

## **Dead Faith**

What we truly believe defines who we are. True belief directs how we live. True belief is also observed in how we die. James writes, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, <sup>16</sup> 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? <sup>17</sup> So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” James is straight and clear in what he says. James is not talking about one’s salvation, but that if one truly believes, their belief effects how they think and see the world and their purpose in it. This then effects how they live. If we are not caring for others, as Christ lived and taught, and as he calls for our faith to be lived out, then why should unbelievers listen to us concerning our faith? **Is not what we do the outward evidence of what we believe and who we are?**

Our faith helps others and ourselves only in limited ways until it causes us to act. Once a chaplain walked up to a wounded soldier on the battlefield that had been lying on the ground for a long time without anyone treating his wounds. The soldier was in a bad way. The chaplain asked, “Would you like for me to read to you from the Bible?” “No!” came the angry reply. “Is there anything else I can do for you?” the chaplain asked. “I’m thirsty!” the soldier said. The chaplain gave him a drink from his canteen. “Anything else?” he asked. “I’m cold!” came the reply. The chaplain took off his coat and spread it over the soldier. “Anything else?” he again asked. “My head hurts!” was his reply. The chaplain took off his cap and arranged it under the soldier's head. The chaplain asked again, “Anything else?” The soldier looked up at him and tears came to his eyes as he said, “I think now I'd like for you

to read to me from the Bible.” You see, meeting practical needs opens the door to address people’s spiritual needs.

Serving others was a main theme of Jesus’ teachings. In the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew chapter 5, we see that as a large number of people gathered around Jesus, he used the opportunity to teach them what it means to live by faith. He began by explained what it meant to live a blessed life in the first 11 verses. Then beginning in verse 13 Jesus speaks of what it means to live as a blessing to others by action, <sup>13</sup> “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.”

<sup>14</sup> “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, **let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.**”

(Matthew 5:13-16) Just as the soldier was ready to receive the good news of the Bible once the chaplain cared for his needs, so too, we are to **let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven.**” Those Jesus calls to salvation he calls to live a life of service. Early in his ministry Jesus encountered superficial believers whose lives lived did not match their proclaimed faith. John records one such event, “Now when he Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. <sup>24</sup> But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people <sup>25</sup> and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.” (John 2:23-25) Jesus did not entrust himself to these people because in truth they did not belong to him. Their belief was based on Jesus’ performance of signs. They saw him as a prophet, but not as the Messiah. They were just like Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night saying, “...Rabbi, we

know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus was not just a teacher sent by God or the miracle worker doing great signs and wonders, but Jesus was God in the flesh, the Messiah. “Jesus answered ~~him~~ Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:2-3) Clearly unless one is spiritually born again they will not “see the kingdom of God.” No matter if one is sincere or acknowledges Jesus was a prophet or that he did great miracles - these acknowledgements do not constitute spiritual rebirth and saving faith.

James is addressing this attitude by those in the church who either felt that since they became Christian it was now God’s job to care for them or the only thing needed for salvation was to claim Christ. James continues, <sup>18</sup>“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. <sup>19</sup>You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! <sup>20</sup>Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?” Faith and works are the opposite sides of the same coin.

Some of you may be thinking what James has written is in conflict or contradicts what Paul wrote in Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) We are all saved by the grace of God and his bringing us to saving faith. We have no control or credit in our salvation otherwise we would boast about what we did. Further the one thing every false cult has in common is that salvation is works based. Again, if this were true we then would be in control our salvation and are able to boast. Paul is addressing good works people want to use to control and gain salvation, he is not speaking about the good works that come as the natural outpouring of ones faith. It reminds me of the story of the Scotsman and his rowboat.

An old Scotsman operated a rowboat for transporting passengers from one side of the river to the other. One day a passenger noticed that the old man had carved on one oar the word “faith” and on the other oar the word “works.” Curiosity led him to ask the meaning of this. The old man, being a Christian and glad of the opportunity for testimony, said, “I will show you.” So, he dropped the oar named “faith” and pulled the other called “works.” They went around in circles. Then he dropped the oar named “works” and began to pull the oar called “faith”, and the boat went around in circles again - this time the opposite direction. After this demonstration the old man picked up both “Faith” and “Works” and pulling both oars together, the boat sped swiftly over the water, explaining to his inquiring passenger, “You see this is the way it is in the Christian life. Works without faith are useless. Faith without works is dead. But faith and works pulling together make for spiritual safety, progress, and blessing.”

## Living Faith

James continues by using the examples of Abraham and Rahab to bring his point that true faith pours out in ones life in good works. All Jews considered themselves the children of Abraham by birth and James is writing to the churches that are populated primarily with converted Jews. Reading from James chapter 2, beginning in verse 21, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” James uses the story of Abraham and Isaac found in Genesis chapter 22, a story well known to every Jew. The writer of Hebrews, 20 years later, supports James’ view of Abraham’s faith being justified by his works. What we truly believe defines who we are and is evidenced by how we live. Hebrews, chapter 11, “By

faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,<sup>18</sup> of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' " (Hebrews 11:17-18) The young man in Matthew 19 who told Jesus he had kept the commandments and then asked what one thing he needed to do to be saved ended by rejecting Jesus when he would not sell his possessions in order to follow Jesus. But Abraham was by faith willing to sacrifice Isaac fully trusting God. God had told Abraham that through his son Isaac would come the people of God. Abraham knew that God the Creator of everything could bring Isaac back to life and he was to be obedient. His behavior, his actions and his works demonstrated what he truly believed and it was demonstrated by his faith in action. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army said, "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 they can scarcely distinguish which is the one and which is the other." This is the faith Abraham lived and this is the life lived in faith that I strive for.

