



Today we come to a passage in our series on the book of James that gets to one of the great debates and sticking points about a person's relationship with God that also has an incredibly practical, real-world impact. Where you land on this debate has the potential to have a significant impact on your every day life. I will also say that while this debate is still very active and alive today in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it has roots that go back centuries and centuries, across cultures, and spans the human spectrum of religious belief – except, perhaps those who truly believe that there is no God. And that debate is this: Who is the greatest Rock and Roll band of all time? Nah...I'm just making sure you're listening.

That debate can be summed up in this question: **Does what we *do*, or does what we *believe*, matter more?** Can you believe essentially whatever you want, and is that belief good enough to open the door to eternal life if you've done all the right things? Are our *works* enough? Or how about believing all the “right” things but not really doing much with that belief? Is it ok for faith to just be an intellectual/mental belief, even a very strongly held belief? Is that enough? There's a wide range of responses throughout the centuries and even today. Many people believe that as long as you live a good life and treat other people well, that that is good enough...while others think all that matters is what you believe...that you have to have “right theology” down to the “nth” degree. Today's passage brings this debate to the forefront.

So let's dive into **James 2:14-26**, a passage that gets into this tension between faith and works. This is God's word to you and me today...

Let's start with a little historical background about this passage and some of its themes that will help us not only to understand the passage in the context of Scripture, but will also help us to help us understand the historic roots of people's beliefs even today. And the place to start is in the early to mid 1500's, with the theologian **Martin Luther (Picture<sup>1</sup>)**.



If you're familiar with Martin Luther at all you know him as one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, and one of the founding fathers of a whole branch of Christianity that came out of, and now stands alongside Catholic Christianity. Denominations such as ours, Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, non-denominational churches, and so forth are all in this

Protestant branch of Christianity. **Luther wasn't seeking to start a whole new branch of Christianity called Protestants; he just wanted to reform the Catholic Church.** But he was excommunicated in 1521 from Catholicism because of his efforts at reformation, so he really had no choice. As my Catholic friend Mike says, "We only have ourselves to blame for Martin Luther and the start of the Protestant Church – we kicked him out of the Catholic Church, after all."

So Luther, along with others, began emphasizing Christian Biblical teachings and beliefs that they felt were being overlooked in the Catholic church at the time. **Two of those beliefs are: (1.) Salvation is "by God's grace alone" (no "works" on our part) through (2.) "faith alone."** Luther had significant issues with the book of James because of its emphasis on "works" which we see quite strongly in today's passage. His biggest issue with the Book of James was that he thought it contradicted these doctrines of salvation by God's grace through faith. Especially, he thought James contradicted the writings of Paul, where there is more of an emphasis on God's grace over our works.

**When Paul writes against works, and emphasizes "faith alone," he's writing of works done in an effort to replace the work of Jesus on the cross.** If we think that by what we do we can make ourselves fit to stand in the presence of almighty God, then that is a "works righteousness" theology. It's a very common theology today, even if people wouldn't necessarily use the phrase "works righteousness." It's a way of approaching God that says, "If I am good enough, then God will accept me." It's very attractive because there's no accountability to a standard of what is "good" set by someone else – like God. You get to determine what is good. You get to "play God" in this regard. You can set the bar high, or you can set it low. It's up to you. Paul

speaks against this works righteousness theology. Jesus speaks against it, as well. Instead, they always come back to our relationship with Jesus, and our trust in and belief in His life, death and resurrection – with the work on the cross accomplishing what our own works could never do. **In other words: no matter how “good” we are – or think we are – it’s not going to be good enough to be in the presence of a perfectly good, holy, and righteous God of the Universe.**

So when it comes to Martin Luther’s skepticism of the book of James, it is because in his day there had begun to be an increase in a number of practices within the Church that emphasized human works and de-emphasized the work of Christ. There were shades of today’s popular works righteousness theology in the Church. Martin Luther rightly saw that as un-Biblical and diminishing the work of Christ on the cross, and he vehemently opposed anything that smelled like works righteousness.

