

Recognizing Genuine Saving Faith

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Date: 04 July 2021

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[0 : 00] I don't know how many of you still have a landline phone in your house. A few years ago, it would have been a really strange thing for someone not to, but now it's not quite so common.

I have one that is rarely used. When it rings, I know there are two possibilities. One, that it's my mum. Or two, that it's someone trying to sell me something.

But many of those calls are questionable. They make a claim about who they are. They say that they are from HMRC, from Microsoft, from my bank, without naming it.

They tell me about the problems that apparently I'm having with my broadband, about the warranties about to expire on my 20-year-old fridge, or about the fraudulent activity on my account. But it only takes a few seconds of hearing them talk, to know that they are not who they claim to be. Who they say they are, and what they say does not match up.

[1 : 08] As we look at tonight's passage, we'll see that James presents a question about how to recognise genuine saving faith.

Then he gives four illustrations to try and help us understand the issues, and ultimately to demonstrate the fundamental misunderstanding behind the original question.

So for those of you who like headings, we'll first be looking at a fundamental question in verse 14. And then we'll look at the four illustrations.

The futility of meaningless words in verses 15 and 16. The faith of demons in verses 18 and 19. The faith of Abraham in verses 20 to 24.

And the faith of Rahab in verse 25. And finally we'll conclude with James' two summary statements, verses 17 and 26.

[2 : 10] Which I guess if you want more alliteration you could call a frank answer. And so let's start off with that fundamental question. In verse 14.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?

This question is what this passage is all about. And it's an important question. But for many of you, this question will already be setting off a klaxon in your heads.

For some it will be a theological klaxon. Are you questioning salvation by faith alone? Surely this goes against everything we believe. Everything that Paul teaches us.

Everything the great reformers stood for. But for others it will be a more personal klaxon. Are you questioning my salvation? Are you questioning if I'm really saved?

[3 : 14] But this is the question that's central to the whole argument of James' letter. Because it's a letter filled with instruction to action.

To do this and not to do that. It talks a lot about how we speak. About how we treat others. And it's full of warnings against hypocrisy.

Against saying one thing and living in a completely different way. Back in chapter 1 verse 22 we read the warning Do not merely listen to the word and deceive yourselves.

Do what it says. And we see that this passage continues with that theme. This letter is primarily written to an audience that have probably come to Christianity from a Jewish background.

They have grown up with the Pharisees teaching them on all the many rules that they must follow to be right with God. And then they have heard this message of salvation by grace through the finished work of Christ.

[4 : 26] And it seems that they may have thought great. That's me off the hook. I can now just sit back and relax. I can do whatever I want.

I don't need to worry about those sacrifices and rituals. I also don't need to worry about helping the poor or loving my neighbour either. And James wants to make it crystal clear that that is not the

gospel.

And so we come in verses 15 and 16 to the first of these four illustrations the futility of meaningless words where James writes suppose a brother or 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?

While throughout the letter James frequently refers to the care of the poor I don't think that is actually primarily what his focus in these verses is about.

Instead this scenario is given to illustrate the futility of meaningless words how it's possible to say things that sound great but have nothing more behind them than vague sentiment.

[5 : 56] what good is it to tell the person you need to be warm and well fed and then do nothing to help despite the fact that you could?

It's pointless. It is just meaningless words. You would have been better saying nothing. And I think this is key to understanding that question at the heart of the passage because James asks what good is it if someone claims to have faith?

If someone makes a claim to have faith but it goes no further than mere words then it's pointless. It's just meaningless words.

They say that they are a Christian but there is no evidence of the reality of it. They may have confessed with their mouth but they have not believed in their heart.

It means nothing to them. I think probably this is most likely to happen in cultures where some form of Christianity is expected of you.

[7 : 09] At one point that would have been the case here. It still is the case in some parts of the USA where not being a Christian is seen as a hindrance in society.

We saw in Acts recently how at first many people wanted to be associated with the early church until things started getting serious and then they began to keep their distance.

Then the only people that chose to associate with them in the temple courts were those who had made the decision to follow Christ and to become one of them.

In our society in 21st century Edinburgh there is nothing really to be gained by claiming to be a Christian. In fact it may well be a hindrance.

In some countries it would be a literal death sentence. But I think we have to be careful. while there may be no pressure in our culture at large we all live within our own microcultures our own bubbles of people that we associate with.

