, there's the true faith, saving faith, which results in salvation from hell.

But here, in James, they said that James is talking about a fake faith, fake faith, a false faith. I asked, do Protestant theologians really teach this?

I looked at my Bible commentaries at home regarding verse 14. Boy, I hope this doesn't rock your world. But let me read what it says.

Warren Wearsby, page 354. Any declaration of faith that does not result in a changed life and good works is a false declaration.

John Woolvard, page 825. James is referring to a spurious boast of faith, a false faith. Simon Kissed the maker.

[10:19] Faith without works is useless for man because it cannot bring him salvation. Doug Moo, he says, this is only a claim to faith, which means having no faith at all.

James McDonald, a faith that does not result in good works cannot save. It is not real faith at all. How about the Honorable J. Vernon McGee?

Verse 14 is talking about professing faith that which is phony and counterfeit. Well, friends, there is a problem with this solution.

You see, faith is described several ways in the Bible. You can have great faith. It talks about O ye of little faith. You can have weak faith, but we don't find any fake or phony or counterfeit faith.

Instead, the word that we see there is unbelief. I want all of us to just feel the tension here because this is one of the most debated passages in the whole Bible.

[11:35] And if you listen out there, you read the commentaries, everybody has their proof text. This group says this, has these texts.

Another group has their texts. Now you have scripture going against scripture. I want to ask you, who wins? I think that unbelievers win.

I think that those who mock the Bible win. I think Satan wins. I think that there's a better way to understand this passage.

And I'd like to begin with a very simple question. Here it is. Why is it that whenever we see the word saved, it's always assumed that it's referring to being saved from hell?

Did you know that about 70% of the time in the New Testament, the word saved is not about eternal salvation? No.

[12:38] Rather, it's about being saved from some life-threatening danger. It may be persecution. It may be drowning. It may be disease. There's this concept here that we don't hear very often.

It's the fluidity in meaning. And how do you tell? Context. Context is king. That word saved here is the Greek word soter.

And you may have heard of the word soteriology. That's the study of salvation. James uses this word five times in this letter. And none of them suggests that he's referring to being saved from eternal hell.

The best example, and I know I'm jumping ahead here. Maybe I'm raining on someone's parade. But in James chapter five, verse 15, in the ESV, it says, the prayer of faith will save, that's that word soter, the one who is sick.

Now, I don't know anybody that equates that with eternal life. There's other places. We see in 1 Timothy 2 that women shall be saved through the bearing of children.

[13:50] So, Lydia, congratulations. You're gonna be saved. The bearing of another child. So when James asks this question, can that faith save him?

He's talking about being saved from something else. And I would like to suggest what that might be. to be saved from a useless life.

How do I know? How do you and I know? Well, first of all, it's very simple. James is writing to believers, right? We talked about that quite a lot.

Those who are already saved. But simply, here's the second thing, simply look at the very previous verses. And by the way, when James wrote this letter, there were no chapter divisions, there were no verse divisions.

It was just one long letter. In chapter 2, verses 1 to 13, notice, James has just revealed man's tendency to show partiality between, for example, between a rich man and a poor man.

[14:59] And what's the remedy? Dave covered it last week. Show mercy to those who are less fortunate. Because mercy triumphs over judgment.

And how do we do that? We put our faith to work. And in this passage that we're going to be looking at here, James is going to give us four reasons why you and I should put our faith to work.

Please bear with me. This is going to be a very tedious message here. Four reasons. Here's the first one. James offers a hypothetical situation.

Look with me. Verse 15. If a brother or a sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, go in peace, be warm and filled, and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body.

He asks, what use is that? James is talking about the use of our faith. In other words, how is my faith being lived out in practical terms?

[16:05] Is my faith profitable to others? Or is it useful? Is it helpful? Or maybe it's not. It is profitable to others when it's accompanied by works.

My faith is unprofitable when it is not accompanied by works. Got it? Got it. Let's go on here. James even says, even in verse 17, even so faith, if it has no works, is dead being by itself. What does he mean here?

Well, again, we have this fluidity of meaning going on here. The word dead, nekros, that's the Greek word, that can be used literally.

