



“Resurrecting a Dead Faith” (James 2:14-26)

Cornerstone Bible Church • Lilburn, Georgia
June 3, 2018 • Dr Doug McIntosh

We’re taking a look at James 2 in our ministry of the word this morning, and I want to begin by reading our passage. You will notice on your printout that I have made a point of designating the two speakers in this chapter, and therein hangs some of what makes this a challenging text. James 2 is one of a handful of passages in Scripture where punctuation takes on a great deal of importance. So let’s begin by looking at James 2:14, where the brackets indicate that James is the one making the point.

SCRIPTURE: JAMES 2:14-26

[JAMES] *14 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Faith cannot save him, can it? 15 If a brother is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to him, “Depart in peace, be warmed and be filled,” but you do not give him the things that are needed for the body, what does it profit? 17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say,*

[THE OBJECTOR] *“You have faith and I have works. Show me your faith by your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that God is one, so you do what is right; but demons also believe that, and they only tremble.”*

[JAMES] *20 But do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is dead?*

[Let me pause here to do some clarifying. Almost all modern translations make a punctuation mistake here, as do most of the commentaries. That’s why I cheated

just a bit by putting at the beginning of each section the person who is speaking. You will notice that in verses 14-18a it is James, the author of the epistle, who is the speaker. Then beginning in the second part of verse 18, we have a new figure, an imaginary objector, who doesn't like what James is saying, so he puts in his two cents' worth. And that is where the punctuation comes in, and by that I mean the quotation marks.

How much does the objector say? Most translations close the quotation marks early in verse 18 after, "*You have faith, and I have works.*" One translation, the *New American Standard Bible*, extends the quote to include all of verse 18; but the consensus is that the quotes should close after, "*You have faith, and I have works.*"

So—to the broader question who decides where the punctuation goes in a passage? Did James put punctuation marks in his original letter?

The answer is No. The earliest manuscripts that we have do not include any punctuation marks, which in fact are quite modern. The very earliest do not even distinguish between capital and lower case letters. Some of them don't put periods at the end of sentences; many do not even leave spaces between words. The only way James had of helping us here is the wording of the text itself. And he left us two huge clues about his thinking. But not to get ahead of things, let's read my translation of the text to see how the passage works.

We find James' two clues here in verse 20.

For the first, note especially the phrase, "*You foolish person.*" This is the first clue. James is speaking again, and he's taking on the objector and telling him he's all wet. He makes it easy for us to know that his refutation has begun by putting those words, "*You foolish person,*" into his passage. So the quotation marks should not close until the end of verse 19.

Notice also his second clue. As James returns to his point after hearing his imaginary objector, he immediately repeats verse 17, where he stopped speaking and injected the words of the objector. "*Faith apart from works is dead.*" That's the point he wants to make. Because he does this, he helps us to trace the resumption of his own argument. In verse 20 he repeats that statement verbatim, and goes on to defend it by giving two examples. I'll have more to say about the objector and his argument when we meet next time. But let's read on.]

21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was working along with his works, and faith was matured by his works; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS COUNTED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS"—and he was

called the friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

25 In the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

THE PROBLEM JAMES IS ADDRESSING

James is addressing a very common problem in the church of Jesus Christ. It is the problem of the believer whose faith has grown cold and lifeless. From this terrible dead condition, he needs to be saved—not saved from eternal condemnation, but saved from plowing his life into things that will be valueless in a few short years—from wasting his life. He needs to be rescued from this condition, which is not only useless for ministry, but will also prove a source of shame at the judgment seat of Christ, as he noted in verses 12 and 13 of chapter 2.

We are looking at a distinctively Christian problem. It is Christians who sometimes find themselves drifting away from the original joy of their experience, and they don't always understand how that drift began. That is what James is going to tell us. He is going to tell us why it happens, and what to do about it.

So let's turn now to the issue of...

THE SOLUTION JAMES OFFERS

He says that such a cold and lifeless faith is like a corpse: what made it alive is missing. In telling us this, he uses a particularly helpful analogy. Verse 26 says, "*As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead.*" Let's explore this analogy for a minute, because in it we find the key to resurrecting a cold and lifeless faith. Many people miss the point here because they read the text casually.

There is one thing that is often overlooked here. When you see a dead body, you know two things. First, that it is lifeless now. Secondly, you know that it once was alive. There was a faith there once. Now, it's missing.

You have here two pairs of terms. One set is tangible (the body, works), and one set is intangible (the spirit, faith). Curiously, many people read this as though James is saying that if your faith is real, it will energize your works. If you truly believe, you will be active in the practice of your faith. In other words, works are the inevitable byproduct of faith.

While that sounds good, actually James is saying just the opposite. It helps to lay out these terms side by side to see how this works. It requires a careful understanding to get it right.

