

Grounded Faith

James 2:14-26

Introduction

If there was any passage in the Bible that appears to be a contradiction from what we read in other books of the Bible, it is James 2:24, which states: **“You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”** This verse seems to contradict what Paul wrote in his epistle to the Ephesians: **“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not a result of works, so that no one may boast”** (2:8-9). So which is it? Is salvation a gift from God that can be received apart from anything we do, or is salvation something you have to work hard at keeping?

In the 1980s these questions were popularized and brought to the forefront of theological discussions had in many homes and churches. At the heart of these discussions was the question: “What does it mean to believe in Jesus?” Zane Hodges wrote his book, *Absolutely Free* arguing that nowhere in the Bible does it teach that belief in Jesus for eternal salvation requires a person to repent of his/her sins. Hodges went as far to say that a person can be a Christian and at the same time not love God. In response to Zane Hodges’s book, John MacArthur wrote *The Gospel According to Jesus*; in his book, he argued that true salvation involves a lifelong commitment to Jesus, which is the evidence of true biblical belief. Those who agreed with Zane Hodges labeled the teachings of people like John MacArthur as “Lordship Salvation.” Those who agreed with John MacArthur labeled the teachings of people like Zane Hodges as “Easy Believism.”

Far from being a modern controversy, the argument between Hodges and MacArthur was simply an old theological debate dressed in newer garb. I do not have the time to give a history lesson as to what led up to Hodges and MacArthur duking it out in the form of books, but you should know about the idea ‘if you just believe and say a prayer, that you will be “saved.”’ There is a theological stream that led to language you are probably familiar with, such as: “Ten said ‘Yes’ to Jesus!” Or you may have had someone in your life encourage you to repeat a prayer, for if you just say the words, you can be saved just so long as you believe the words to be true in your mind.

In 1763, a well-known Scottish author and pastor named Robert Sandeman (1718–1771) arrived in Danbury, Connecticut. His central teaching was that “bare assent to the work of Christ alone is necessary for salvation.” In other words, Sandeman argued that simply believing in Jesus was enough to be saved—you didn’t have to follow Him or demonstrate love for Him. In Sandeman’s view, requiring evidence of love or a changed life made works a necessary part of salvation, which he firmly rejected.

By the time Sandeman set foot in Connecticut, his writings and ideas had already spread widely through American churches. Ezra Stiles, who befriended Sandeman and would later become president of Yale University, remarked, “I believe he has sown a seed in America which will up and grow, though I have no apprehension of any great ill effect.”¹

Sandeman’s doctrine, which came to be known as “Sandemanianism” and is now often labeled “easy-believism,” was more than a theological curiosity—it ignited debate and concern that ripple through the church to this day. What academic circles now call “Free Grace Theology” became the very ground upon which Zane Hodges and John MacArthur sparred. The warnings of giants like John Wesley (an Arminian) and Andrew Fuller (a Calvinist), echo through history: Sandemanianism, they cautioned, might lull the church into a shallow faith, one that confuses mere intellectual agreement with living trust. Its legacy remains, challenging and shaping the contours of American evangelicalism across generations.

My hope today is not that you are more informed, but that you are more grounded in the Bible. At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter what I think; what matters is what does the Bible have to say about it! So, let us turn to our text this morning to find out.

A Grounded Faith is an Active Faith (vv. 14-17)

James asks a question in verse 14, **“What use is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?”** He then gives us an example of what a faith devoid of works looks like in real-time: **“If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,’ yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that”** (v. 15)? What is James getting at in these verses? He is picking up on what He said in 2:1-13 and forcing us to take a long, hard look into the mirror of God’s word to examine our hearts.

If you say that your faith is in Jesus as the One who died for your sins and rose from the grave, then how can you pass by a brother or sister who shares your faith in Jesus who is in need and do nothing to help that person? Genuine faith will result in genuine, although not perfect, love for those who share in your faith in Jesus? Just so you know, James is not the only one who asks this question. The apostle John had some things to say about a faith grounded in Jesus being an active faith: **“Beloved, let’s love one another; for love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love. By this the love of God was revealed in us, that God has sent His only Son into the world so that we may live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins”** (1 John 4:7-10). Where on earth did John and James get their understanding of genuine faith from? They both got it from Jesus, who said, **“I am giving you a new commandment, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, that you also love one another** (John 13:34).

¹ https://www.therestorationmovement.com/_states/connecticut/sandeman.htm

Again, John wrote in his epistle, **“This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commandments remains in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He remains in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us”** (1 John 3:23-24). But, John and James are not the only ones who understood that a faith grounded in Jesus was an active faith, for the apostle Paul wrote: **“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them”** (Eph. 2:8-10).

Listen, salvation is the free gift of God made available through His Son that you cannot earn or work for. However, when you are genuinely saved by Jesus, you are then “born again” (John 3:1-21). When you are “born again” you go from being spiritually dead, to being made spiritually alive with Jesus (Eph. 2:1-6). The evidence that you are alive with Christ is a faith that is living! In the words of Paul, and in light of our salvation that is from God, you are to **“walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called...”** Paul did not stop there, he continued: **“walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love”** (Eph. 4:1-2).

The clearest sign of being born again is a life transformed—a faith that is alive, first in love for God and then in love for others. This is why Jesus described a coming day of judgment, when all people will be separated into two groups: the sheep on His right and the goats on His left. The difference between them will be revealed in how they responded, with love and compassion, to those in need. Jesus will say to the sheep, **“Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me”** (Matt. 25:34-36). Those who ignored the brother or sister who was hungry, thirsty, need shelter, needed clothing, was sick and needed care, or was in prison... will hear these words: **“Depart from Me, you accursed people, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.... Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it for one of the least of these, you did not do it for Me, either.”** These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (25:41, 45-46).

