

Fil-Am Community Church

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Key verse: James 2:14-26

## **“HOW TO HAVE REAL FAITH”**

For the umpteenth time Mrs. Youngston came to her pastor to tell him, “I’m so scared! Joe says he’s going to kill me if I continue to come to your church.”

“Yes, yes, my child,” replied the pastor, more than a little tired of hearing this over and over. “I will continue to pray for you, Mrs. Youngston. Have faith - the Lord will watch over you.”

"Oh yes, he has kept me safe thus far, only....."

"Only what, my child?"

"Well, now he says if I keep coming to your church, he's going to kill YOU!"

"Well, now," said the pastor, "Perhaps it's time for you to check out that little church on the other side of town."

Looks like that pastor’s faith is not the real thing.

What is real faith? It seems if you put the word "real" in front of anything it sells more -- real coffee or real leather. We're interested in the genuine article. We want the real deal. This explains why there’s an explosion of reality shows. Remember when Coke was the "real thing"?

I want to talk to you today about what James has to say about how to have real faith. There are a lot of phony religions out there -- people who think they are Christians and really aren't. In this passage James talks about the difference

between real and counterfeit Christians, authentic believers and fake believers. He talks about how you can have a real faith.

We're in the third part of our series called "Real Life 360." As we've mentioned before, our life is like a circle.

On the four points of this circle, the North, South, East, and West, are four areas which we really need to work on so that we don't get lost in our life's journey. These are Friendship, Finances, Faith, and Freedom. When we develop these areas with the help of God, then we experience a life that is full. Jesus says in John 10:10, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Today, we're going to tackle the third area which is Faith.

Now, let's look at James 2:14-26 on which this message is based. Our key verse is found in verse 17 which says "*Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by actions, is dead.*" But I want you to open your Bibles and follow along as I read this passage. (Read Bible)

Folks, this is the most controversial and misunderstood passage in the book of James. Do you know that Martin Luther, the great Reformer, even struggled whether to consider this book as part of the Bible? You see, every cult misunderstands it and they try to use this passage to prove you have to work your way to heaven. It's important that you get what I'm going to talk about today so that when those guys come to your door, you'll know what to say to them.

You see, the entire New Testament teaches that we are saved by faith alone. Paul makes that clear in Romans, for example. He says, "*For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'*" (Romans 1:17). Then James comes along and says, "It's not just faith but faith and works." What is he

talking about? Paul and James. Do they contradict each other? No. Both are right. Because they are talking about two different things.

Paul was fighting the problem of legalism -- the problem of "I've got to keep all the Jewish laws and regulations to be a Christian." Paul is talking to that group.

James is not fighting legalism but laxity -- those that say "It doesn't matter what you do as long as you believe."

They are fighting two different enemies. But they both use the word "works" in different ways. When Paul uses the word "works" he's talking about Jewish laws like circumcision and things like that. When James uses it, he's talking about the lifestyle of a Christian -- acts of love. It's totally different.

Paul focuses on the root of salvation -- what happens to me internally. James focuses on the fruit of salvation -- what happens on the outside. Jesus says, "*By their fruits you will know them.*" Paul is talking about, "How to know you're a Christian." James is talking about, "How to show you're a Christian." Paul is talking about his passages on faith alone, how to become a believer. James talks about, how to behave like a believer. So, it is not a contradiction.

It's summed up in Ephesians 2:8 and 10 "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith... to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.*" There are three prepositions in this passage -- "by grace", "through faith", "to do good works". If you get those out of order, you're in trouble. If you think you're saved by works for faith you're in trouble. But he's saying we're saved by grace through faith. We're saved just by accepting God's gift.

But how do I show I am a believer? James says there's five ways you can know you've got the real thing. He gives us five steps or principles here in this passage. So, let me give these to you one by one.

## 1. REAL FAITH IS NOT JUST SOMETHING YOU SAY

v. 14 says, "*What good is it my brother if a man claims to have faith, but has no deeds? Can such `faith' save him?*" It doesn't say this man actually has faith, he just claims to have it. He talks about it. He knows all the right phrases. There are a lot of people who claim to be Christians.

George Gallup says that 50 million Americans say "I'm born again," but you don't see anything in their lifestyle. Today we tend to label people as Christians if they make the slightest sound of being a believer. It's more than just talk that is involved in real faith. Jesus says, "*Not everybody who says to me `Lord, Lord' is going to enter into the kingdom of heaven.*" Not everybody with a Christian bumper sticker is a believer. I remember a story I heard on the radio a few years back. This really happened. There was a man who left his office in a very bad mood because of an argument with a co-worker. So he drove out of the parking lot to cool off. Then he stopped at a traffic light. Suddenly, the driver behind him honked his horn twice. Immediately, he got off his car, dashed toward the hapless driver, and lashed at him angrily. The driver put up his hands and said nervously, "Uh-oh, I'm sorry. But your bumper sticker says, 'Honk twice if you love Jesus.'"