Buttressed by careful understanding

Remember, the spirit is the animating force of the body. If the spirit is missing, the body is dead. So, the key to resurrecting a cold faith is to put the spirit into it. And the spirit or animating force of faith is works, not the other way around.

The pairing runs this way: works (what is tangible) is likened to the spirit; faith (what is intangible) is likened to the corpse. What James is saying is this: If your works are there, they will give life to and energize your faith. If your faith is cold and lifeless, what it needs to energize it is not more faith; instead, it needs works.

Through the years I have talked with a lot of people who recognize that their faith fits into the “cold and lifeless” category. They want to know what to do. They want a suggestion about how to change that. Often people expect that I’m going to advise them to get involved in a new Bible study or go to a conference. But that’s not what I recommend.

My counsel is the same as James’s. If your faith has grown cold, you don’t need more time in the study of the Scripture; you don’t need to pray more; you don’t need to attend a seminar; you don’t need to be more faithful in your church attendance. I don’t mean to suggest that those are bad things; far from it. But they won’t bring vitality and enthusiasm to your faith if your faith has grown cold.

What you do need to do is to invest yourself in ministry to people. When you begin to do that, you will find that your spiritual excitement, your enthusiasm for the things of the Lord, will grow warm and vital again, and you will save yourself from the folly of throwing your life away, and there will be no cause for shame at the judgment seat of Christ. That is James’s solution, his recipe, if you will, for resurrecting a dead faith. Many people have discovered this, but I’ll give you one good example.

Buttressed by example

It comes from the experience of a Methodist minister of a past generation, William Stidger of Boston. During a depressing period of his life, he was advised to reach out to others with encouragement and thanksgiving. In other words, he was urged to inject works into his experience to re-animate his faith. He sat down and began to think of the benefits he had received during his life from other people. He remembered an English teacher he had studied under years before, who had given him a love of poetry that stayed with him all his life. He wrote a letter of thanks to the teacher, who by this time was well advanced in years.

He soon received back a letter that began: “My dear Willie.” That thrilled him right away. By this time he was pudgy and bald, a seminary professor, and he didn’t think there was anybody left in the world who would call him “Willie.” Anyway, this is what she said:

My dear Willie,

I cannot tell you how much your note meant to me. I am in my eighties, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, lonely and, like the last leaf of autumn, lingering behind. You will be interested to know that I taught school for fifty years and yours is the first note of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue-cold morning and it cheered me as nothing has in many years.

There was a brightness that came to William Stidger's heart as he read those words. It swept away a lot of spiritual lethargy and he began to write other words of encouragement to other people. His interest in ministry was renewed and invigorated because he took that first step of good works.

That is the great beauty of ministry. It always has two effects. One is the good it does for others. The other effect is the good it does for the one doing ministry. Actually, there is no comparison between the two. The one who ministers always takes far more from the experience than the one who receives ministry. If you have been letting your faith be a receiving experience only, you are cheating yourself immeasurably. God's greatest gifts he reserves for those who, like his Son, minister to others. Works animate faith. In fact, they resurrect faith.

But we don't really base this viewpoint on experience alone. It is certainly...

Buttressed by Scripture

As you might expect, a principle this important finds support in many places in Scripture. Probably the closest analogy is in the letter to Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7. Jesus is speaking to a whole church whose faith is in a cold and lifeless condition. He says to them,

I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil.... Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.

The church had left its original love of Jesus. What is his prescription for them? More Bible study? More church attendance? No. Repent and do the first works. The vitality of their faith will return. Their faith will be resurrected and be as vital as it once was. Works—doing the word, being a doer and not just a hearer—is the solution. That's James's solution as it is Jesus' solution. And, as the Lord says, it starts with repentance. You have to see the problem and take action. And the required action is works... ministry. That will change everything.

So, we have our answer: to resurrect a dead faith, don't just let inertia dictate what you do; repent and engage in ministry. It will accomplish two things. It will benefit other people, and it will benefit you. And so we ask...

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A BELIEVER ENGAGES IN FAITHFUL MINISTRY?

Two things happen. First...

He is justified by works

That's the point of verse 24, where he writes, "*You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*"

And oh, that little adverb *alone* creates no end of difficulties. Many people read this and formulate an equation in their minds. They think that James is advocating a kind of justification before God that is a hybrid mixture of faith and works.

What it isn't

People think James is saying "Faith plus works = justification." That is actually the exact reverse of what he is saying. In fact, that is false teaching. He is not saying, "You trust God for some of it; then you go out and do a lot of work, and in the end you will get into heaven." It is painful for me even to repeat those words. Protestant Christianity has condemned that kind of teaching for four and a half centuries, because it is terribly misleading.

Let me pause here to urge you to understand this. There is nothing more important to understand in the word of God than this. If you make mistakes in many areas of life, the consequences are painful, but you can live with them. If you wear stripes with checks, your friends may give you a funny look or two, but you can live with that. If you don't check the oil in your car, you may ruin your engine. You can even live with that.

