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**Series Title:** James: Life Lessons

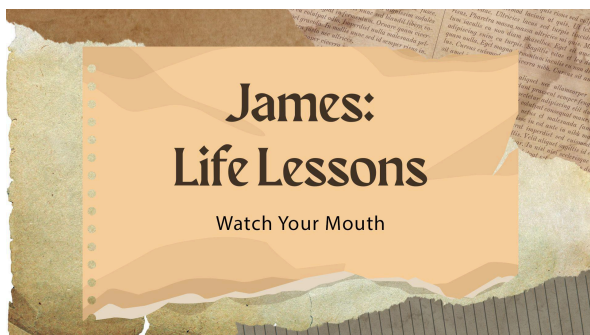
**Sermon Title:** Faith AND Works

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This is installment number two of four in our series on the Book of James called *James: Life Lessons*. James is primarily practical, combining wisdom about how to live with an indictment of how people were living. Half of James's 108 verses are commands about living, thus, LIFE LESSONS. There is an emphasis on doing and acting. Two of the best-known passages from James are "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (James 1:22) and "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17). Last week, we talked about James's admonition against playing favorites or, said differently, discrimination.

That second famous passage—"faith without works is dead"—is a part of our reading today and goes to the heart of what the writer of James was trying to sort out. He was trying to find the intersection between faith and works. Even the Bible seems to have different views on the subject of faith and works. Let me read for you two short verses and see what you think. The first is written by Paul in the book of Romans. The second is a verse that you heard read today.

"[A] person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (Romans 3:28).

"[A] person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24).

I don't know about you, but those two seem to conflict with one another. And, to make things worse, they both use the exact same Old Testament quotations to prove their point. By the time we wrap up today, I hope that you'll see that these two are more complementary than they seem on the surface.

I mentioned last week that the reformer, Martin Luther, didn't like James much; he called it "an epistle of straw," and this section of James is at the root of his complaint. The protestant reformation had at its core what were known as "five solas"—sola is the Latin word for "alone." It's where we get our musical term "solo." These five solas were a foundational set of Christian theological principles. Each sola

represented a key belief in Protestant traditions, although they were not assembled together as a theological unit until the 20th century. It always struck me as odd that there were five of them; it seemed that something that was labeled as “sola”—or alone—should have only one, but these people were much smarter than I.

In the earliest articulations of the solas, three were named most often: sola scriptura (“by scripture alone”), sola fide (“by faith alone”), and sola gratia (“by grace alone”).<sup>1</sup> What that meant was that when in doubt, scripture always wins over tradition, faith always wins over works, and grace always wins over merit. It was that second one—sola fide (by faith alone)—that put Luther crossways with James. Luther, however, near the end of his life, softened his rhetoric a bit on James as we’ll see later. None of the reformers, not even Luther, would entirely dismiss tradition, works, and merit. For all, even for us today, faith is the starting point.

Faith is necessary for salvation unconditionally. Good works are necessary only conditionally—that is, if there is time and opportunity. John Wesley would point to the thief on the cross next to Jesus as an example of this. He believed in Christ and was told by Jesus, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” This would be impossible if good works were a requirement for salvation. The man was dying and lacked time; his movements were confined and he lacked opportunity. In his case, faith alone was necessary. Sometimes, we hear of people making deathbed professions of faith. It would be wrong to say such confessions of faith are not valid because there are no works attached.

However, for the vast majority of human beings, good works are sign and symbol of the faith they profess. It is a natural and necessary outpouring of the faith we know. We have both the time and the opportunity to let our faith manifest itself in action. For the Reformers, sola fide did not mean that good works were unimportant or even unnecessary, only that we should not rely on those works to merit justification before God. Paul perhaps said it most succinctly—which is saying something for Paul—in his letter to the Ephesians: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

We are created for good works, but these works contribute nothing to our right standing with God. We are not saved by works, and we do not stay saved by works. James, in our reading, gives an example of a character from the Hebrew scriptures that the Jews would have known well. It is an unlikely example because, on a first look, this example is seemingly an unworthy person. When the Israelites were getting ready to conquer the city of Jericho, their leader, Joshua, sent two of his men to secretly enter Jericho to do some surveillance. Thinking it would be a good place to hide, the two spies stayed in the house of a prostitute named Rahab.

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<sup>1</sup> Resources on Five Solas taken from various sources but this has most complete information. The Five Solas An Essay by Matthew Barrett found at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-five-solas/>

The king of Jericho got word of this and told Rahab to send them out. Instead, Rahab hid the spies. She told the soldiers looking for them that they had just left but if they hurried they could probably catch up with them. After the soldiers left, Rahab explained to the two spies why she protected them. She had heard how the God of Israel had given them victory after victory. She feared the Lord and made the spies promise that when the Israelites invaded Jericho, she and her family would be spared. The spies gave her a scarlet cord to hang in the window as a signal to the Israelites not to harm that household. Rahab exemplified her faith in that she believed that God was at work and she acted on that. She believed in God and adjusted her life accordingly.

