

FAITH THAT WORKS.

4 - FAITH.

James 2:14-26.

(A note on the NIV translation of the passage. In the Greek NT there is a word that occurs twelve times in these verses - *erga*. It means works. If you read the passage in the NIV, that word is translated in a few different ways - (deeds, action, "what I do", etc). They all get the sense but the repetition of what is a key word in the passage is less obvious. The ESV maintains the repetition by translating the word the same way each time.)

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 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? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

(ESV)

In the beginning of his book, *Blink: the power of thinking without thinking*, which is about instinctive decision making, Malcolm Gladwell tells the story of a sculpture that was sold to the J. Paul Getty museum in California in 1983. A dealer, Gianfranco Becchina, approached the museum with what he claimed was a 6th century BC marble statue. A good sculpture of this precise type is rare, so this was quite an exceptional find. Sale price was just under \$10 million.

The museum staff were cautious. They took the statue on loan and began to investigate it thoroughly. The style seemed to match it up with the dealer's claim. A geologist examined it for two days and identified the type of marble and the place where the marble had come from. His discoveries told him that the statue was old: it was certainly not a contemporary fake.

So after fourteen months, the museum bought the statue. In the autumn of 1986 it went on display. It was front page news in the New York Times.

But something was not quite right. Several people - an art historian, a world expert on Greek sculpture, a museum director, all had hesitations. It just did not seem right.

And bit by bit the story that the dealer had told the museum started to fall apart. Eventually it turned out that the museum had not paid \$10 million for a statue that was over 2000 years old; it had come from a forger's workshop in Italy in the early 1980s.

Fakes, phonies and forgeries represent a healthy industry! How do you know that the brand new irons you are planning to use on the golf course this week are the real thing? Some fakes are hard to tell. (The image on the screen shows you how close forgers can get). On the other hand, some fakes

are obvious. If you bought a Rolex watch on holiday last year for the equivalent of £55, or a Gucci bag for a fiver, chances are good you have bought a fake. You probably realised that when you bought it; the person who sold it to you probably realised as well. Unless you actually believe that you are wearing the real article, you have not suffered much harm.

But what about your blood pressure tablets? There is a major trade in counterfeit medicine and drugs. For one thing it is costing the genuine companies huge amounts of money in losses, but it's not terribly good for the health of the people who swallow the tablets. If you are relying on them to do what it says on the box, you could be in trouble.

I remember a book in the 1980s. It was based on the letter of James and the lady who wrote it had come up with a great title. It was one of those titles that, as a preacher, you wish you had thought of first. *"Will the real phony please stand up."* (Any fans of Audrey Hepburn might remember the description of one of her characters as a phony, but a real phony).

This is what James is about. He is aware that when it comes to religious faith and religious profession, you don't always get what it says on the box; you don't always get the real thing. So his concern for his readers is that they will have a faith that works. Our passage today gets to the heart of this. There is such a thing as fake faith; it is not the real article. James calls it dead and useless. Fake faith makes no difference to a person's life. There is no evidence. Faith without works, says James, is dead.

Before we get into the actual passage, I want to say a word or two about a problem that James' teaching throws up.

The Protestant tradition (theological, not NI political) has always stood on the teaching that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. In his free grace God has given us a Saviour to rescue us from the condemnation that our sins deserve. We do not need to follow a list of regulations in order to benefit from this salvation. We are asked to turn from our sin to trust Christ who has died and risen for us. We trust him and what he has done for us. That is how we are saved. We don't add something to it, as though what Jesus has done was not enough. In fact, trying to add to what he has done is actually to take away from what he has done. We are saved through faith. We are justified (counted righteous) by faith.

That is a big emphasis in the writing of Paul. For example, in Romans 4:

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...

Paul actually uses the example of Abraham and his trust in God to underline the fact that salvation is by faith.

But then you have James (who probably wrote his letter before Paul wrote his). James also talks about Abraham, but he wants to underline what Abraham did: his works.

It was John Calvin who said that we are justified by faith alone but the faith that justifies is never alone. Faith alone saves but the faith will be accompanied by works.

