

Show and Tell

Faith Works!—Part 1

James 2:14-18

Introduction

The State of Massachusetts faced a unique, rather agonizing court case several years ago. The case involved the family of a man who drowned and another man who refused to save him.

Evidently, according to court evidence, the deceased and his friends were at the lake for the afternoon. He happened to be walking out on a dock when he accidentally tripped on a rope, lost his balance and fell off the dock into the water.

He surfaced, flailing his arms wildly as he spluttered and cried for help—he couldn't swim. He sank below the water, but then resurfaced again, crying out for help, then sank for the last time into the dark waters of that lake.

His friends were one dock over and saw what was happening. Even though they ran as fast as they could to reach him, by the time they dove in and pulled him out, he was no longer breathing . . . they were unable to get him to breathe again.

The tragedy was only compounded because of the fact that just a few yards away from where that man fell in, on that same dock, a young man was sunbathing, in his beach chair.

Even though he had heard the splash of the man falling into the water; even though he had heard the drowning man's cry for help; even though it would be proven that he was an excellent swimmer, in spite of all of that, he never got out of his chair to save this man's life.

The family of this deceased man was beside themselves with grief and anger. They were so incensed and hurt by this incredible display of apathy and indifference they decided to sue the sunbather and make him pay for his crime of apathy.

The case reached the state supreme court where arguments were heard from both sides. Eventually the court wrapped up its deliberation and the family of the deceased lost the case.

Although reluctant, the court ruled that the young man on the dock had no legal responsibility

to try and save the other man's life—he had instead the right to choose for himself whether or not he would involve himself in the dying man's distress. That ruling resonates around the world today.

The human heart thrives on self-centeredness. You work hard for yourself and maybe your own family, but then it's all yours and you are responsible for no one but yourself.

The golden rule is actually, "every man for himself." The living has no responsibility for the dying or the suffering, or the hurting. Just look out for number 1!

So what does that mean for the Christian? And what does this mean for the church? I'll tell you what it means. It means incredible opportunity!

If we are indeed living at a point in human history where you can sit on a dock and watch another man drown—when you can live your life with such self-centered individuality—where you can live so totally, openly, unashamedly for yourself alone, then that means the Christian has the opportunity of a lifetime to demonstrate the uniqueness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is the Gospel that... cares, interacts, moves into action, gives, risks everything and saves. Christianity is not simply a gospel of words . . . it is a gospel that works!

You see, we've been given more than a new attitude; we've been given a call to redemptive action.

Jesus Christ said, during his mountain side sermon—***Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works***—not, see your light, but see your good works, and then what—***that they might glorify your Father who is in heaven.*** (Matthew 5:16)

And it will be the half-brother of Jesus Christ—the Apostle James—who would pick up on that theme and deliver a letter to the dispersed,

Jewish Christians of the first century. His letter would be written to believers, about their behavior. And in his letter, he will define genuine faith as a faith that works.

Now as James works through this particular theme of faith that works, he will define for us three different types of faith—dead faith, demonic faith and dynamic faith.ⁱ

Dead Faith is Inactive

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? (James 2:14)

James begins in this verse with these two rhetorical questions. Each one anticipates the answer to be negative.

James asks, “If someone says he has faith without works—that is, he says he has faith but doesn’t live like it—is his faith useful?” The answer is, no.

James goes on in his second question to ask, and I’ll amplify it for you, “Well, if someone says he has faith but doesn’t live like it, should he assume he’s a believer?” Again the answer James expects in response is, no.

You could translate that second question—taking care to translate the Greek article before the word *faith* so that it reads, “Can that faith save him?” Or to expand it, “Can that kind of faith really be genuine faith?” And the answer would be, no.

Again, the point of James’ letter is not so much to convince an unbeliever that he’s an unbeliever, but to challenge the believer to act like a believer.

In other words, if you don’t demonstrate your faith, as far as the world is concerned, your faith is useless—it’s dead; it’s fruitless!

Now immediately, for those of you who are older in the faith and aware of Paul’s writings in Ephesians and Romans, you’re not sure where James might be going as he talks about faith and works being inseparable.

We’re going to see in our studies together through this paragraph that the Apostle Paul and the Apostle James do not contradict one another—they complement one another.

Comparison of Paul and James

First of all, in Romans, Paul is writing to **unbelievers** on how to define their salvation—which is by faith, and James is writing to **believers** on how to demonstrate their salvation.—which is by works.

Paul is writing in **theological terms**, while James is writing in **practical terms**.

Paul is focusing on **faith which leads to salvation**, and James is focusing on **faith after salvation**.ⁱⁱ

Paul is teaching us how to be **justified before God**—who can see faith. James is teaching us how to be **justified before men** who can’t see faith but can clearly see works.