And: **The book of James puts a lot of emphasis on works.** There’s no denying that. I mean, in today’s 13 verses, the word for “works” or “deeds” or “doing something” appears 11 times. And all 11 are encouraging us to do good deeds, to do good works. As a result, Luther simply felt that the message of James cut too closely to the errant theology of the day about works that he was seeking to correct. It doesn’t help that James only mentions Jesus directly two times – and both of those are kind of “in passing.” So in Luther’s view, the book of James de-emphasized Jesus – which is exactly the problem in the Church he was seeking to combat.

And it is true that “Jesus” or “Christ” or only found twice in the book of James. But there are other times where we read the word “Lord” which certainly means Jesus. And there are numerous references – even direct quotes – to Jesus’ teaching even if James doesn’t write, “as Jesus said...” or anything like that. I mentioned the first Sunday in this series that just the Sermon on the Mount is quoted or referenced here in James some 20 times. James’ writing is saturated with Jesus – but not in an explicit way. But that all wasn’t good enough for Luther – he was very skeptical of James because of the veiling of Jesus and the emphasis on works, and Luther encouraged Christians in his day *not* to read it.

**Now, before we get too critical of Luther for this stance, let's realize that we all tend to have these kinds of overreactions at different times of our lives.** Maybe there was a time you have overreacted to your spouse or your children or a co-worker or a friend. And maybe, like Luther, there was some larger context that caused the overreaction in that moment. We see this on larger-scale things all the time. Some people think that in the midst of this pandemic that we are overreacting with all the stay-home orders, shutting down of certain kinds of businesses, and so forth. We probably won't actually know if we are overreacting or not for quite some time – perhaps years, even. But there are other times that we can assess reactions more easily.

**For instance, think back to the weeks, months and even several years after the events of 9/11.** When you got on a plane then, there was exceedingly tight airport security that had not been there previously: Shoes were taken off the feet of every passenger going through security; All electronic devices were required to come out of luggage; Scissors and screwdrivers were no longer allowed on planes; A ball-point pen was practically considered a potential weapon of mass destruction. And if you didn't have a ticket, there was no way you were going through security out to the gate to say good-bye to loved ones or welcome them home.

Now, some of these things are relaxed. I've been on several flights where shoes did not come off, and laptops were not taken out of their bags, scissors and screwdrivers shorter than 4 inches have been allowed since 2005; and this last December it was announced that Sea-Tac is one of three airports in the nation to start allowing people without tickets out to the gate. It's limited to 100 per day and you have to register in advance to do it...but the point remains: the further away we get from a crisis or other significant event, the more measured our response becomes. The pendulum swings back. **If Martin Luther were alive today, he may very well say he over-reacted in regards to James' letter.**

It's like the story of Mrs. Smartt, who was at church one Sunday, fumbling in her purse for her offering when a large television remote fell out and clattered into the aisle. The usher bent over to retrieve it for her and whispered, "Do

you always carry your TV remote to church?” “No,” she replied, “but my husband refused to come with me this morning, and I figured this was the most evil thing I could do to him legally.” You see, that’s a measured response, perhaps arrived at after previously trying a stronger, illegal response.

We experience this at the micro-level all the time. **How many of us have ever taken on a project of some kind and then struggled with it, maybe even failed, and in the midst of that said, “I’m never doing that again!”** Could be making a quilt, changing a door knob, learning to paint, exercising, raising children, visiting the in-laws, or rooting for the Mariners... And then some time later after the emotions have settled down and we’ve reflected on the experience, we end up taking on the same thing one more time – but we’ve learn from our experience and have a new approach. I was cautiously optimistic that the Mariners wouldn’t lose 100 games this season. I’ve learned to temper my expectations. And of course this season they’re guaranteed not to lose 100 games. 😊

**Luther’s response to James is much the same. He was so concerned (others, too) about the state of the Christian faith in his day and the emphasis on “works” within the church as a means to salvation, he wanted nothing to do with works of any kind.** The pendulum swung from “here” to “here.” And still today, as I said at the start, a lot of people – including a lot of non-Christians – emphasize one or the other. Probably “works” righteousness is where most non-Christians tend to land. The popular theology – or philosophy might be a better category of this thinking – is that it doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you live right, or do the right thing. It’s kind of a “golden rule” theology that a lot of people subscribe to – which is ironic, because “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” actually is a teaching of Jesus’. And then there are other people who are all about what a person believes: If your theology isn’t 100% right down to the last dot on the page, then you’re wrong.

