Introduction

Before I get started: We need volunteers for youth and kids.

A marriage ceremony
The wedding ring symbolizes a confession of love for someone.

A wedding ceremony centers on two people declaring their love for one another.
And in that ceremony, the couple gives each other a ring.
That ring is then worn to symbolize their love going forward.

- After the ceremony, both individuals assume certain things.
- First, that neither of them will be perfect in living out what their ring declares.
- Second, that both of them will not simply grow in their words of love for the other, but will grow in acts of care, concern, and love for the other.
- And as they do, that ceremony, that ring comes home, the words of the vows are fulfilled, and completed!

Conversely, if 10 years after the ceremony, one of them continually ignores the other, and has no desire to serve, or even pay attention to the other…it would be very reasonable to say the words they vowed, and the ring they wear, are empty and useless.

- And if you challenged that person and said, “I am not sure you love your spouse,” it would be ridiculous for them to say, "What are you talking about!” I am married; look, I have a ring.
- **And in that case, there is one of two realities.**
  - First - they needed to be woken up to how they have been living.
  - Or secondly - their declaration of love was not true, and what they said before God and others will have been exposed over time as an emotional or selfish sentiment.

This isn’t to say that there are no seasons in which we forget, or seasons in which our own selfishness controls us to greater or lesser degrees…but upon seeing these drifts away, what does the heart of the person say?

- Do they take confidence in what they spoke at a ceremony?
  - Are they treating their marriage like a business transaction, in which the ring they wear is a receipt?
- Or do they change their ways in a step of transformation?

This morning, we are going to read a passage that is full of healthy tension.
That tension makes sense if we see what James is describing as a relationship, not a transaction.

- **A tension that explains that saving faith, just like true love, is seen through our actions.**

- And I believe what makes this passage different and startling is not what it says, but how it says it.

(Announce Bibles available)

Read James 2:14-26

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Purpose Statement

The faith of our new life is confirmed and reaches its intended purpose through the actions of the new life.

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To support this summary statement of God's Word, we will look at the following arguments:

1. The Question of our words
2. The Knowledge of God
3. The Activity of our Life

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Point 1: The Question of our words

Verse - [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, [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. [18] 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.

Summary Statement: Our words cannot cover anyone.

What Good? My Brothers?

What good is it, my brothers?
James asks a provocative question to those he is in relationship with.

And the assumption in the question is that he’s addressing a very real concern he has for the particular people he is writing to.

- That is, the Jewish Christians scattered from their homeland.

And the language of his question has an incredulous tone.

- As in, OBVIOUSLY, we know the answer to what I am about to ask.

Says: A Hypothetical Conversation about the word Faith

And he asks,

“if someone **says** he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?”
Or is that “faith” real and able to accomplish its intended purpose?

And so, we should put ourselves in that hypothetical situation for a moment.
If you say to someone I have saving faith!

- The kind of faith that is effective in saving me!
- The faith that trusts Christ in my place before God!
  - And that faith covers me before God.

And that person says, "What does faith mean?”

- And you say, "Well, it is to understand who Jesus is, to believe Him about what He has said and done, and then to put my trust in Him as my Lord and Savior.

Then the person asks, "What does that look like?”

- And you say, "What do you mean?”
- And they say, "To have faith in Christ- what does it look like to have that faith?”

- And you say, "It's something that can't be seen; it's a love of Jesus in my heart.
  - And it means that one day, I am going to go to heaven and be rescued from this horrible place that I am stuck in.

And the person innocently asks, but what does that LOVE of Jesus mean for today?

- And you say, well, it means that I go to church a couple of times a month with some others who love Him, and we sing songs about Him, and we hear sermons about Him.
- And He's hiding out in our hearts.
- And then, I am supposed to tell others about how they too can have Jesus hide out in their heart, and be saved from this horrible place and eternal damnation.

And I think James is pressing here.

- But what good is that kind of faith?
- What effect does that kind of faith have?
- How does that honor and glorify God in this age?

For Example

And James gives his own example and says,

[15] If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, [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?

And again, the answer is none good!

- A kind word does not warm a person's real needs.

The statement Go in peace, be warmed and filled, is a good statement.

- It ought to be on our lips and hearts that we would seek the shalom and fullness of all those around us.
- However, in this context, James is explaining that this good sentiment from our lips is being used as a superficial work of our religion.
  - That is, by offering well wishes, we feel as if we are making a transaction.
    - We feel like we are living out our faith.
    - That this statement is what our faith is meant to look like.
    - It itself is the action or the good work of the gospel in this age, and not only are we blessed in the saying of it, but also, somehow, the person in need is covered by it.
    - And their correct response should be gratitude towards us.