A Grounded Faith is a Sacrificial Faith (vv. 18-26)

When it comes to what read in James and what we read in Paul’s letters, Timothy Keller said when looking at something with only one eye, you lose depth perception. To appreciate something for what it really is, you need two eyes. Why? Because each eye is looking from a

slightly different perspective at the same object, and as a result you see it better.”² The problem with Robert Sandeman, Zane Hodges, and Free Grace Theology is that they are only looking at Scripture with one eye, and in doing so, their sermons and books suffer from a distorted theological depth perception problem. Do you want to know one way you can make sure you have both eyes open? Have one eye on the text you are reading and the other on the rest of Scripture. James is not saying works first then faith later; what he is saying is that a faith that has generated new life in God is a faith that acts on the belief it rests in.

To say you believe is easy; to act upon your belief is evidence that you believe. This is James’ point in verse 18, **“But someone may well say, ‘You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.’”** Let me share an illustration from our family that may help you understand what James is saying here. Recently our family went on an Alaskan cruise; we probably never would have gone on a cruise during this season in our lives had it not been for my mother and step-father inviting us to go with them with all expenses paid on our behalf. Not only was the cruise paid for, but all of our travel expenses were paid for too! The package that my mother and stepfather paid for included all of our meals, and that the cruise line provided a medallion that we could either wear around our neck, or our wrist, which functioned as a pass for just about everything, including anything we wanted to eat or drink. We were told that we could order anything we wanted from an app on our phones that was synced to our medallion and that a server would deliver the food to us no matter where we were. All of it was paid for and I did not have to do a thing to earn it. However, my belief that was true was evidenced by acting upon the gift that was bought and paid for on my behalf.

The difference between my experience on the Alaskan cruise and being born again, is that with my salvation came a new nature that involved a heart change. So what happened when I genuinely believed the gospel of Jesus Christ? I received the promise of Ezekiel 36:26, **“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”** I received the circumcision of the heart promised in Deuteronomy 10:6 that frees me up to “Love God with all my heart and all of my soul, so that I may live.” Here is how the NLT translates this verse: **“The Lord your God will change your heart and the hearts of all your descendants, so that you will love him with all your heart and soul and so you may live!”**

James is saying that if you really believe what you say you believe, then the evidence that you really do believe will be seen in your actions. But James is not just talking about acting in light of what you believe, no... he is talking about something more than intellect and actions. Notice what he says in verse 19, **“You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.”** Do you see what James is doing here? The demons do not have a theological problem when it comes to their intellect, but they do have a heart problem! The fruit of genuine

² Timothy J. Keller, [The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive](#) (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).

belief that involves the mind and heart are actions that reveal that a spiritual resurrection has taken place and that you have gone from death to life.

Faith without action reveals a deeper issue—a problem of the heart. If faith shows no signs of life, it isn't truly alive. To illustrate this, James points to two powerful examples from Scripture: Abraham and Rahab. Both demonstrated their genuine belief in God not just through words, but through courageous acts of obedience. They trusted God so completely that they were willing to risk everything, proving that living faith always moves us to action, even when it requires sacrifice.

Conclusion

Consider Abraham's journey—a life seasoned with trials and tests, both by circumstance and by his own choices. For years, Abraham and Sarah hoped and longed for the promise of an heir to become their reality. Miraculously God fulfilled His promise to the elderly couple and when we reach the dramatic moment in Genesis 22 that James refers to, God commanded Abraham to do the unthinkable—sacrifice Isaac. Abraham's faith had been forged in the furnace of experience. He was finally able to trust God, even when the command seemed impossible to understand.

When Abraham, Isaac, and their servants arrived at the mountain, Abraham told his servants, **“Stay here with the donkey, and I and the boy will go over there; and we will worship and return to you”** (Gen. 22:5). Despite the looming test, Abraham expressed confidence that both he and Isaac would return. This conviction shows that Abraham's faith wasn't just a matter of words—he truly believed that God was both good and powerful enough to raise the dead if necessary.

James continues in verse 25, **“In the same way, was Rahab the prostitute not justified by works also when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?”** The messengers were spies that Joshua sent into Jericho to assess what they were up against. When the king of Jericho learned that the spies were in Jericho, he searched for them, but Rahab hid them. Before she helped them escape undetected, she said to them:

“I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have despaired because of you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt.... When we heard these reports, our hearts melted and no courage remained in anyone any longer because of you; for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth below.” (Josh. 2:9-11)

The evidence that she really did believe what she said about the God of the Hebrews is seen in her hiding the spies and then helping them escape at great personal risk to herself.

Abraham was told to sacrifice his son, but he did not have to because God provided a sacrifice in place of Isaac. Many years later, the Son of God would climb up to the top of Golgotha out of obedience to His Father to die for sins we are guilty of. Jesus died to redeem and make you new

for **“good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them”** (Eph. 2:10). Rahab hid and protected the spies when there was no law requiring her to do so. In so doing, her life was not only spared, but God had a greater purpose she could not have been aware existed, to include her great grandchild being King David, and from David would come the promises King of kings, the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, I leave you with a few questions:

1. What is your Isaac that God is asking you to place upon His altar of sacrifice and why have you been reluctant to do so?
2. What is your Jericho that God is asking you to forsake, and why have you been reluctant to let it go?

Remember that God is asking these things of you because He is both holy and good. You say that you believe God to be so, therefore trust Him by obeying Him. Christian, God loves you and He ultimately intends good for you.