



5. Faith without Works is Dead! (James 2:13- 26)

Out of all the insults we have hurled at us as Christians, I think one of the worst is hypocrites. We don't practice what we preach. Sadly it's a criticism that is too often true. And we lack credibility because of it. How seriously would anybody take me if I was to try to give you advice on healthy eating.

If you are a Christian full of love, joy and peace, why don't you tell your face about it?

Here we are again in our fifth dip into the letter of James. As we have discovered in past weeks, it was written to Jewish Christians to persevere in their faith and resist temptation.

But they were also Christians that were showing a gap between what they said they believed and how they behaved – they were hypocrites.

Last time we saw how that expressed itself in the way they showed partiality, particularly in the favouritism they showed to the rich and the prejudice they had for the poor.

So we open today with verses **9** *But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.* **10** *For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.* **11** *For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.*

What James wanted these people to understand was that this piece of "normal" behaviour was totally unacceptable to God. It was a sin. Look at verse **11** *For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.*

These were self righteous Jews who had been brought up with the Law. They understood right and wrong. They would not dream of adultery or adulterous thoughts, yet alone think of killing. James says to them – so you're not adulterers? Well, the same law that says you shall not commit adultery also says don't murder! How were they murderers? Because they had discriminated against their brother. Remember these words of Jesus: **Matt 5: 21** *"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'* **22** *But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. (NIV)* Jesus is saying that it's not just the act of murder that's sinful, but the thought that gives birth to it. Just despising someone, to God is tantamount to murder!

I'm sure we all understand that – and by that account, we are all murderers: and for that matter adulterers too.

And if you break the Law in any one part, then you've transgressed it all. Ouch! All have sinned and come short of God's glory.

Why is James saying this? Because God is a HOLY God. He hates sin. He cannot bear it. We must understand this. God does not tolerate sin in any form. It's not just the big public sinful acts that God hates, it's what we do in our hearts and in the petty behaviour we show. It's all sin.

Let's understand and make it clear this morning. The wages of sin is DEATH. Sin brings DEATH. God is a righteous God, He must judge sin. This is the human condition – all lost. Sin is awful. It destroys. It brings death. Yes, we are redeemed if we have accepted Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. We have been saved from an eternity of hell. Let's grasp it.

God is a loving God who desires no person to perish and God Himself brought the solution through

the death of the Lord Jesus Christ in our place. Therefore by faith we can be saved from hell. That's what saved means. Saved from the lake of fire – which is the second death.

Maybe you think that none of this stuff applies to you because you are a Christian. You'll be happy I'm sure to remind me of my sermon on Romans 8:1 that there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. True. And God is a God of love. We love to talk about that. And it's true. But that doesn't mean we take sin in our lives lightly. Because we have been redeemed, we think we can take sin lightly. After all, we think, God will forgive me. He understands. He understands very well "*Jer 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*" God is a God of love – yes. But God is a holy God too and we have been redeemed so that we are a holy people.

I brought this book to your attention last year. It's the *Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* by Ron Sider. It's aimed at an American audience but it applies here too. His argument is that in their lifestyle and behaviour, there is little difference between Christians and anyone else. We know God's standards of morality but choose to do things our way. And we wonder why the church nationally in the UK is in such decline.

How can we not take the demands of a holy God seriously when we have been saved from so much. Quite easily it would seem. We don't control our tongues, we show partiality. Our words and deeds don't match. We are hypocrites of the worst sort.

Knowing what we have been saved from, than how can we take sin lightly. Paul says in Romans 6 – *6:1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?* How can we live in that sin when we understand how awful that sin is before God. Our actions must reflect the faith we testify to.

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, Jam 2:16 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? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

How we act, shows what we are. Next week we'll find that what we say reflects who we are. We can't get away from it. ? *15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, Jam 2:16 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?* Here were these Christians who were refusing to help the poor. And they said they had faith. *17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.* Faith that does not have works is dead. What does James mean? Let's go back to earlier. What are the wages of sin – death. Sin means death. Faith without works – death! Our unloving and uncaring actions are sin and they are death.

Sometimes we use phrases to describe churches. "That church is dead". Usually it's something to do with the form of worship. But what brings true death in churches is not dissention or adultery or murder. It's an lack of respect and loose tongues. They are sin and bring death.