You see, Paul wants the unbeliever to **get into the faith**; James wants the believer to **grow up in the faith**.

Paul would write, “**It is faith alone that justifies**,” and James writes, “**Faith which justifies is never alone**.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And so, it is little surprise that James is interested in getting the believer to engage in ‘show and tell’—you remember those? You brought something into kindergarten to show and tell. You weren’t just going to talk about something . . . you were going to show something.

So the little girl that took a vacation with her family to Hawaii brought in her little garland of flowers; the boy whose brother made the high school football team brought in his brother’s helmet; the kid who loved bugs brought in his ant colony. We used to love show and tell.

I’ll never forget our neighbor’s mother and son coming over one afternoon. Evidently his class was having a show and tell the next day and he wanted to take our five-year-old daughter Charity to class as his show and tell. He said he wanted to show and tell his friend, Charity. This mother and my wife thought that was the sweetest thing . . . I’m thinking, “Uh uh! You want to take my daughter into your class to show her off? I don’t think so. You can run along now . . . and I’ve got my eye on you.”

Of course, my wife and the neighbor’s wife won the argument and Charity went as this little boy’s show and tell . . . and life’s never been the same.

Okay, I thought it was cute too . . . sort of.

Trouble is we outgrow this anticipation . . . besides, show and tell is for kindergartners!

But this is James' announcement, "Get your faith out into the open—it is show and tell time for the Christian . . . and you never outgrow it."

That's the key phrase in this entire discussion—skip down to verse 18—and you might underline the words where James spells out this distinctive phrase, "**Show me your faith**" . . . again, "**I will show you my faith.**"

You see, Christianity is a show and tell proposition, and James will contrast that with the individual in verses 14-16 who only has something to say.

Go back to verse 14 and notice, "**What use is it, my brethren, if someone says . . . he has faith.**" Look down at verse 16, "**And one of you says to him . . .**"

That's the descriptive phrase of dead faith—useless faith—dead faith replaces works with words. It's all tell, and no show.

People with dead faith substitute words for deeds. They know the correct vocabulary; they can even quote a verse or two; they've come to the conclusion that they can live anyway they like so long as they know the words . . . but they are wrong.^{iv}

Alexander McLaren writes in the 1800s on this text, with a touch of sarcastic humor, "The people who least live out their creeds are the same people who shout the loudest about them; for some reason the paralysis which affects their hands does not seem to interfere with their mouths."^v

And this is the one thing that evidently James cannot stand—a profession of faith without the practice of faith.^{vi}

Because he knows it's useless—**what use is it?** James writes in verse 1.

Again at the end of verse 16 he writes, **What use is that?** Again at the end of verse 20—**that kind of faith is useless.**

It's true isn't it? I mean, if the world wants to see a living, genuine profession of Christianity, they will never examine your faith—they don't know how—but they will examine your life—and they can do that!

I find it interesting that John wrote to the believers in 1 John 3:18-19, **Let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We**

will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him.

In other words, faith that works, not only gives the world assurance of our genuine faith, but it gives us greater assurance as well.

So, if we want to outline James' description of dead faith, the first word we could use from verse 14 is the word *inactive*.

This person is someone who says, but does not do. He never takes his faith out into the open. Christianity may be 'show and tell' but for him it's no 'show' and all 'tell'. His Christianity never gets past the stained-glass experience. What he says and what he prays and what he sings on Sunday never makes it to Monday.

Dead faith is inactive faith!

Dead faith is indifferent

If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so, faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. (James 2:15)

The second word that describes dead faith is the word, *indifferent*. And again, James is saying that true faith never travels by itself—it travels with the companion of works.

Now James describes the scene here, much like he did with the rich man and the poor man earlier in chapter 2.

In this case, it's not two visitors who show up to the service late, and the implication is that both men are unbelievers who've come to check out the assembly. But in this case, it's two believers who happen to be a part of the assembly. It's one of the brothers and one of the sisters, and they show up in this condition—James writes in verse 15 that they are, "**without clothing.**"

While the word used here is often translated "naked", the word is also used in the context of someone poorly clad, which is obviously the reference here. This believer comes to church wearing clothing that has become so threadbare and tattered that it's as if he doesn't have anything on.^{vii}

And James even uses a verb tense that tells us this is the consistent condition of these believers.^{viii}

In other words, everybody in the church knows their brother and sister are deeply in need and that their clothing is utterly unable to warm them or protect them from the elements. So, it's obvious they have a need.

James then adds in verse 15 that these two church members are also *in need of daily food*.