But if you are approaching God on the basis of a faith and works mixture, you cannot live with that. Justification before God does not come by trusting God for fifty percent of what you need to get into his presence and then going out and trying to earn the other fifty percent. There is no hybrid justification accomplished by a faith plus works mixture.

What it is

What James is saying is that there are two complete and entirely separate justifications. "*You see then that a person is justified by works, and not by faith alone.*" There is one justification by faith, and a second justification by works. There is no hybrid justification of faith plus works. Paul speaks of one justification, the justification that comes from faith. James speaks of another justification, the

justification of works.

The justification by faith takes place in the mind of God when the believer accepts the truthfulness of God's promise. God said to Abram, "*Your descendants will be as numerous than the sand of the sea.*" And he believed in the Lord (Gen 15:1-6). That is how a person is made right and fit for eternity in the sight of God. Jesus said, "*The one who believes in me shall never die*" (John 11:26). He said, "*He who believes in me has eternal life*" (John 6:47). No mention of works whatsoever.

But there is another justification, James says. Justification by works takes place in the mind of men when the believer obeys God's commands and engages in good works.

He calls attention to the actions of Abraham in offering up Isaac. Are you impressed? I certainly am. Abraham gained a reputation for godliness by his actions. He did not "become" the friend of God, he "*was called the friend of God.*"

Interestingly enough, the Apostle Paul agrees tacitly with this. In Romans 4:2, he says, "*If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about—BUT NOT BEFORE GOD.*" Nobody is going to stand before God and boast that he got there because he was such a good person and that his works prove it. But before men, who cannot see the heart as God does, a person's behavior gives him credibility. And how did Abraham gain credibility? Through the way he behaved while in a test—in the severest test of his life. That is what the believers that James is writing are doing. They are going through persecution and severe testing. Their actions will either justify them or they won't.

Being justified by works involves time, obedience, and maturity. They don't automatically happen because of conversion, but they never will happen without conversion. So, the godly believer who is faithful to engage in good works is justified by those works. He is justified before people, who see his behavior and place a stamp of approval on his life.

But there is another benefit...

His faith is matured by his works

So when a believer faithfully engages in ministry to others, he is justified before men by his works. But something happens to his faith as well. It is matured by his works. Verse 22 says, "*You see that faith was working along with his works, and faith was matured by his works.*"

Abraham's early experience of faith was less than satisfactory. God said, "Leave your family and go to the land I will show you." Abraham did not obey that command perfectly. He stumbled around for years and waited until his father died before he left home. When he finally arrived in the land, a famine took place and he panicked and took off for Egypt. He tried to pass his wife off as his sister to

save his own skin—twice. He shows many admirable qualities, of course, but his faith took a while to develop.

By chapter 22 of Genesis, however, his faith shows great maturity because here it is that God gives him a great test. God said to him, “Abraham, I want you to do something hard. I want you to trust me to complete the promise I made to you. I told you that Isaac would have many children and grandchildren, more than you could number. I want you to take Isaac and offer him up as a burnt offering to me on an altar that I will appoint.”

How did Abraham react? We see what he did, and the Scripture also tells us how he thought. He thought, “God has promised to give me many grandchildren through Isaac. I believe that he will fulfill that promise. God also detests the taking of human life. That I know about him. He can’t fulfill his word if Isaac is dead. Yet he told me to take his life. That leaves only one alternative. God is going to raise Isaac from the dead after I take his life.” In other words, he demonstrates a huge faith. His faith was increased because of his obedience.

So Abraham went off to the land of Moriah to complete his test, and we know that at the last minute God withdrew His request, because Abraham had passed the test. We see a faith that is in full flower because Abraham did not shrink from obeying even the hard requests God made of him.

When your life is marked by good works, when you invest yourself in ministry to people, your faith matures. Your faith is made strong as you obey God and minister to others. You will be less and less likely to go through cold and lifeless periods in your Christian life.

But not only are you justified by your works, not only is your faith matured by your works, your works complete the purpose of your justification by faith. God justifies the one who believes in Jesus Christ so that he can do good. The Apostle Paul is the one who said, “*We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for [not by] good works, which he ordained that we should walk in them*” (Eph 2:10).

James puts it this way in verse 23: “*And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’* Abraham made God’s previous commentary on his faith full of meaning because of what he did in the crisis with Isaac. We see there that what God had once “counted” to him, he now possesses. He is a righteous man—not simply because God declared him to be one, but because he has become one. And may it be so with us.

contain the above copyright notice. This data file/manuscript may not be copied in part (except for small quotations used with citation of source), edited, revised, copied for resale, or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays, or other products offered for sale without the written permission of the copyright holder. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Dr. Doug McIntosh, 5753 Levelland Trail, Lilburn, GA 30047.