

# When Believing Isn't Enough

November 15, 2006

## QUOTE

"This is the evangelical rationalism that we have in fundamental circles: 'If you learn the text you've got the truth.'

"This evangelical rationalist says what the Pharisees...said: 'Well, truth is truth and if you believe the truth you've got it...'

"They have the text and the code and the creed, and to them that is the truth. So they pass it on to others." (A.W. Tozer, *Power for Living* [Oct. 16, 1977], *Christianity Today*, Vol. 33, no. 13).

## James 2:14-26

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

<sup>15</sup>Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup>If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup>In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

<sup>18</sup>But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

<sup>19</sup>You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

<sup>20</sup>You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

<sup>21</sup>Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he *did* when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup>You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. <sup>23</sup>And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. <sup>24</sup>You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

<sup>25</sup>In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? <sup>26</sup>As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

## QUOTE

In Ken Follett's novel, *Triple*, he describes one of his characters much the same way that James described some of the church members he knew...

"He believed in Communism the way most people believe in God; he would not be greatly surprised or disappointed if he turned out to be wrong, and meanwhile it made little difference in the way he lived." (*Christianity Today*, Vol. 36, no. 9)

James wants us to know this much—if what we *believe* doesn't make much difference in how we *behave*, then whatever else our belief system might be, it is not Christian faith. And that's a bold proposition.

Is believing all the right things about God, having an ironclad Systematic Theology, sufficient to cause God to forgive our sins, impute to us the righteous standing of Jesus himself, and cause us to receive the very life of God through the invading and indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit?

Very timely question, and the answer is *no*. It has to be. If that's all there is to it, the answer is *no*. There is a part of what it means to believe something that isn't faith, and, naturally, there is a part of what it means to believe in something that is faith. Our goal is to try and understand how to explain the difference.

A caveat is in order. Using the terms that we commonly use to talk about biblical faith, I know what I mean and I understand what I'm saying. These same words may or may not make sense to you. Therefore, what seems clear to me, because I know what I mean by the words I use, may not be so clear to you, and may, in fact, serve to confuse you. So don't hesitate to ask a question if the water starts looking murky to you. I won't be offended. I really want us to live with this for a while and see what develops.

## DISCUSSION

Consider the connection between *belief* and *behavior*. How does this topic relate to the three major topics that James has written about up to this point (trials that test our faith, the difference between knowing what to do and actually doing what we should, and treating other people with respect and dignity regardless of who they are)?

## When Believing Isn't Faith—Faith Is Dead.

### ILLUSTRATION

In 1955 General Electric's R & D department heated a chunk of carbon to 5,000 degrees Fahrenheit while simultaneously applying 1.5 millions of pressure per square inch to it in an effort to synthesize a genuine diamond from coal.

Their efforts were rewarded with meager results, a poor replica that is now referred to as an *industrial grade diamond*. It's not considered a real diamond in the trade, and while it shares some of a diamond's qualities it is clearly distinguishable from the genuine article by what it can and cannot *do*.

A real diamond that is formed beneath the crust of the earth is a mystery that human hands cannot duplicate.

Faith, as the Bible describes it, is vibrant, durable, and eternally brilliant. But there is also a *synthesized* kind of faith, James tells us, that has been created by human effort. It shares some of the characteristics of the genuine article, but, like the industrial grade diamond, it is identifiable, although not so easily, by what it can and cannot *do*.

### ILLUSTRATION

On a number of occasions when Shara and I have taken vacations to the Caribbean or Bahamas I've had guys walk up and offer to sell me diamond bracelets, necklaces, pins, huge gold "Pimp" chains, you name it—all guaranteed to

be genuine and authentic and as good as anything the stores were selling—for about 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the price. I even had a chance to buy a genuine Rolex President watch...for a smooth 100 dollar bill. But I couldn't tell anyone, because he was going to do this favor for me, and only for me because he liked me.

For some reason I've never felt that buying from them was the thing to do, because, just like the Rolex I'm wearing right now, what they were trying to sell me was nothing more than a cheap imitation. It may look like the real thing, but a trained eye can spot the difference, and in time, an untrained one will be able to.

My friend, Ron Dunn, had a classic way of explaining so much of what went on in the lives of Christians that shouldn't as well as so much that was absent in the lives of so many Christians that should be present... *All that glitters is not gold, and all that believes is not faith.*

### **All That Believes Is Not Faith**

Ever heard of a thing called *Aerobics*? Sure. Most of us know a lot more about it than we do about it. It was big thirty years ago. Various types of exercise were given certain point values: running a mile was, let's say, 5 *aerobic points*, 50 sit-ups might have been 3, walking to the refrigerator to get ice cream probably wouldn't be one. The goal was to earn a sufficient number of *aerobic points*, 30 per week I think, that would produce physical fitness. Sounds easy enough...