This is the only time this exact expression occurs in the New Testament. It refers to the day's supply of food.^{ix}

In other words, they don't have anything to eat that day after church. Everybody else in here is going to leave church and go to Olive Garden, or Taco Bell or Cook Out . . . these are commercials and I'm expecting a payback . . . or you're going to go home and fry up some pancakes or grill out some chicken or find out what's been simmering in the crock pot all Sunday morning, but whatever it is, you've got a meal ahead of you.

The idea here is that these people are leaving the assembly to go nowhere to eat . . . in fact, they'll go home to nothing. They literally have no food for their daily supply.

This double need of clothing and food is James' way of showing us a brother or a sister facing extreme destitution.^x

Here's the point—the church knows about it, and watch what happens—verse 16. ***And one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled." And yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?***

That's another way of saying, "Are you kidding me or what?" Go in peace—that's the common way for the believer to say, "God bless you." We've created our own expression for that and it's—good-bye.

Good-bye is actually a contraction created near the end of the 16th century—first it was, "God be with ye", shortened to "God be ye" to good-bye to the pronunciation of good-bye.^{xi}

The believers here are saying the Greek equivalent—"Go in peace" which is nothing less than the pronunciation of God's blessing upon them.

What makes it even more alarming is the way James writes this. These verbs translated "be warmed and be filled" are imperatives—they are commands, as if these people can obey them. In fact, these verbs indicate that these people are actually being told to keep themselves warm and have plenty to eat. Can you imagine?

The church service is over, and someone sees them going out into the cold and they say, "God bless you—you keep yourself warm now won't you! And another believer says to them, "God bless you—now you make sure you get plenty to eat!"

This is utterly ridiculous. This is absolute indifference. This is shameless apathy and unconcern.

Couched in the hypocrisy of sanctified words like, "God bless you!" God bless you—by which they mean to imply, "God will take care of you if you trust Him, and maybe you're not and that's why you're hungry and cold.

One Greek scholar said that this response implied a subtle implication of blame—that is, if they would only exert themselves, they would have plenty to eat and sufficient clothing to wear. In other words, it was up to them to be clothed and fed, and if they weren't it was their own fault.

One author wrote, "This family didn't need a sermon, they needed supper. They didn't need to sit in your living room, they needed to sit in your kitchen. They needed you to open your refrigerator, not your Bible."^{xii}

He goes on to write, "And don't misunderstand. There's nothing wrong with sharing the Word—the problem is when you don't obey the word you're sharing."^{xiii}

Go back in church history and you discover a growing realization of God's sovereignty in which the wealthy understood that when they gave they were giving to God. One author writes . . . "and the poor received what he received as from God." With this understanding, the giving of gifts did not separate between rich and poor, but became a bond which united them in God, making them conscious of their oneness in one Lord.

I also found it interesting that the church was careful about the recipients of their charity. One fourth century church leader wrote, "Great experience is required to distinguish between those who are really poor and those who beg only that they may collect money. He who gives to a distressed and sick person gives to God, and will receive a reward, but he who gives to a parasite gives it to men who deserve contempt for their audacity, rather than pity for their poverty. Another fourth century leader described the art of pretended beggars."^{xiv}

So James is clear to describe genuinely needy people who are unable for whatever reason to clothe themselves or find food for that day.

I remember what most pastors can remember, and that is having the experience of being conned.

Our old church building down the street was often visited by people who sounded needy but weren't. We had to learn to discern the difference. I remember one woman coming into my office and telling me about her dying mother and that she didn't have any gas in her car to go visit her in the hospital, and I gave her everything I had in my wallet—I think it was 15 dollars.

When she left, I looked out my office window and saw her get into a brand new vehicle with a man and drive off just chatting away. I learned to look out the window first.

Several years later—in fact, just a year ago, I was teaching a Shepherds seminary course one evening down the street at South Hills Baptist Church—the pastor and church are so kind to let us use that church auditorium for preaching class and pastoral class where I teach them how to baptize—they actually get in the baptismal tank and practice on each other. You didn't think we'd put somebody in there cold, did you? We'd need an emergency medical team down front if we did.

Well, a woman knocked on the front door of the church. When I opened the door a woman began to tell me about her mother who was having emergency surgery in the hospital and she needed gas money to go and see her.

I said, "I think I know you . . . I want my 15 dollars back.

With my class all listening in, I told her how sorry I was about her mother's surgery and by the way, "What is her name?" She told me. I asked her what hospital she was in, and she told me, Wake Hospital. I just pulled out my cell phone and called Wake Hospital. I asked for this woman's room. The receptionist said, "There's no one here by that name." So I said, "Hold on a minute," and I asked the woman, "How do you spell your mother's last name?" Without blinking an eye, she stood right there in front of me and spelled it for me. I spelled it back to the receptionist who said, "Sorry, there's no one here by that name." I hung up and said to this woman, "Your mother's not in the hospital is she?" And she got mad and walked away in a huff, muttering under her breath

something I think in the Hebrew language . . . it wasn't anything about peace be with you.

