

# FAITH TRACKS

## JAMES 2:14-26

Walk into the supermarket and you'll find the shelves stocked with "Lite" groceries. There's *lite mayonnaise, lite dressing, lite crackers, lite cheese, lite maple syrup, lite potato chips, lite spam...* there's even *lite dog food...* Everything needs to be less calories, fat free, no cholesterol... We want our foods to still taste great, but be less filling. And sadly today, there's some church-goers who've taken the same approach to their faith. They've opted for a *Gospel Lite* – a watered down version of Christianity. They want a low-calorie faith... **Christianity Zero.**

Several years ago a cartoon appeared in a Christian Magazine which showed a church marquee. It was advertising to the community... It read... "The Lite Church... 24% fewer commitments, home of the 7.5% tithe, 15 minute sermons, 45 minute worship services, we have only 8 commandments – your choice. We use just 3 spiritual laws and have a 800 year millennium. Everything you've wanted in a church... and less!"

When my kids were tots I'd get them in bed by promising *the Coke Cup*. They loved Coca-Cola. So if everyone was in bed by the time I counted to 10 they'd all get a sip of the Coke Cup. Little did they know the famous Coke Cup was a watered down solution of 30% Coke and 70% tap water. They always wondered why the Coke was stronger at granddaddy's...

There's certainly no harm in a dad manipulating his toddlers with a little cut-down Coke. But what is dangerous is a pastor or church that dilutes the demands of the Gospel to make it more palatable to society's tastes. It's been called "easy-believe-ism" or "cheap grace." It's the idea that saving faith is nothing more than coming forward after a church service - mouthing a prayer - signing a card. Jump through a few religious hoops and you're saved for all eternity. You got fire insurance! Salvation is like signing up for a retreat - *and it doesn't cost \$80...*

Yet that's not what we learn from Scripture. **Grace is free, but it's definitely not cheap.** Jesus paid a steep price to earn God's favor. And though it comes to us at "no charge," we have to desire it with all our heart. Paul said to the Romans, in 10:9, "that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." Notice, it's with the heart that a person receives God's righteousness. In other words, salvation is given by God to those desire it... you reach out for it with your heart - you don't expect God to toss it into your lap.

When Philip witnessed to the Ethiopian on the road to Gaza, the seeker asked him, "What hinders me from being baptized?" Philip answered, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And James would agree! Salvation is by grace through faith, but "heart faith" leaves tracks. It impacts a person's life... It makes a difference in how I respond to trials, and in what I value, and in my approach to temptation, and in how I treat people... Real faith displays evidence it's there. It leaves tracks.

It's been said of today's church, "The Gospel has become so diluted, if it were a medicine it would heal no one, and if it were a poison it would harm no one." As my kids can testify you can dilute a Coca-Cola to the point where it's no longer "the real thing." And the same is true with the Gospel.

And this is what concerns James in the last half of chapter 2. Apparently, even in the early church there were preachers who were trying to broaden the Gospel's appeal by dumbing down its demands. Here James steps in to help us define the true nature of saving faith.

He begins in verse 14, "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith..." Understand this man's claim. James speaks of a *hypothetical Christian with a hypothetical faith*... he "says he has faith..." I hope you realize it's easy to talk about faith. Every now and then a celebrity converts to Christianity, and he or she gets paraded through the mega-churches and across Christian TV. They share their testimony... Everybody oohs and ahs... then a few months later they're going through a nasty divorce, or they've been arrested on a DUI. Sadly, *they talked the talk, before they walked the walk*. And it's easy to do. Real faith is not a silent faith. It speaks out, but there's more to it than mere "words." It also involves "works" – discernable changes in how I live.

James asks, "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works?" Understand, James is playing the antagonist. He's asking a loaded question. He's trying to force us to think. You say you have faith, but where's the works? Forget the religious rhetoric! Is it real faith if there's no trace of it anywhere in the person's life?

The church I attended as a kid used the expression, "professions of faith." When a person came to Christ they had made a *profession of faith*. But I don't like that terminology. Faith is more than a *profession*. The person who believes doesn't just "say so." Real faith is a *possession*. Faith is a living thing that grows, and bleeds out, and shows itself. Faith leaves tracks all over my life. And if there's only words it's a pretend faith.

James is asking, what constitutes *true saving faith*? His answer is in verse 15, "If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?" It profits zilch! Your blessing is nothing more than hollow words. It's certainly not "compassion" until it moves you to action. And if *real love* always has hands and legs, what about "real faith?" For faith to qualify as *true faith* there also has to be action and movement.

