

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

Faith and Works James 2:14-26 Part Three

We sang a song last week entitled “It Is Well With My Soul.” Listen to the words of this song:

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll - Whatever my lot,
thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul.*

*My sin - O the joy of this glorious thought - My sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross,
and I bear it no more: Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, O my soul!*

*And, Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight, The clouds be rolled back as a scroll: The
trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend, “Even so” - It is well with my soul.*

For the redeemed, for the truly born again, all that is conveyed in this song is gloriously true. It is well with their soul. They may lose everything in terms of the things of this world but they are secure in Christ. They are secure because their sin, not in part but the whole, has been nailed to the cross, and they bear it no more. It is well with their soul. It is so well with their soul that even when the King of Glory descends and they see Him face to face, even so, it is well with their soul.

But how can people know whether or not they are a part of the redeemed community? How can they know whether or not they are born again? How can they know whether or not it is truly “well with their soul?”

The epistle of James was written to answer this very question. The theme of this great epistle is “Tests of Living Faith.” The first test that we examined was the “Response to Trials test” in **James 1:2-18**. The second test that we examined was the “Response to the Word test” in **James 1:19-27**. The third test that we have examined was the “Impartiality test” in **James 2:1-13**. We are now considering a fourth test found in this epistle and we will call it, “The Works test” in **James 2:14-26**.

In developing this test James contrasts dead faith with living faith. He establishes this contrast first of all by giving to us the characteristics of “dead faith” in VV. 14-20. The first characteristic we considered was an “empty confession” in V. 14. **“What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save Him?”** And of course the answer to that question is, no! It does not matter what we say if there is no works to back it up, no matter how adamantly we proclaim it. The second characteristic of dead faith that we have examined was a “false compassion” in VV. 15-17, **“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,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”** This passage illustrates the point that James made in V. 14. He does this by comparing the so-called profession of faith without the corresponding works of faith to words of compassion without the corresponding works of compassion. If we say that we have faith let us see the works of faith. If we say that we have compassion let us see the works of compassion.

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

James is now going on to the third and last characteristic of “dead faith.” And that is “shallow conviction.” I hope and pray that this study will help us to understand that having a right theology does not bring us salvation. Having a right theology is necessary for salvation, that is true. But having a right theology does not save us. In fact there are many people who are very orthodox in their doctrine but who have a “dead faith.” My hope is not to bring you grief through these messages but rather that we as a congregation might be united together in a great sense of personal well being.

Shallow Conviction

What exactly do I mean when I speak of a “shallow conviction?” Shallow conviction is present when a person accepts certain facts about God and His Word as true without submitting to either.

Let us read **James 2:18-20**, “**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. You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?”**

This passage may at first glance not be a very difficult passage to interpret but certain commentators consider these three verses among the most difficult verses to interpret in all of the New Testament. The problem of interpretation begins to unfold when we seek to identify, who James is referring to when he says, “**But someone may well say,.**” There are basically three different views:

(1) The “someone” could very well be an ally of James or perhaps even James himself. This would be an excellent interpretation if we could somehow get around the very first word in **V.18** which is the word “but” (ALLA). The reason why this word is difficult is because it most commonly introduces an objection. If this word is in fact introducing an objection, there is no way that we could consider the “someone” to be an ally of James. And therefore we are led to the second major option among Bible commentators and that is

(2) The “someone” is an opponent of James. Though this avoids the problem that we have just discussed in the first possible interpretation, it has it’s own problems. If this is the proper interpretation, where do the words of the objector end and those of James begin? It does not at all flow and gives us the sense of a strained interpretation.

(3) A third way of understanding the opening statement is to connect the “you” and “I” not to James and his opponent but rather to representative positions within the church. There are people saying they have faith and there are other people saying that they have works. But if this were so then most all commentators believe that it would have been structured differently in respect to its grammar (“ALLOS ALLOS” one has faith and another has works”).

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

So who is James referring to when he says, **“Someone may well say, I believe that the best interpretation would be that the “someone” is an ally of James. He is a person who agrees with James.** He is a person who would agree with the words of James in the previous verse in **James 1:17** when he says, **“Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”** A person who professes faith in Christ must have a life that is consistent with that profession. But if we accept this as the best interpretation, how can we overcome the objection that the word **“but”** (ALLA) most commonly introduces an objection? We can do this very simply by saying that though this translation is the most common translation of the Greek word it is not the only translation.