- But what exactly is an *aerobic point*?
- What does an *aerobic point* look like?
- How much does one weigh?
- What color is it?
- How would you recognize an *aerobic point* if you met one on the street?

The fact is, an *aerobic point* isn't anything. It's just a word. Apart from the blood, sweat and tears of intense exercise it doesn't even exist. An *aerobic point* simply describes what's possible if someone decides to put some action behind what it represents.

Faith is like an *aerobic point*. It, too, has a goal—spiritually fit believers. As is the case with an *aerobic point*, outside the atmosphere of its activity faith is meaningless or dead—because outside the realm of obedience to God's word faith doesn't exist (James 2:17, 26). *Faith* describes what's possible for people who believe in God and in his word when we choose to act according to truth. Otherwise it's nonexistent.

### **The "Straw Man" Of James 2**

#### **James 2:14, 18**

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

<sup>18</sup>But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

So our straw man is telling us that his faith has everything to do with the good deeds that he performs as a believer.

## The “Straw Man” Of Romans 4

### Romans 4:4-5

Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. <sup>5</sup>However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

This time our straw man is telling us that his faith has nothing to do with the good deeds that he performs as a believer.

Whose straw man is right? Paul’s or James’? It’s an important point, because while these straw men may represent hypothetical situations, they are not imaginary.

- Paul says we are saved by grace alone apart from any good deeds we do. (Romans 4)
- James says if we don’t do good deeds we aren’t saved at all. (James 2)

He’s actually the same guy. This will come as no surprise to you—they’re both right. As I said, no big surprise. They’re both biblical, so naturally they’re both right. While it sounds like they’re contradicting each other, in fact they aren’t, because they’re talking about two different things.

## Faith’s Origin & Its Operation

### Paul is Talking About the Origin of Faith

#### Ephesians 2:8-9

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup>not by works, so that no one can boast.

If we are Christians it is solely because of the saving work of Jesus Christ whose life, death and resurrection makes it possible. So purely is this the case that even the *faith* we use to believe in him, through which we God’s *grace* comes to us, is a *gift* from him to us.

There is absolutely nothing about your or my salvation that we had a single thing to do with—it was all an act of grace on God’s part. That is the origin of our faith.

### James is Talking About the Operation of Faith

#### Ephesians 2:10

For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

That faith, once imparted to us through the sovereign election and predestined choosing of God that occurred before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), never lies dormant. That's James' point.

John makes the same point in more graphic language...

### **1 John 3:7-10**

Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. <sup>8</sup>He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. <sup>9</sup>No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. <sup>10</sup>This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.

Without getting too bogged down in Greek grammar, John uses different types of grammatical action to make his point. The verbs that concern us here are all what we know as *present tense* type verbs, which in Greek imply continual or habitual action.

John is not saying that no Christ-follower will ever commit a single sin, but that no Christ-follower will live the same kind of life they lived before becoming a recipient of God's saving grace. Which is the same thing James is saying.

## **DISCUSSION**

Consider this "Straw man" that's exactly like a lot of very real men in Fort Smith. He agrees with every point of theology that you set before him. He believes the gospel message. So he calls himself a Christian. But he freely admits that there's very little about how he chooses to live or wants to live that would cause anyone else to confuse him with one.

1. Is this man a Christian? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
2. Why or why not?

---

---

---

## **The Value of a Dead Faith**

### **James 2:14-19**

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

<sup>15</sup>Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup>If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing

about his physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup>In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

<sup>18</sup>But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

<sup>19</sup>You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

- A dead faith can't save the person him or herself. (v. 14)
- A dead faith can't help them minister to others on God's behalf. (vv. 15-17)
- A dead faith can't honor God by the way it lives. (v. 18)

There is no value in this kind of faith. In fact, it's so lacking in value that James tells us it's no different than how demonic spirits believe.

These words are taken from the most orthodox of creeds, the Jewish Shema, taken from the Old Testament:

### **Deuteronomy 6:4-9**

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup>Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. <sup>6</sup>These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. <sup>7</sup>Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup>Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup>Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

The Shema, from the Hebrew meaning, *to hear*, was sacred to the Jews. It still is. And they literally wear it in these various forms. But even that sacred creed is utterly meaningless if a person's life does not bear out the image of God.

**JAMES ISN'T SAYING THAT ANY LIFE WITH GOOD DEEDS ATTACHED TO IT IS A CHRISTIAN LIFE, BUT THAT ANY LIFE WITHOUT GOOD DEEDS ATTACHED TO IT IS NOT.**

### **DISCUSSION**

Obviously James did not write these words in order that we may judge the reality of any other person's faith in Christ, so to what end would you suppose he did write these words?