And James asks the reasonable question: What good is that sentiment from our lips?

The Great Modern Danger

And in this modern age, the danger of slipping into this kind of religion and faith is all around us.

- On our news feeds, we see a need.
- Or we get a group text about a need.
- And we hit the like button or the praying hands emoji, and we feel like we have ACTED for the good of the need presented to us.

Then we keep scrolling and move on.

- And we have the modern phrase “slacktivism.”
- That is, our support for those in need is limited to likes and comments.

So the posture James is addressing lives on in the modern church.

- And it becomes how our faith functions.
- And a new Christian walks into our place with ZEAL to act on what they believe, and we say, "Settle down now.”
  - Let’s be wise and discerning; let’s be reasonable.
  - Sacrifice and generosity have their limits.

Here is what our faith actually looks like.
And another generation is being discipled into a faith revealed only in our words.
Instead of a discipleship that follows the ways of their Lord and Savior.

And James drives home the logic we already instinctively feel about such things:

[17] So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. [18] 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.

Faith that is only words and sentiments, and does not have the works of Christ, is dead.
Habakkuk and Paul echo this when they say, “The Righteous (before God) will live by faith.”

- I don’t believe that refers only to the end of days; I believe that IN THIS age, we live and walk in the faith; that is the trust, the love we declare.
- It is not simply internal; it is operational!
- It is not something meant to remain hidden in our hearts.

We hide God’s word in our hearts for what reason?

- SO THAT we might not sin against him in this age!
- This includes, as we see throughout the OT and NT, actual works and not just words of love to those in need.

And James explains that we will show our true faith BY our works.

- We will show whom we love.

- Whom our Lord is.
- Whom we trust - by our actions and deeds.
- Our works remove the masks we create with our words.

Because ultimately, our words cannot cover anyone, not even us!

Transition:
Paul then moves to a very important understanding about what we understand.

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Point 2: The Knowledge of God

Summary Statement: Life is not found in what we understand

Even the demons believe

So James tells us our words can't save us, and then he makes it clear he is not addressing the words of people outside the church.

- He's talking about the words of those who are "churched."
  - The words we recite and rehearse: the creeds and the confessions we cry out.
  - The choruses of the songs we hum, and the catechism questions that sit in our mouths.
  - And yes, even the scripture we read and memorize.

James is waking up and warning the Jewish Christians and us to see and understand that theology in itself has no power to save you!

- Truth is not the Savior.

And James, in his provocative style, writes,

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

- Even the demons believe!
- And you can even see their belief - they shudder!
  - The language there is "to be terrified."

The demons' theology, that is, their knowledge of God, causes them to quake with terror.

- Our understanding of the power and majesty of the one true God cannot match theirs.
- And that theology leads them to something - rebellion, hatred, hostility toward God in truth.
- And so, their right understanding of God does not save them.

The Question is, what will we DO

Illustration: A House on Fire

If you know what to do in the event of a house fire, and let's say you're even a firefighter. And you know how different kinds of fires work, and how to avoid smoke inhalation…And then let's say your house is on fire. Because the fire is not a hypothetical, and it is real, it is true; you cannot simply sit on your couch and say, I know all about what is happening right now around me. I can define it. If you do not ACT on what you know, believe and trust what you know, you will not make it out.

So the question before us is: what will we do with our theology?

- Again, we must understand that right theology is meant to lead you to a relationship with Jesus, not a relationship with knowledge.

Jesus said this:

John 5:34–40
[34] Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but **I say these things so that you may be saved**. [35] He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. [36] But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For **the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me.** [37] And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, [38] and **you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. [39] You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, [40] yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.** (ESV)

So eternal life is found in a relationship with Christ.

And to be sure, the purpose of the Scriptures is to point you to that relationship in truth!
You cannot simply have a loving relationship with someone you do not first know.

We see this progression in Acts 17.

Acts 17:22–24
[22] So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. [23] For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. [24] The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, (ESV)

They had a monument to the God whom they felt must exist.

- The God whose invisibility has been revealed in creation and the order, or LOGIC, of the universe, but whose name is not known apart from His special revelation of His Word.
- And so Paul proclaimed the knowledge of God to them, and upon hearing about the person of Christ, some believed, and entered into that relationship with Him.

Going back to the **house fire**…Just DOING anything in a house fire will not save you either.
It is important to know what to do.
What if you believed throwing gas on the fire would save you?
And you said, well, I did something; doesn't that count? NO!

So then, to be a child of God, we must know who He is in Truth through the ways in which He has chosen to reveal Himself!
And then, in knowing Him, we go to Him and are known by Him.