But here’s the thing: **While Paul and Jesus teach against works righteousness, they never dispense with works all together.** Jesus tells us to “hear and do” what he teaches. He tells us to take up our cross and follow

him. He regularly uses agricultural metaphors that involve work – such as plants that bear fruit or farmers who work the fields and the crops. My favorite verse is Matthew 5:16, where Jesus says, **“Let your light shine so that people will see your good deeds and glorify their Father in Heaven” (Matthew 5:16)**. And of course, Jesus did good deeds for people all the time.

Paul is much the same in his writing, which should come as no surprise because everything he wrote was founded on Jesus. Even in the midst of some of his letters that are famous for their articulation of the doctrine of grace and pointing people to the cross of Christ as the only work that makes us righteous, he still tells us to do good works:

- **Romans 2:7 – “To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.”**
- **Ephesians 2:10 – “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”**
- **Colossians 3:17 – “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”**

Those are just a few – there are a whole bunch more from both Jesus and Paul’s teachings.

So “works” to achieve righteousness, to be accepted by God, is condemned, and Luther was right to bring reform to the Church in his day in regards to this. But the pendulum swung from one side to the other. **And “in the middle” is Jesus’ teaching, Paul’s teaching...and also James.** James is not writing about a works righteousness, but about works that are a *result* of the work Jesus has done on the cross, that are a result and an expression of our belief. Perhaps we could say that *our works make our belief into faith*.

It’s a Goldilocks Theology...or a theology of the third way. Goldilocks went into the bears’ home and some things in the house were one extreme or the other – too hot, too, cold, too big, too small, too hard, too soft. But in each set of items there was always one that was “just right.” **Similarly: Faith and works both matter – but the order in which they come makes a**

**difference.** You start with faith. What you believe matters. Simply believing that God exists isn't even enough, though. Even the demons believe that, as James write here. There is a level of particularity that matters, without overdoing it as some do. And what we see is that *Jesus* matters. The cross of Christ matters. That's the only work that matters when it comes to righteousness in God's eyes. Jesus has done the work that you and I can never do for God to welcome us into His eternal presence. That is all God's grace, and that work is applied to our lives when we believe it. I hope you have that belief, and if you don't I invite you to take that step today.

And then I invite you to take action on that belief, so you would live in faith. That's the emphasis that Jesus and Paul have, and James, too. James highlights two people from the Old Testament who are known for their faith – because of what they did. First he mentions Abraham, and then Rahab as well. He goes on to say that faith without works is dead. It's like a lifeless body, which is his third illustration to drive the point home.

This idea that “belief put to action is faith” is something we know to be true in other facets of life, too. Believing a bungee cord will support you when you jump off a bridge is not faith. Jumping off the bridge is faith...as long as the bungee cord is attached to you and the bridge, that is. If it's not, then it's stupidity. ☺ Faith is believing the bungee will do its job, then taking the action of affixing it to yourself and to the bridge...and then doing the work of jumping. Anything short of that is not faith

So: **Faith is the combination of first “believing” and then “doing.”** I invite you into that kind of real faith today. Jesus is the only one who points to himself both as the one to believe in and the one whose teaching we should put to action...and also backed it up. He's done the work for you on the cross and He proves it with his resurrection. That's a God worth believing in, and worth working for, in all facets of life. That's a God in whom it is worth having a real and robust faith – there's no debate about that. Won't you live with that kind of faith today? Let's pray (**Sermon Graphic**)...Amen.

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