

September 13, 2026

The Letter of James
V. Faith Is a Verb, Not a Noun
James 2:14-26

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Faith is a verb, not a noun – that’s what our Brother James wants us to understand when he says to us that, *“Faith apart from works is dead.”* Faith is not something we merely “have” – *“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works . . .”* Faith is something we do, a way that we live out and live out of the grace Jesus has freely given to us. Faith is not merely something we believe; faith is trusting in those beliefs – trusting in Jesus! – enough to put those beliefs into practice every day. As Brother James points out – in a rather cheeky fashion, as our English friends might say – even the demons believe in Jesus Christ; in fact, they shudder at the very mention of His Holy Name! Faith is not merely believing in Jesus, it is setting out to live with and for and by Jesus. Faith, says Brother James, is a verb – something we do; and not a noun – something we merely possess.

Faith without works is dead. Faith as a noun, and not as a verb, is of no use to anybody. Brother James gives us an analogy of this. Remember the parable Jesus told about that Good Samaritan?¹ A man travelling along a desolate stretch of highway is set upon by thieves – who rob, beat, and leave him for dead. Along comes a priest – sees the man, crosses over to the other side of the road in order to pass him by, thus avoiding any involvement in that poor man’s troubles. Then comes a Levite – same thing. Sees the man and crosses over to the other side, doesn’t want to get his hands dirty or his life complicated by that poor man’s problems. Maybe both the priest and the Levite said a prayer for that man in passing – something like, *“May the Lord help you and heal you.”* But they didn’t do anything at all to actually help the man – these two men of supposed faith.

In the same way, Brother James says, *“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?”* That’s faith as a noun – useless to everybody. Useless to the ones in need, useless to the man lying by the side of the road; the sort of faith that is useless even to ourselves – and perhaps, most especially of all, utterly useless to Jesus who commands us to care for the ones who are in need: *“Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.”*²

What is needed, what is expected by our Savior, is that we should be living out our faith as a verb – like that Good Samaritan who came along, saw the man lying there, stops and gives him aid. Like the one who sees the brother or sister hungry and poorly dressed, and then takes them to the meat and three, then over to Walmart to buy some decent clothes for them. *“Truly, I say to*

you,” says Jesus, “as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”³ Or, as Brother James puts it: “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

Faith is a verb and not a noun – something we live, not something we merely believe. And so, “*Faith apart from works is dead.*” Now some have tried to object to Brother James, saying that he is undermining the very heart of the Gospel when he says that – undermining the great truth that we are saved by grace and grace alone, and not by our works. Martin Luther, for example, the great Reformer – he was one of those accusers of Brother James. Thought we should tear out the entire letter of James from our Bibles. But he was wrong, of course. That accusation that James is teaching salvation by works and not by grace received through faith is wrong – not only wrong, but rather ridiculous. For example, some have tried to make that argument by pitting James against Paul. Quoting Paul writing to the Romans, declaring that we are “*justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*”⁴ – and then saying that James is undermining that great truth by his insistence that faith without works is dead.

But James and Paul are not at loggerheads with one another. In fact, they completely agree with one another about both salvation by grace received through faith and that faith is a verb, not a noun – that faith without works is dead. They are in full agreement on that. The difference between them lies only in where they place the accent mark – a difference which stems from the different situations each was facing, the questions and quarrels their letters were intended to resolve in the congregations to whom their letters were addressed. Paul is leaning more heavily on the saved by grace side because he is dealing with a perversion of the true faith in which some Christians were seeking to return to a system of salvation by works. So he boldly proclaims, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works . . .*”⁵

James, on the other hand, is writing to Christians who have decided that all you have to do is receive grace and you’re done – transaction complete, salvation accomplished, you don’t have to do anything else ever. To them James writes to say that no, accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior is not the finish line of faith – it’s the starting line for the new life of faith in and by the grace of Jesus. One old preacher put it this way: that Paul is dealing with obstetrics, with how new life begins; while James is dealing with pediatrics, family medicine, and geriatrics – with how the Christian life grows and matures and ages in the life of the one saved by grace received through faith.⁶ Or, to use the traditional theological categories: Paul is focused more on justification; James is focused more on sanctification. But both are on the same page.

