

FAITH & DEEDS

James 2:14-16

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Have you ever tried one handed clapping? It's quite hard to make any sort of noise that sounds like clapping with one hand. To clap well, you need your two hands. They belong together. Hold that thought as I ask another question. What do we mean by the word 'integrity'? Integrity means what we say and what we do line up, they match. It means what we say we believe and how we live go together. They integrate. They belong together. Integrity is the opposite of hypocrisy. That's where we say one thing and do another. C.S. Lewis said, 'Integrity is doing the right thing even when no one is watching'. Where your beliefs line up with what you do, things are as they should be, like clapping with two hands. Now I am talking about this notion of integrity, of belief and action lining up together, to give us a handle on this difficult passage in James. I say it's a difficult passage because Martin Luther had a lot of trouble with this passage. In fact, he regarded the letter of James as '...an epistle of straw.' He felt it did not belong in the Bible. Especially this verse in our text got to him (James 2:14) *"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?"* And also (James 2:24) *"You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone."*

At first glance James seems to be saying if you haven't done any good works you can't be saved. So, you can imagine Martin Luther's problem. He had discovered the gospel message of 'justification by faith alone'. That was the core of his entire thinking and theology. He wrote, 'We believe that the very beginning and end of salvation, and the sum of Christianity, consists in faith in Christ, who by his blood alone, and not by any of our works, has put away sin, and destroyed the power of death.' In other words, we do not have to do good works to earn our way to heaven. None of our works would be good enough anyway. We receive eternal life by grace, through faith. It is a gift. Before his rediscovery of justification by faith alone, Martin Luther was always afraid his good works were not good enough. So, he used to punish himself and make sacrifices to earn merit points. Things like going to bed in his cold cell in the monastery in a German mid-winter, without blankets. Luther was so grateful to discover God's grace he would not accept anything that smelled of a works salvation.

But a careful reading of James shows he heartily agrees with Luther. Faith is a key point in his writing too. He writes of the church as being (James 2:1) *"...those of the faith in Jesus"*. And he writes of God's grace (James 2:5) *"God has chosen the poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom of God"*. So, salvation by faith is James' teaching as well. But his main concern in this letter is to test whether the faith of his readers is authentic. And James says we can know that our faith is real by what we do. By how we live. He says faith produces deeds. The two go together. There is integrity. Faith and deeds go together like two hands clapping. In the Christian life faith and works go together like breathing, inhaling and exhaling. Breath in, breath out. Faith is taking the gospel in. Works is faith working the gospel out. The story is told of a Christian who worked each day by taking tourists across a lake in his rowboat. On occasion he would present the gospel and its implications for life in an unusual way. He had painted the word 'faith' on one of the oars and 'works' on the other. When he got quite a distance from shore, he would stop, then begin rowing with only the one oar marked 'faith'. Of course, rowing with just one oar he caused the boat to go in circles. Reversing the process, he would pull on the other oar marked 'works' and they would circle in the opposite direction. By this time his bewildered passengers were waiting for an explanation. This gave him a wonderful opportunity to teach them about discipleship and the Christian life. He always concluded by saying 'You see, neither faith nor works can stand alone. They are twins that cannot be separated'. The commentator John Macarthur tells about the Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler. Adler said, when deal with people 'Trust only in movement. Life happens at the level of action....We are not what we say, but we are what we do. What we do is the real key to our intentions. Trust only in movement'. That is James' point. He is following his brother Jesus who said (Matthew 7:22) *"Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my father...by their fruit you will recognize them."*

James argues his case by giving four examples. The first two are negative examples and the last two positive examples. With each of these two categories (negative and positive) he points out that faith shows itself in how (1) we relate to God and (2) how we relate with others. In his first example he writes (James 2:15,16) *"Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?"* We can sense very quickly how empty those supposedly 'well meaning' words are! In fact, they are not just empty words. They are a lie. If you really meant it, you would do something. There is a lack of integrity here. The words don't match the actions. James' illustration is powerful. It's hard to imagine how a Christian would not respond with care and action. Especially with a fellow believer. Did you notice how James speaks of 'a

brother or sister"? If a fellow person in our church was homeless, sleeping on the street and starving, would we, could we, just walk past and 'I'll pray it all goes well for you' and then walk on, leaving them there? Says James (James 2:17) *"In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."* So, if we claim to have faith, but have no compassion for others, especially fellow Christians, it begs some questions we need to seriously consider.

