

James
Your Faith: Dead or Live? (Part 1)
James 2:14-26
November 6, 2005
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Well, it's my great joy to ask you to turn again, this morning, back to the epistle of James. It was several months ago we began our study of this great letter, written by the half-brother of our Lord to the Jews who'd been scattered from persecution out of Jerusalem. And he writes to them as their dear brother, their pastor. And the result is this wonderful, rich and profound letter. Today we come to a portion of James that is, without question, the most controversial: James 2:14 - 26. I trust, when we're done, over the next several weeks, that you'll look back and, it won't be controversial to you, anymore. It won't be a mystery anymore. But we'll have worked out all of those questions that we all have when we read through this passage for the first time.

On October 30, 1938, CBS radio was broadcasting the music from the Meridian Room at the Park Plaza in New York City, all across the country. Suddenly, a reporter from Intercontinental Radio News interrupted the broadcast to deliver a very important announcement. A meteor had fallen to earth, impacting violently on a farm near Grover's Mill, New Jersey. It turned out that the meteor was, in fact, not a meteor. But as the newscast went on, it described the fact that it was some kind of spaceship. Tenacled creatures emerged, and quickly disposed of seven thousand armed soldiers surrounding the crater. Creatures destroyed communication lines, and began to release a deadly black gas against which the gas masks of the time were absolutely useless. Many listeners began to panic. Some loaded blankets and supplies in their cars, and began to map out routes which to leave and to flee. Others hid in their cellars, hoping that the black gas would be blown over their homes and wouldn't cause them any trouble; that they would not be harmed by it.

Course, the news broadcast was entirely fictitious. It was simply the weekly broadcast of Orson Welles. And that week, in honor of Halloween, he had decided to broadcast a highly dramatized version of his story, "The War of the Worlds," in which the world in invaded by creatures from outer space. History tells us that about six million people (because of the popularity of radio, at that time), about six million people tuned in for that broadcast. And if they missed the warning at the very beginning that what followed was merely fictitious, it was forty minutes, and the worst of the program, before they were told again that it was, in fact, a hoax; simply a story for

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their entertainment. And during that forty minutes, we're told by history, that nearly one million people panicked, believing there was, in fact, some truth to what they were hearing over their radios.

We kind of sit here today and smile and smirk a bit about that. How could they have been so gullible, as to believe those things? And yet, if we're honest with ourselves, as human beings, we are susceptible to deception. Sometimes, it's harmless deception, like that of a skilled, or expert magician, a David Copperfield, making the Statue of Liberty disappear, or a 747 seem as if it's not longer there. Sometimes, it's malicious deception: deception of a scam, intended to bilk people out of their money. This week, as I was preparing for this message, I looked at a number of websites that the government produces. And on all of those websites, there were warnings about the top ten, or top dozen scams that people are constantly foisting upon Americans. We are susceptible to deception. But the most dangerous kind of deception is not the kind of deception that comes from outside, but that which comes from within. The most dangerous kind is self-deception. And one of the most common and most deadly forms of self-deception, to which professing Christians are prone, is thinking that we are genuine believers, when in fact, we are not.

There are warnings throughout the New Testament of this very reality, calling us to serious self-examination, to examine the reality of our faith, warnings against being deceived into thinking that we are Christians, when we are still in our sins. You're familiar with passages such as 2 Corinthians 13:5, which says, "Test yourselves, *to see* if you're in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you-unless, indeed, you fail the test." Or the words of Peter in 2 Peter 1:10, "Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you..." But the most direct, the most thorough, and undoubtedly the most hotly-debated warning passage in all of the New Testament is here in James 2.

James 2:14 - 26 is the most important theological passage in the book, and the most controversial, as well. We're going to be looking at it over the next several weeks. And let me read it for you, just to give you the flow of James' thought. You follow along as I read, beginning in verse 14.

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith, but he has no works?
Can that faith save him? If a brother or a 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.