Now you may have second thoughts about that angry guy being a Christian. The point is, not everybody who professes to be a Christian is actually a Christian. There are Christians who are Baptists but there are Baptists who are not Christians. There are Christians who are Presbyterians but there are Presbyterians who are not Christians. There are Christians who are Pentecostals but there are Pentecostals who are not Christians. But one thing is true, only Baptists go to heaven.

James is saying that real faith is not just something you say. Do you know anybody that claims to be a Christian but you don't see any evidence in their life? That's a phony faith.

Real faith is not just something you say.

## **2. REAL FAITH IS NOT JUST SOMETHING YOU FEEL.**

It's more than emotions. A lot of people confuse emotions and sentiment with faith. You can be emotionally moved and never act on it. You can go to church and get goose bumps, but it never makes any difference.

Then he gives an illustration. v. 15 *"Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?"*

In a Peanuts cartoon, Charlie Brown and Linus are inside all bundled up and Snoopy's out in the cold shivering in front of an empty dog food bowl. Charlie and Linus are having a discussion on how sad it is that Snoopy is hungry and cold. Charlie says, "He's cold and hungry. We ought to do something about it." They walk outside and say to Snoopy, "Be of good cheer, Snoopy."

Do you know where Charles Schultz got that idea? From this verse. What good is it if you see someone in need and you say, "I feel for you!" James is saying, "It's more than just words. It's more than just feelings."

If, after church, you're walking into your car and you happen to trip and you fell and you cannot get up, I walk up to you and say, "I really feel for you!" -- is that any help?

Real faith is more than just sympathy and feeling and emotion. You give assistance. You do something about it. You act on it. Real faith takes the initiative. A real believer has real faith and it's practical. It gets involved with people. So, James is talking about Christians here.

When you become a part of God's family you have some family responsibilities. A real believer will care about other believers. 1 John 3:17 *"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"* Real faith is generous. It wants to give.

Who can count on you in a crisis? How many Christians have the freedom to call you up in the middle of the night if they are in an emergency? Not just talking the talk. Not just feeling for people. I John 3:14 says that one of the proofs of salvation is that we love other Christians. Do you have fellowship with other believers? Real faith wants to be around other believers. You love them. It is known we are Christians by our love.

We are a lot better at verbalizing our faith than practicing it. I can't meet everybody's needs but I can meet somebody's. Even Jesus while on earth couldn't meet everybody's needs. James is saying that if my faith doesn't lead me to share with others it's wrong. v. 17 *"In the same way, faith by itself if it's not accompanied by actions is dead."* If I don't feel like helping other Christians, I don't have a sick faith, I have a dead faith. James is laying it on the line. He says, "Do you want real faith? It's more than just something you say and it's more than just something you feel."

### **3. REAL FAITH IS NOT JUST SOME SOMETHING YOU THINK**

For some people, faith is an intellectual exercise -- a matter to be studied, debated, talked over and discussed. James imagines this intellectual objector in v. 18, *"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."* He's imagining some intellectual guy who says, "You're into faith, I'm into works. Different strokes for different folks. Let's discuss."

You know, real faith is visible. You can see it. If you claim to be a Christian, people will be able to see it. But we know too that faith is odorless, weightless, invisible, so anybody can claim to have it. How do you know for sure that one has real faith then? James says, "Show me." If you claim to be a Christian I have a right to ask you to prove it by looking at your lifestyle.

Somebody said, "Faith is like calories. You can't see them but you can sure see the results." You can't see faith but you can see the results.

James would have made a good Missourian. The theme of the state of Missouri is "Show me". James is saying, "You say you're a Christian? Prove it. Let me see your actions back up your words." If I say to you, "I believe my health is very important. Personal health is a high priority in my life." Then, you ask me, "Do you exercise?" No. "Do you eat a well-balanced diet?" No. "Do you ever go for a check up?" No. "Do you eat lechon?" Yes. It doesn't matter what I say. What counts are my actions. Real faith is more than just something you think. You can point it out and see it in people's lives. 2 Corinthians 5:17 *"When someone becomes a Christian, he becomes a brand new person inside. He is not the same anymore. A new life has begun!"*

If you hold a 220 volt wire you're going to know it. I don't see how somebody as big as God can enter your life and not change you. James says, flat out that, if it doesn't change you there's a question whether God is really in your life. How do you know you're a believer? You'll see some changes in your life because real faith always produces change.

Real faith is not just something you say. It's not just something you feel. It's not just something you think.

#### **4. REAL FAITH IS NOT JUST SOMETHING YOU BELIEVE**

v. 19 says, *"You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that -- and shudder!"* There are a lot of people who have strong beliefs in God, the Bible, about Christ. They can recite creeds to you and catechisms and talk about the doctrine of the Trinity, quote bible verses.

James says, "Big deal!" Just saying I believe in God is not enough to get you to heaven. Even the devil believes in God!

You know, the devil is a great theologian. He knows theology backwards and forwards. He knows a lot more about the Bible than you do. He's been around a whole lot longer. Remember, he quoted verses from the Bible when he tempted Jesus in the desert. He believes. His demons believe and shudder. The Greek word is "to bristle" -- their hair stands up on end. It's the kind of word you'd use reading a Stephen King novel. Why? Because the devils understand the majesty and awesomeness of God. They believe in God and they tremble. But they believe only in their minds. It's called intellectual assent. It doesn't involve the will or the heart.

