

## James IRL: Faith For Real, James 2:14-26, 10/22/23

A state governor during the pandemic who shuts down restaurants and requires masking in public, is spotted maskless in a crowded restaurant eating and drinking with other politicians. A school superintendent touting the greatness of their public-school education, meanwhile her own child is enrolled in an exclusive private school. A well-known fitness guru and advocate of all natural supplements goes viral after it is discovered he uses steroids. All true scenarios that share the same problem- an enormous gap between what they say and what they do. Of course we have a word for this problem- **hypocrisy**. And while it's easy to point out hypocrisy in these and other public figures, to our shame, this is a word that is often used to describe Christians. According to the **Barna Research Group, 85% of non-Christians label Christians as hypocrites.**<sup>1</sup> Now maybe you say, that's an unfair label. Is it? Pew Research independently found that while **63% of Americans call themselves Christian, only 6% possess a biblical worldview and demonstrate a consistent application of biblical values.**<sup>2</sup>

Why do you hear stories or have personal experience knowing people who grew up in the church falling away or deconstructing their faith? I would argue Christian hypocrisy is a leading cause. Christians who talk big and walk small. Whose lives don't reflect the very gospel and faith that they claim. The stakes are high in our homes, in our church and in our community.

And this problem is what James is going to address head on in our passage. If you have been tracking with us we already know that James doesn't pull any punches. He has already confronted the hypocrisy of our words- **1:26 Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.** Last week in James 2:1-13 we saw that he confronted the hypocrisy evidenced in favoritism- how can Christians who say the gospel makes us all equals treat people with favoritism? All of this hypocrisy begs the question...and it's the question that James asks **14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?** Great question, maybe an uncomfortable question. But the purpose of this question, and this sermon is NOT so that we can all get sticky notes that say saved and unsaved and start walking around slapping them on people's foreheads. This question is for us to ask ourselves. "But I thought we aren't supposed to question our faith?" You sure? **2 Corinthians 13:5 Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine.** How can I distinguish between real faith and counterfeit faith? James is going to show us three signs of counterfeit faith.

### **Sign #1 of Counterfeit Faith: Words without Action**

Now it is important to note the question that James is asking. **14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?** James isn't saying that there are two kinds of faith, a faith with action and a faith without action. No, what he says is that there is a counterfeit claim of faith (that isn't faith at all) and there is real

<sup>1</sup> Findings in *UnChristian* and other Barna Research.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/> and [https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CRC\\_AWVI2021\\_Release06\\_Digital\\_01\\_20210831.pdf](https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CRC_AWVI2021_Release06_Digital_01_20210831.pdf)

faith. James uses a relatable scenario to make his argument. <sup>15</sup> *Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> 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?*

<sup>17</sup> *In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.* Let's bring this scenario into our own church. It's not hard to imagine because we have an economically diverse church family here. Let's say one of us here goes through a really hard time, maybe medical bills piled up and they are about to lose their house. And you find out about it, and you say, "Well that's a shame, but cheer up, at least you have your health! Good luck with that, I'll pray for you. And walk away from this need right in front of you. Words can't warm someone. Sentiments don't help someone starving. James says, there is a cognitive dissonance between your claim of faith and your actions of faith. Real faith does, it's moved to action- hearing that scenario triggers your faith to act.

Now what James is not saying is that every person who claims to have a need is our personal responsibility to fund them (cloth, feed, shelter). We need to use discernment of whether the need is legitimate or not because there is a kind of helping that hurts, that enables. Paul had to had to give some guidelines for the church for this very reason- 2 Thessalonians 3:10 said *For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."* But James is using a simple illustration to make simple point- Faith works, faith bears fruit- one of those fruits is serving people in need. This should characterize our lives. And, like Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, we should help not only people in our family and church (although we certainly have a first priority to them), but even the stranger, the immigrant, the outsider who has need. Our posture should not be finding every excuse of why we shouldn't help. Rather our posture should be- "Why wouldn't I help?" Real faith acts. Real love does.

You can't just say it and not do it. James' logic checks out in every area of life doesn't it? You can't just say "I'm a fitness fanatic." And yet never workout and your Peloton just collects dust or is being used to hang clothes. You can't just say "I love my wife. But then treat her poorly and never take her out on a date." If you claim to have faith and yet you have no interest in the Bible, no zeal for seeing your unsaved friends or neighbors come to know Christ, no desire to live a holy life, no concern for justice, no grace and compassion for people- you better check your exam results because the diagnosis may be a counterfeit claim of faith. Can't call yourself a Jesus-follower if you don't actually follow Jesus anywhere. Real faith acts. Real love does.