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. [So,] ... are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham, our father, justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled, which says, “AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD. AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. And he was called the Friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith, alone. In the same way, was not Rahab, the harlot, also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without *the* spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”

Now there are some passages in this that I’ve just read that are potentially confusing, and need to be answered. And we’ll answer those over the next couple of weeks. But one thing is crystal clear: and that is James’ theme in this passage. You’ll notice in verse 14, he speaks of a faith without works being useless. In verse 14, he also says, “Faith without works cannot save.” In verse 20, he says, “Faith without works (again) is useless.” And in verse 26, “Faith without works is dead.” It’s very important that you understand what James is addressing here. He is NOT contrasting faith and works, like Paul does in Romans and Galatians, where Paul is dealing with the issue of works as way to attain salvation. That’s not James’ theme. James, instead, is contrasting a living faith with a dead faith. It’s a serious warning for everyone who claims to be a Christian. You see, here’s James’ big picture point: in the church, IN THE CHURCH, there are two kinds of faith; a real, living faith that saves, and a deceiving, dead faith that damns.

But the danger is this: the two kinds of faith, the true and the false, have much in common. As you read about these two hypothetical people, here, that represent people in James’ readership, (one who has a living faith, and one who has a dead faith), you discover that both of these people claim to be Christians. They don’t just claim it. But they both are convinced at the very root of their being that they are Christians! Both embrace the same biblical doctrine. Both kinds were present among James’ readers. And both kinds are present in this church. And sad to say, I can guarantee you that both kinds are present under the sound of my voice, this morning. You’re

sitting here, this morning. And you're feeling pretty smug, thinking that this message is going to be great for the person sitting next to you, or the person seated down the aisle. Then this passage was written for you. "Be warned," James says. There are two kinds of faith: a real, living faith that saves, and a deceiving, dead faith that damns.

But how can we tell the difference between the true and the false? How can we know if ours is the genuine article, or if it's simply a fake, a fraud? Well, in this paragraph, James answers that question. James gives us detailed descriptions of those two kinds of faith. If we were to break this passage down (and we will.), in verses 14 to 19, we have an AUTOPSY OF DEAD FAITH, an autopsy of dead faith. He wants us to know what it looks like. And then in verses 20 - 26, he gives us A PORTRAIT OF LIVING FAITH, a portrait of living faith.

This morning, we're only gonna start to examine an autopsy of dead faith. You see, usually, if the cause of death is uncertain, the coroner will order an autopsy, to see if the true cause that led to that person's death could be determined. Well, James says, "If you can find someone if you could take someone in the church, who has a dead faith, and you could do an autopsy of that person to determine the conditions present, where there is a dead faith, you would find three conditions that would show up on the pathology report three conditions that are characteristic of a dead faith."

The first condition you would find is an empty profession of faith. I think this is as far as we'll get this morning, an empty profession of faith. Notice verse 14, "What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?" Now James begins, here, with two rhetorical questions. "What use is it?" Or we could say, "To what benefit, or what profit is it?" Profit or benefit in what way? Well, the second question answers that: profitable or beneficial to save. "Is it really profitable to salvation?" is the question. Now, the tense of the Greek verbs that come next could better be translated this way. Let me retranslate it for you. "If someone keeps on saying he or she has faith, but keeps on having no works."

There's nothing, by the way, here in the Greek text, or in the English, to lead us to conclude that this person who's saying this knows they are being hypocritical. There's nothing for us to believe here, in this text, that this person is a deliberate deceiver; that this person knows in his heart he's not a Christian, but he's just claiming to be. No! This person honestly thinks that he possesses true saving faith. And he does have a kind of faith. And it's a kind of faith that looks a lot like the real thing. But it has one Achilles' heel, one fatal flaw, James says. His kind of faith consistently has no works; no works!

Now what are these works that false faith lacks? And what are the works that only true believers do that become a sign, if you will, that you're a true believer? James obviously isn't talking about religious activities. All of the people reading his epistle were involved in religious activities. Even unbelievers are involved in religious activities. So, that's not any sort of proof. So, what are these works? Well, I think we need to back up and look at the whole of the New Testament to get a better picture of this. Paul has a lot to say about these works. He calls them "good works," or "good deeds."