It is probably helpful to see James and Paul addressing two different problems and talking about justification in slightly different ways. In terms of what they say about works, Paul looks at the person who wants to come to God on the basis of their religious good deeds; they need to realise that it is enough to rely on Jesus Christ. James, on the other hand is thinking of the person who has a basic profession of belief, but without the evidence of a changed life. That is phony faith. Faith without works is dead.

That is a long introduction (really two introductions), so let's look at the verses. I just want to give you two points that sum up James' teaching.

1. Faith without works is dead faith.

2. Faith accompanied by works is living faith.

Faith without works is dead faith.

This is the summary of the whole section, but James writes particularly about it in verses 14 to 17.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 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? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

It is useless to claim you have faith when you don't have works. There are people who talk about their faith, their belief in God, but it does not make any difference to what they do or how they live their lives. They are no more loving than anyone else; they are no more compassionate than anyone else; they talk in the same way as everyone else; they live for the same things as everyone else. Talking has taken the place of acting.

A lot of us are good at that. It is a temptation for people like me. My job is to talk about God and to talk about faith. One of the most dangerous things about being where I am is that it is easy to think if you have preached about something, you can tick the box. At times some of you are tempted to put some of us on a pedestal. If you do that out of respect for the office to which God has called us, then I appreciate your motivation. But we are as human as you. I cannot speak for all of my colleagues, but I can tell you I certainly find it easier to preach about things than do them.

What good is it, asks James, to have faith like that? What good is it? Can faith like that save you?

So that we get a vivid picture of how useless it is when talking takes the place of acting, James imagines an encounter with a poor brother or sister who does not have adequate clothing and does not have enough to eat. You tell that person to go in peace, to be warmed and well fed. It even sounds rather spiritual. But if you don't actually do anything to change their circumstances, "what good is it?" (James repeats that expression from verse 14).

Your words will not make a button of difference to that brother or sister. The fact that you have told them to go in peace will not feed them. Telling them you hope they have a good dinner will not put a warm coat on their back.

What good is it? You might feel good about yourself because you expressed some kind wishes; it confirms to you that you really are quite a kind person. But words that take the place of works are useless. That's the issue - words taking the place of works. If your faith is like that, it will not do you any good.

We claim to believe in one God who tells us to love our neighbours: do we love your neighbour? We claim to believe in a God who watches out for the needy and tells us to do the same: do we?

Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Faith accompanied by works is living faith.

The opposite of dead is alive and James gives us some examples of what living, saving faith looks like.

But first, in verse 18, he anticipates the argument of an opponent.

But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

This imaginary dialogue is actually more complicated to figure out than first appears. We don't have time to get into the details of it, but James wants people to know that faith and works are not two options from which you choose one. "One person has faith, another person has works." For James,

the two belong together. Otherwise you can end up with nothing more than an affirmation of a basic statement of doctrine. "I believe that God is one."

This seems to be a reference back to the OT *Shema*:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one

Any good Jew would have affirmed that belief. The problem is that if that is as far as it goes, that kind of believer is no closer to salvation than the demons. They believe the same thing, and it causes them to tremble. At least their belief causes a reaction.

James wants to keep faith and works together.

To make his point that faith without works is useless, he points back to two OT stories: the story of Abraham and the story of Rahab.

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

This is particularly interesting because Paul uses the same OT quotation in his argument that Abraham was declared righteous apart from works. It comes from Genesis 15:6, where God promises Abraham that he will have many descendants. Abraham believes God, he takes him at his word, and his faith is credited to him as righteousness.

Notice three things in what James says:

- Faith was working with his works: his faith was not alone; nor were his works isolated from his faith.

Faith and works should travel side by side, step answering to step, like the legs of men walking. First faith, and then works; and then faith again, and then works again--until you can scarcely distinguish which is one and which is the other. (William Booth)

- Faith was completed by his works. When he offers Isaac, or at least is about to, he is demonstrating that his faith has come to maturity. That means that faith which does not result in works is incomplete: there is something missing.
- The Scripture was fulfilled. The man has been declared righteous; his faith has brought him to that place, and now he is demonstrated to be a righteous man.

