

You Can Have A Faith That Works.

Reading: James 2:14-26

A faith that died can accomplish nothing!

Preached at Centurion West Presbyterian Church on 14 October 2012, by the Rev Andries Combrink.

Introduction: Simple *intellectual* agreement to Christ and his gospel is not enough.

Let's take a look at this passage from James and as we look closely we realize that he is not asking *whether works without faith can save us*. But rather, whether a dead faith, one that produces no change and no transformation in our lives, can save us, and he answers: "no"!

Dr. Hans Kung, a brilliant theologian from Germany, said: "*Whoever preaches one half of the gospel is no less a heretic than the person who preaches the other half of the gospel.*"

That is the temptation of every preacher — to preach one half of the gospel. This is the risk, that we preach a gospel of *either faith alone, or of works alone*.

James is a champion of works. He is not tactful about it or tries to be theologically correct. He speaks straight from the heart.

Listen to James in these verses:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can such a faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

This is the emphasis of the entire James letter. ***We must be doers of the Word and not hearers only.***

This has caused this particular book of the Bible problems over the years. In his earliest years as a reformer Martin Luther called it an "epistle of straw", because at that time Luther was calling his church back to the core of the Gospel: *Justification by grace through faith*. He called this period in church history a time "*when sin was winked at and forgiveness could be bought.*"

So "Faith alone" was his battle cry, and he felt at first that James was undermining the Gospel by saying that salvation also had to do with works. Later on Luther changed his mind about the letter of James!

And in this last 100 or so years, we also see a modern battle between two perspectives. One group of preachers has emphasized works over faith. Often their teaching is called "Social Gospel" and they are criticized, because they are accused of focussing on social action at the expense of personal salvation. And on the other side of the spectrum are some who call themselves evangelicals, who are often criticized for emphasizing personal salvation without caring about the physical needs of people and their pain and suffering.

This battle is between denomination against denomination, Christian against Christian. What is the answer? Is it sufficient to live a good life? Is it enough simply to do our best to help others? Do our good works qualify us as Christians? If we obey the Golden Rule to love our neighbour, is that our permit to go to heaven? I don't think most of us would say so, and I would agree. *The Bible says our good works are not good enough, and that we need to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.*

1. Do not separate the roles of Christ: Yet, you can be so committed to preserving the gospel of "faith alone" that you separate the roles of Christ. You place Christ in a box by saying that he only comes to sinners as Saviour and makes no claims of his Lordship. You may say, the Lordship of Christ comes later and is not part of our turning to Christ for salvation. *The problem with this is that it encourages people to claim Jesus as Saviour by simple intellectual affirmation — by saying yes in our mind to some spiritual laws, sinners prayer or a belief in a plan of salvation, and defer until later, or worse never, the claims of Christ in the transformation of life. This leads people to believe that their behaviour has no relationship with their spiritual life.*

But then there would be nothing different in the behaviour of a Christian and a non-Christian. Their lifestyles would be the same.

The majority of our nation claims to be Christians. But, do you think our nation's youth would be drowning in drugs, indulging in pornography, allowing millions to go hungry and live without shelter, abusing children — do you think we would be in this mess if the majority of us were really Christians, meaning, living as Jesus would have us live?

James says: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? In the same way, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

We are mocking the Gospel when we reduce its requirements to simply intellectually believing that Christ died for our sins — *and all He requires of us is to agree to that.* There is more to being a Christian. There is agreeing to Christ being our Lord! There is surrender to Christ as being in charge of our whole lives, including our morals and our ethics!

C.H. Spurgeon used this illustration to describe faith.

Suppose there is a fire on the third floor of a house, and a child is trapped in a room there. A huge, strong man stands on the ground beneath the window where the child's face appears, and he calls, "Jump! Drop into my arms!" It is one type of faith, Spurgeon would say, to know that the man is there. It is another type of faith that acknowledges that he is a strong man; but the essence of true faith lies in trusting him fully and dropping into his arms. Only in that way could the child be saved. And so it is with the sinner and Christ. Faith demands some action on our part.

Mere intellectual agreement is not enough. If we look deep enough into this passage from James, we realize that he is **not asking whether works without faith can save us.** But rather, whether **a dead faith, one that produces no change and no transformation, can save us,** and he answers no.

2. What did Jesus say about this? Let's look at the parable of Jesus about the last judgment in Matthew 25. This is the only time Jesus told us what the judgment would be like.

*"When the Son of Man comes in his glory and gathers before him all the nations of the world, he will separate the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. He will say to those at his right hand — the sheep: **Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.**"*

That was a surprise to both the righteous and the unrighteous, because neither knew when they had done that sort of thing for, or in relationship with Jesus." When," they asked, "*when did we see you hungry?*" His response to their question is unforgettable: "*As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.*" There is nothing here about believing the right things or belonging to the right church.

So James' question is not whether works without faith can save us, but whether *faith without works, faith without transformation, can save us*. From this we can discover an important truth. First, there is no salvation without discipleship. It is not enough to claim Jesus as Saviour, we must allow him to be Lord as well. We must surrender to him.

3. Even demons believe the Gospel: Verses 18 and 19 give us a startling revelation: "But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. **You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.**" *Even demons know there is a God; even demons know Jesus is real; even demons know that Jesus is the Son of God sent by God to save all who believe in Him.* The difference between demons and Christians is not knowledge.

The difference is that Christians faithfully submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ and become His disciples.

4. An emphasis on Christian faith that does not include faithfulness to Christ's call to walk in newness of life is a distortion of the Gospel. The kind of faith that does not give attention to works — to telling the truth, seeking to live clean lives, shunning evil, fighting personal immorality and social injustice, feeding the hungry, caring for the needy, seeking the lost, suffering for those the world has said no to — that kind of faith, **a faith that does not give attention to these issues, is dead. And is worth nothing to Christ, to the Church and to the world!**

5. A Faith that emphasizes a life that seeks good works as a means of salvation is a false faith too.

Good works do not save us, but they are the expression of the radical change that the Holy Spirit gives within us.

A person who claims to have faith without works is like a person who puts all their effort into building the foundation of a house and never builds anything on that foundation. *But a person who displays great works but has no faith in Christ as Saviour, is like a person who builds their house on sand without any foundation.*

6. Closing: Our response to God's love is to be more than simple belief. It is to be a faith *so strong it calls us to action*. It calls us to surrender to Christ as Lord! We are called Christians when our faith is alive:

When Jesus is more than Saviour to us. When he is the Lord of our lives. When our faith is confirmed by our works for the Lord!

This is the Word of God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.