We may not be hiding spies in our house as an act of faith, but we should all be in a place where our faith spills out of us as actions. Each one of us has ways that actions—or James would say “works”—come forth from our faith. And, how that happens changes as our stage and station in life change. Let me demonstrate faith and works for you with my trusty flashlight from home. I have to remember to take this home because our newish dog, Rhetta, is good at hiding behind the shrubs when I let her out in the morning or late at night. This flashlight is you with faith. When I turn this flashlight on, this is you—still with faith but now with action doing what you were made to do to help others.

I ran across a story this week; I like to think it might be true. A man was hired to paint a boat. He brought his paint and brushes and began to paint the boat a bright red, as the owner asked him. While painting, he noticed a small hole in the hull and quietly repaired it. When he finished painting, he received his money and left. The next day, the owner of the boat came to the painter and presented him with a nice check, much higher than the payment for painting. The painter was surprised and said, “You’ve already paid me for painting the boat!” “But this is not for the paint job. It’s for repairing the hole in the boat.” “Ah! But it was such a small service... certainly it’s not worth paying me such a high amount for something so insignificant.”

“My dear friend, you do not understand. Let me tell you what happened: When I asked you to paint the boat, I forgot to mention the hole. When the boat dried, my kids took the boat and went on a fishing trip. They did not know that there was a hole and I was not at home at that time. When I returned and noticed they had taken the boat, I was desperate because I remembered that the boat had a hole. Imagine my relief and joy when I saw them returning from fishing. Then, I examined the boat and found that you had repaired the hole! You see, now, what you did? You saved the lives of my children! I do not have enough money to pay you for your ‘small’ good deed.”<sup>2</sup>

James really makes the distinction between having a living faith or a dead faith. “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17). The clear, overwhelming teaching of the Bible is that we are saved by grace through faith alone. Our works are not required for salvation; they are a result of our salvation. If we were saved by grace plus works, then grace is no longer grace, but a faith without works is not a vibrant faith.

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<sup>2</sup> Found in article by Rita Wirtz, “Red Boat! An Inspiring Story About Helping Others,” posted on June 19, 2021 and found here, <https://www.bamradionetwork.com/red-boat-an-inspiring-story-about-helping-others/>

Ultimately, Paul and James don't contradict each other; they complement each other. Paul is dealing with salvation. And he's dealing with Jewish legalists, who believe that keeping the works of the law of Moses is needed to be declared righteous by God. Paul is teaching justification by faith. James was dealing with people who say or profess to be Christian, but their lives have no evidence of their Christianity. So, he is challenging them to consider whether they have a true or false profession.

Paul and James are dealing with two different issues. When James uses the word "justify," he's using it differently than Paul did in Romans and Galatians. Paul is talking about being justified before God; James is talking about being justified before people, in them seeing our righteousness in the way we live, by seeing the evidence of our faith. With Paul, we have the root of the tree; in James, we have the fruit of the tree. When James talks about "works," he's not talking about the law of God, he's talking about philanthropy; feeding the poor; taking care of the sick; showing love, mercy, and grace; and performing other deeds in our lives.

Even Martin Luther, later in his life, came around a bit on the book of James. He said this: "It is impossible to separate works from faith, yes, just as impossible as to separate burning and shining from fire. Faith is a living, busy, active, powerful thing! It is impossible that it should not be ceaselessly doing that which is good. It does not even ask whether good works should be done; but before the question can be asked it has done them. And is constantly engaged in doing them, he who does not do such works, is a man without faith."<sup>3</sup>

Just as I was writing this, our preschool's assistant director, Paula, brought a preschooler into my office. Paula explained that this girl wanted to give her money to the church because she knew we helped people and she had a million dollars to give. I could see her holding it tightly in her hands and I put out my hands to receive it. It was just shy of a million dollars—it was 16 cents actually—but it was a million dollars to her, and I assured her that we would put it to good use.

What do your works declare about your faith? If we can only think of excuses—James's warning is to us—our faith may need some CPR. Our works declare whether our faith is alive or dead. A few weeks ago, our children's choir sang the classic children's song "This Little Light of Mine." I looked out that day and I could see many of you wanting to sing along as did I. That second verse that the children sang holds meaning for us today—"Hide our light under a bushel, no!" Let's sing like I know you wanted to a few weeks ago.

This little light of mine  
I'm gonna let it shine  
This little light of mine  
I'm gonna let it shine

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, Word and Sacrament I, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 365-380, at 370-371.

This little light of mine  
I'm gonna let it shine  
Let it shine let it shine let it shine

Hide it under a bushel no  
I'm gonna let it shine  
Hide it under a bushel no  
I'm gonna let it shine  
Hide it under a bushel no  
I'm gonna let it shine  
Let it shine let it shine let it shine

German priest and writer Karl Rahner said, “The number one cause of atheism is Christians. Those who proclaim Him with their mouths and deny Him with their actions is what an unbelieving world finds unbelievable.”<sup>4</sup>

Our faith is not passive; it is active. May the passage from James today be our guide this week. “Show me your faith apart from works, and I by my works will show you faith” (James 2:18b). I, by my works, will show you faith. May it be so for each and every one of us. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Found at Good Reads here:  
<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/476136-the-number-one-cause-of-atheism-is-christians-those-who>