The current trend of trying to show ones lineage to the patriarch Abraham, to live by Jewish customs, traditions and laws counts for nothing, for as John the Baptist was baptizing people to repentance in the Jordan River he saw the Pharisees and Sadducees approaching and called out to them, "And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham." (Matthew 3:9) God used Abraham to birth the Hebrew people that would worship the one true God. God used Abraham, who at times was unfaithful, deceitful and sinful thus demonstrating God can use the worst of sinners. Before Christ men struggled with craven images and ignorance because of the men in power who were wicked and demanded obedience to them. After Christ everything changed. Paul speaking to the Greeks in Athens said, "Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold

or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. <sup>30</sup> The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed (*referring to Jesus Christ*); and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:29-31)

The only thing that matters is ones repentance and submitting to Christ by faith, not ones lineage. The messianic Jewish Christian movement is much like Catholicism for they both replace faith with works, which is what James is warning against.

James concludes with another story very familiar to all Jews. Reading verse 25 of James chapter 2, “**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?**” A little background will help. In chapter 2 of Joshua, he sent out 2 spies to Jericho to evaluate how they could best attack the city. They entered Jericho and went to the inn of Rahab, a non-Jew, as were all the inhabitants of Jericho. The inn was located just inside the city wall and the outside wall of the inn was also the wall of the city. The inn may very well have been a public gathering place much like the saloons in the western movies – drinking, eating, gaming and socializing downstairs and upstairs there were rooms and women for rent. This would have been a natural place to go. The spies did not have to venture far into the city and at the inn they could hear people talk about the city, its problems, its leaders and general gossip. However, the spies failed at being good spies for the king of Jericho quickly was told about the spies and that they were at Rahab’s inn, so he sent soldiers. After the kings men left and Rahab brought the 2 men out of hiding she tells them why she hid them, saying, **“I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you.”** (Joshua 2:9) We see by Rahab’s own words that she acknowledges the God of the Hebrews as the true LORD. Now Rahab had heard, as all the inhabitants of

Jericho, of the great works of God who brought the Hebrews out of Egypt and the military victories of Joshua, but this was not what gave her faith in God for Jericho was well built and well defended. Remember the Hebrews did not defeat Jericho with military might. The explanation may be that God sent his Holy Spirit to Rahab in order for her to have faith that the Hebrews would indeed defeat Jericho. Rahab then acted upon and lived out her faith in the LORD. Again the writer of Hebrews agrees with James about 20 years later when he wrote to the believing Jews. “By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.” (Hebrews 11:31)

God made Abraham the father of the Hebrew people and James uses his example as faith lived out. God uses Rahab a non-Jew at the bottom of the social structure as an example of faith in action.

God ordained that Rahab be taken from the dunghill and her remarkable faith was a sanctifying faith leading her to a honorable life. As the result of her faith she married Salmon, one of the two spies whom she had saved. Salmon paid back the life he owed Rahab by a love that was honorable. This honorable love placed Rahab as ancestress in the royal line from which Jesus came as the Savior of lost souls. She was the mother of Boaz and the great-grandmother of King David.

Abraham and Rahab both risked everything that was dear to them, trusting the LORD. By faith they were committed to the LORD despite the cost. As you come to the crossroads in your life will you be like the young man who walked away from Christ or like Abraham and Rahab and lived and acted by faith?

Christ teaches believing faith is a faith that is lived out, a faith of good works; a faith of a life lived in action. In the Book of Mark are recorded Jesus’ words both positive and negative. Which will you live? Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” That’s the

positive! There is a price for believing and following Christ and only true faith lived out works – no matter the cost. Jesus continues with the negative result of not taking up one’s cross and following him. He continues in verse 35, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? <sup>37</sup> For what can a man give in return for his soul? <sup>38</sup> For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:34-38)

### **Faith Made Alive**

James ends with verse 26 echoing the very imagery that Jesus was expressing, “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.” We have looked at the distance past of both the Old and New Testament, let me now close with a practical example from the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

When Dave Thomas died in 2002, he left behind more than just thousands of Wendy’s restaurants. He also left a legacy of being a practical, hard-working man who was respected for his down-to-earth values in business and as a Christian.

Among the pieces of good advice that have outlived the smiling entrepreneur is his view of what Christians should be doing with their lives. Thomas, who as a youngster was influenced for Christ by his grandmother, said that believers should be “roll-up-your-shirtsleeves” Christians.

In his book *Well Done*, Thomas said, “Roll-up-your-shirtsleeves Christians see Christianity as faith and action. They still make the time to talk with God through prayer, study Scripture with devotion, be super-active in their church and take their ministry to others to spread the Good Word.” He went onto say they are “...

anonymous people who are doing good for Christ may be doing even more good than all the well-known Christians in the world.” Personally I think that statement has more meat in it than a Wendy’s triple burger. Thomas knew about hard work in the restaurant business; and he knew it is vital in the spiritual world also. So, my beloved, let’s roll-up-our-shirtsleeves for there is much still to do. Is it not true what we believe defines who we truly are and how we live? Let us live out our faith as our Lord and Savior Jesus said, “... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

(Matthew 5:16)