Verse 17, "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." This past week a killer earthquake devastated the northern coast of Japan and send Tsunami waves toward Hawaii. On Thursday night sirens sounded all across the islands warning folks to evacuate to higher ground. When the waves hit Friday there were no casualties... *why?* Because everyone *believed* the warnings, and took action. Their faith moved them. If someone had stayed put, it would've proved an absence of faith. This is what James is saying, a living faith is dynamic. It acts on what it believes. It leaves tracks. Whereas, a passive, non-committal faith is no faith at all. It's a dead faith. It's a spiritual corpse masquerading as faith.

Perhaps you've heard of Charles Blondin? He was a famous acrobat. On June 30, 1859 Blondin crossed Niagara Falls on a three inch manila rope. It was stretched 1100 feet across the falls at a height of 160 feet. Over the course of that summer Blondin did a number of stunts from the tightrope... *he did a backwards somersault... he crossed blindfolded... he pushed a wheelbarrow across the rope... he walked the rope on stilts... he crossed the falls one night, in the dark, with Roman candles flaring from the ends of his balancing pole... he even cooked an omelet on a portable stove halfway across the falls, and lowered it to a boat on the river below...*

But Blondin's most amazing feat on the wire above Niagara Falls came the following summer on September 15, 1860. Before crossing the river that morning, he turned to crowd and asked, "Do you believe I can carry a man across the rope on my back?" The crowd roared, "Yes, we believe!" That's when Blondin asked for a volunteer... *but there were no takers!* He pointed to one eager fellow and said, "Will you volunteer?" The man replied, "You don't think I'm going to risk my life like that, do you?" The man turned and walked away. Of all the people who shouted "Yes," and nodded in agreement, none were willing to ride on Blondin's back. Their so-called faith was all talk. Their lack of action betrayed their claim to faith.

Finally, one man stepped forward. The crowd didn't know it, but the man was Blondin's manager, Harry Colcord. *Harry had already tied his future to Blondin's daring, so why not go all out and trust him with his very life?* And this will be our reaction if we really trust Jesus. We'll climb on the Savior's back and let Him carry us. We'll tie every area of our life to Jesus. Real faith, saving faith, faith that gets you to heaven - is faith that acts on what it believes. It's a commitment to live out the implications of faith!

In verse 18 James once again takes a position he doesn't agree with for the sake of argument. "But someone will say..." It's not true, but someone says it... This is not a "It is written..." it's just a "someone will say..." "Someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." This "someone" James mentions, is trying to separate faith and works, but James responds, "Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." In reality faith and works are inseparable.

First, let's not confuse what James teaches. Some folks err by redefining faith and works. Realize, *faith is faith and works are works. Faith is not another work...* The legalist will emphasize certain deeds and rituals until they swallow up faith. *Doing this and not doing that* become so important you're faith is in what you're *doing and not doing*. You assume you're entitled to heaven because you attend church each Sunday, do your taxes on time, witness, tithe 10%, don't get drunk, or cheat on tests. "I buy Girl Scout Cookies. I'm an organ donor. I've got a porno filter on my computer... I have to be headed to heaven!" Not hardly! All the goodness in the world isn't good enough to satisfy a holy God.

If we could be right with God on our own merit, Jesus would've never had to die in our place. It took nothing less than the cross of Christ to gain God's forgiveness and acceptance. Jesus paid a price too steep for us! This is why we obtain and maintain a right standing with God by faith. And faith is faith. Don't ramp it up into some religious deed. Don't try to define faith by our performance. Faith is simple trust in Jesus. "Salvation is by faith and faith alone..." But here's James' point... "Faith is never alone." This is why he says, "Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." Real faith will produce good works...

Going to church isn't faith – it's a work. Church attendance doesn't make me a Christian anymore than going to Dunkin Donut makes me a Snellville cop. I'm saved by faith alone – but if I believe I'm part of God's family, and I want my faith to grow, then I'll make church a high priority. Tithing 10% of my income is a work. It won't get me to heaven. But if I trust Jesus with my eternal soul, then why can't I give Him a portion of my income? It's a minimal way to say thanks and express my faith tangibly. Stocking up on Thin Mints certainly won't get my through the Pearly Gates, but if my heart is so hard and cold that I can resist a cute, little girl in a Girl Scout uniform selling delicious cookies, well... *enough said!* Don't turn faith into a work, but *real faith* will produce works.

Over the years people have been confused by the book of James.

Some people consider it opposed to Paul's letters - especially verse 24, "*You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.*" That seems to fly in the face of what Paul taught in Ephesians 2:8-9, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*"

Martin Luther was so upset with James, he called his letter, "*a right strawy epistle...*" Luther felt the book of James was of lessor value than the writings of John, Peter, and Paul. It was *strawy* in contrast to *solid gold*. Luther thought James allowed himself to be too easily misinterpreted. He was so frustrated with the book, in 1542 Luther wrote, "*I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove...*" Luther belittled the Apostle James by calling him "*Jimmy*." He never rejected James as part of the canon of Scripture, but he didn't hold it in the same esteem as the rest of the NT.