History has often begged those questions. I wonder if the French revolution would have been so vicious and anti-church, if the government and church of the day really cared for the people. When Louis 16th came to the throne he was only 20 years old. He and his wife Antionette prayed 'Oh God guide and protect us. We are too young to govern.' They were supposed to be very orthodox Christians. The clergy supported them. But while the country was in financial crisis and starving people stalked the streets of Paris for bread, the king and queen held extravagant banquets. They never raised a finger to help. They played games while others were starving, children pleading at the palace gates for food. Eventually the people revolted, killing the king and queen and many clergy who were also wealthy and corrupt. The French revolution was very anti- church, wanting nothing to do with a religion that showed no care for the poor and hungry. I wonder if communism would ever have arisen if Karl Marx, as a Jew had not been oppressed by orthodox Christians in Germany. And if the millions of peasants in Russia had not been exploited by the landowners with a church that did little for their situation. Yes, James illustration has a lot of punch. Faith must express itself in how we care for others.

Now, it might be argued that people are called to do different things. Like some are called to do good deeds and others have a deep belief. That's the sort of argument in verse 18 (James 2:18) *"But someone will say 'You have faith; I have deeds'".* James responds by saying belief can never be just intellectual. It must always express itself in what we do. Having the best Reformed, biblical theology means nothing if you don't live obediently. As James points out *"You believe there is one God? Good! Even the demons believe that and shudder"*. The central belief for the Jews and Christians is that there is only one God. Every day the Jews pray the Shema, the prayer of the orthodox: "Shema Israel, Adoni Elohim, Adoni echad- Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is one". James here would reply, 'This is good, truly. But do you realize the demons could pray this prayer too? They believe there is one God'. In that sense the demons are orthodox, conservative believers, not at all liberal or atheist. They acknowledge one God. But they do not have one speck of obedience or love for God. They work very hard against God knowing the day of judgement will come. They know it so well, they 'shudder' at the thought. So, we may think ourselves pious, having all our theology worked out and true

to God's word. But if it is not expressed in our daily living with God it is not for real. As James repeats (James 2:18) *"I will show you my faith by what I do"*.

Having shown that you cannot have faith without deeds, James goes on to show positively what he means. (James 2:20-22) *"You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did."* When James says *"Abraham was considered righteous..."* he is quoting Genesis 15. There we read the Abraham was already considered righteous when he trusted God's word that he and Sarah would have a son. They were both far too old. But Abraham trusted God. And by his faith he was justified. But we read in Genesis 22, after Abraham was about to sacrifice his son, God said *"Now I know you fear God..."* Abraham had already made his 'profession of faith', if you like, and was saved. But *"God tested Abraham"* which revealed the depth of Abraham's faith. Through his obedient acts his faith was made all the clearer. As James writes Abraham's *"...faith was made complete by what he did."* You see our faith becomes fuller, more complete, when we act out of what we believe. The word 'complete' can also mean 'perfected' or 'mature'. It's the same word in Ephesians 4 where it speaks of Christians becoming 'mature' and Christlike. For example, we may feel we believe God will provide for our every need. But its not until we trust him and act on it that it becomes real to us. I may say I am forgiven through faith. And I am. But its not till I step out in the joy of a new start, that my faith is becomes more mature. We know the Bible says God will give us the words when we witness for him. But we don't really know that until we step out and witness. Then our faith is fuller. Then we know that we know. You know the old story of the tight rope walker going across Niagara Falls. Those watching him go across with a wheel barrow and heavy weight can know he can do it. But if you get into the wheel barrow then you act on what you know and really know he can do it. When Israel was at the flooding Jordan River waiting to enter the Promised Land, they believed God would stop the flow water for them to cross. But the water did not stop until the priests carrying the ark stepped in. And it was not shallow. That is how God works. You do not stand back and wait. You step out in faith trusting God. Like Abraham, and in contrast to the devils, real faith steps out and acts, in trust and obedience to God. The obedience fulfills, matures, our belief. That's why James says (James 2:24) *"A person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone"*.

The final illustration James brings up is that of Rahab prostitute. She is his positive example of faith in action to others. In stark contrast to Abraham she was no example of good behaviour. Yet she too was a child of God. Her faith was seen in what she did. She was no pious well- wishing person leaving the desperate to their own devises, as in

the first example. In her faith, she put her whole life on the line in that dangerous situation to save the Israelite spies. James concludes (James 2:26) *"...as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead"*. Or as John Calvin put it 'It is faith alone that justifies and yet the faith that justifies is not alone'. James' four examples amply prove that. The caring but empty words and the orthodox but valueless belief of the devils clears the ground for the examples of Abraham and Rahab. What was the expression of Abraham's faith? He held nothing back from God. He was willing to give his son, trusting God would raise him from the dead. What was the work of Rahab? She reached out and took into her own care those who were in need, regardless of the cost to herself. Which reminds us of Jesus. (Philippians 2:8) *"He emptied himself and humbled himself to death, even death on a cross."* Jesus gave all he had, even his life. He trusted God would raise him from the dead. He did that for us who were lost and desperate in our sin. If faith is being united with Christ, the living Word, then it will express itself by living as Jesus did. Or as the Apostle John put it (1 John 2:6) *"Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did"*. In other words, we must walk our talk. There is integrity between what we say we believe and how we live.