Turn to Ephesians 2. There's a passage in Ephesians 2 that we're all very familiar with, where it profoundly sets out the reality that salvation is by "grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone." And we love those verses. Look at verse 8 of Ephesians 2, "For by grace you have been saved through faith." It only comes through grace: by grace, and through faith! And "it's not of yourselves." Nothing of salvation is of yourselves. It's all "the gift of God! Not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." Here he says, "We are not saved by doing works." Works are uninvolved in our salvation. Works are not how we earn, somehow, our position with God. Works have absolutely nothing to do with being saved.

But notice verse 10. Works do follow true salvation. Verse 10, "For we are His workmanship." Literally, "We are His masterpiece, created [or recreated] in Christ Jesus unto good works." And these good works are the ones that God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them; that our daily pattern and habit of life (that's what that term "walk" means), that our daily patterns of behavior would be characterized by good works. You see, we are never saved by what we do. It is completely an act of God's grace, received through faith, because of what Christ accomplished on the cross. But once we have been saved, true salvation always produces good works. That was God's intention. He prepared beforehand that everybody He would save by grace would walk in good works.

In fact, (if you turn over to Titus) in Titus, Paul is really addressing the same thing that James is addressing in James 2. James and Paul are not at odds. In fact, in Titus, you'll find the same basic message that James is presenting in James 2. Of course Paul left Titus, his young son in the faith on the island of Crete. And he left him there for some specific purposes. But there was a problem on Crete. Notice 1:16.

He says, [There are these people on Crete, on the island there, that] ... profess to know God, [They have an empty profession,] but by their deeds, they deny *Him*, [The reality of their lives belies what they profess.] being detestable and

disobedient and worthless for any good deed.” Notice 2:1: “But as for you [Titus, I want you to] speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine.”

In other words, “I want you to teach the people there to behave in such a way that fits sound doctrine, that fits what they say they believe.” Verse 7, he says, “Titus, in all things, as a young man, show yourself to be an example of good deeds.” Notice 3:8. “This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds.” Verse 14 of chapter 3, “Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds....” You get the point? That those who come to faith in Christ will produce good deeds. They don’t come to Christ THROUGH their good deeds. Instead, the reality of a changed heart produces a changed life. True salvation leads to the expression of good deeds, or good works.

Now, that raises the question again, though. What are these good deeds? What’s he talking about? What’s James talking about, when he says, “faith that has no works?” Well, Paul explains, I think, in Titus 2:14 He says, “... [Christ] gave Himself for us, to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.” Now notice the comparison. Christ redeemed us from every lawless deed and made us zealous, instead, for good deeds.” So, in other words, good deeds are the opposite of lawless deeds. And fortunately, lawless deeds are very easy to define. Lawless deeds are simply those deeds, or those actions, those behaviors, those attitudes that are contrary to the Law of God. Those are lawless deeds.

That means that good deeds are all of those actions and attitudes that the Bible commends and commands. So, good deeds have to do with obedience to the Scripture. So back to James 2. When James says that false faith has no works, he means that there is no pattern of obedience to the Word of God. There’s no pattern of obedience to Scripture. He’s really saying the same thing he said back in chapter 1. You remember 1:22. He’s saying, “Prove yourselves DOERS OF THE WORD, and not merely hearers.” Because if you just hear the Word, and you don’t do it, you don’t practice it as a pattern of life, then you’re deceiving yourself. You’re deluding yourself. You’re thinking you’re saved, when, in fact, you’re not. That’s what James is saying, both in 1:22; and that’s also what he’s saying in 2:14; the one who’s keeps saying, “I have faith,” but keeps on having no obedience to the Word of God, no works.

Then he gets to the point with the second question: “Can that kind of faith save him?” James Hebert writes, “James is attacking, here, a verbal profession of faith that produces no change in

conduct.” It’s an empty profession. It’s “I believe.” And the person is convinced that they are the real thing. But they keep on having no works, no obedience to the Scripture. And by that lack of obedience, they demonstrate the lack of reality of a truly changed heart. John MacArthur, in his commentary on this passage, writes, “A faith that is devoid of righteous works cannot save a person, no matter how strongly it may be proclaimed. It is not that some amount of good works, added to true faith, can save a person; but rather, that faith that is genuine, will inevitably produce good works.” James is saying, “Can the kind of faith that constantly keeps on saying, “I know Christ; I’m a believer,” but consistently lacks obedience to the Word of God, can that kind of faith produce genuine salvation? And the understood answer to his rhetorical question is “NO. That kind of faith CANNOT SAVE.”

