

Dead Christianity

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[0 : 00] Well if we could, with the Lord's help, and the Lord's enabling this evening, if we could turn to that portion that we read, the letter of James chapter 2, James chapter 2, and if we just take as our text the words of verse 14, where James asks, what good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works, can that faith save him? Can that faith save him? And so this evening we're continuing our study.

In the letter of James, we've neglected it for a wee while, but we're coming back to it. And as we've said on a number of occasions, the letter of James is to be considered as a handbook to Christian living, because the emphasis of this letter is not so much on information but upon application. James wants us to be able to apply the gospel in our everyday lives and live out our Christianity in a practical way. He says that our knowledge of the Bible is no use to us if we can't apply it practically. It's no use knowing what to do and doing nothing with it. And so the message which James wants to get across to us is that Christianity and being a Christian is not just about believing certain doctrines and following certain traditions.

It's about having your life transformed by the power of the gospel. It's about living out your faith in a broken and a fallen world. And that was the concern, as we said before, that was the concern which James had, especially for those to whom he was writing. Because as we've learned through our study, James was encouraging these persecuted Christians that living out your faith in a fallen world is not an easy task, especially because they were new converts to Christianity. They were living in a foreign land amongst people who worshipped false gods. And there were all these temptations to fall away from their newfound Christian faith. And because these young Christians were surrounded by temptation, their lack of discipleship and teaching, it highlighted many issues. But the root cause of them all was immaturity. They needed to grow as Christians. They needed to mature in their faith.

And in chapter 1, we saw that James teaches us how the Lord brings us on in our faith, how he enables us to grow and develop and mature. And he does that through trials and temptations. Because the first thing James says about the faith of a Christian is that it's a faith that will be tested. If your faith is genuine, he says, your faith will be tested. But James said that in order to endure the trials of our faith and to grow in our faith and to stand against the temptations of the world, then we not only have to listen to what God's word is telling us, we also have to live it out in our lives. We not only have to be hearers of God's word, he says, we also have to be doers. We not only need information, we also need the application. Because if we're not willing to listen and to respond to the teaching of God's word, then we're never going to apply that teaching in our lives. We're never going to grow and develop and mature in our faith. And as we saw last time, and as we read at the beginning, the first section of this chapter, chapter 2, James, he addresses the sin of partiality. The sin of having prejudices or showing favouritism towards certain types of people. And James taught that our faith has to be genuine.

It has to be genuine. We have to treat everyone the same. Because when our faith is genuine, he says, as we saw last time, it will be a consistent faith, it will be a considerate faith, and it will be a compassionate faith. When our faith is genuine, he says, it will reflect the Lord of glory.

[4 : 42] Because we will have a faith that not only hears, but also a faith that does. It will be a faith that not only receives information, but also makes the application. But what we see here as James moves into this section, is that we solemnly, he says that, it's like he solemnly warns us that we need to be aware of dead Christianity. Because he says that if our faith is only a faith that hears and not a faith that does, then he says it's a dead faith. If our faith is only a faith of information, but not a faith of application, then it's a dead faith. He says we have a dead Christianity. And you know, as we go through this passage, verses 14 to 26, we'll see that James, he does admit his words here.

He becomes very sharp and very direct in his approach towards us. And it's as if he's giving this wake-up call to us as Christians. He's saying to us to wake up from our comfortable, consumerist Christianity that's leaving us as dead Christians. And James is saying to us, this is the way I read it anyway, saying to me, Christian, wake up, your faith needs to be genuine. And you know, it's a solemn warning. And so the first area, there's three areas I'd like us to look at, but the first area of this dead Christianity, which James addresses, is a detached faith. A detached faith.

So if we look at verse 14, he says, what good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, go in peace and be warmed and filled without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. And what we can see from these verses, and in fact, this whole passage, is that James gets his point across by asking a lot of, you could say, rhetorical questions. He asks questions in which the answer is so obvious that, well, an answer isn't actually required.

