

FECKLESS FAITH OR WORTHY WORKS?

James 2:14-26

(CSB) What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed," but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way faith, if it doesn't have works, is dead by itself. ¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one. Good! Even the demons believe—and they shudder. ²⁰ Senseless person! Are you willing to learn that faith without works is useless? ²¹ Wasn't Abraham our father justified by works in offering Isaac his son on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active together with his works, and by works, faith was made complete, ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" [**Genesis 15:6**] and he was called God's friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ In the same way, wasn't Rahab the prostitute also justified by works in receiving the messengers and sending them out by a different route? ²⁶ For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther (1483-1546) is the Catholic priest who risked everything to oppose the corruptions of the Medieval Church. Do you know why he was excommunicated by the Pope, sentenced to death, and forced into exile? Because Luther insisted the Bible does not give any priest or church the right to dispense God's forgiveness as a commodity we can purchase by money or good works. Luther and other leaders of the Protestant Reformation championed the Biblical truth that God's grace granting us forgiveness is a *gift* we receive by placing our *faith* in Christ's *merits*, who satisfied God's justice by sacrificing Himself in our behalf upon the Cross to atone for our sins. We cannot gain God's forgiveness by our merits. **Ephesians 2:8-9** (ESV) declares, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast." **Romans 6:23** (NASB) proclaims, "For the wages of sin is death, but the *free* gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." The Greek word translated "free gift" describes "a favor one receives without any merit on the part of the recipient."

In 1881, Clara Barton, became first president of the American Red Cross she helped to found. She went to Cuba to oversee the work of the Red Cross at the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898, at a time when the functions of the Red Cross were still new and unfamiliar to most people. Colonel Teddy Roosevelt came to her one day asking to buy medical supplies and food for the sick and wounded among his Rough Riders cavalry corps. Clara Barton refused to sell him anything. Roosevelt was perplexed. His men desperately needed this help. He offered to pay out of his own pocket any amount she might ask above what Army funds he had. Then one of his junior officers told him, "Colonel, just ask her for what you need!" A smile broke over Roosevelt's face. Now he understood—these provisions were not for sale because they'd already been paid for. Everything his troops needed would be *freely given* to them.

Martin Luther's legacy is restoring to the Church the Gospel truth, "the *free gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"; God's favor is not something we can earn or need to earn. Yet, Luther also believed **Jesus Christ**, as "King of kings and Lord of Lords" (**Revelation 19:16**), who "purchased" us "with His own blood" to save us from everlasting destruction (**Acts 20:28**), is worth any price to serve Him! Luther lived by the motto, "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing."

Today's sermon contrasts *costless faith* with *costly faith*, and *worthless works* with *worthy works*. Who suffers the most if we play it safe, if we don't put ourselves or our resources at risk in the Lord's service (when called upon to do so), or if we limit our participation in the Lord's work and with Christ's Church to what is convenient, self-serving, or won't interfere with our plans? We do, both in this life and forever!

Early in the 20th century, an evangelism team in China asked a poor farmer to join them one spring. "But I haven't planted my wheat yet," he told them. While explaining why he couldn't possibly neglect commitments to his farm and family, God spoke to his humble heart: "*Your* wheat? Nay, your Heavenly Father's wheat." He believed God wanted him to put **Matthew 6:31-33** (NLT) to the test: "So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?'"³² These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs.³³ Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and He will give you everything you need."

The farmer heeded God's call and went with the evangelism team, though his pagan neighbors scoffed, calling him foolish not to stay and plant his crops first. He happily planted the incorruptible "seed" of "the word of God" among China's lost souls (**Luke 8:4-8, 11**). After more workers joined the evangelism team, the farmer was released for a few days to return home and plant his wheat. His heart sank when he saw his neighbors' fields green with sprouts. He hadn't even planted yet! But God's Spirit comforted him saying, "Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs," and his peace returned. With his planting done, he returned to the team to continue sowing the gospel of **Jesus Christ**. Seedlings of new converts sprouted everywhere. However, no rain fell for some time on the farms of his community. The ground became so dry his wheat seed did not sprout and the green fields around him began to turn yellow. Before the drought was over, a third of the neighbors' crops had withered and died. Then refreshing showers began to fall and his wheat took root and sprang up. When harvest season came he had a beautiful field of waving golden grain, while his neighbors complained bitterly of poor yields. From that day forward, his neighbors came to him to ask when he would plant his crops, so they could plant theirs at the same time. They discovered God honored His servant who was faithful to Him, and some embraced His God as their God!