[8 : 26] And in our social circles it might be the done thing to say that you're a Christian. In particular the children in our church grow up in a culture where being a Christian is the norm.

We need to be careful that we don't encourage them to say all the right things just to make us happy without it going any further than being mere words.

I remember one of the guys I grew up with in church recounted how one of the old ladies in the church would encourage him to get baptised. it was completely well-meaning but what she didn't realise was that he wasn't a Christian at the time.

He only came to church under duress because his parents forced him to. He later came to a real saving faith but until then it would have been easy for him to say and do all the right things and to fit in but it would have been pointless.

It would just be meaningless words and James makes it clear that meaningless words do not save. They are futile. And so we come on to our second illustration in verses 18 and 19 where we see the faith of demons.

[10 : 01] Here James challenges those who say that they have faith to show it. I think it's helpful here if we remember that there's nothing special about the word translated here as works, deeds or acts.

This is not some deep theological term with huge amounts of theological baggage. It's just a normal everyday word which means what it says. Things that people do.

And so James challenges them to show their faith without doing anything. And he will show his faith by what he does. The faith that they claim to have cannot be seen.

But their actions can. And how they live betrays the reality beneath the surface. then we see that James anticipates their response.

Their response but I believe. Surely, surely that's all that matters. And he comes back with a stinging retort. You believe that there is one God?

[11:11] Good. Even the demons believe that. Well done. Your faith is as good as the demons. We're told very little about demons but we can expect that they have a far greater knowledge of spiritual realities than we do.

And they hate it. As James says, they believe and they shudder. I think this is a very important distinction that has to be made.

And we're perhaps not always very good at expressing it. believing in God is not what matters. Trusting him is.

It's not a matter of intellectual assent to an idea like believing in extraterrestrial life or something like that. Rather, it's about trusting in that God and relying on his goodness and in particular his mercy shown to us through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Recently, we had a talk from Ash Cunningham on atheism. And he told a story of someone that he had met at a student outreach who at the beginning of the week was an atheist.

[12:35] It only took him until Tuesday to be convinced that there was a God God and even to be convinced that the biblical claims about God were true.

It took him the rest of the week to decide that this God was good and that he wanted to trust him. To quote Ash, he said, his atheism was not built primarily on the idea that God could not exist.

It was built on the supposition that God was not worth following. And James wants his readers to know that they have to make that step. They have to move from believing truth about God to trusting in him, acknowledging his goodness and acknowledging their need for him.

And so then we come in verses 20 to 24 to the third illustration where we see the faith of Abraham.

James writes, 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.

[14:07] 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.

You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. God said, this illustration at first seems the most problematic part of the passage, but actually it's the most helpful, particularly because there are several other passages that deal with the exact same events.

Because in particular, Paul writes about Abraham's faith in Romans 4, where he says, what shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?

If in fact Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about, but not before God.

What does scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

[15:29] Paul takes the exact same quote from Genesis, that Abraham believed God that was credited to him as righteousness, to show that Abraham was not made righteous because of his works, but that his righteousness was through his trust in the God who justifies the ungodly.

Paul makes it explicitly clear in the surrounding chapters that living a good enough life is impossible, and also that no number of religious rituals of sacrifice, penance, or dedication could ever compensate for our failure.

people. But Paul continues further down the chapter to say, the words I was credited to him were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness, for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

He was delivered over to death for our sins, and was raised to life for our justification. faith is not some sort of vague, fuzzy, religious feeling, but is a life-changing belief in and reliance on the completed work of Jesus for our salvation through his death and resurrection.

So what does James mean when he takes the same verse to show that faith without deeds is useless? I think the passage that was read to us in Hebrews 11 may help our understanding, because almost every sentence in it begins by faith.

[17:17] It is by faith that Abraham left his home. It is by faith he made his home in the promised land. It is by faith that he offered Isaac on the altar.

All of these actions were a result of his faith. His actions demonstrated what he believed. His actions showed that his faith was real, that his trust in God was not just academic, but that it was

what he was basing his life upon.

Now, that does not mean that Abraham lived a perfect life. Far from it. That's the great thing about the Bible. It gives us awarts and all view of these heroes of the faith.

We see that their lives are a mess. We see that at times they doubted God, that they thought that they knew better, but his life gives evidence that his faith is real.

We see that James said that Abraham was considered righteous when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. In the context, it's clear that James is not saying he was made righteous before God by these actions, but that he was shown to be righteous.