And with every question, James is strengthening his case that faith without works is dead. And you know, Jesus was the master when it came to rhetorical questions. Because how often do we hear Jesus in the Gospels saying, how much more? Or which one of you? And by asking a rhetorical question, Jesus was always getting his point across. He was driving the point home. And it seems here that James, well, he learned this trait from his elder brother, Jesus. But what James also learned was that Jesus had no time for dead Christianity. There was no room for dead Christianity and dead faith in the mission of spreading the Gospel message. There was no room for dead Christianity when it came to the urgency of the urgency of the Gospel. There was no room for dead Christianity when it came to living out your Christianity in the midst of a fallen world. And we can see why James is very sharp and very direct in his approach towards us here. Because that's the approach which Jesus took. We can see why James is giving us this solemn wake-up call. Because that's the approach Jesus took. And we can see why James is telling us to wake up from our, you could say, our comfortable consumerist Christianity, which is leaving us as dead Christians, because that's the approach Jesus took. Because you'll remember in John chapter 15, when Jesus spoke to his disciples in the upper room, the upper room discourse, and he spoke about the importance of being connected to the vine. And Jesus said to his disciples,

I am the true vine. My Father is the vine dresser. Every branch that does not bear fruit, he takes away. And every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. And Jesus goes on to say, abide in me, remain faithful to me, and I will remain faithful to you. Because a branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine. Neither can you unless you abide in me. And Jesus says, I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I am in him, he it is that bears much fruit.

[9 : 45] For apart from me you can do nothing. But says Jesus, if anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers, and the branches are gathered, and they are thrown into the fire and burned.

Now, in that context, Jesus isn't talking about the solemn subject of dead branches being thrown into hell because he's speaking to his disciples. But Jesus was talking about the solemn subject of dead branches that are proving to be useless for the growth and extension of the true vine. Jesus was talking about dead branches that are hindering the message of spreading the gospel, hindering the mission of spreading the message. And he's saying that if we're a dead branch with a dead faith and a dead Christianity, then we're not abiding in the vine. And if we're not abiding in the vine, then we're not bearing fruit. And if we're not bearing fruit, then we're detached. Our faith is detached. And that's the issue which James is addressing here. Because he's addressing the fact that if our Christianity is dead, then it's because we have a detached faith. Now, we must be clear, James, he doesn't mean that we're detached from Jesus. He doesn't mean that our, you could say, our union with Christ is severed. And that we're no longer a Christian and we're being cast out from Jesus. Not at all. James isn't addressing the issue of salvation. That doesn't change. He's not talking about our adoption or our inseparable union or our justification or our sanctification. James isn't speaking about that. Now, as we've said before, James is addressing the way in which we live our life as a Christian. He's talking about practical Christianity. And he's saying that if we're a dead branch with a dead faith and a dead Christianity, then it's because our faith is detached. And our faith is not only detached from the true vine in the sense of bearing fruit, that we're doing nothing in the mission to spread the message. But James is also saying that if our faith is detached, then it's detached from

our works and ultimately detached from the society around us. And this is what James is saying to us here.

What good is it, my brother, if someone says that he has faith but is not of works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, go in peace, be warmed and filled without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?

What good is that? James is saying that if our Christianity is only about the spiritual and devoid of the physical, then it's a dead Christianity. If our Christianity lays emphasis upon the theory and head knowledge and minimises practical help and concern, then it's a dead Christianity. If our Christianity doesn't look at people holistically of body and soul, then our Christianity, he says, is a dead Christianity.