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

Summary Statement

So again, Life is not found in what we understand; it is found in how we respond to that understanding.

Transition: James then turns to two people from the OT to help the Jewish Christians see the role of life-revealing works.

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Point 3: The Activity of Our Life

READ 2:20-26

Summary Statement: The New Life of faith is revealed and confirmed through its works.

Do you want to be shown?

James skillfully chooses two examples that illustrate the scope of what he is saying.

Abraham is the blameless forefather of the Jewish people.
And then there is Rahab - a prostitute in Jericho.

- And she gives safe harbor to the spies of Israel and then lies to her king.
- And she and her family are kept safe when the Israelites invade.

And James chooses these two examples as a merism.

- It is a way to say from one end to the very other end of the spectrum, and therefore everything and everyone in between.

James says that faith was active alongside works.
That faith was completed by their works.
That they are justified by works and not by faith alone.

And this ought to cause a tension in us!

- This tension is ONLY present because of what we know Paul wrote.
- That it is by faith and not works that we are justified.

And because “being justified before God” is at the core longing of our hearts, I think it is good and right to ask: how can these things be so?

- First, James writes this letter before Paul, and he uses the word justified in the same way Christ talks about the final judgment.
- Paul uses the word justified as how we enter into a relationship with God.
- And again, if you read back through these verses, James continually leans on the idea of showing the validity or the vanity of someone’s faith.
- James is concerned with what will be revealed in the end: whether someone's “saying” of faith is real or useless.

And so, here he is saying, at the final judgment, the works of Abraham and Rahab show and make known the trust of the heart.

We know that **Abraham** trusted God with his only son Isaac, and as it says in Hebrews 11, he reasoned that God could raise his son from the dead if he were sacrificed.

- And so, that faith was seen in his work of putting his son on the altar.

So too, **Rahab's** faith was shown as she transferred her trust from her own kingdom and king, and it showed in her protection of God's people.

- And in doing so, she put her life in the hands of the God of Israel over the King of Jericho.

Remember what Repentance is!

And I think at the core of our unease is a very truncated understanding of what repentance is.

- Repentance is NOT simply words of regret or confession; it is a turning of works.

So when Paul puts the Pharisees on blast about the hypocrisy of their words vs. their works, he tells them in **Romans 2,** do you presume on Grace?

- Don't you know that this GRACE is meant to lead you to repent!
- That is, GRACE is meant to lead you to DOING what you say.

Discipleship

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this concept of receiving forgiveness without true repentance "cheap grace."

- It's a therapeutic grace that calms our concerns and eases our zeal to be transformed into the image of Christ through participation and obedience.
- Christ picked up your cross, so that you could go on living as your own god.
- And we believe that it is by our words of faith alone that we are identified as God's children.

And I think this is the ground-level problem, not just in Jame's day, but certainly in our day as well.

Saving faith leads us into discipleship.

A disciple is not JUST a learner of Christ; it is a follower of Christ!

Christ said, IF ANYONE would follow me, then they MUST deny themselves, and pick up a cross!

- And as one commentator puts it, "There is no such thing as a saved non-disciple of Christ."
  - No such thing as a saved non-follower of Christ in His works of love.
  - If grace looks more like a couch than a cross, then hear James, and Christ, and yes, Paul, clearly: just as you are joined in marriage by love, that love is not apart from works!
  - We are saved by faith alone, but faith that saves is never alone!
  - Evangelism does not end with a confession; it moves us toward repentance and discipleship.

And please hear it! All of this is by grace.

- Grace helps you see your death.
- Grace helps you see the beauty and love of Christ; without grace, we see Christ as the demons do.
  - We see Him as an enemy, as being against us and our good and joy.
  - But grace helps us see Him and his ways as the path to life.
- AND THEN - Grace then empowers you to not walk away from the mirror without repentance or turning.
- And Grace will uphold you as you fight and crucify the flesh as you strive and strain, in fear and trembling, in light of His mercy, work out your faith in fear and trembling!
- The working out of what your words proclaim.

The Bible says, today is the day of your salvation; do not harden your hearts!

- And I would ask, who in the world would harden their hearts to cheap grace.
- A grace that says, just say some words and then do whatever you want to.
- Ignore the poor and needy, don't forgive and show mercy to the one who has wronged you.
- Don't deny yourself and count others as MORE than yourself.
- Who would harden their hearts against living like hell, and justify themselves by saying, "It's okay, I've got a ticket to heaven?
  - But that's not salvation.
  - What will harden hearts is the call to true repentance.
  - To the call to deny yourself.

This is why I asked for us to have a cross put on stage.

- I think we need to be continually reminded not only of how we are gathered, but also of what we are called to.