Now, what kind of salvation are we talking about, here, just to make sure we’re all on the same page? There are some, like Zane Hodges, who argue that the salvation in this verse is not eternal salvation, but rescue from some earthly danger or trial. They say, “It’s used that way over in James 5:14, where it speaks of the sick man being anointed and being saved from his illness through that anointing. However (and that is true); but James has just used this word, over in 1:21. And he’s used it there, clearly in the context of eternal salvation. Look at 1:21. He says, “Putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the Word implanted, which is able to save your souls!” Two other times James uses this word, in 4:12, and in 5:20, meaning the same thing. He’s talking about eternal salvation.

So, here’s his point. If you have made a profession of faith in Christ, if you say “I know Christ; I’m a believer,” but your life has consistently been without evidence of change, you may have faith. But James says, “It’s not the kind of faith that will profit, or benefit you when you stand before Christ. And it’s not the kind of faith that will save you from His judgment.” You see, there is a huge gulf between the profession of faith and the possession of Christ. One will insure you all the joys of heaven. And the other will only guarantee eternal hell. Because of the influence of men like Charles Finney, American Christianity has absolutely been overrun with people who make a profession of faith, but never demonstrate a changed life. James says, theirs is a useless, non-saving, dead faith. Yes, they have faith. Yes, they have some belief in Christ. Yes, they have made some confession of Christ. But theirs is a dead, non-saving, useless faith.

Years ago, when I was at Grace church, one Friday morning I received a call from a distraught wife, who had just found the little black book in her husband’s briefcase. That book was filled with dozens of names and addresses and phone numbers of women. I was shocked, to be honest. This couple was deeply involved in the life of the church. He was a deacon. I went to his office

that morning, found his place of work, and confronted him with what his wife had found. In the hours, (literally hours) that followed that day, and in the days and weeks to come, it came out that for fifteen years, this man had led a double life. It started with pornography, went to affairs at work. Soon there were random encounters, even with prostitutes. And he'd even begun to be involved in homosexuality.

And when I confronted him, I challenged him to seriously examine his heart about the reality of his faith in Christ; because for fifteen years, he had lived in absolute denial of it. But he wouldn't even seriously consider my challenge. He refused to admit for a moment that there was any question about the reality of his faith. He knew. He just knew in his heart he was a Christian. After all, he attended church. He went to a Bible study, even taught some Bible studies, taught some parent classes. He was a deacon at Grace Church. But for fifteen years, this man had lived a lie, a complete double life, by his own admission, absolutely devoid of the fruit of the Spirit, or any pursuit of personal holiness. His was an empty profession of faith, and he wasn't even willing to consider it.

But you don't have to live such a terrible, double life to have an empty profession of faith. Scripture is filled with examples of those who had similar empty professions. Let me just have you look at a couple of them. Turn to Matthew 7, the ministry of our Lord. This is a passage that we've come to before. It's one of the most troubling in all the New Testament. Matthew 7 at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us in these chilling words, "Not everyone [verse 21] Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven." [Not everybody who has a profession of faith in Me is going to get in, He says.] Verse 22,

"Many will say to Me on that Day, (that is, in the Day of Judgment), 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your Name, and in Your Name cast out demons, and in Your Name perform many miracles?' [Look at all we've done for You!] "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from Me, [and here's the key], you who practice lawlessness.'"

You have a profession that you know Me. You call Me Lord. And yet your life practices absolutely the opposite; which simply shows that you never really knew Me, at all.