I. FECKLESS FAITH (**James 2:14-19**)

We focused two weeks ago on the first part of our text [reread **2:14-17**]. James is telling us whatever we say we *believe* about the Lord **Jesus**, or how much we claim Christ is *important* to us, our claim to have a saving relationship with the Lord is suspect if our actions cannot prove our claims. Feckless (feeble, ineffective) believers, according to **James 2:18**, claim to be genuine followers of **Jesus** who are *long* on saving faith but *short* on works that demonstrate their faith. The "works" James envisions are "deeds" (NIV) of grace and mercy toward others that demonstrate Christ's heart beats within our heart. James insists in **vss. 18-19** it's not a matter of whether "faith" *or* "works" are required of all true Christians; it's both: "Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith by my works."¹⁹ You believe that God is one [there is only one God (CEV)]. Good! Even the demons believe—and they shudder."

To summarize **vss. 14-19**, James tells us our doctrine, what we believe about God, may be good. Who is more correct in their doctrine than "demons," especially about who **Jesus** is (**Luke 4:31-34**)? Thus, demons are good "believers," but their "faith" doesn't produce a change of heart leading them to repent and surrender themselves to **Jesus** as their Lord. James concedes, as well, that our prayer life may be good; including our prayers for God's blessings on others. Our pious feelings over the needs of others may tell us our hearts are good. Our prosperity, having more than we need to live comfortably, may tell us God blesses us because *He* thinks we are good. Yet, we may still be almost good for nothing in God's eyes.

Years ago, a young boy on an errand for his mother bought a dozen eggs. As he left the store, however, he tripped and dropped the sack. All the eggs broke and made a mess of the sidewalk. The boy stared at the ruin before him with shock and grief. As he tried to stifle his tears, a few people stopped to ask if he was okay. Some said how sorry they were this had happened. Suddenly, one man transformed the pity party into a rescue rally. He handed the boy a quarter (over \$1 today). Seeking to draw out the best in others, he turned to them and said, "I care 25 cents worth for this boy. How much do the rest of you care?" Those who asked this boy if he was okay or were sorry for his mishap may have been well intentioned. Their sentiments may have made *them* feel better. But did they do anything about this lad's most pressing

need? No. They were feckless ("feeble," and "ineffective"). One person proved the worth of his concern for the boy when he backed up his kind thoughts with even kinder and more effective actions.

II. WORTHY WORKS (James 2:20-26)

This brings us to consideration of the second half of our text, **James 2:20-26** [reread]. The contrasts between Abraham and Rahab are striking. James must have intended us to include every type of believer in his comprehensive statement on the vital connection between works and faith: people who are more like Abraham to people more like Rahab, and everyone in between. Abraham is a major Bible figure; Rahab is a minor participant. Abraham is the father of the faithful (**Galatians 3:6-9**). Rahab was a foreigner to the faith community, being a resident of Jericho in Canaan (**Joshua 2:1-21**). Abraham was a Jew; Rahab was a Gentile. Abraham had respect as a godly and influential leader. Rahab lived as a disreputable prostitute. Abraham was a man, as were most people whose spiritual impact the Bible records. Rahab, a woman, played a crucial role in Israel's history by giving safe haven to spies Joshua sent to Jericho to prepare for Israel's first battle for their Promised land. Abraham was a spiritual giant; Rahab was a new believer.

With all these contrasts, what did they have in common to justify James citing them side-by-side? Abraham waited 25 years before God fulfilled His promise of Abraham's rightful heir, Isaac, being born, through whom "all the peoples on earth" would "be blessed (**Genesis 15:1-6; 18:18-19; 21:1-5**). Then, "God tested Abraham" by demanding Isaac be offered to Him in sacrifice (**Genesis 22:1-18**). Abraham, father of the nation of Israel, must prove himself worthy of God's trust and special calling by demonstrating no one or nothing would be allowed to rival God's place in his heart. Abraham could have told God, "No. You have no right to ask this of me. Forget Your plans. Isaac is *my* son. By all my years of serving you, I earned the right for Isaac to fulfill *my* plans and *my* dreams." But Abraham knew better. There is only one rightful God of this world, and we all rightfully belong to Him. Abraham's primary "work" of "faith," by which his "faith was perfected," was withholding nothing or no one back in his obedience to the LORD.

