

Wisdom and Works
James 1:22-27 (2:14-26; 3:13)
John Breon

Christian writer and activist Jim Wallis tells about how when he was in college, every Christian group on campus witnessed to him—without success. He responded to their preaching by asking, “How can I believe when I look at the way the church lives?” They answered, “Don’t look at the church—look at Jesus.” Wallis goes on:

I now believe that statement is one of the saddest in the history of the church. It puts Jesus on a pedestal apart from the people who name his name. Belief in him becomes an abstraction removed from any demonstration of its meaning in the world. Such thinking is a denial of what is most basic to the gospel: incarnation. People should be able to look at the way we live and begin to understand what the gospel is about. Our life must tell them who Jesus is and what he cares about. (*The Call to Conversion* 108).

James would agree. A little earlier he said that God chose to give us birth through the word of truth, the gospel, the good news of Jesus. That new birth is the beginning of the new life God intends for us. James goes on to encourage us to rid ourselves of moral filth and evil and meekly to accept the word planted in us, which can save us. Repentance plows the ground and receiving God’s word plants the seed of new life in us. God’s word in these verses can refer to all of Scripture. James probably was focused on the word of the gospel that tells us about Jesus and all that he taught and did. In other parts of the New Testament, we see that Jesus himself is God’s living Word. So the written word connects us to the living Word. We should probably have all this in mind as we think about God’s word here.

James immediately presses the point that we mustn’t simply hear the word, we must do it, we must live by it. Receiving (“humbly or meekly accepting”) God’s word means more than just passive listening. It involves

active response and obedience. Without response and obedience we're just deceiving ourselves if we think we've received God's word.

A mirror illustrates this point. Looking in a mirror may temporarily absorb our attention, but it probably has no lasting effect on how we go about our business. We might change our appearance slightly, but a glance in the mirror is momentary and has no real effect. Hearing the word without doing it is the same. If we just have a good time reading and hearing about James, or anything else in the Bible, or if we just enjoy hearing the music in the familiar setting of church, but what we do here has no real effect on our lives beyond this place, we're deceiving ourselves.

On the other hand, we can gaze intently into God's word, which is "the perfect law that gives freedom." We can remember the word and do it, practice it, walk the talk. God will bless our doing of God's word.

After mentioning the need to control our tongues, James continues the thought about being doers of the word. He describes pure and faultless religion that God our Father accepts. This real life with God has two aspects: caring for the weak and vulnerable people in the community and avoiding corruption from the world system that rebels against God. We could see these aspects of life with God as representing *compassion* and *holiness*. James calls for purity of heart that flows into compassionate action. John Wesley spoke about "holiness of heart and life." God cares about inward purity, that our hearts are right. God also calls us to outward purity where our behavior and relationships are right, where we show compassion and work for justice.

James 1:27 gives us some basics for living out our faith. There's a new ministry in Durant that takes its name from this verse. It's called J127. Its aim is to provide a place for young people who are orphaned or homeless when they age out of the foster care system (<https://www.j127ministry.com/>). That's one good example of living out this call to put our faith into action.

As usual, later in the letter James expands on a theme he introduces in the early part. This theme of doing God's word, of inward and outward life being consistent, shows up again in 2:14-26. Here James presents very practical expressions of the mercy he calls for in 2:13. The famous faith and

works question appears in the context of how we treat the poor and how we handle our possessions.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Faith that doesn't result in merciful action or deeds of charity is dead—it's empty and useless. Saying we have faith without works is hearing the word without doing it.

The example James gives may come from his readers' experience. Suppose a brother or sister (a fellow believer) has no clothes or food and you say to him or her, "Bless you. I wish you well. Keep warm and eat well," but you do nothing about their physical needs. You don't share some clothes or give them a meal or anything. What good is that? What's the use

of our nice words if our actions don't match what we say? Faith that doesn't produce action is dead.

Real faith expresses itself in works of love. And the specific work James has in mind here is generosity, sharing with people in need. Generosity is necessary. Being merciful requires giving.

In the rest of chapter two James speaks more generally about faith and deeds.

James argues with an imaginary opponent here. This opponent says, "You have faith; I have deeds." James replies, "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do." So you believe there is one God, or that God is one. Congratulations! You believe as much as the devil.

The confession or affirmation that the Lord our God is one was the primary confession of faith for the Jews. It comes from Deuteronomy 6:4. Observant Jews recited it twice a day. James says that just mouthing the words and saying we believe is worthless if our actions don't express our belief.

Nearly every Sunday, we recite the Apostles' Creed. We stand and say, "I believe..." But just knowing those things we affirm and just saying "I believe" is only empty faith without a life that flows from those beliefs and expresses them in mercy and good works. Simply believing the right things without doing works of charity and mercy is useless.

James uses an argument from Scripture. Abraham was considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. Abraham's faith and actions worked together and what he did completed his faith. Abraham believed God, God credited that to him as righteousness, and Abraham was God's friend (Genesis 15; 2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8). Abraham's belief in God came to full expression when he took his son, his only son, the child of promise, up the mountain to offer him as a sacrifice (Gen 22). By this time Abraham had learned to trust God. God honored that trust by interrupting the sacrifice of Isaac and providing a ram to be sacrificed in his place. James draws this conclusion from Abraham's example: people are justified by what they do and not by faith alone.

James then draws another example from Scripture. Rahab the prostitute was justified for what she did when she hid the Israelite spies in Jericho (Joshua 2). James now repeats his main point in conclusion: As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Right believing alone is dry and dead. Any “faith” we claim that doesn’t produce works is a corpse. Faith without works is no faith at all.