[13 : 17] And our faith, it isn't a genuine faith, as Jesus teaches us to be considerate, compassionate and consistent, but our faith is detached and disconnected from the society around us. I'm sure you've heard the phrase being said of someone, they're so heavenly minded that they're of no earthly use. But I have to say the opposite is true. Because if we're so heavenly minded, that's where Jesus is. And if our mind is on Jesus, we will desire to be more and more like Jesus. We will desire to be consistent and considerate and compassionate, just like Jesus. And we will be of great use to the extension of God's kingdom and the mission of spreading the gospel message. But it's by being earthly minded that we're of no heavenly use. And it's by having a detached faith which is detached from the Bible and the needs of those around us that it leaves us with a dead

Christianity. And it's by Christianity, in which our faith and our works, they're detached, completely detached. And James is saying, yes, it's good to know your Bible. It's good to pray. It's good to be in fellowship. It's good to be growing in the knowledge of the Lord. These things are great. But if your faith is detached from your works, he says, your Christianity is going nowhere. It's a dead Christianity.

Christianity. And it's a hard-hitting lesson. My friend, if our Christianity is only a Christianity of getting, of hearing and not doing, a consumerist Christianity, then our faith is a detached faith. And if our faith is a detached faith, then we will have a comfortable Christianity. Because we will be detached in our Christianity from the needs in our society and the needs in our community and the needs in our congregation. We will be detached in our Christ-like holistic care and concern for both body and soul.

Because if we see someone in need and just say to them, well, go to church or I'll pray for you. I mean, that's good. But that often doesn't help them in their time of need. That doesn't get alongside them and listen to them and pray with them. That doesn't move with compassion like Jesus.

[16 : 05] And if someone speaks to us about the concerns of their soul, it's no use telling them, well, speak to the minister. Speak to one of the elders. Because if we can't communicate to those around us about our faith and their need of Jesus, James is saying our faith is detached. There's something missing.

My friend, if we don't have a care and concern for both body and soul, then he's saying our faith is a detached faith. And James affirms this to us in verse 17 when he says, Faith by itself, detached faith, if it does not have works, it's dead.

It's dead. But you know, James doesn't leave it there. He doesn't leave it there when it comes to the dangers of a dead Christianity and the need to wake up.

Because as he moves on from addressing the dangers of having a detached faith, he addresses secondly the dangers of having a deluded faith.

A deluded faith. He says in verse 18, But someone will say, You have faith and I have works. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

[17 : 26] You believe that God is one, you do well. Even the demons believe and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

And it's safe to say that, well, the letter of James, it's full of memorable statements and phrases. We all know them. When we think of the letter of James, we immediately think of some of the statements in it.

Like, Be doers of the word and not hearers only. A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways. Every good and perfect gift is from above. And the one we're looking at this evening, faith without works, is dead.

But, not everyone was a fan of the letter of James. Because, the well-known German reformer, Martin Luther, he regarded the letter of James as an epistle of straw.

Now, Luther thought it to be like the dead branch in the true vine. Worthless and of no benefit. And he thought that the only remedy for it would be to rip it out of the Bible, cast it into the fire, and burn it.

[18 : 38] Of course, in order to understand why Luther thought the way he did, we have to understand the context he found himself in. Because, in the lead up to and during the Reformation, Luther was in this theological battle for the truth of salvation.

And for many centuries, the Roman Catholic Church, they had advocated that salvation and our righteous standing before God was by faith through works with the additional help of penance. But when Luther discovered those precious words from Romans 1.17, the righteous shall live by faith. When Luther discovered those words, he realised that sinners are made righteous in God's sight, not by works, not by the priest, the Pope, or penance, but by faith in Jesus Christ alone. And Luther knew that this teaching was backed up by other letters which Paul wrote, namely Ephesians. Because, as you know, Paul's letter to the Ephesians, it's a beautiful letter, very theological letter.

And in it, Paul emphasises that our salvation, it's not of works, it's the gift of God. Because he says in Ephesians chapter 2 that, well, we are brought from death to life, from being children of wrath to being children of God, from being a sinner to a saint, and we're brought, and it all takes place by God's gracious gift of salvation.