The cross of Christ is not a magic symbol of a transaction, and it's certainly no license to sin.

I know I keep referring to this passage, but in light of everything we are considering here. Hear the words of Christ Himself.

As I read these verses, listen to the interplay of Love and Works.

- Hear how love and trust will be seen as valid.

Read John 15:1–17

Look at what Jesus Himself points to as proof of His love for the Father.

- Was it because of what he taught?
- Is it because he prayed a prayer, walked an aisle, or said some words?
- Or was His love and trust of the Father shown in His works?

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus did pray a prayer of trust, and he said to the Father, "Not my will, but your will be done.

- Those are words of Faith - and if Jesus had stood up and run from the cross, His words would have been useless and completely unable to cover us in our nakedness.

But He did not!
Jesus prayed His words of faith, and then we read that He stood and met His accusers.
And it was through the cross that He was made effective for our salvation.

Hebrews 2:10 [10] For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. (ESV)
Christ's work as our savior was made full; it reached its purpose through suffering.
And so to…we enter into this relationship by Him and with Him.

- The Cross was not added to His love for us; rather, it revealed His love for us and made a way for us to access Him.

Our salvation is made complete; it reaches its purpose through this relationship of loving discipleship of taking up a cross.

- It is not something we add to our faith; rather, it is something that reveals our faith.

Saving faith is certainly only before God, BUT it will be seen and experienced before man.

Are you unconcerned with your sin in this age, convinced that the grace of God has stamped your ticket to eternal bliss?

I would join not only James, but Jesus, and Paul in saying that a people who have no posture of obedience, who are not active in fighting their flesh, who are not participating with the Spirit in picking up a cross of self-denial every day, who are not aimed at forgiveness and mercy, are not only NOT disciples of Christ, but ultimately, as it will be revealed, are not the true children of God.

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Conclusion

The Visible and Invisible

We talk about the visible and invisible church.
In the visible church are those who are in the building, but in the invisible church are those who have true saving faith.

BUT DON'T BE CONFUSED!
Children of God, those who are a part of the INVISIBLE church!

- We are not meant to be invisible!
- We are meant to be visible!
- God is not glorified by our secret society!

In our fear of legalism and activism, have we swung too far the other way?
As one theologian writes: *Quietism says there's nothing you can do to move your sanctification along. God does the work in you, and so you should just calmly wait and be passive in the process. (Barry Cooper)*

And we hear that our faith will bear fruit, and we think it is passive.
That it happens to us.
But the fruit the Bible mentions are acts of obedience!

- We participate because of a new love.
- A new God and King who replaces us.
- "Living sacrifices" is not the language of a passive approach to our transformation.

The Grace of God ought to humble us and help us see that His love is completely detached from our deservedness.
BUT the Grace of God is not meant to then be used as a cover for our complete lack of obedience.

Transformation is our desire, but we must also understand that transformation is not optional and it is not accidental.
If you are waiting to be zapped by some mystical force overnight, or worse, if you are walking in the posture of saying, " Well, I will be transformed into the image of Christ on the day I stand before Him, but for now I am going to live with a lukewarm struggle against my self-centeredness."

- Then I believe the Bible would say, not just James, but the entire canon of Scripture would say, that faith will not save you.

So what then?!?

So what then?

Think for a second about how a child grows up into maturity.

- At first, they obey in fear of punishment.
- But as they grow up and understand their parent's character, they begin obeying out of love for the parent.
- Because not only are they in a relationship with them, but also because they trust them and their instruction.
- That their words are the way of life for them.

And so too for us…What will motivate us?

- Love or Fear?
- This is not a call to panicked work; it is a wake-up call to go to your first Love!

If you are married, and wake up and realize you have not been loving your spouse, then what should you do?

- Be terrified that you are not actually married, or run to your spouse in love?
  - See them, cherish them, and then walk in love for them!

And so it is here!

- Love leads us to delight in His ways as revealed in His good words of life.
  - And it is in a secure relationship with Him as we follow Him in these things.
- While fear leads us to panic, resentment, and separation!
  - And we harden our hearts as we put our confidence in a grace that covers our disgust of the cross and leads us to death.

If you feel fear in this moment, let it reorient you, not crush you.

Ultimately, every act of repentance must begin with the heart.

- It begins with seeing, and then turning.
- So we must first see our drift, or even our hostility.
- And then turn in love.
  - See Him, know Him, not in a way to make a transaction, but rather as the furnace of your transformation.
  - And walk in that new life that He has implanted in your hearts, not in fear of condemnation, but rather in the joyous presence of your first love and author of your life!

Pray

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Consider