James Lesson 4 (2022)

**FAITH IS MADE COMPLETE BY GOOD DEEDS**

James 2:14-26

Key verse: 2:22

“You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.”

One of the main arguments in the book of James is that faith, without good deeds, is dead. James didn’t just indicate it. As you read in today’s passage, he was adamant about his argument. He repeats similar phrases, highlighting that faith, without good actions, is lifeless (17, 20, 24, 26).

Those familiar with the doctrine of justification by faith alone may wonder if James’ teaching and Paul’s teaching are opposing one another. In fact, Martin Luther, one of the leading Protestant Reformers, thought that the book of James should be removed from the Christian Bibles. I am glad that the book of James survived and remained in the biblical canon. Why? It’s because James’ teaching counterbalances the overemphasis of salvation by faith alone.

What would Jesus, our Lord, think of what James taught? I believe Jesus would have approved James’ teaching more than 100 %. Why do I think that way? The best example is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, in which he taught a high standard of Christian living, behaviors, and ethics. Jesus also said to his followers, “You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world… Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Mt. 5:13-16)

According to James, our faith is useless and dead if we don’t struggle to live up to God’s high calling. Our faith and good deeds have a synergy effect, working together. Faith is made complete by what we do (22). There is so much to think about in today's short passage. So, we need to work hard to learn how our faith and good deeds work together and how our life of faith may not remain stagnant but be flourishing, rewarding, and fruitful.

Look at 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?” Here, James presents a person who claims to have faith and does not have any acts corresponding to that faith. James questions whether this kind of faith is called saving faith. The answer is “Absolutely not.” Why not? James explains it in several ways.

***First, faith without action is dead (15-17).*** Look at verses 15-16. “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?” The case in these verses illustrates the desperate need of a person for daily survival. The person needs clothes and food, more than just kind words of sympathy.

We often face people who need help for survival due to natural disasters. We feel sorry for them, express our sympathy, and offer our prayers that the Lord may provide them with what they need. I am glad that many of us pray for them and contribute money and other resources to help them get out of their desperate situation. Yet, if we offer only words of sympathy and do nothing to help them practically, we are almost useless. James’ point is that we must do something and take action.

In verse 17, James makes his point that faith also requires action. He said in verse 17. “In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” In other words, no matter how great faith we claim to have, faith is dead if we don’t take action corresponding to that faith. Actions are vital signs that our faith is not dead but alive.

Is your faith alive or dead? If it is active, do you have deeds to prove it? It leads us to James’s second point.

**Second, faith and actions are not separable (18-20).** Look at verse 18. “But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.” It’s interesting how James proceeds his argument. Someone may have said faith and actions are two separate things. James’ answer is “No.” Faith and actions are not separable. That’s why James challenges their false assumption, saying, **"Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.”**

We know that under the false assumption that faith and actions are two separate things, anybody can say they have great faith in God. They may sound so convincing and impress many people. But how do we know their faith is genuine? It’s hard. But we can eventually know whether their faith is true or not based on their action because actions speak louder than words.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:15-18 when warned against false prophets, “By their fruit, you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.”

The prime example of false faith is the faith of the demons. Look at verse 19. “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that-and shudder.” The demons tremble before God, knowing that God is the only true God. Yet, their knowledge does not lead them to repentance. They remain evil. Here, we learn that our faith is not genuine if it does not lead us to repentance. In other words, true faith produces the fruit of repentance.

Look at verse 20. “You foolish person, do you want evidence of faith without deed is useless?” James states that it’s foolish to think that faith alone, apart from actions, has some saving value. Such kind of thinking is dangerous and nothing but an illusion. However, many Christians think that if they believe that Jesus Christ is their Savior, they are saved and go to heaven. They don’t take their Christian lives seriously enough and remain nominal Christians. Why are we tempted to stay as nominal Christians?