What James says here seems to contradict what Paul says in some of his letters (see Romans 3:20, 28; 4:16; Galatians 3). There’s real tension here and we need to feel it. But we also need to hear Paul and James on their own terms. That makes the answer to this problem a bit clearer.

I don’t want to oversimplify, but here’s a summary of what seems to be the best answer to this faith-works controversy in Paul and James. First, James and Paul were dealing with different problems in their churches. It’s possible that James was addressing people who said, “We believe, now don’t bother us anymore, especially about charity.” Or, possibly, that church was trying to court wealthy people by excusing them from doing works of mercy and charity.

Paul was dealing with people who were trying to make the Jewish ceremonial law—acts that set Jews apart from the surrounding culture—a requirement for becoming Christian. When Paul talks about not being justified by works, he has in mind *works of the law*. When Paul says we’re justified by faith, he’s talking about trust in God’s grace and in Christ’s work for us—not trusting in our own righteousness, but Christ’s.

So Paul and James use the same words (faith, works, justify) in different ways. Faith for Paul is lively faith, the act of believing, active trust, the relationship a person has with Jesus. James, here in chapter two, speaks of faith in terms of doctrines, right believing, orthodox opinion. James argues with people who *say* they have faith.

And when James talks about works, he refers to deeds of charity and mercy, not works of the law that Paul deals with. James won’t let us get by with simply saying we believe. He wants to see evidence of our faith in what we do—especially in how we treat others and share with the poor. Paul said essentially the same thing in Galatians 5:6, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

Being justified means being put right with God, experiencing now the final verdict of “not guilty.” We’re justified by grace alone through faith alone. But genuine faith isn’t alone. Real faith, whether trust or believing, will produce good works, deeds of mercy and charity. We show that we’re justified, we’re considered righteous, by expressing faith through love. Faith is the root and good works are the fruit. Faith and works belong together as spirit and body belong together.

I read a great story last week that demonstrates the impact of taking action and shows that Jesus’ way is different from the world’s way. Philip Yancey writes about the “Orange Revolution” that took place in Ukraine. Like other members of the Soviet Union, Ukraine moved toward democracy as the Soviet empire collapsed, though in Ukraine democracy advanced very slowly. When the Ukrainian reformer Victor Yushchenko dared to challenge the entrenched party, he nearly died from a suspicious case of dioxin poisoning. Against all advice, Yushchenko, his body weakened and his face permanently disfigured by the poison, remained in the race. On election day the exit polls showed him with a ten percent lead. But through outright fraud the government managed to reverse those results.

The state-run television station reported, “Ladies and gentlemen, we announce that the challenger Victor Yushchenko has been decisively defeated.” However, government authorities hadn’t taken into account one feature of Ukrainian television, the translation it provides for the hearing-impaired. On the picture-in-picture inset in the lower right-hand corner of the television screen a brave woman raised by deaf-mute parents gave a very different message in sign language. “I am addressing all the deaf citizens of Ukraine,” she signed. “Don’t believe what [the authorities] say. They are lying and I am ashamed to translate these lies. Yushchenko is our President!”

Deaf people, inspired by their translator Natalya Dmitruk, led the Orange Revolution! They text-messaged their friends about the fraudulent elections, and soon other journalists took courage from Dmitruk’s act of defiance and likewise refused to broadcast the party line. Over the next few weeks as many as a million people wearing orange flooded the capital city of Kiev to demand new elections. Under such massive pressure, the

government scheduled new elections, and this time Yushchenko emerged as the undisputed winner.

Yancey says that the image of a small screen of truth in the corner of the big screen is an ideal picture of the church. Followers of Jesus don't control the big screen. When we try to, we usually mess it up.

Throughout history nations have always glorified winners, not losers. The world says that political power, material wealth, and physical appearance are most important. Then, like the sign language translator in the lower right hand corner of the screen, along comes a person named Jesus who says in effect, *Don't believe the big screen—they're lying. It's the poor who are blessed, not the rich. Mourners are blessed too, as well as those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and the persecuted. Those who go through life thinking they're on top will end up on the bottom. And those who go through life feeling they're at the very bottom will end up on top. After all, what does it profit people to gain the whole world and lose their souls?*

(<https://philipyancey.com/big-screen-little-screen>)

Another key idea we find in James' words is our need to express what's in us. We mustn't simply hear the word without doing it. We can't have faith without expressing it through works. We have to respond. We have to *express*. If we don't, we *repress* our feelings and responses, and then we become *depressed*. Lloyd Ogilvie calls this "the stress of what we don't express" (*Making Stress Work for You*).

We need to look for opportunities to serve. The church needs to provide opportunities for all of us to be in ministry, for all of us to give ourselves. We can't just get fed constantly. We have to share and put the truth into practice.

Can you think of some ways you can do that? What's one thing you believe that you can put into practice this week?

If we believe that God is the Maker and Ruler of the earth, we could find some way of helping care for God's creation in the natural world.

If we believe that God loves the world and sent Jesus to save people, we can look for opportunities to share that good news with someone.

If we believe that the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective (James 5:16), we can devote ourselves to praying for each other.

If we believe that God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (4:6), we'll look for ways to lay aside our pride and humble ourselves before God.

If we believe that God has a special concern for the poor (2:5), we can make the effort to share with a poor person, to work with the poor, to help change systems that make life harder for poor people.

Remember the good news that James announces: God gives us good gifts of wisdom, new birth, the word, grace. If we have faith, we have something to give, something to share. Will we hear the call? Will we believe? Will we act?

You may need to accept the word of God, the gospel message, and receive new birth.

You may need to confess that you've said you believe without acting on your faith.

You may want to pray for others in need.

You may want to recommit yourself to the service and ministry you're already involved in.