[18 : 38] James makes it clear that his righteousness was credited to him when he believed. And if we look back at Genesis, where that quotation comes from, we see that there are decades between these events.

That Abraham's actions when his faith was tested showed the reality of his faith that he has lived with over decades. But I think what James is saying is that if Abraham had believed God, went back in Haran, but had decided just to stay there because he was quite comfortable there.

If Abraham had believed God and never acted on it, if nothing about his life had changed, he would have to start asking serious questions about the reality of Abraham's faith.

And so it is with us. If we are striving to work our way to God by our good deeds, by going to church as often as we can, having non-stop worship music playing in our headphones, helping out with the food bank, giving to everyone we can, opening our homes, sharing amazing hospitality, giving a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on, and just hoping that it might be enough, we need to give up now.

You can't. It's a hopeless task, and it's not what James is teaching. You need to run to Jesus. You need to run to him with your failure, your inadequacy, your guilt, and then, trusting in him, you can go out and act in his strength.

[20 : 25] by his spirit, and live a life of service, out of love and gratitude, instead of out of guilt and fear. But if instead you're thinking, yeah, I'm fine.

I said a prayer at an SU camp 20 years ago, but, you know, since I left that camp all those years ago, I've not really given another thought.

my faith doesn't really feature anywhere in how I live my life. Nothing changed, and to be honest, you're quite happy that way.

If that's you, then I think that is exactly who James is addressing. And he's saying that the faith you claim to have is useless. If your faith is in no way affecting your actions, then you need to really start questioning the reality of your faith.

And likewise, you need to run to Jesus. You need to run to him with your hypocrisy, your pride, your laziness, and your fear.

[21 : 39] You need to ask him to change you from within, to give you new life, to put his spirit within you, and to give you the power to live for him. But for many of us, we will know that our faith is real.

We know that God has really moved in our lives, and that we are not the person that we once were, and certainly not the person that we were headed to become.

We know his spirit is at work within us, and yet we see so little change. We see that our actions are barely distinguishable from those around us.

We see that we have become complacent, that the sins we used to struggle with, we no longer struggle with, not because they're not there any longer, but because we've just accepted them as part of our lives.

we know that we are walking contradictions, that what we declare on Sunday and what we live on Monday are far too far apart.

[22 : 52] And firstly, we need to have confidence in our salvation. We should rest secure in the saving work of Christ, that he who begun a good work in us will be faithful to complete it, and that no one will snatch us out of his hand.

But we too must run to Christ. We must repent of our sin, our apathy, our hypocrisy, and we must ask for his strength to live for him each day as he slowly transforms us into his likeness.

We will fail again and again, but he is faithful. He will pick us up, dust us down, set us on our feet again and help us take one more step.

And then in the final illustration in verse 25, we see the faith of Rahab. James writes, 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.

We have lengthy accounts about Abraham's long journey of faith, but we know very little about Rahab. We have an account of this one event in her life in the book of Joshua.

[24 : 26] Then she's mentioned briefly here and in Hebrews 11 and she also probably gets a name call in the genealogy in Matthew's Gospel.

Rahab is a prostitute in the city of Jericho when the people of Israel are approaching under the leadership of Joshua, following their years of wandering in the wilderness.

And the people of Jericho have heard that they are approaching. As Rahab explains, I know that the Lord has given you this land and a great fear of you has fallen on us so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you.

We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed.

When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you. For the Lord, your God, is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

[25 : 44] So we see that the people know that the Israelites are approaching and are terrified. They've heard how their neighbours across the Jordan, the Amorites, were unable to stand up against them.

But as well as what happened recently, they know of what happened about 40 years ago when the Israelites left Egypt. But what's really terrifying them, what's causing them to melt in fear, is they've also heard that they're coming with the protection of a powerful God who's working miracles for them.

and it's into this context that Joshua has sent two spies into the city to see the lie of the land and they've sought shelter in Rahab's house.

In that situation, when the authorities came looking for them, she decided to hide the spies and let them later escape in secret.

In return, the spies promised that she and her family would be saved when they come and destroy the city. She had the exact same evidence as everyone else in the city.

[27 : 01] She even had the same belief that their success was because the Lord, their God, was with them. And based on that information, based on what she believed she had a choice to make, would she stand with her people in defiance of the Lord and put her faith in the strength of their walls and their armies, which would be quite reasonable.