In reality Luther's frustration was in vain. There really is no contradiction between James - and the teachings of Jesus, and Paul, and all of the NT. J Vernon McGee encourages us to think of Paul and James *not* as two enemies fighting each other face-to-face - but as two allies back to back fighting opposite enemies, with the same truth, but from different angles. Paul fought *the legalist* who said the Gospel is faith in Christ plus works. James fought *the liberal* who said faith has *nothing* to do with how we live.

The so-called conflict between Paul and James clears up when you understand the difference in personality and vocation of the two authors... Paul was a theologian by trade - an expert in the law. A lawyer is adept at breaking down abstract ideas. Paul could decipher steps and causes. James though was the son of a carpenter. James was measured by the finished product - *not the steps involved in getting there*. The procedures you follow while building a chair don't really matter if you end up with a handsome, sturdy piece of furniture. James cares about *the end result*.

And this is how these two men dealt with salvation. Paul was careful to break down salvation into cause and effect. Faith alone is the cause. Fruits of the Spirit and good works will be the effects... Whereas James saw salvation as a whole. He was so sure faith produced works, he saw salvation as a package deal. If a life didn't show good works, then the obvious explanation was it didn't possess real faith.

Think of Paul's letters as spiritual schematics. They're breakdowns of the inner workings of faith. While the book of James is about the finished product. It shows what real faith looks like as its applied to a person's life. *Paul x-rays the roots of faith... James eyeballs the fruits of faith...* Paul says faith comes first and should never be confused with works. But James says works always follow faith. Works are the evidence of faith. Package together both perspectives and you see the picture perfectly... **Your faith is not a faith that saves, unless it's a faith that works!**

James is writing to most Southerners - folks who grew up in church - who cut their teeth on the back of a pew... *We've been sold false goods...* A lot of Southerners have assumed that by responding to the pastor's invitation, walking the aisle, praying the prayer... they'll be saved forever. There are folks who made a decision for Jesus at 10 years old - *but haven't given Him the time of day since* - and think they're really saved!

And here's their confidence, "*we're saved by faith...*"

Believe in Jesus – *that's all that matters* - then you can go your merry way, party on the weekends, live as you please, run your own life, and never have to think about God any more. Let me warn you, this is the idea that's sending some of you - and many of your neighbors - straight to hell. Don't assume since salvation is by faith, once I believe nothing else matters. *That's not true*. Once I truly believe everything else matters. Faith impacts the whole enchilada. It has implications for every area of my life.

James has a strong word for those who say they believe in Jesus, yet nothing changes in their life... Listen to verse 19, “**You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe - and tremble!**” Just agreeing with the facts about Jesus – giving a nod to God - without allowing His truth to grip my will and impact my life – isn't *saving faith*. Don't be deceived! “*Demon faith*” isn't “*saving faith*.” Just because a person says, “**I believe in God,**” doesn't mean they're headed to heaven. It just means they have the faith of a hellish demon.

Realize demons are orthodox doctrinally. Clarity is not their problem. Yet apparently, just knowing the truth – being theologically accurate – isn't enough to constitute real faith. *Saving faith demands my allegiance*.

James says “**even the demons believe – and tremble!**” The Greek word translated “**tremble**” means “**to bristle up!**” Here's verse 19 in the Amplified Version, “**So do the demons believe and shudder [in terror and horror such as make a man's hair stand on end...]**” Apparently, a demon's faith doesn't *save him*, it just *scares him*. A demon only focuses on God's judgment. The demons fear *the wrath of God*, but they've refuse *the love of God*. And it's God's love that leads a person to repentance. You can believe in God intellectually, but to truly *believe in Him* you will *receive from Him*...

Verse 20, “**But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?**” James sums up his premise – faith that's not accompanied by works *is* dead. It might have been alive at one time, but it's now dead. Here's a misconception... We think of faith as a contract. It's a sign on the bottom line kind of arrangement... So you respond to an invitation, sign a card, join a church, or agree with a set of doctrines *and you call it faith*. But real faith is like a seed. It nestles into the soil of our hearts, then we *water it*, and *weed it*, and *feed it*, and *fertilize it*, and it grows and produces fruit. But if you neglect that seed it can wither, and shrivel up, and die. Some people have a dinosaur faith. It's become extinct. It use to exist, but no more. Today it's pretend faith – imaginary faith – it's no longer real.