"But it's only a little sin. It's a white lie. I can't help how I feel. I was only speaking the truth. But they are so ungrateful. I don't help that sort of person. He doesn't have these beliefs so he can't be a Christian. Oh, he looks cool. Wow! Look at her. There's nothing wrong with a little bit you fancy. I'm too embarrassed to tell them about Jesus. I don't want to push my religion on them" You know it's sin. I know it's sin. God knows it's sin. Sin means death. Jesus died so that you may have freedom from that sin.

As a believer you may be saved. You may feel like quoting Romans 8:1 to me and say no condemnation. You may have eternal life but God still hates sin and sin leads to death in some way or another. It may be the death of your marriage, the death of relationships, the death of your lifestyle, the death of your health or even your physical death. And it will continue to bring death in various areas of your life until you repent.

How we live shows what we are. It's an inescapable fact of Scripture. I was talking to my former Pastor yesterday about as mutual friend He was in a large church and played in the worship band.

He prided himself in His faith, but He did not know Jesus and his life reflected what was on the inside.

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. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder!

I can't believe how fresh this passage is. If you look at all the commentaries they all say how controversial this passage is. People have been confused by the faith and works bit over the centuries. Martin Luther described James as a "epistle of straw" and didn't think it should be in the NT. But I don't find it a problem. It's fresh as a daisy. As soon as we talk about sin, we immediately rationalize it in some way. "The most important thing is trusting Christ". We reduce Christianity to a verbal assent. If I believe that then I must be a Christian. Christianity is not about belief. The demons believe exactly what you and I believe. They understand fully what sin is, they understand fully what the death of Christ was all about. But they are not Christians. The demons believe and shudder. They know exactly what sin is and shudder at the wrath of God that will one day be vented on them.

Saving Faith is a working thing, a moving thing, a living thing, a dynamic thing, an active thing. Saving Faith is a repentant, submissive, trusting, enduring faith that works.

Saving faith is not a case of belief, but of trust. Abraham believed God, so did Rahab

20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 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.

24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 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?

Their belief led to actions that saved them. If you say you are a Christian, then it is going to show in your life.

How? By being different to the lost world around us. As we shall explore more fully tonight, God made His intentions for us clear in scripture. Never has it been so important to show to a lost world that we are different. We think different, we act different, we do different. We help the brother or sister in need. We help that neighbour in difficulty. We support in our society that which is just.

But most of all, if we understand that sin brings death, then everyone who is not a believer is without hope. Yet we have those words that will save them. We have the Lord's command to do so.

Suppose you are out in a boat and you see somebody in the water a long way from land: what do you do? You have a line that you can throw them that will bring salvation. Do you throw it to them?

Perhaps you won't because maybe they will laugh at you or mock you for doing something so stupid as believing they can be saved by taking the line. Perhaps you think someone more experienced in boating will come along with a lifebelt. Perhaps you have already thrown them the line once and they refused it. Perhaps you think it's their problem and row away. Perhaps you will wait until they swim up to the boat and climb in themselves.

Absurd isn't it. If we were in a boat we would throw out that line IMMEDIATELY and encourage them to take it and not stop until they take the rope and are hauled in. Why? Because to not do so means certain death for them.

So if we do that without thinking, why do we not throw the line out to that relation, that friend and neighbour and not stop until they take the line. The wages of sin is death. Death. What's our faith worth if all it does is spread death because we are not prepared to turn it into works and tell others about Jesus?

In Christian Today this month, the writer said this:

Christian, are you working for God? Are you doing your best for Him? Are you playing your part in the preparation for the final harvest home, or are you merely drifting along happy to stand by and see men and women being left out when the time of harvesting comes.

Are you content to attend church and listen to pleasing sermons week after week, not caring about the plight of those who will be found without God and without hope at the time of the reaping.

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

How alive is your faith this morning? Is it a faith that is bringing life to your friends and neighbours. Is it faith that is changing your life and the lives of others. Or is it a faith that is bringing death.

Let's bring life!

Prayer of repentance & commitment.



© Mark Reid 2005
Preached at Swaffham Baptist Church 11/9/2005
Scripture Quotes ESV