This is not what James is talking about. In fact, the early church developed discerning ways to determine true need.

We have done the same here at Colonial and while we together give thousands of benevolent dollars away each year to those in our fellowship and outside our fellowship who are in need, we are able to attach the gospel to the give-away so that our works of love and care become a bridge over which our faith can travel into the lives of others.

If we don't care, we fail to demonstrate active, living faith.

Instead, our faith is useless—it's dead.

Dead faith is impenitent

But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works." (James 2:18)

First, dead faith is inactive; secondly, dead faith is indifferent and thirdly, dead faith is impenitent.

In other words, it refuses to be challenged and corrected—it defends itself in its error rather than reform itself in repentance.

James introduces us to an anonymous objector who suddenly speaks out. ***But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works." (James 2:18)***

Now you need to understand that in James' day, they didn't use quotation marks—that was a device invented later.^{xv}

Keep in mind, quotation marks are not "inspired" but supplied by the translators. They are normally very helpful, but in this case they are confusing.

Here's what the objector said, and I'll quote from verse 18, ***"You have faith and I have works."*** End quote. Then James responds, quote: ***"Show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."*** End quote.

The objector says, "Isn't this great—I have faith and you have works . . . isn't it wonderful we're in the same family so that we can balance one another out!"

And James responds, "Not so fast!"

In order to reveal the misguided argument of this objector, James effectively says to him, “Tell you what, you show me your faith without doing anything and I’ll prove my faith to you without saying anything.”

And James knows it’s impossible to prove your faith without doing something—why? Because faith is invisible . . . it’s intangible and unseen!

Let me simplify it all by saying this—faith is like calories. They are invisible, but you can see the results.^{xvi}

So also, works are the external physical evidence of an internal spiritually alive faith.

But this objector refuses to bend . . . you see he wants to keep faith and works divorced . . . with visitation rights provided only so often . . . let’s just keep them separate.

Which will allow him to defend his inactivity and his indifference—which will allow him to defend his faith which James declares is useless.

So as James wraps up his discussion on ‘dead faith’ in verse 18, he effectively challenges his objector to a show and tell.

Let’s take Christianity out into the public square . . . let’s not only declare our faith, let’s demonstrate our faith.

Frankly, James is not arguing for one against the other. He’s saying; let’s reveal through our lives and the work of our hands and the words of our vocabulary and the spirit of our character what Christianity is really all about.

In fact, the word James uses in verse 18 translated ‘*show*’ is a word which means, to bring to light . . . to exhibit . . . to display.^{xxvii}

He’s exhorting the believer to take his faith on the road and make an exhibition of it by means of his works, and don’t misunderstand, works do not create faith . . . works do not bring faith into existence.

Instead, works are the exhibition of our faith; works put on a display which brings to light the faith we have.

I remember when our first born twin son was delivered he immediately cried out—and didn’t stop for quite a while. We were concerned about our second son, who would make his grand entrance in about two minutes. He had spent those last hours higher up in the womb and every contraction caused his heart rate to become erratic. When he was delivered he was quiet—he didn’t cry out—and then the doctor gave him a little smack and his little body jerked in disapproval and he let out a wail. We all breathed a sigh of relief. If he was crying, he was breathing and his heart was pumping. It was the only time his crying brought us any joy.

His crying didn’t give him life—it simply revealed that he was alive. His wailing at the top of his lungs didn’t *produce* life—it *proved* life.

And that happens to be James’ primary point as he begins his inspired comments on the fact that true faith *works!*

- Faith in Jesus Christ produces life;
- Life in Jesus Christ produces works;
- And works for the glory of Jesus Christ proves the existence of spiritual life and faith.

-
- i Outlines from Warren W. Wiersbe, James: Be Mature (Victor Books, 1979), p. 76
- ii R. Kent Hughes, James: Faith That Works (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 108
- iii Wiersbe, p. 77
- iv Wiersbe, p. 76
- v D. Edmond Hiebert, James (BMH Books, 1992), p. 160
- vi William Barclay, The Letters of James and Peter (Westminster Press, 1976), p. 75
- vii Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James (Zondervan, 2008), p. 130
- viii Ibid
- ix Hiebert, p. 161
- x Ibid
- xi Online Etymology Dictionary, © 2010 Douglas Harper
- xii Tony Evans, The Perfect Christian (Word Publishing, 1998), p. 91
- xiii Ibid
- xiv World Magazine, *The Rise and Fall of Christian Charity*, July 3, 2010, p. 67
- xv Hiebert, p. 166
- xvi Spiros Zodhiates, The Labor of Love (AMG, 1985), p. 11
- xvii Zodhiates, p. 23