That's why in Hebrews 11, the Hall of Faith, the faith of all these heroes is described with *action*: *Abel brought an offering. Noah built an ark. Sarah trusted God. Abraham left his home and offered up Isaac. Rahab welcomed the spies.* Abraham and Rahab, the very two examples James uses of real faith. In fact, James comes to the conclusion by looking at Abraham's faith *James 2:24 You see that a person is justified by what they do and not by faith alone.* Now hearing that statement should cause you to throw a flag...whoa, whoa, whoa. Time out. That statement sounds like the exact opposite of something that the Apostle Paul says somewhere right? The verse you might be thinking about is *Romans 3:28 For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.*

And any skeptic might say, “See, the Bible is full of contradictions.” Wow, this appears to be problem. Good luck. Let’s close in prayer. I hope to demonstrate why it is not what it appears. There is a danger in just ripping verses out of their context. Song of Solomon 7:4 *Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon looking toward Damascus...* out of context this sounds like an insult but it’s actually the opposite, it’s part of a love poem of a groom to his bride. So the context of Paul’s letter to the Romans and James’ letter to the Jewish Christians sheds light on this apparent contradiction. Keep in mind that Paul and James were not enemies, they were partners for the sake of the gospel. Sam Allberry- “We have to allow for the possibility that James might be offering a corrective, not to Paul himself, but to followers, who been taking the faith alone teaching in an unwise direction.”<sup>3</sup> To keep this as clear as I can let me lay out...

Four Differences:<sup>4</sup>

Paul: Works = laws you try to keep in order to earn God’s favor

James: Works = deeds done out of gratitude for having received God’s favor

Paul: Fighting legalism: “I have to keep all these rules to be saved.”

James: Fighting laxity: “It doesn’t matter what you do as long as you believe.”

Paul: Justified = righteousness declared

James: Justified = righteousness demonstrated

Paul: How do you *know* Christ? (faith)

James: How do you *show* Christ? (works)

In fact this is the same Paul that says Galatians 5:6 *The only thing that counts is faith working through love.* The bottom line is that Paul and James aren’t contradicting each other, they come to the same conclusion from two very different angles. They both agree: works don’t save, but real faith works.

Diagnostic Question: Is my faith in Jesus leading me to follow him with actions?

### Sign #2 of Counterfeit Faith: Doctrine without Demonstration

<sup>18</sup> *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.* <sup>19</sup> *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.*

James addresses a counter argument that goes like this “Well, there are different types of Christians out there. We don’t all have the same strong point. We have our own way of being a Christian. Some are the thinking types forever reading up on their doctrine and getting everything pinned down. Then there are us practical types that we’re going to do rather than

<sup>3</sup> *James for You*, Sam Allberry, p.84

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Pastor Andrusko, Summit Church, on his message from James 2:14-26

reflect. You've got your faith I've got my deeds. You say, potato, I say, potahto." James say, XXX-that dog don't hunt. He said there aren't "it's all in my head Christians", and "my faith is what I do Christians". There's genuine faith, and there is counterfeit faith. No wiggling out of that. After all James says, look at the demons. Now, whenever you are being compared to demons, that's never good, agree? James says that the demons believe that "God is one." This is a reference to the great Shema from Deuteronomy 6, the greatest doctrine for a Jewish people. And it was emblematic of having the right doctrine and beliefs. The great puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards gave a sermon on James 2:19- "True grace distinguished from the experience of devils" ...Great titles back then. "Devils have been to the greatest divinity school in the universe, Heaven itself. And yet all it qualifies them to be is devils."<sup>5</sup> Demons know the truth, probably better than us, but that doesn't save them, all that knowledge just condemns them even more. See, we can have good beliefs, good knowledge...and pursue knowledge of God, it's important and good. But if all it is, is doctrine and it lives in your head and never makes it the 18 inches to your heart to impact your life? It doesn't qualify us to be anything more than demons.