Though the Greek word “ALLA” is most commonly translated “but” it can also be translated “indeed” or “yea,” And this is the way that it is translated in the KJV. Listen how it reads, rather than saying “But someone may say...” it says, “Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works” Though this use is uncommon it is supported in certain New Testament passages such as **John 16:2; 1 Cor. 3:2; 2 Cor. 7:11; 11:1; Phil. 1:18.**

So let us go back to **V. 18** again and read it with this new understanding. Rather than reading, **“But someone may well say,...”** we now understand it to say, **“Indeed someone may well say,” And what will this person who agrees with Paul 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.”** This ally of James, this person who agrees with James, is challenging a particular person. And who is this person?

I believe that the person being challenged is the person in **V.14** who is characterized by an “empty confession.” I believe that the person being challenged is the person in **VV.15-17** who is characterized by “false compassion.” It is the person who may have been sitting in church for 10, 20, 30, 40 years saying that they are a Christian, professing to have faith, saying the right things at the appropriate times, believing the right things, but who does not demonstrate the reality of it. They have a so-called faith but it is without works. They look like the average law-abiding American citizen but they certainly do not look like a true disciple of Christ.

They are not striving to make disciples. They are not striving to baptize those disciples in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are not striving to be obedient to all that Christ commanded them and teaching others to obey also. Their lives are wrapped up in their plans and their goals and their dreams rather than in the pursuit of holiness and in obeying the Great Commission, but they come to church when it is convenient and sing the song “It Is Well With My Soul.”

It is this person that the ally of James is now challenging. And what does he say? **“Show me your faith without the works.”** If you are here this weekend and you say that you have faith, if you are here this weekend and you say that you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and that he died for your sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried and that he arose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and on the basis of these truths you have by faith embraced Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Yet you are not striving to be the person that Christ wants you to be and you are not striving to do what Christ has commissioned you to do.

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

And you are more concerned about storing up treasure on earth rather than treasure in heaven. Then respond to this challenge. **“Show me your faith without the works.”** And do you know what? You won’t be able to do it. The only way for true, genuine, living, saving faith to be manifested is through works.

Therefore if our lives are not characterized by works then let us be careful before we sing the song, “It is Well With My Soul.” But if our lives in fact are characterized by works, if we are striving to be the person that Christ wants us to be and we are striving to do what Christ has commissioned us to do, then our faith which saves is being manifested. That is why this ally of James goes on to say, **“... and I will show you my faith by my works.”**

Every true Christian has times of unfaithfulness, sin and barrenness. It is during those times that he is in danger of losing assurance of salvation, for the blessing of peace and confidence from the Spirit is forfeited. Security of salvation is eternal and permanent, being based on the Lord's sovereign power to keep those who belong to Him. But assurance of salvation is temporal and can fluctuate, for it is a blessing granted to those who are obedient to the Lord.

Just in case we have not gotten the point, it is driven home in **V.19, “You believe that God is one, you do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.”**

Jewish orthodoxy was always centered in the belief of one true God. This is stated very clearly in **Deut. 6:4, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!”** Where most Jews fell short was in not obeying the next verse, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”**

James’s point is that belief in the truth of **Deuteronomy 6:4** without obedience to **Deuteronomy 6:5** is a worthless kind of belief like, that possessed by **“demons.”**

As far as factual doctrine is concerned, demons are monotheists, all of whom know and believe there is one true God. They also are very much aware that Scripture is God’s Word, that Jesus Christ is God’s son, that salvation is by grace through faith, that Jesus died, was buried, and raised to atone for the sins of the world, and that He ascended to heaven and is now seated at His Father’s right hand. They know quite well that there is a literal heaven and a literal hell. They doubtless have a clearer knowledge of the millennium and its related truths than does even the most devoted Bible scholar. But all of that orthodox knowledge, divinely and eternally significant as it is, cannot save them.

Orthodox doctrine is immeasurably better than heresy, of course, for it is true and points toward God and the way of salvation. That is why James says to the person who believes that God is one that they **“do well.”** But mere assent to it as true cannot bring a person to God and to salvation.