One main reason is the gospel has been watered-down by popular preachers. Of course, it’s true that Apostle clearly states, “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As the Scripture says, ‘Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.’” (Ro. 10:9-11)

What Paul talks about in these verses is justification, which is just a beginning point of God’s salvation in us. But most people believe that once saved, always saved, assuming that spiritual struggle to obey God’s word is unnecessary. But that’s a distortion of the gospel that Paul preached. Apostle Paul emphasized the importance of obedience to God’s words after being justified. He said in Romans 1:5, “Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake.” Paul also said in Philippians 2:12-13, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed-not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence-continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” Christian faith is not separated from acts of obedience.

Considering that Christian salvation includes three stages: justification, sanctification, and glorification, James’ teaching and Paul’s teaching are not contradictory. However, they appear contradictory when some people focus on Paul’s emphasis on justification by faith, which does not require our work. In contrast, James focuses on sanctification by faith, a lifelong process requiring good deeds.

To illustrate that faith is useless apart from work, James brings out Abraham and Rahab's examples in the following verses. Look at verses 21-24. “Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith and his action were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 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.”

We are reminded of what Paul said when we read these verses, quoting the same Scripture, Genesis 15:6. When Paul mentioned Genesis 15:6, he was trying to prove that justification is by faith alone, not by works. Romans 4:2 and 3 states, “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.’”

But James sees it from a different perspective. He quotes the same verse from Genesis 15:6 to prove that faith without deed is not valid. He said in verse 21. “Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?” Wait a minute! We don’t understand James’ logic. When Abraham’s faith was credited as his righteousness, Abraham was 86 years old. And Isaac was born when Abraham was 100 years old and offered Isaac many years after Isaac’s birth (25-30 years gap). Still, we wonder why James insisted that Abraham was considered righteous for what he did when he offered Isaac? There was a time gap between these two, around 25-30 years.

How does James explain it? Look at verse 23. “You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’” What did James mean by this explanation? It means that Abraham's faith in God in Genesis 15:6 found its fulfillment in his act of offering his son as a sacrifice. Abraham’s faith and action were not separate matters. They worked together. In fact, Abraham’s faith was made complete by his act of obedience. In other words, Abraham was already saved by faith even before he offered Isaac, and the act of sacrificing his son Isaac confirmed that Abraham’s faith was genuine.

We see the same point in the case of Rahab. Look at verse 25. “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?” Joshua 2:1-24 shows that Rahab believed in the God of Israel even before the spies came to her home. And when they came to her house, she demonstrated her faith through her good deeds by hiding and protecting them.

James concludes his argument by saying in verse 26. “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” In this verse, James restates what he said in verse 17, “In the same way, faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead.” A body without breath is a corpse, which is cold and lifeless. When a person is unconscious, medical doctors or nurses check the vital signs, including pulse and breath. Even though their hearts stop beating and they stop breathing, CPR is done, hoping that the person will not die. For about 4 minutes, there is still enough oxygen in the blood to sustain life. But if there is no vital sign after 10-15 minutes of CPR, the person can be safely pronounced dead.

The same principle is applied to our faith. If our faith is alive, it tends to produce works over time. But if there are still no changes and good results, we may pronounce our faith dead.

Let me close my sermon. What do we take from this passage? A living faith will always produce good works. We become the heirs of eternal life and God’s kingdom by God’s grace through our Lord Jesus Christ. We are saved to do good works in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:10 states, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

As God’s beloved children, we have a lot of resources that can be utilized to serve God and his people in need: our time, money, talents, etc. We see people in need of loving care and support, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and financially. Faith without good deeds is useless and dead. We must ask ourselves, *“Does my faith in Christ promote service to my brothers and sisters who are in need?”* It’s overwhelming to see the tremendous needs of the people. But when we do something even small in the care of those in need, we can make a small difference. It’s a good beginning.

We can also be confident that our faith is alive and growing; our life of faith will not be stagnant. It will be flourishing, fulfilling, and fruitful. We have been stuck because of a pandemic for almost two years. But I hope and pray that our faith is made complete by what we do in our day-to-day life. And great reward from heaven is ours now and forever.