Next, James gives us a couple of biblical examples of real faith... First, James mentions the founder of the Hebrew nation, Abraham. And this is noteworthy, for Abraham is considered *The father of our faith*. In Genesis 15 God made a promise to Abraham. He'd be the daddy of many nations. Yet at the time Abraham and his wife had two problems that made God's promise seem preposterous. First, they were childless. And second, they were senior citizens. Abraham was 75. Sarah was 65. Yet Genesis 15:6 tells us, “**(Abraham) believed in the LORD, and (God) accounted it to him for righteousness.**” But don't think the story ends there.

Faith stories never end with an initial foray into faith. Faith follows through. It'll be 25 years later when God finally fulfills His promise and a child is born to Abraham and Sarah. They were the only couple in history to pay for labor and delivery with Medicaid... Old man Abraham was 35 years post-retirement age when he became the father of a newborn... *But there's still more*... Even after Isaac is born Abraham's faith gets tested. Faith has to act. God tells Abraham to offer his son a sacrifice. It's a foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Jesus – God the Father will offer His Son. And Abraham obeys. He holds a knife to Isaac's throat, and believes God will raise him from the dead if necessary. Instead God provides a ram.

Now James concludes, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?” If Abraham had not obeyed, how could we say he really trusted God? If you pray for rain, then walk outside without an umbrella – you obviously didn’t pray in faith. If you really believe God, you’ll obey Him.

Verse 23, “And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” James quotes Genesis 15:6 - the promise God made to Abraham 25 years earlier. Obviously, *faith came first*. But real faith had a great follow through.

James says of Abraham, “And he was called the friend of God.” Abraham is the only person in Scripture referred to by this title. Yet I think this is the essence of faith. Think of faith as a friendship. You don’t let a friend down. You trust Him. There’s a loyalty between friends. A willingness exists to please one another - to cooperate and work together. The same is true with faith. Real faith creates unbreakable ties between us and God. Bonds of love form. Real friend acts like a faithful friend.

James states in verse 24, “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” And in the context that James has laid out, he’s right. This makes perfect sense. If faith is real it will inevitably produce works. It’s been said, “We’re saved by faith not works, but real faith works.” Remember James sees faith and works as a continuum... He’s not worried about where faith ends, and where works begin. He sees the two as one unbroken chain... *Of course, one does end and the other does begin – that’s what concerns Paul in his letters to the churches.* But in the context of how James sees salvation it’s just as fitting to say we’re *justified by works*, as to say we’re *justified by faith*. In his mind we’re *justified by both* - in practice, how do you separate the *root* from its *fruit*?

And he provides us one more illustration. Verse 25, “Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?” In Hebrews 11 we learn that God had *mercy on the Madame* because of her faith in the will of God. She was saved *by faith* - and it was faith that acted on what it believed. Rahab didn’t just believe God would overthrow Jericho, she tied her fortunes to God’s people. She chose sides. *Faith always takes sides*. Rahab hid the Israeli spies, and helped them avoid detection. They climbed down and escaped on the scarlet cord that hung from her window.

The blood of Jesus is the scarlet cord that saves us today. But it saves only those brave enough to hang it from their window, and use it to separate themselves from this wicked world. **Faith takes sides.**

James closes his thoughts on faith and works in verse 26, “For as the body without the spirit is dead...” Notice James provides us a biblical definition for death. *When does a person actually die?... when the heart stops?... when brainwaves cease?... when the lungs no longer breathe?* In a world of modern medicine there are exceptions to all the above. But here’s the ultimate answer... *death occurs when the spirit exits the body*. There is a *physical part* and a *spiritual part* to every human. We don’t always know where one ends and the other begins. But they both exist.

You and I are as much a *living soul* as we are a *human body*. Don’t let the behavioral psychologist tell you otherwise. Animals are bodies without a spirit. But we’re more than animals. We’re made in God’s image. God breathed into our nostrils His own breath. Humans are eternal.

Though our bodies return to dust, our spirits live forever. Even as we speak we're deciding our destiny – we'll spend forever in heaven or in hell. But physical death occurs when the spirit vacates the body.

And likewise, **“so faith without works is dead also.”** Just as a body without a spirit is dead, faith without works is deader than a doorknob. When the spirit leaves the body it doesn't take long for the body to deteriorate. And in the same manner a faith that's dead loses its spark, and vigor, and guts, and daring, and beauty. It becomes a spiritual corpse.

Here's today's big idea... When the Spirit of God stirs up a faith and invades a human heart you can't remain the same. Change will take place. *Think back to when you first believed...* If nothing much spiritually has transpired... if you're no more like Christ now than you were then... if your life shows no evidence of God's impact... If you're the same ole same ole... then you've detected a dead faith!

Rather than **Christianity Zero** we need a **Jolt Christianity**. Faith should pack a punch! Twice the love. Twice the loyalty. Twice the passion. Twice the obedience. Twice the commitment. *Faith leaves tracks!*