[20 : 13] He says, for it is by grace that you've been saved, through faith, and it's not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Salvation, he says, is all of grace, from beginning to end. And so when Luther considered what James was saying here, he thought that the letter of James was too practical, and not theological. He thought it was too much about works, and not enough about faith. But more than that, Luther believed that James was contradicting the teaching of Paul. And as a result, well, Luther, he didn't like this letter, because it doesn't mention the cross, he doesn't mention the death of Jesus, he doesn't use theological terms like redemption, or adoption, or all these terms.

And in Luther's mind, this epistle of straw, the straw which broke the camel's back, it was the imbalance between faith and works.

And Luther took exception to what James says, especially in verse 14. What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works?

[21 : 27] Can that faith save him? And so the questions which we have to ask ourselves is, is the letter of James an epistle of straw? Are Paul and James really at loggerheads over the issue of faith and works?

Is their teaching contradicting one another? And of course, the answer is no. The letter of James is abiding in the vine.

Paul and James are not contradicting one another, but complementing one another. And we have to say that unfortunately, but understandably, because of his context, Luther had misunderstood what James was teaching.

And it only affirms to us once again that the best of men are only men at best. because what we see here is that James wasn't teaching works instead of faith, as other religions do.

James was stressing works as a result of faith. He was emphasising that works is to be an outworking and an evidence of our faith.

[22 : 39] Works is not the means of salvation, but it's the evidence of salvation. And so Martin Luther may have questioned James' theology, but James' desire, it wasn't to produce this systematic theology like the Apostle Paul.

His desire, as we've said all along, was to present or to produce this handbook on practical theology. And although James doesn't discredit the importance of systematic theology and knowing the doctrines of the Bible, he certainly didn't want it to overshadow practical theology and the need for us to live out of faith in the fallen world.

Because, as we've said already, James wants us to see that it's good to have faith. It's good to enjoy the doctrines of grace. But what use is that faith or that knowledge to us if we do not apply it? And the danger which James is addressing is that when we gain a knowledge of the Bible, we can do nothing with it. There's the danger of doing nothing with it. And as Christians we can become

content in our salvation and rest upon the sovereignty of God for evangelism and outreach and all the other things and the result is that we become lazy.

And what James is stressing to us is that a faith which doesn't have works is not only a sign of spiritual obesity, it's also a sign of spiritual immaturity because we're sitting back and doing nothing without faith.

[24 : 19] In fact, James goes as far as to say that if our faith is devoid of works, then our faith is not only detached, it's deluded. Because we're deluding ourselves, he says.

We're deceiving ourselves if we think that it's okay to have faith without works. We're deluding ourselves if we think that it's okay to be a comfortable consumerist Christian that doesn't get involved in the life and work of a congregation.

Because James is saying that if we have a faith without works, it's no faith at all. It's useless. It's a deluded faith. Because even the demons have faith, he says, and shunned.

Even the demons believe in God and know that God exists and that God's word is true. They have faith. They don't evidence their faith by their works because their works are evil and they're against God and they oppose his cause and the extension of his kingdom.

But you know, in order to drive his point home and to wake us up as Christians, James challenges us by giving a demonstration of what faith and works actually looks like.

[25 : 36] Because he says in verse 20, do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Now the word foolish here in the ESV, it's a bit too strong.

In the original language, James doesn't call anyone a fool. But he's saying that if we think that our faith is sufficient without works, then he says our faith is vain and it's empty.

It's vanity to think that we can have a faith without works because we need a faith that works. And James demonstrates this in the closing verses of the chapter.

because when it comes to the dangers of a dead Christianity and the need to wake up, James, he's addressed us in the dangers of having a detached faith and a deluded faith.

But through the witness of Abraham and then Rahab, James gives to us a demonstrated faith. A demonstrated faith.

[26 : 39] Look at verse 20. He says, Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?

You see that faith was active along with his works and faith was completed by his works. And the scripture was fulfilled that says Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness and he was called a friend of God.