To illustrate that knowing a lot about God isn't what saves us, James uses the example Rahab from Joshua 2. <sup>25</sup>*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?* Rahab was about as far from seminary educated as you could get. In fact, she was a gentile from Jericho, she grew up in a pagan culture and she was a prostitute. We don't know how much she knew about the true God, but it couldn't have been much, certainly far less than demons. But what she did know and trust is that he was the true God and he saves, and that's all she needed. And what she may have lacked in refined doctrine she made up for in a demonstration of faith. By helping the Jewish spies, she risked her life, she stood up against her culture, and she obeyed the will of God.

**Point #2 Slide** You may know a lot or you may know a little. You may have the status of Abraham the great beacon of faith, or the status of Rahab the prostitute...But the beauty of the gospel is that it is for everyone. If you know John 3:16, that's enough to knowledge to transform your life and transfer you to eternity with God forever! Study, grow in your knowledge because the more we know about God the greater our faith can grow...but doctrine doesn't save us. It's how that knowledge becomes trust in action. **Diagnostic Question: Am I acting in faith upon the knowledge of God that I have? If so, how?**

### **Sign #3 of Counterfeit Faith: Fear without Friendship with God.**

<sup>19</sup> *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.* See the demons believe and respect the power and greatness of God. You may know the story of Jesus confronting the legion of demons in Mark 5- they believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the son of God...and they were shuddering, they were terrified of him, it made them want to get as far away from Jesus as possible. All of their knowledge was only shuddering. If our knowledge of God, if the greatness of his power only produces fear, all it will do is drive us further away from the heart of God. Fear will drive us to running away in rebellion. Or we might try to keep clean,

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Tim Keller for this reference in his sermon on James 2:14-26

stay out of trouble hoping that God doesn't bother us. All this is just shuddering. Real faith results in Friendship with God. Look at the example of Abraham who trusted God to provide the sacrifice when he went up the hill with his only son Isaac. Abraham had a healthy fear, a reverence for God to obey him but look what James says- <sup>23</sup> *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.*

Fear didn't motivate his obedience, friendship did. Real faith wants to please God out of love, because we find him lovely, worthy. If you are in a healthy relationship, you understand this. A healthy, real friendship- you want to do things for each other because you love the other person. You celebrate their birthday, you reach out to them when you haven't seen them in a little while, you have their back when things are tough. A real friendship isn't motivated by fear. "Well I better give them a birthday present or they might stop talking to me." No, friendship with God will draw you to want to spend time with him and his Word, a desire to pray (not out of fear, out of love). A desire to follow where he is leading you.

**Point #3 Slide** I see fear vs. friendship in my story of coming to faith in Jesus. Before the age of 18, I could have rattled off all 66 books of the Bible, could have explained the doctrine of justification...I knew all the lyrics to DC Talk Jesus Freak...and yet it was all shuddering...I didn't know God, I was running my own life and avoiding the gaze of God in my life out of fear and shame. But through reading Romans 5 I came to the heart-deep realization that all my sin was joyfully paid for by Jesus, out of his amazing love for me, even though I didn't deserve it. And what began to happen in me was shuddering was replaced by an overwhelming sense of his love and acceptance of me...like a big hug around me. And not only a sense of his love, but he became lovely to me. What resulted wasn't a complete transformation of my actions right away, but it started me on a trajectory of obedience, not out of fear, but out of friendship with God. Break up, wanting to read the Bible, wanting hear sermons, desiring to control my foul language...

**Diagnostic Question: Does my faith demonstrate fear of God or friendship with God?**

**#1 Words without Action**

**#2 Doctrine without Demonstration**

**#3 Fear without Friendship with God**

As you examine your own life, what would the evidence suggest? A counterfeit claim or real faith? Now some of us have a very tender conscience is an any time a challenge like this comes along we instantly think of our faults. They are never too far from our minds and we might be questioning am I even a Christian at all. It is a blessing to have a tender conscience, but the danger is that we will consider our deficiencies that we failed to notice the ways in which we actually do express our faith and actions. We only see the flaws and we easily miss what might be genuine fruit.

Others of us have the opposite reaction. We immediately assume we're fine. We run a cursory self diagnostic think of a handful of Christian deeds we did and check the box. In both case our self-assessment is superficial. Take the time and pray and consider this question. The root of faith will bear the fruit of faith. Not always in the same quantity and consistency, but it will be there.