Believing in Jesus, however, is more than just head knowledge. A lot of folks are going to miss heaven by 18 inches. They've got it in their head but not their heart. They say "I believe in God." But everybody believes in God or in some kind of a god. The Hindus believe in God. The Muslims believe in God. The Jehovah's Witnesses believe in God. But that's not enough.

If it's not just something you say or think or feel or believe, what is real faith then?

## **5. REAL FAITH IS SOMETHING YOU DO**

In the next couple of verses James gives two illustrations that say real faith is something you do. Two illustrations of two very different people, Abraham and Rahab -- exact opposite extremes.

Abraham is a man. Rahab is a woman. Abraham is Jewish. Rahab is a Gentile. Abraham is a patriarch. Rahab is a prostitute. Abraham is a somebody. Rahab is a nobody. Abraham is a major character in the Bible. Rahab is a minor character.

James uses these illustrations to say, it doesn't matter who you are as long as you've got the important thing. Abraham and Rahab had only one thing in common – their faith in God. Their faith in God led them to an action.

v. 20 *"You foolish men. Do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. His faith and his actions were working together. His faith was made complete by what he did. Scripture was fulfilled when it said, 'Abraham believed God.'"*

How do we know it? We saw it. He behaved in a way that his belief came out visibly. *"Abraham believed God and it was accredited to him as righteousness and he was called God's friend."*

You know the story. It's the ultimate test where God asked Abraham to give up his own son. This has nothing to do with salvation. Abraham was already a believer. Twenty-five years earlier God had said, "You're righteous." He's not talking about being saved by his works. He's saying, that this just shows how much you believe. Abraham obeyed God. It was immediate. He followed Him. He took his son up. He did all those faith steps. He cut the wood, built the altar and was ready to sacrifice his own son. Abraham says to his son while walking up the mountain, "We [not I] will return". He knew that God would provide somehow even if it meant raising him from the dead. The fact is God did raise him from the dead, figuratively speaking. Abraham was about to sacrifice him and God says, "I

was just testing you to see what's most important in your life.” It was an action. His works proved his faith. He held nothing back from God.

And James talks about Rahab. The story is in Joshua chapter 2. It's the story how a prostitute helped a couple of spies when they were coming into Jericho. Rahab ends up in the family line of Jesus. She risks her life to save the spies.

Our faith is not determined by what we do, it is demonstrated by what we do. One night a house caught fire and a young boy was forced to flee to the roof. The father stood on the ground below with outstretched arms, calling to his son, "Jump! I'll catch you." He knew the boy had to jump to save his life. All the boy could see, however, was flame, smoke, and blackness. As can be imagined, he was afraid to leave the roof. His father kept yelling: "Jump! I will catch you." But the boy protested, "Daddy, I can't see you." The father replied, "But I can see you and that's all that matters." The boy believed his father and he jumped to safety.

In a very real sense that's what God says to you. Jump! Take the plunge. Demonstrate your faith by following it up with action. Talk is cheap. Put your money where your mouth is. "I believe in Jesus!" you say. Prove it. Our faith is demonstrated by our actions. Actions speak louder than words. Our behavior shows what we really believe.

2 Corinthians 13:5 *"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith."* Test it. Check it out. See if you're really a believer or not.

A couple of questions:

Am I really a Christian after all? In the light of what James says, am I really a Christian?

What changes can I point to in my life? Is my lifestyle any different at all from unbelievers? So many people think it doesn't matter what you do as long as you believe. James says that's not true. He's not saying you work your way to

heaven. He's not saying works deliver salvation. He's saying they demonstrate it. He's saying, that if your faith doesn't work, what good is it?

How do I know for sure? You settle it in your mind. Maybe some of you have had doubts whether you're really a believer or not.

You're a good person, you've gone to church, and maybe you've known about Christ, and you've read the Bible, and you've had religion and you've gone to classes. But are you absolutely sure that if you died tonight you'd go to heaven? The fact is you can be sure. You don't have to leave here and have the shadow of a doubt. You can settle it right here.

How do you do that? Ephesians 2:8-9 *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith... to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

It's all God's grace. We don't deserve to be saved but God gave his own son Jesus to die for our sins. As the Bible tells us in Romans 5:8, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." And Jesus did not stay dead because he rose again from the dead on the third day, he resurrected. He has conquered sin and death forever. Therefore, you don't have anything to do to save yourself. Jesus saved you. And if you believe in what Jesus has done for you, if you trust him and turn your life over to him, then you receive the gift of eternal life. Ask forgiveness for your sins and receive Jesus in your heart as your Lord and Savior.

God reaches down. He says, "I want you to know Me. I want to have a relationship with you." That's grace. And you look up and say "I want to know You, Lord. I want to have a relationship with You." When God's hand of grace comes down and your hand of faith goes up, that's called salvation. That's what it

means to be a believer. Saved by grace, through faith to do exactly what God made you to do in the first place.