For instance, Paul says in his first letter to the Thessalonians, the dead in Christ will rise first. What kind of dead is that? That's literal.

[17:06] Literally dead. Or the word can be used figuratively. In Revelation chapter 3, the Holy Spirit said to the church of Sardis, I know your deeds, that you have a name, that you are alive, but you are dead.

Now, are those people really dead? No, he's saying this figuratively. And here, in James, James is using the word dead figuratively.

It's a synonym for useless, to be, in effect, dead. So that's the hypothetical situation he gives.

Secondly, a second reason to put our faith to work.

James offers a hypothetical person. Look with me, verse 18. Someone may well say, let me just stop right there. Someone may well say, who might that be?

This is a common literary device. It's called a diatribe. This is where the writer, in this case is James, he introduces this made-up person.

[18:14] And we might refer to him as an antagonist. And this antagonist is, he offers contrary views so that the writer can knock them down.

Verse 18, look with me. The antagonist says, you have faith and I have works. Show me your faith without the works and I will show you my faith by my works.

You believe that God is one? You do well. The demons also believe and shudder. Now you're saying, who said what?

Yeah. And that's because there are difficulties with these verses. And it's because there's no quotation marks in the original Greek text.

So we really don't know where the antagonist begins and where ends and where James begins his answer. Most likely, I believe that James begins in verse 18.

[19:16] I'm sorry. Most likely, verses 18 and 19 are being said by the antagonist. And here's why. Notice, he commends the belief that God is one.

God is one. He says, you do well. Well, friends, this is not a Christian belief. That's what you call monotheism.

What we may call it Judaism in this context. That's the belief of unsaved Jews. The antagonist, secondly, the antagonist believes that good works are a necessary sign of salvation. salvation. Yeah, if you read it, keep reading it. That's what it says. Good works are the necessary sign of saving faith. Well, if that's what he's saying here, that's the position of many Protestants. It's called lordship salvation. And all those Protestant theologians that I referenced earlier believe that saving faith always results in good works.

[20:29] and if a person is not doing good works, then he or she is not saved. Wow. You might notice in verse 18 that some of the Protestant translators in the English Bible added the word well, that that person may well say.

The translators are commending the antagonist position. I firmly believe that James begins his response in verse 20. And here's why.

Notice, he calls the antagonist foolish. Look with me, verse 20. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is what?

It's useless. James again reaffirms his position that faith without works is useless. Well, there's two reasons.

Here's the third reason. Third thing why we should put our faith to work. James is going to offer some real life examples here. And we're going to begin with Abraham.

[21:40] Read with me, verse 21. Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? Here's another seeming seeming contradiction to Paul's teaching.

First, let's review some terms here, okay? The word dikio often with coupled with the word sunay dikio sunay that means to be justified.

That means to be pronounced righteous. Having a quality or a state of correctness. Now, when we read the New Testament, the most common usage is regarding a person's eternal salvation. Being righteous in God's eyes. But friends, there are other uses of the word. Let me give you an example. In Luke chapter 7 verse 29, we find Jesus commending the ministry of John the Baptist. And it says that when all the people and the tax gatherers heard this, they acknowledged God's righteousness. They acknowledged his justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John. [23 : 02] The King James actually says all the people justified God. God. So, the main point here is in whose eyes is someone viewed as righteous?

Again, fluidity in the way words are used. And you have to look at the context here. Now, back to verse 21. We have this account about Abraham.

back in Genesis 15, 6, Abraham was declared righteous when he believed God. Remember that thing with the stars and it says, you know, these are going to be your offspring.

And then it says Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness. At that moment, Genesis 15, verse 6, he was justified.

He was given, granted eternal salvation. And friends, once that happens, a person never loses his or her righteous standing before God.

[24 : 11] Now, here's the thing. Decades later, something happened. And if you would please turn with me to Genesis 22. We'll pick it up here in verse 11 in Genesis 22.

In Genesis 22, God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. In that account, we read that Abraham stretched out his hand and he had a knife in it.

And he was about to slay his son, Isaac. And in verse 11, it says, but the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham.

And he said, here I am. And he said, do not stretch out your hand against the lad and do nothing to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.