You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And 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. You know, when we read these verses you can appreciate how Martin Luther misunderstood the teaching of James.

Abraham was the father of the faith. verse 24, a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. It does seem to raise more questions.

[27 : 52] But by giving the example of Abraham, James knew that he was on safe ground because every Jewish convert to Christianity knew that Abraham was, as we were singing in Psalm 105, the father of the faith.

Abraham was the father of the faith and there was through him and his descendants that all the nations of the earth would be blessed. That was the covenant promise that we were singing about. But of course, as we know, Abraham, he wasn't perfect and his works weren't always perfect. As you know, Abraham, he doubted God's protection and he pretended that his wife, Sarah, was his sister so that they wouldn't be killed.

And through his impatience and his lack of faith, Abraham, he also hurried along God's promise of blessing when he had a child with the housemaid, Hagar.

But James, he doesn't mention those episodes in the life of Abraham. Instead, he makes reference to one particular occasion in Abraham's life when he asks in verse 21, was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son, Isaac, on the altar?

[29 : 11] And James qualifies his statement about Abraham being justified by works by saying in verse 22, you see that faith was active along with his works and faith was completed by his works.

And what James is saying is that Abraham's faith was working alongside his works. Which means that his works were not instead of his faith but as a result of his faith.

Now James backs up his statement of verse 21 that Abraham was justified by his works. He backs it up in verse 23 by quoting words from Genesis 15 verse 6.

He says, the scripture was fulfilled that says in Genesis 15 verse 6, Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

But what's interesting and what has often caused a lot of confusion was that the statement from Genesis 15 verse 6, Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

[30 : 18] that statement was also used by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans and Galatians when Paul was emphasising that we are justified by faith alone.

And again, it seems that we're back to this contradiction between Paul and James. It seems that James is saying that we're justified by faith and works. Paul is saying that we're justified by faith alone.

But you know, this is why James used the illustration of Abraham. Because before Abraham performed his act of works, you could say, by offering up his son Isaac, and that's recorded for us in Genesis 22, before that point, seven chapters earlier, Abraham, we're told, was justified by faith in chapter 15 verse 6.

which means that justification, or I should do it this way, justification, it came by faith first. It came first in which Abraham was declared righteous in God's sight by his faith in God's covenant promise. And in that faith and his justified position as a believer, it was demonstrated in the act of sacrificing Isaac on Mount Moriah.

[31 : 41] which means, as we said, Paul and James, they aren't contradicting one another, they're complementing one another. Because Paul's use of the word justified, and it's so important to get to understand words and understand the author's use of the word.

For example, John and Paul. John uses the word flesh flesh to mean body. Paul uses the word flesh to mean sinful flesh.

John says the word became flesh, he became body. Paul says, deliver me from this sinful flesh, the sin, us sinful.

And so, words are important. And so, Paul's use of the word justify, he uses it in the legal sense of declaring a person righteous, in which by our faith in Jesus Christ we are declared righteous before a holy God.

We're always righteous. If we've been declared righteous, that righteousness will never change. We are as righteous today as we will be the day we stand in glory. And, you know, we have the confidence that we can stand before God on the day of judgment and we need not fear because we stand not in our own righteousness but in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us.

[33 : 05] He who knew no sin was made sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. But the truth is James wouldn't disagree with anything Paul was trying to say because he quotes the same verse that Abraham was justified by faith.

He was declared righteous by his faith. But when James uses the word justify, he doesn't use it in the sense that Paul used it by being declared righteous.

He uses it in the sense of demonstrating that you are righteous. And by using Abraham as this illustration, James makes his point very clear because in Genesis 15, Abraham was declared righteous by having faith in God's word.

And then in Genesis 22, Abraham demonstrated that declaration of being made righteous by acting in faith.

And what James is saying is that the two go hand in hand. Because if we have been declared righteous by our faith in Jesus, then we must demonstrate that faith and that declaration of righteousness by our works.