It was one of the greatest fortified cities of the time. Or would she put her faith in the Lord? Would she acknowledge him as God in heaven and on earth below and side with him?

and put her life into his hands? She was putting her life in danger if she had been caught, and yet she saw where real security lay.

Faced with that choice, she had to make a decision about whose side was she on. And it couldn't just be an academic decision. She had to act on it.

Whatever she chose would determine the trajectory of the rest of her life. Faith was not to believe that the Israelites were coming with the power of God behind them.

[28 : 25] Faith was not even to believe that on balance, all things considered, she would be better off siding with the Lord instead of against him.

Faith was to step out and make that decision reality. She couldn't do nothing. That wasn't an option. She couldn't remain passive. Either she would hide the spies or she would hand them over.

Either she would trust God or she would trust the armies of Jericho. And like Rahab, we have a decision to make. As Peter reminded us this morning, we can't choose two contradictory options at the same time.

We're called to choose this day who we will serve. And like Rahab, such a decision is a life-changing decision. Like Rahab, it can't remain an academic question.

It's going to affect our lives. It's going to affect our choices, our words, our actions. It may affect our career choices, what we do with our weekends, what we do with our money.

[29 : 43] It could completely mess up our plans. In his autobiography, *A Better Ambition*, Tim Farron, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats, recounts his struggles to be a faithful follower of Christ within the world of national politics.

when he finally decided that he could no longer continue in that role, he finished his resignation speech like this.

I want to say one more thing. I joined our party when I was 16. It is in my blood. I love our history, our people.

I thoroughly love my party. Imagine how proud I am to lead this party, and then imagine what would lead me to voluntarily relinquish that honour.

In the words of Isaac Watts, it would have to be something so amazing, so divine, it demands my heart, my life, my all. Whatever you think of his politics, or of how he dealt with some of the challenges that he faced, that is what we are called to, to a life that gives everything, as the only reasonable response.

[31 : 06] And so, having looked at these four illustrations, what is James' conclusion? What is his frank answer? What is his answer to the question, can faith without works save?

In verse 17, he's pretty blunt. Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. And just in case you had a different meaning of dead in mind, he's even more explicit in verse 26.

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. James makes it clear here that when he says dead, he does not mean resting, inactive, not ideal, but still faith.

He means dead. He means it is not faith at all. And so, what's his answer? Can such faith save? I think we've seen through the examples that his answer is a big no.

Such so-called faith cannot save. But we have to be clear, this is not because we need something extra, something additional, as well as faith.

[32 : 34] He's not saying, yeah, faith is all very well, but for salvation you need works as well as that. He's saying, if it doesn't change your life, it's not faith at all.

Because he's shown us in the first example that mere words will not do us any good. He's shown us through the example of the demons that intellectual belief on its own will not save.

He's shown us through the example of Abraham that we are saved by faith, not by our works, but that how we will live will show the reality of our faith.

It has shown us through the example of Rahab that we have a choice to make. We have to decide who we will follow, and that decision will change our lives.

James goes on in the rest of the book to detail some aspects of what a life lived for Christ will look like, a life of humility, careful speech, of helping the needy.

[33 : 51] But as I come to an end, I'm very conscious that dealing with this passage, that some things I've said may be troubling to some of you.

If anything I've said has not accurately communicated what's in the passage, then I'm sorry, forget what I've said. But if what is troubling you was not my words, but the words of scripture that we have read together, then you should take it seriously.

It's not for me to question your salvation, that's between you and God. But if anything I've said has caused you to question the reality of your faith, then as I said before, run to Jesus.

And for all of us, there's a real challenge here. are we happy to compromise, to live lives that don't make it clear where our allegiances lie?

Or are we willing to step out and live lives that are transformed by the power of the Spirit at work within us? A life that demonstrates that our faith is the real, genuine thing and not a fake.

[35 : 12] Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that our salvation is only through faith in you.

We thank you for the work of Jesus on the cross, that he bore all our sin. and that he was raised to give us new life.

But Father, we confess that too often our lives don't show this reality. Too often we see great things. we think great things. And then we live lives that look just like anyone else.

Father, we pray that you will forgive our hypocrisy and that you will give us strength, that you will give us a desire to become more and more like you and that you will work in us each day to bring about this transformation.

[36 : 46] And for any whose faith is not in you, Father, we pray that they will see that there is no hope anywhere else, but that you are there waiting to welcome them.

And we pray that they might turn to you tonight. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.