God stopped him. And at that point, Abraham was declared righteous. Now I ask you, did Abraham get saved again?

[25 : 17] Abraham no. Abraham demonstrated the faith that he already had. And God was pleased with his obedience.

Verse 21 here said that Abraham was righteous, but for two different, for different reasons. He was righteous because of his works.

Two different events, two different justifications. go back to verse 21 here in James here. He asks, let me paraphrase here, verse 21.

This is my words. Did not Abraham put his faith to work when he obeyed God's command to offer up Isaac, his son, on the altar?

That's what James is teaching here. And we can notice what were the results of that. First, Abraham's faith was perfected.

[26 : 17] Verse 22 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected. James is making a contrast here between mature faith and immature faith.

In the beginning of James, it begins in chapter 1, verse 4, let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

So the first thing here is that Abraham's faith was perfected. Secondly, Abraham was then called a friend of God. Look with me, verse 23, the scripture was fulfilled which says, and this is Genesis 15, and Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

And then in verse 22, and he was called a friend of God. Abraham's obedience became known to others. Notice, people called Abraham a friend of God.

Did you notice the third person there? Abraham was called a friend of God? This tells us that Abraham's obedience was recognized by his peers, by those around him.

[27 : 36] He had a close relationship with God. God does not want good works from unbelievers. No.

He wants them to believe in him. And once you are a believer, the Lord wants good works. That's what God wants, is our obedience.

Jesus said in John chapter 15, in the book of John, this is my commandment that you love one another. Lord, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

And then he adds this, you are my friends, if you do what I command you. Secondly, we're given this another real life example, Rahab.

Rahab the harlot. Can you imagine when we get to heaven and we're looking for Rahab the harlot? To be known by that? Verse 25, he says, and in the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

[28 : 47] You have to go back to Joshua chapter 2, verse 11, because there you'll see that Rahab declared her belief in God to those two Hebrew spies.

She says, He is a God in heaven above and on earth below. And then she acted on her faith by welcoming and hiding the spies.

And she was saved. She was saved physically. It saved her life. Here's the fourth reason. The fourth reason why we should put our faith to work.

James offers a comparison, an analogy. Verse 26, For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

Again here, just like in verse 17, James uses that word dead as a synonym for useless. James says that faith and works are like body and spirit.

[29 : 51] Just as the spirit gives life to the body, good works give life to our faith. Think of this, here's another expression maybe some of you have used. Think about a dead church.

This doesn't mean that those that are gathering are not Christians. I mean, that's possible, but generally we don't mean that. I remember when Mary Ellen and I first moved back to St. Louis, we were visiting churches before we came to Bethel, and we would say that church or this church, whatever, they lack vibrancy.

that's what we meant by a dead church. Here's the key thing, faith, without works, our faith is unprofitable or useless in showing mercy to others.

Last week, again, Dave exhorted us to walk the talk, and if you believe that you ought to love your neighbor and give to the poor, but you don't actually act on those beliefs, then your faith is no good or no use to anyone.

Got it? Yeah. Once upon a time, there was this, on a Sunday around noon, there was a man who fell into a ditch near a roadside, and he tried to climb out, and he slipped, and he would slide back into the ditch, and he's calling out for help, and this well-dressed man walked by, and he was holding a large book.

[31 : 31] He peered down, he heard the cries for help, he peered down the ditch, and the guy says, hey, can you help me? And the guy's, can you give me a hand?

And the guy said, well, actually, I'm on my way to town to give a lecture on, well, what's your lecture about? How to avoid falling into a ditch? Can you give me a hand?

He said, I can't, I'm gonna be late. So he left. A church group walked by, and they gathered around the edge of that pit, and they're looking down, and the guy's crying out for help, and they said to one another, we should do something.

Another guy said, yeah, let's form a ditch response committee. That sounds great, but can you help me now? Said the guy. Well, one of them said, we meet on the first Thursday of every month, and we're gonna put your name on our agenda, but in the meantime, we're gonna be praying for you. I think that was the benevolence team, wasn't it? Off they went discussing who should bring snacks to the next meeting. Just about then, a farmer pulled up in a muddy truck and a rope, and the guy, he helped him out of the pit.