In fact, even with his emphasis on salvation by grace received through faith, Paul is just as adamant as Brother James that faith is a verb and not a noun, that faith without works is dead. For example, no sooner has Paul declared salvation by grace received through faith in chapter five of his letter to the Romans, than he turns and says at the start of chapter six that this gift of grace, the birth of our faith, means that we must now be changed, must now begin to seek to live a new and different life – a grace-filled and Christ-honoring life: “*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him by baptism into death that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*”⁷ And elsewhere Paul speaks of our no longer being conformed to the world but of our being transformed by our faith in Christ’s gift of grace.⁸ He speaks of putting off

the old life of sin and putting on in its place the new life of goodness and kindness and all the other fruits of the Spirit.⁹ So no, Paul and James are not in disagreement at all. They both believe we are saved by grace received through faith. And they also both believe that faith without works is dead – that the faith which saves us is also to become the faith which changes us. Because faith is a verb, and not a noun.

But, even more importantly, what Brother James is saying to us this morning accords perfectly with what our Lord and Savior Jesus told us. Jesus said to us, *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”*¹⁰ *“Faith without works is dead.”* Or remember that parable Jesus told about a father and his two sons? No, not that one – the other one, in Matthew chapter twenty-one. The father goes up to the first son and says to him, *“Son, go and work in the vineyard today.”*¹¹ But the first son replies, *“I will not,”* and walks away. But a little bit later he changes his mind and goes out and does what his father has commanded him to do.

Then the father goes up to the second son and repeats his request: *“Son, go and work in the vineyard today.”* Son number two says, *“I go, sir.”* But then this second son doesn’t do it all what he said he would do – he doesn’t go into the vineyard to work; he doesn’t obey his father’s command. Jesus ends that parable by asking His audience, *“Which of the two did the will of his father?”* The audience gets the answer right – they answer Him, *“The first son”* – the one who, in the end, did as his father had commanded. Faith without works is dead – because faith is a verb, and not a noun. It is something we do, not merely something we believe. It is something we seek to live out daily, not something we tuck away in a drawer in case we might need it someday.

And then Brother James gives us some examples of faith rightly understood, rightly lived – beginning with Abraham, the great father of the faithful. Abraham straight off, the moment God called to him, said “yes” to God and set out in obedience to God’s command to leave his home and kindred behind and go to the place that God would show him.¹² In other words, he not only believed in God’s promise to him, he also acted on it. Faith without works is dead. Faith is a verb, and not a noun. Of course, the supreme example of this in Abraham’s life, and the one James focuses in on, is that moment when Abraham offered up his son, his only son, as God had commanded.¹³ That is such a complex and difficult story for us – but at heart, the meaning is simple. The meaning is exactly what James says it is: *“You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works.”*

And then Brother James offers up the story of Rahab, as a second example.¹⁴ Rahab is an unexpected choice, at first glance – given that a) as James points out, she was a prostitute; and b) because she wasn’t even an Israelite at the time – she lived in Jericho, which Israel was at that very moment besieging on their way into the Promised Land. But Rahab was faced with a decision of faith. The King of Jericho had demanded of her that she turn over to him the Israelite spies that she was hiding in her home. Rahab chose, instead, to trust in God, to believe in God, to act in faith that the God of the Israelites was the one true God. She faced down the king and helped the Israelite spies escape. She put her faith into practice. Faith as a verb in which she literally put her life on the line for the cause of the one true God. Faith as a decision she made, an action she took, a work she accomplished. Faith without works is dead – because faith is a verb, something we do in every aspect of how we live; and not merely a noun, something that we merely believe.