---

---

---

## When Believing Is Faith—Faith Is Alive.

In contrast to an incomplete faith there is *completed faith*:

Let's re-read verses 22 and 23:

### **James 2:22-23**

His faith and his actions were *working together*, and his faith was *made complete* by what he *did*.<sup>23</sup> And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

### ***His faith was made complete? How?***

- To be physically fit we have to *do* aerobics.
- To be spiritually fit we have to *do* faith.

There's something that we who possess faith must *do* in order for our faith to be complete—we add appropriate works! Don't be alarmed at that statement.

In one sense faith and works don't mix—we are saved purely by God's grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). But in second sense they do mix—once we are saved by God's grace our faith is activated through obedience. Our works don't *save us*—they *unveil us*.

- *What we do* proves *what we are*.
- *Who we are* proves *whose we are*.

### **Hebrews 11:4**

By faith Abel ***offered*** a better sacrifice....

### **Hebrews 11:7**

By faith Noah...was ***moved*** with fear...

### **Hebrews 11:8**

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, ***obeyed and went***.

### **Hebrews 11:30**

By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had ***marched*** around them for seven days.

What's the common link? All of these people, Able, Noah, Abraham, Joshua's soldiers, had to ***do*** something in order to complete their faith.

## When Did Abraham Complete His Faith?

### Genesis 22:2-12

God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

<sup>3</sup> Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. <sup>5</sup> He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

<sup>6</sup> Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, <sup>7</sup> Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

<sup>8</sup> Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

<sup>9</sup> When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. <sup>11</sup> But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

<sup>12</sup> "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

How could he do that? I can't begin to imagine... Let's be very, very careful at this point. He was able to do what he did by faith...because he believed God would do what he said he would do:

### Genesis 17:19

God said, "...your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his *descendants* after him."

God had told Abraham that Isaac was going to *grow up, find a wife, get married, and have a family*—and he couldn't very well do that if he were dead.

### Hebrews 11:17-19

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, <sup>18</sup> even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." <sup>19</sup> Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead...

A brief caveat... There are lots of people who do lots of crazy things and blame it on God—but God really was behind this—and he never intended that Isaac be harmed. It must be God's truth that we obey, and the only safeguard for us is sticking to the truth as it is revealed in the Bible.

So...when did Abraham complete his faith? When he *obeyed* the voice of God:

### **James 2:21**

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did **when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?** <sup>22</sup> You see that his **faith** and his **actions** were **working together**, and his faith was made complete by what he **did**.

When faith is joined by action and we do what God's word has prescribed we complete our faith.

## **How Did Abraham Complete His Faith?**

I mentioned earlier that the men and women listed in Hebrews 11 had to **do** something in order to complete their faith...and that's true...but not just anything. They had to do something specific. For instance:

### **James 2:15-17**

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Let's pose a scenario where I happen to know that a winter storm is on the way and you don't have a coat. Not only that you're hungry. I don't want to you be cold when the storm hits and I can't stand the thought of you being hungry so, as an act of faith to help keep you warm when the temperature plunges and to get you seated before a fine meal I start memorizing the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm.

*Why in the world would you do that?* Because "faith without works is dead" and memorizing Bible verses is a good work. So, in order to complete my faith, which I do by adding good works (James 2:22), I start memorizing a bunch of Bible verses to keep you warm and fed.

The works that complete faith must not only collaborate with what we believe, they must correspond to it. I could memorize the entire Bible as a work of faith on your behalf and you'd be cold and hungry till the day you die—or until someone a little more up on things comes your way.

Unless I do something to clothe and feed you my faith will be an incomplete faith.

There was only one way for Abraham to complete his faith—he had to give up Isaac. Nothing else would do. Why? Because that was specifically what God required of him. And how did he know that? He knew that because God had spoken to him.

*But God doesn't speak to me.* Well, yes he does—not the way he spoke to Abraham because Abraham didn't have the Bible. For you and me it's a little easier than it was for Abraham—we do have the Bible. And that's how God speaks to us, through the Bible. When properly studied and rightly understood you and I can experience God speaking to us, not through his spoken word but through his written word, the Bible.

That being the case, what might you need to do complete your faith? If there's a lack of vibrancy in your spiritual life it could be that you're trying to live for God with a dead faith because of some area of disobedience in your life. I want to encourage you to respond with immediate obedience to what you believe God is requiring of you.

"The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to obedience.... ..the two are...opposite sides of the same coin." (Citation: A.W. Tozer, *Leadership*, Vol. 12. no. 14).