Similarly, Rahab could have told the Israelite spies, "I truly believe 'the Lord your God is God in heaven and on earth below,'" as she stated in **Joshua 2:11**. "But what if something goes wrong?" she could have asked. "What if it takes months before you conquer Jericho, or what if other kings in Canaan come to our rescue and Israel is defeated? I can't put my life at risk or the lives of my family. I'll give you a three-hour head start, but then I must report you to the authorities. If you do conquer Jericho, remember I helped you as much as I could, under the circumstances. Do you have the right to expect more of me?" Maybe these spies did not have the right to expect more of her, but Rahab knew God did, if He really is "God in heaven and on earth below," as she professed. Therefore, she put herself fully on the line for the Lord, aiding God's people and God's cause to the best of her ability, regardless of the cost to herself. Not only did Rahab save herself and her family from God's judgment that obliterated Jericho. She also gained an enduring place within God's redemptive nation of Israel, became a great-great grandmother of King David, and secured her eternal home in Heaven (**Joshua 6:22-25; Matthew 1:5-6; Hebrews 11:30-31, 39**).

By their works of faith, Abraham and Rahab demonstrated the reality of the saving faith they professed. Another man once said, "If I had some extra money, I'd give it to God, but I have just enough to support myself and my family." And he said, "If I had some extra time, I'd give it to God, but every minute is taken up with my job, my family, my home, my clubs, and hobbies—every single minute." He also said, "If I had a talent I'd give it to God, but I have no lovely voice; I have no special skill; I've never been able to lead a group; I can't think cleverly or quickly, the way I would like to, so I'm not able to talk to others about giving their hearts to the Lord." God was touched, so this story goes, so He gave that man extra money and time, and a glorious talent. Then He waited, and waited, and waited for this man to come through by living more for Him as he said he would. But after a long time, God shrugged His shoulders and took all those things right back from the man: the money, the time and the glorious talent. After a while, the man sighed and said, "If I only had some of that money back, I'd give it to God. If I only had some of that time, I'd

give it to God. If I could only rediscover that glorious talent, I'd give it to God." And God said, "Oh, shut up!" The man then told some of his friends, "You know, I'm not so sure that I believe in God anymore."

CONCLUSION

Do our lives display we believe in costless faith, or costly faith; worthless works, or worthy works? Hassan came to faith in Christ in Egypt, Islam's intellectual center. He moved into Old Cairo, one of the riskiest places in the world for Muslim evangelism, hoping he could lead his neighbors to experience the joy and peace he'd gained by embracing God's love for him through **Jesus Christ**. He steeped his mind in the Qur'an, the Hadith (sayings of Muhammad compiled after his death), and teachings of leading Islamic scholars, to build better bridges between their ideas of God and salvation and what is taught in the Bible.

About 3:00 A.M. one morning, Hassan was startled awake by a rough hand clamped firmly over his mouth. He felt a gun's cold muzzle at his right temple. "Don't say a word," a masked voice whispered. "Get up, and come with me." Hassan believed he was in the hands of an imam, a leader of a local mosque who serves as a guardian of Islam at any cost; usually the cost of the life of anyone who dares to embrace **Jesus** as Savior and Lord. Someone must have reported him to this imam, Hassan thought, and he was being led to his execution. He did not fear his own death as much as he feared for the everlasting doom of those who lived all around him in spiritual slavery and darkness. They needed lights to lead them to **Jesus!**

After passing through one quiet block after another with a gun at his back, Hassan was suddenly ordered, "Up the stairs." After a climb of five stories, which heightened the blood pounding in his veins from fear, his captor said they must jump from the roof of their building to the adjoining building. When Hassan protested his inability to make the leap, his captor pointed the muzzle of his gun at Hassan and said, "You can, and you will. Get a running start." Adrenaline, and possibly the help of an angel of the God to whom Hassan had desperately prayed since his abduction began, aided Hassan to make the most magnificent leap of his life. His kidnapper, more practiced, thumped beside him two seconds later, pistol in hand. He seized Hassan's right arm and forced him toward a hatchway in this abandoned warehouse. Believing he would never again see the night sky, Hassan whispered, "Jesus, into Your hands I commit my spirit."

Hassan found himself in a room lit with a single candle. Ten obviously Muslim men stood in a circle. They ordered Hassan to sit. And then, to his astonishment, they smiled at him. His captor spoke first. "We are imams, and we all studied at Al-Azhar University" (founded in Cairo in 972 A.D. as a center for Islamic learning). "During our time there," his captor continued, "each of us had a dream about Jesus, and each of us has privately become a follower of Christ. For a time, we didn't dare tell anyone about this. It would, of course, have been our own death sentences." This man explained further that each imam had begun to pray to **Jesus** for help in learning what it means to follow Him. One-by-one, **Jesus** brought them miraculously together, and they were amazed to learn there were other imams in Cairo who'd given themselves to Christ. They told Hassan they met secretly three times a week in this warehouse, "to pray for their families and for the people in our mosques to find Jesus too." They apologized for his night abduction at gun point, but if anyone had discovered them in the streets, they believed this was the only way he could be brought to them safely. "But now our question is," they asked Hassan, "will you teach us the Bible."

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