The two work together. The second completes the first. The works give evidence that faith is alive.

Then there is Rahab.

And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

Clearly this woman believed something. She believed in the God who was represented by the spies. She believed that he was going to conquer her city. The sign that her faith was living was that she acted on what she believed.

If she had never acted, by helping the spies, there was no evidence that her faith was real faith at all. It would have been a vague, lifeless, useless affirmation of something she believed to be true.

For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from **works** is dead.

Faith that is accompanied by works is living faith. The works are the evidence that the faith is genuine. It becomes clear that God accepts and vindicates such a person.

Is that the kind of faith you have?

Let me go back for a moment to part of verse 18:

I will show you my faith by my works.

James will demonstrate that he has faith by what he does. You won't know that James has faith just because he talks about it; you will know because of the impact it has on his life.

I think this is such a powerful verse. We can be such great talkers. We like to argue and prove ourselves right. There are some of us who can sniff out the most minute deviations of doctrine. There are people who seem to spend so much time and energy trying to point out what is wrong with everyone else.

I believe in doctrinal clarity and accuracy, and I hope I would never want to set that aside. I also believe in talking - the gospel is an announcement and we need words to announce it; but I can't help thinking that that little snippet of a verse would make a superb motto. **I will demonstrate that I am a believer by the things I do.**

What if people knew we were believers because of the way we live before they hear the things we have to say? What if they noticed our **kindness**? What if they could not help see our **patience** and genuine **goodness**? What if they saw how we treat people with the **dignity** of being made in God's image? What if they noticed how genuinely **caring** and **helpful** we were? Then what if they wanted to find out what our beliefs were because they could see what kind of people we were?

We will demonstrate our faith in God by our obedience to God.

Faith, accompanied by works, is living faith.

Conclusion: is your faith genuine?

As we start to draw this together, you realise that this is serious business. We all need to know if we have dead faith or living faith. The emphasis of this passage is that we will know if our faith is accompanied by works.

If you buy a set of fake Callaway golf clubs, you will feel cheated and frustrated, but your health and your life are not at risk. Order some fake blood pressure tablets without realising what is going on, and you may be putting your health at risk. Settle for phony faith and you have something that cannot save you. It is useless.

Let me read from a book called *The Great Work of the Gospel*, by John Ensor.

Ask a hundred people if they want forgiveness, and a hundred people will say, "Yeah, sure. And can I have fries with that, and a large Pepsi?" They have no great sense of needing God's forgiveness but believe it would not hurt to have it in their pocket just in case. Religion is, I fear, most often practiced to buy off God's anger, to pay for a sin done, so that one is free to go on in it. We throw ourselves into church or confession as a burglar might throw a steak to a watchdog—to keep him at a safe distance.

...

Our natural belief about ourselves is that we are pretty darned good people, though we are not too proud to admit that we have made a few mistakes along the way. This allows us to confess a little guilt, but in a self-flattering way. We say, "Well, I admit I'm not perfect." We do not mean to be humble here, as in "Now, honey, remember I'm not a perfect husband." We say it defensively: "Okay! I'm not perfect." Translation: "Other than a blemish or two, I sparkle. So get off my case!"

We also like to say, "I'm only human." By this we mean, "My sin should be excused because, as a human being, I really can't help it."

Even when we feel guilty, we do not believe it is because we are guilty.

He is talking about people who think they are not too bad; and they would prefer to keep God at a distance. A measure of religion in their life seems like a good way to keep him from getting too close.

Is this part of why some of us are struggling with this message this morning, if we are honest? Some of us look back to a time years ago when we prayed a sinner's prayer, or we even got baptised, but not much has really changed. We have a measure of religion: just enough to keep God from getting too close.

I mentioned last week that some of us have a problem in that we want the benefits of mercy but we don't want our lives to be shaped by mercy. We really need mercy: and we can find it in Jesus and what he has done for us on the cross. Faith is leaning all we are upon everything he is for us. In that sense it is surrender. Then it can come alive and change us.