The word **“shudder”** (PHRISSO) means to bristle and tremble and was commonly used of the **trembling associated with great fear.**

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

Demons at least have the sense to “**shudder**” at God’s truth in a state of fear, for they know that eternal torments awaits them in hell (Matt. 8:29-31; Mark 5:7; Luke 4:41; Acts 19:15). In that regard, they are much more realistic and sensible than those with false faith who think they will escape God’s judgment by their shallow and superficial faith.

The Puritan theologian Thomas Manton described non-saving faith in forceful terms:

“It is a simple and naked assent to such things as are propounded in the Word of God, and maketh men more knowing but not better, not more holy or heavenly. They that have it may believe the promises, the doctrines, the precepts as well as the histories.... but yet, lively saving faith it is not, for he who hath that findeth his heart engaged to Christ and doth so believe the promises of the gospel concerning pardon of sin and life eternal that he seeth after them as his happiness. And doth so believe the mysteries of our redemption by Christ as that all his hope and peace and confidence is drawn from thence and doth so believe the threatenings, whether of temporal plagues or eternal damnation as that in comparison of them all the frightful things of the world are as nothing.”

He goes on to speak of a somewhat deeper kind of faith, which because it is nearer to genuine, complete faith, is all the more deceptive.

“This sort of faith is distinguished from temporary faith, which is an assent to scriptural or gospel truth, accompanied with a slight and insufficient touch upon the heart, called “a taste of the heavenly gift, and of the good Word of God, and the powers of the world to come” (Heb. 6:4-6). By this kind of faith, the mind is not only enlightened, but the heart affected with some joy, and the life in some measure reformed, at least, from grosser sins, called,” “escaping the pollutions of the world,” (2 Pet. 2:20); but the impression is not deep enough, nor is the joy and delight rooted enough to encounter all temptations to the contrary. Therefore this sense of religion may be choked, or worn off, either by the cares of this world, or by the voluptuous living, or by great and bitter persecutions and troubles of righteousness sake. It is a common deceit; many are persuaded that Jesus is the Christ, the only Son of God, and so are moved to embrace His person, and in some measure to obey His precepts, and to depend upon His promises, and fear His threatenings, and so by consequence to have their hearts loosened from the world in part, and seem to prefer Christ and their duty to Him above worldly things, as long as no temptations do assault their resolutions, or sensual objects stand not up in any considerable strength to entice them; but at length, when they find His laws so strict and spiritual, and contrary either to the bent of their affections or worldly interests, they fall off, and lose all their taste and relish of the hopes of the gospel, and so declare plainly that they were not rooted and grounded in the faith and hope thereof.”

Further, James asks, “**But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?**” “**Foolish**” has the idea of “empty” or “defective” and identifies anyone who opposes the truth, that true saving faith produces works of righteousness.

“Useless” (ARGOS) carries the idea of fruitlessness, lack of productivity. Remember the words of Christ in **Matt. 7:19, “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and is thrown into the fire.”** A fruitless tree is certain proof that it does not belong to God and is unacceptable to God, because it does not have His divine life within.

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

CONCLUSION

A dead faith is characterized by “an empty confession,” “false compassion,” and finally a “shallow conviction.” It is not enough to profess that we believe. We must actually exercise saving faith. And we will know that this has taken place when we see the works of faith manifested in our lives. And when we see the works of faith manifested in our lives, it is then and only then that we will be able to sing with confidence that it is “well with our soul.”

Is it well with your soul? If you have listened to this message this morning and have come to the conviction that you have never exercised a genuine, saving faith. If you have listened to this message this morning and you have come to the conviction that your so-called faith is a dead faith. You recognize that you have never seen your life changed or transformed, then I would encourage you to at this very moment to do the following:

Recognize that you are a sinner and cannot save yourself.

Recognize that what you could not do Christ did for you in His death, burial, and resurrection.

And therefore on the basis of these facts, will you by faith now turn from going your own way and embrace Jesus as your Lord and Savior, committing yourself to be the person God would have you to be and to do the things God would have you to do? If God by His grace would unite us all in this way then there would not be a single individual who would not be able to sing this song enthusiastically based on the clear teachings of God’s Word.

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll - Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul.

My sin - O the joy of this glorious thought - My sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more: Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, O my soul!

And, Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight, The clouds be rolled back as a scroll: The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend, “Even so” - It is well with my soul.