Turn over to Matthew 13, in the Parable of the Soils, commonly called the Parable of the Sower. Jesus talks about two kinds of soils, or two kinds of human hearts that appear to be the genuine

article, that appear to be truly saved, that appear to know the Lord. And yet they prove not to be. Notice 13:20: Jesus is explaining the parable. And He says,

“The one on whom the seed was sown on the rocky places: This is the man who hears the Word, hears the Gospel, and immediately receives it with joy;” [He receives it! He’s excited about it! The plant appears to begin to grow.] Verse 21, “yet he has no *firm* root in himself, but is *only* temporary, and when [his] affliction or persecution arises because of the Word, immediately he falls away.” [He makes a profession. He appears to be the genuine Christian. And yet persecution comes, and he’s gone.] Verse 22, “... the one on whom the seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, [hears the Gospel, and responds to some degree. But then, as the plant begins to grow,] ... the worry of the world, the deceitfulness of wealth choke out the Word; and it becomes unfruitful.” [Here, in at least two kinds of human hearts, there is an outward profession of faith in Christ that proves not to be genuine.]

Turn to John 8. Jesus, in His ministry encountered people just like this. In John 8:24, He gives this warning: “I say to you, (to this crowd of people), that you will die in your sins.” For unless you believe that I AM that I AM JEHOVAH, GOD, that I AM YAHWEH, that I AM the TRUE, THE ONE, THE LIVING GOD, you will die in your sins!” Verse 30,

As Jesus spoke these things, many came to believe in Him. [You say, ‘Oh, that’s wonderful!’ Watch what happens next.] Verse 31.

So Jesus was saying to those Jews, who had believed Him, “If you continue in My Word, *then* you are truly disciples of mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

[And then they respond, “Wait a minute; WAIT A MINUTE! We didn’t understand this.]

... “We are Abraham’s descendants ... [we] have never been ... [in slavery] to anyone,” [which is a joke, both on the literal level and the spiritual level. You know, they were, right now, in slavery to the Romans, even as they’re saying these words]

Verse 34, Jesus answer[s] them, “Truly, truly I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.”

He says, “I’m talking about slavery to sin! And I can make you free from that slavery!” Verse 37, “... yet you seek to kill me....” Now remember, he’s talking to people who had believed at some level in Him. “... yet you seek to kill me....” And then he gets to the real heart of the issue in verse 43,

“Why do you not understand what I am saying? *It is* because you cannot hear My Word. You are of *your* father, the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father.”

And by the time you get to the end of the chapter, the same crowd that’s said to believe Him, to some degree, to make some profession of confidence in who He is, they’re trying to kill Him, because He claims to be JEHOVAH. He claims to be YAHWEH, the God of the Old Testament.

You come to Acts 8, and you meet Simon: very fascinating character; lived in Samaria. Acts 8: 9, we meet this man. “Now, there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city” [And this isn’t David Copperfield kind of magic.] “and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great;” Notice verse 12.

Phillip [was] preaching the good news about the kingdom of God, the name of Jesus Christ. [People] ... were being baptized, men and women, alike. Even Simon, himself, believed. [Again, your immediate response is your heart to leap with joy. If you’re a believer, you go “Great!” If you’ve never read this story before, you’d be excited about this.] And after being baptized, he continued on with Phillip. And as, he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

Verse 18, “Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give this authority to me, as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’” [Here. Here’s some money for you to use in your ministry. Just give me that authority and power. This is better than any magic deal I’ve had going.] “But Peter said to him,” (verse 20), “May your silver perish with you.” [The English translation sort of removes a little of the barb from what Peter said:

basically, he says, May you and your money be damned;] because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money. You have no part or portion in this manner. For your heart is not right before God. ... repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of [your own] iniquity.” [Simon made a profession of faith, and he was even baptized. But he wasn’t the real deal.]

You go on to the ministry of Paul, in 2 Timothy 4:10. You meet a man named Demas, who Paul says, “having loved this present world, deserted me,” and, presumably deserted the faith, as well. You never hear of him again.

First John 2:19, John says, “There were those went out from us, because they were not really of us. For if they had been of us, they would’ve remained with us. But they went out, so that it would be shown that they are not all of us.” You see, that, throughout Scripture, it’s clear that professing Christ, saying you believe in Christ does not mean that you really possess Him.

Now turn back to James 2. James, in verses 15 and 16, gives an analogy, a kind of parable to show how worthless it is to say that you’re a Christian, and not to live like one. Notice what he says. Imagine, he says,

If a brother or [a] 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?