Faith is a verb, and not a noun, says Brother James. So how are we to respond? I suppose we could, and probably should, begin with a faith self-examination, a spiritual inventory of where we stand in relation to faith as verb and not a noun. Of whether we are living out our faith actively, with works giving evidence that our faith is alive and growing in us. Or whether we are living out our faith passively, without any real daily effort to seek to grow in Christ – evidence suggesting that our faith may actually be dead in us. Here’s a good exercise, suggested by the Presbyterian pastor and writer John Ortberg in his book *possessing the wonderful* – and in our case quite appropriate – title: *If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat*:

Imagine that your life is over, and you are led to a small room. There are two chairs in the room, one for you and one for God (who gets a very large chair), and there’s a VCR. God puts a tape into the machine. It has your name on it and is labeled What Might Have Been.

Imagine watching all that God might have done with your life if you had let him.

Imagine seeing what he might have done with your financial resources if you had trusted him to be generous. Imagine seeing what he might have done with your giftedness if you had trusted him enough to be daring. Imagine what he might have done in your relationships if you had trusted him enough to be fully truthful and fully loving. Imagine what he might have done with your character, if you had dared to confess sin, acknowledge temptation, and pursue growth.

I don’t know that God will make any of us watch a video like that. I do know that if I think too much about how far I fall short of what might have been, it can become defeating and that unrealized potential can become a club I beat myself over the head with.

But I also know that I want my life to come as close as I can to realizing the goodness God intended for it. I know this is my only chance, and I know I want to minimize the gap between what shall be and what might have been as much as I can. I know that as long as I’m living, it’s not too late – because I have this day. I know I want to ask God for commands, not guarantees, because when God commands, he enables . . . And I know that one day it will have been worth it.¹⁵

So, there we go: let’s do a faith self-examination, a spiritual inventory, a check-up on whether we are living out our faith more as a verb or more as a noun.

But what I like most about that quote from Ortberg’s book – and what I think constitutes our second and best response to Brother James’ imperative – comes right there at the end, where Ortberg says that “*when God commands, he [also] enables . . . And I know that one day it will have been worth it.*” What Ortberg is pointing out there is another of the great truths of salvation. Namely that it isn’t only our justification, our coming to faith, which is the result of God’s grace;

but that it is also our sanctification, our growing in faith, our faith as a verb and not as a noun new life in Christ Jesus that is the result of God's grace. God's grace not only brings us to faith, it is God's grace that also enables us to live out our faith as a verb, to live out a faith that is not dead but genuinely and deeply alive. What God commands, God also enables – by His grace.

So, as a second exercise in response to Brother James' message to us this morning, I propose this: that we make it a daily task to pray to God to make our faith more alive. John Calvin, our Presbyterian forefather, said we should be praying at least five times a day – when we wake up in the morning and when we go to bed at night, as well as before each of our three daily meals.¹⁶ So let's do that, you and me – at least five times a day. Let's turn to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the One who in love has saved us from our sins and by His grace has delivered us from death – let us turn to our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom we have placed our faith. And let us pray to Him, "*Lord Jesus, make my faith come alive. Lord Jesus, make my faith come alive.*" Say it with me: "*Lord Jesus, make my faith come alive.*" Pray it with me: "*Lord Jesus, make my faith come alive.*" Because faith is a verb, and not a noun. And faith without works is dead.

¹ Luke 10:25-37.

² Matthew 25:45.

³ Matthew 25:40.

⁴ Romans 3:24.

⁵ Ephesians 2:8-9.

⁶ Ernest Campbell, quoted in Frances Taylor Gench, Hebrews and James (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 106.

⁷ Romans 6:3-4.

⁸ Romans 12:2.

⁹ Colossians 3:1-17; Galatians 5:16-26.

¹⁰ Matthew 7:21.

¹¹ This quote and the following: Matthew 21:28-32.

¹² Genesis 12:1-4.

¹³ See Genesis 22.

¹⁴ See Joshua 2:1-24.

¹⁵ John Ortberg, If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 47-48.

¹⁶ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. 2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 917-918, III.XX.50.