

SERMON TITLE: Putting Faith Into Action

SCRIPTURE: James 1:1-4, 2:14-17

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SERIES SUMMARY

In Scripture, we find the life of faith is often a difficult journey. But true faith in Jesus will show itself in tough times and display the reality of Jesus to a watching world. In the same way, we're called to give voice to our words and action to what we believe. This is how our faith can make a transformative difference in our lives and the lives of others. On this side of eternity, a faith not applied is worthless and will make no difference. The book of James regularly asks us to put our faith into action so others can witness the reality of Jesus in our lives. As we turn towards Christ, our faith journey will be purposeful, fruitful, and sustain us through any difficulty we face.

SERMON SUMMARY

In this flyover of the book of James, we learn two basic, but important things. First, the life of faith is a life of difficulty (1:1-4). Second, only a faith that expresses itself in "good works"—in tangible, visible expressions of love for God and others—will "save" you through the difficulties you experience in this broken world and show the world the reality of Jesus in and through the church (2:14-17).

SERMON SCREENSHOTS & KEY POINTS

If you grew up in church, depending on your background, you may have adopted the idea that as long as I "prayed the prayer," or as long as I was baptized as an infant, or as long as I believed the right things, or as long as I married the right person (a Christian), then somehow, mysteriously, magically life would turn out good for me. But then, at some point, you encountered some life-altering, disappointment or difficulty, and everything just kind of fell apart. This is something like what happened to the Jewish Christians that James pastored in the new, first church in Jerusalem. They had believed the Gospel, and that Gospel shaped a loving, caring, sharing community in the church(es) there. But as we read on in Acts, we find that after a prominent church leader, Stephen, was stoned to death, a severe persecution broke out against the young church, and those Jewish Christians were scattered across the Roman empire. They encountered all kinds of trials and troubles as they lost their homes, businesses, livestock, and even family members. It's true—difficult times can cause even the best of us to live selfishly—to live self-focused and self-preserving lives. This is the context in which James is writing his letter. (By the way, most probably the very first NT book that was written, and most scholars believe James to be the half-brother of Jesus). James' hurting, suffering friends needed to be called back to the living, active faith and community life they enjoyed prior to the persecution. And so, in his letter, James addresses all kinds of problems that arose out of the stress of all their trials. Things like quarrels and conflicts (4:1); showing favoritism toward those who could possibly make life easier (2:1-9); sharp, critical tongues (3:1-12); living like people who don't know God (4:4-10); being stingy with money rather than being generous (5:1-6); and making plans without involving God in those plans (4:13).

So, James begins his short letter by acknowledging how life in this fallen broken world is hard (1:1-4). But he moves quickly to his "big idea," which is that only a faith that is put into action can save you in the trials you face—only a faith that expresses itself in visible, tangible, "love God/love others" actions can "save" you through the trials and show others the reality of your faith (cf 2:14-17). The trouble with the book of James is that, for many years, many people have read "saving faith" in James to mean the kind of faith that takes you to heaven when you die. Even Martin Luther struggled to make the way James talks about "being saved by works" fit with Paul's explanations of salvation as "faith alone, apart from works." What about that? Well, we need some new "lenses" through which to read James that make James and Paul fit together with no contradiction. READ 2:14-17. James is not answering the question: How can we go to heaven when we die? James is answering the question: "How can we be "saved" through trials?" The word "saved" is like the word "dozen"—a "dozen" what? Eggs? Pencils? Firecrackers. "Saved" is like that. It doesn't always refer to

“eternal” salvation. It can also refer to “experiential” salvation. [see the chart: The Three Tenses of Salvation]. The point is, being “saved” means more than simply going to heaven when you die. We enter into life with God, by grace, through faith alone, not of works,” as Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9. But faithfulness, (living out your faith in the midst of trials and temptations), is the way you *experience* life with God. Water will not quench your thirst unless you drink it; bread will not satisfy your hunger unless you eat it; medicine will do you no good unless you take it as prescribed. James is saying the same thing about faith. Faith will not “save” you from the power and consequences of sin now; faith will not keep you “safe” in trials unless, it expresses itself in visible, tangible actions.

So, the *first lens* through which to read James is not the lens of eternal salvation, but the lens of experiential salvation. The *second lens* is this: James is not talking so much about belief, but behavior—not so much about the content of your faith, but the character of your faith.

READ 2:15-17 again. James is asking—Does your faith “work?” Does it make a difference in your life and the life of others? Does your faith translate into actions that help other people in their trials? Or think of it this way— Does the fact that a person may have faith that they’re going to heaven when they die, but the question is, can that faith “save” a marriage? Can that faith deliver you from bitterness or resentment or unforgiveness? Does the fact that you believe the right things about the Cross, will that faith save you from the present consequences of lying or cheating or adultery? Will simply believing the Gospel cause you to hang tough in the midst of trials? If you lose your health or your house or a loved one, will that faith “save” you through those kinds of things? —NO—Simply saying, “I believe the Gospel so I know I’m going to heaven when I die—that may be true—but that faith alone will not deliver you through the trials and temptations of this life. That is what James is saying in this letter.

The *third lens* we need is understanding that James is calling for a public faith, not just a private religion. Only a faith that expresses itself publicly can “save” you through trials and be of benefit to others in their trials. Gospel faith must be applied in the midst of troubles and trials in order for it to make a difference in your life and in the lives of others. That’s what James’ letter is all about.

COMMUNITY GROUP QUESTIONS

Read James 1:1-4 —

- Ask for someone in the group to share the background and context of the book of James. Who were the people to whom James was writing? What was their story? How does their story help us understand the reason for which James was writing?
- How have you experienced the “drifting” that sometimes occurs when you encounter various trials? Have you found yourself having more arguments and conflicts with others? How about controlling your tongue? Have you found yourself making plans and not really involving God in those plans?

READ 2:14-17 —

- How have you previously thought about “saving faith” in the book of James? If you have struggled to make sense of James’ “salvation by works” emphasis and Paul’s salvation “by faith alone, apart from works” emphasis, talk about that struggle.
- Why is the faith that will “take you to heaven when you die” not enough to keep you faithful and steadfast during trials?
- Discuss the three lenses through which we must read James—(1), not eternal salvation, but experiential salvation; (2) not simply believing the Gospel, but behaving the Gospel; (3) not simply a private religion kind of faith, but a public faith.

^[1] The following resources have been a great help to us in preparing messages for this sermon series: *The Letter of James (NICNT)*, by Scot McKnight; *James (ZECNT)*, by Craig Blomberg; *Mariam J. Kovalishyn*; *The Epistle of James*, by Peter Lange & J.J. Van Oosterzee; *The Letter of James*, by Douglas Moo. Also, I (Charlie) have benefited from the teachings of Tim Keller, Tim Mackie and the Bible Project, and others whom I will credit during my messages. I have adapted and borrowed insights and illustrations from these men and incorporated them into the messages in this series.