James says, imagine that a fellow Christian comes to you. And that he or she lacks adequate clothing; and doesn’t even have enough food for that day. Now think of it. It’s cold outside. You can look and see this person doesn’t have enough clothes. They don’t have food, even for that day. And how do you respond? He says, “One of you says, ‘Go in peace.’” This is a common Old Testament blessing. It was often given as you parted ways. “Go in peace. Be warmed and be filled.” What does that mean? It means that you say to them, sort of in a pious way, “Well, I commend you to God.” Essentially, it’s “May God warm you, and may God fill you. Go in peace.” And yet, he says, “you do not give them what is necessary for the body. What use is that?” Of course, the obvious answer is, “It’s worthless.” Those words are worthless! One commentator says, “James doesn’t charge these people with antinomianism, but with a lack of moral effort. They praise virtue, but they do not practice it.”

In verse 17, James applies his little analogy, his little parable. Notice that at his application, verse 17. “Even so, in the same way, faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.” He says, “Just as the words, ‘be warmed and filled’ are worthless, without doing something to meet the need of the person who has the need; in the same way, the words, ‘I’m a Christian, I’m a believer!’ are worthless before God.”

Douglas Moo, in his commentary, says, “The words of an uncaring believer, who fails to act to help a person in need, are as useless as the profession of faith of a believer who does not have deeds.” James is not really contrasting faith and works, as if they were two alternative options in one’s approach to God. He is, rather contrasting a faith that, because it is inherently defected, produces no works, and a faith that, because it is genuine, does result in action. You see, both in the case of making a profession, keep on saying, ‘I’m a believer,’ and to say, ‘Be warmed and be filled,’ in both cases the words are worthless. They mean absolutely nothing. They’re useless. It’s just so many words. And, in fact, notice verse 17 goes on to say that the kind of faith without obedience, is dead, because it’s by itself. That is, it’s not accompanied by works.

Now the application to James’ words here are very clear. Perhaps years ago, you walked an aisle. Perhaps, in some circumstance, years ago, you prayed the “sinner’s prayer”. Maybe at a youth camp, you threw a stick on the fire and said you were committing yourself to Christ. You filled out a card. Maybe you were even baptized. And someone told you, that because of that, you were saved. And you have hung your hopes on that decision, to this very day; but all the time, your life has shown no evidence of true heart change. You live like all unbelievers live. You have the same desires. You love the same things. You act the same way. You claim to be a Christian. But James says, “Your claim to be a Christian is as worthless to God as the words ‘Be warmed and be filled’ are to someone who has a need, someone who’s naked and hungry.

Now there’re two dangers in this passage: two dangers related, I should say, to what James tells us here. The first one is directly addressed. It is the danger of misunderstanding true saving faith; and because of that misunderstanding, incorrectly concluding that you’re a genuine believer, when you’re not. Notice that James addresses these words to his brethren, verse 14: “My brethren.” He’s referring to those who profess faith in Christ. He’s referring to those, whom he used to pastor, who have now been scattered because of persecution. And yet, James believed that this was a real and present danger among the people he shepherded. It’s been true throughout church history. You read the writings of pastors. This has constantly been a concern on their hearts. Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote that 30 to 40%, (that he was afraid that 30 to 40%) of the members of his church were characterized by dead faith, a non-saving faith: oh, yes,

a faith in Jesus Christ, but just a dead, useless faith. This is a concern I often think about; I often pray about. It's absolutely tragic to think that there're dear friends, here, in this church, whom we rub shoulders with, day after day, who make a consistent profession of faith in Christ, who dot all the right theological and doctrinal "I"s and cross all the right "t"s, but who have deceived themselves. Their faith isn't a living faith. It's dead. How do you know? James says, "Here's how you know: if you keep on claiming Christ, but you keep on doing no works." That is, you keep on having no obedience to the Word of God.