[34 : 24] I'll say it again. if we've been declared righteous by our faith in Jesus, then we must demonstrate that faith and that declaration of righteousness by our works.

And you know, James is pushing this point. Faith and works go together. And just so we don't think that Abraham was just a one-off, James uses a second demonstration of righteousness in the life of Rahab.

He says in verse 25, And 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?

Unlike Abraham, Rahab wasn't given the covenant promise of blessing. And she wasn't known as the father of the faith. But she was still justified before God by her faith.

And we're told that in Hebrews 11, along with Abraham and many other people, that by faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

[35 : 43] Rahab was justified because she was declared righteous by her faith and she demonstrated her faith and her declaration of righteousness.

She demonstrated it by her works. And so James, he concludes his address to the dangers of possessing a dead Christianity and the need to wake up.

He concludes it in a word in verse 26. As the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

And with this James puts it simply, if we don't have physical life, well, we're lifeless.

We're dead. Therefore, if we don't have works as part of our faith, then we're lifeless. We're dead.

[36 : 41] Our Christianity is lifeless. It's a dead Christianity. And so the message from James is, don't have a detached faith.

Don't have a faith that is detached from society and from those around you. And the message from James is, don't have a deluded faith. Don't have a faith that is deluded into thinking that just believing is enough.

Just being a Christian is enough. No, says James, the message is that we must have a demonstrated faith. A demonstrated faith because like Abraham, like Rahab, and all those who lived by faith, if we have been declared righteous by our faith in Jesus, then we must demonstrate that faith.

We must demonstrate to the world that declaration of righteousness by our works. We must demonstrate it by our works.

faith without works is dead. And you know, the teaching James is giving to us here this evening, it's just what Jesus says to us in the Sermon on the Mount.

[38 : 01] God, you are the light of the world. Don't hide the light, he says. Don't put it under a bushel. No, you are the light of the world.

Therefore, let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

what a challenge. What a challenge. May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray.

O Lord, O gracious God, O, when we stand before thy word, we realise how far short we come.

But we thank thee, O Lord, that we have a rule and a direction to point us in life. And Lord, we do pray that we would be hearers and that we would be doers of thy word.

[39 : 01] That we would receive the information and live out the application that we, O Lord, would truly be those who let our light so shine before men that they might see our good works and that our longing would be that they would glorify our Father which is in heaven.

Lord, bless us, we pray, in all our different spheres, wherever our lot is cast each and every day, wherever our foot treads upon the earth, that thou, Lord, wouldst keep us.

Keep us, Lord, in all that we do, that we might do it for thy glory, for the extension of thy kingdom, or to lift up that precious name of Jesus, the name that we love so dearly, a name that we once cursed, but yet now a name that we bless and praise.

Help us, Lord, to live our lives for thy glory, to do and to fulfil the chief end for which we were created, to glorify my God and to enjoy him forever.

Bind us together, we pray, keep us and do us good. O Lord, keep us, for we know that we cannot keep ourselves. Cleanse us, we ask, for we ask it in Jesus' name and for his sake.

[40 : 20] Amen. We shall conclude by singing in Psalm 90. Psalm 90 in the Scottish Psalter, page 350.

Psalm 90, singing from verse 14 down to the end of the psalm. O with thy tender mercies, Lord, us early satisfy, so we rejoice, shall all our days, and still be glad in thee.

Down to the end of the psalm. And let the beauty of the Lord, our God, be us upon, our handiworks, establish thou, establish them, each one. These verses to God's praise.

O with thy tender mercies, Lord, us early satisfied, though we rejoice, shall all our gain, and still be glad in thee.
aparting us the days of being, when we creep apart, and years wherein we ill have seen, so do thou make us glad.
[42 : 23] O let thy work and power appear, thy servant's face before, and show to their children dear, thy glory evermore, and show unto their children dear, thy glory evermore, beauty of the Lord, our confidence upon, our handy works, establish them, establish them, each one.
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.