[32 : 58] You guys know the story. He helps him out of the pit, and he says, you know, a lot of people came by today, and all of them were really nice, but they weren't all that helpful. The farmer said, yes, I've seen them around lately, and you didn't need a speech about climbing out of a pit.

Prayers are good, but what you really needed was a rope. Amen. Yeah. Oh, let me see here.

Some of you, for some of you, this may be one of the most boring sermons that you've ever heard, and I'm usually not so polemic talking about other groups, but I'll tell you, my friends, I think that you and I have to take a stand, because there are groups that are what you'd call works-based religions, and you can lump them together, whether you're talking about Jehovah's Witnesses, or Mormons, or lots of other groups, and they have misused this passage to teach either that eternal salvation comes by faith plus works, I'm talking about rituals or sacraments or something like that, or they'll teach that you and I must maintain our salvation through our works, or else you were never saved to begin with.

I'm here to declare this morning that this passage in James chapter 2 is not about eternal salvation. No, it's about discipleship.

Discipleship and salvation are not the same thing. And I just ask, and I wonder this question, how do so many theologians miss this?

[34 : 55] It's plain as day in the book of James. The truth is, this is a very practical book, and James wants his fellow, wants his fellow Christians, you and I today, in verse 22, to be doers of the word.

So I'd like to leave with my three takeaways here. First, throughout this book, James emphasizes the importance of good works. You ever ask yourself why?

Here's why. It's precisely because good works do not come automatically to us. Do they? No. Some people think that all believers will produce good works all the time.

But the truth be known is that we Christians do not always live up to our faith. Sometimes believers will backslide. Sometimes believers, believe it or not, will gossip.

Sometimes believers will bring shame to Christ. What's going on? Well, notice how often James writes about the testing of our faith.

[36 : 05] James chapter 1 verses 2. Right out of the gate, he says, consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

We read in Hebrews that it was by faith when he was tested that he was going to offer up Isaac. Abraham was tested and so are you and I.

Trials will come in this life and this is why James says, count it all joy when you fall into various temptations. Secondly, the truth about good works is that our good works do testify to onlookers that we have saving faith.

They're the external fruit that bears witness to the eternal life that we have within us. Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

First Peter chapter 2 says, keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers they may on account of your good deeds as they observe them glorify God in the day of visitation.

[37 : 33] That's the second thing I see here. If I can invite the musicians here I'll end with this third thing here regarding our works. God will reward us for our good works that we do in this life.

It's called the crown of life. In James chapter 1 verse 12 he says that blessed is the man who perseveres under trial for once he has been approved he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Again last week Dave spoke about that approval process. What is that? It's the judgment seat of Christ. This is when believers we will have our works our motives and our faithfulness evaluated not for salvation but for our rewards.

I have five verses that you might want to write down here regarding the judgment seat of Christ. It's 1 Corinthians chapter 3 verses 11 to 15.

2 Corinthians chapter 5 verses 1 and 10. Romans 14 verses 10 to 12. John chapter 5 verse 22. And Revelation chapter 22 verse 12.

[38 : 53] Those are the verses that talk about the judgment seat of Christ. I can give this to you later or I know this is being recorded here for all of our Protestant and Catholic friends. Most likely this will happen after the rapture during the tribulation time on earth.

This is not the great white throne judgment. That's for unbelievers. This is the judgment seat of Christ. And that's what we talk about here when we're talking about the crown of life which the Lord has promised through those who love him.

And we can glorify God with our works. We can be useful to one another and to others. And we can show by our good works that we have saving faith.

And soften, Lord willing, soften their hearts. Father, we are so grateful that we can take this time to explore this passage.

And I pray, Lord, if there's anything that I said that was caustic or divisive, that just that you would scratch it from this memory, but also, Lord, that you would give us great discernment because we can look at your scripture, Lord, and we can study it and see that we don't have scripture fighting against scripture.

[40 : 19] It's our understanding that's flawed. And, Lord, we can give you all the glory that you deserve. Thank you for this, Lord. Thank you for each person here.

May us go forth as those equipped with the truth of your word. And we thank you for this. In the name of Jesus, God's people said, Amen.

Thank you.