Is there (let me just ask you), is there a greater pattern of obedience to Scripture in your life, than there is a pattern of sin? Can you honestly be described as one having love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Wherever the Spirit is, those are there, not in perfection, but certainly in direction. Is there a decreasing pattern of sin in your life and an increasing pattern of holiness? Are your greatest desires to know Christ, to be like Him, and to be with Him? If not, listen again to James: "What profit is it, my brethren, if someone keeps on saying he has faith, but keeps on having no works, or no obedience? Can that faith save him?" James answers, "No, it can't. Your faith is dead."

But there's another danger related to James 2. It's the opposite extreme. And I just have to mention this, because I think this is a temptation in a church like ours. There's a temptation to overreact to the easy believism that James is addressing in this passage. It's common: this overreaction. And those who grew up in churches where easy believism was rampant, where people professed Christ, but lived like pagans. And that overreaction is this: to deny that true believers have sin in their lives, or even can have a pattern of sin in their lives. Listen! Believers sin! We all sin. We sin often. Sometimes believers sin horribly. And we can even sin over a long period of time.

David was unrepentant for the sins of murder and adultery for at least a period of nine months, while the baby was in Bathsheba's womb. If you often find yourself jumping to the conclusion that because a professing Christian is sinning, he must not be a true believer, then one of two things is true. Either, you're not being honest with your own heart about your own sin, or you have somehow redefined your sins as "not as bad" as someone else's, not as serious as those others commit. So, be careful about jumping to the conclusion that someone isn't a believer because there's sin in his life; because from God's perspective, there's sin in your life and in my life and in every believer's life. Now, don't misunderstand what I'm saying. I don't mean that you should tolerate sin in your life, or that I, as a believer, should tolerate it in ours. But there is

a process that the Lord has laid out to deal with sin. And it's in Matthew 18, and we call it the process of church discipline.

If a person who claims to be a Christian is in a pattern of sin, then our responsibility is to go to them privately and confront them with that sin. And if they respond, we've won our brother. If not, we're to take a couple back with us. We're to confront them again. If they refuse to do that, we're to tell it to the whole church, and say, "All of you who know this person and love this person, go pursue them. Urge them to repent." And then, finally, if they still are unrepentant, still refuse to turn from their pattern of sin, then we put them out of the church. And only then, is it right to treat a professing believer as an unbeliever.

So, what's the difference between a false believer and a genuine believer? James says, "It comes down to the pattern of your life." Does your Christian life, over time, show a decreasing pattern of sin, and an increasing pattern of righteousness? Is there enough evidence to convict you of being a genuine Christian? Is there an increasing pattern of obedience to the Word of God? James says, "You need to be warned. You need to ask the probing question: 'Is your faith dead or alive?'"

Let's pray together.

Our Father, our lives, our hearts are an open book before You. We thank You for this penetrating passage that causes all of us to think seriously. Lord, I pray that You would use Your Word in our hearts this morning.

Lord, I know that there are people here who have a dead faith, who made a profession of Christ at some point, who cling to that profession, but whose lives deny that confession. Lord, I pray that You would no longer allow them to be self-deceived. My prayer, Father, is: not a single person would leave this auditorium this morning, remaining in self-deception; but that Your Spirit would use Your Word to remove the blinders, strip away the façade, and let them see themselves as You see them. Father, bring them to true repentance and to true faith, that life-changing experience, whereby You make all things new, and may they set out on a path of decreasing sin and increasing righteousness.

Father, I pray for those here this morning, who tend, by nature, to be introspective. A message like this can be unsettling and disconcerting. I pray that You would help them to take a true

stock and examine their hearts. But then, Lord, I pray that You comfort them, that You would encourage them. Help them to cling to the promises that You have presented in Your Word.

And Lord, I pray for all of us as a church, that You would keep us balanced. Lord, help us to demand that salvation produces a changed life. And yet, at the same time, Father, give us a gracious spirit toward those who claim to be believers, and who are caught in a pattern of sin. Help us to handle them carefully and biblically, and graciously. And help us to urge them to repent. And Lord, if the process plays out and they fail to do that, then, and only then, Lord, help us to treat them as if they were not in the faith. Lord, help us to be biblical in our thinking and in our actions. May our lives reflect a pattern of obedience for the Glory of Christ, for the purity of Your church.

I pray these things and in His Name. Amen.