



Faith Works: James 2:14-26

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I wonder what your memories of childhood are?

For me I remember long summer days, running barefoot around the backyard and kicking the brown plastic football. Now the brown plastic football looked like the real thing, but was actually a cheap supermarket job, which didn't perform anything like the ones you saw on television.

For a start they were infamous for being rock hard at the ends of the ball, which killed your toes if you happened to kick it there; while the centre of the ball was soft and malleable, which meant it didn't really go very far when you kicked it there.

The brown plastic football was a fake, too hard at the ends and too soft in the middle. It's performance was either painful or disappointing.

Compare that to the experience of kicking a Sherrin football – the official football on the AFL. Fully inflated the Sherrin was consistent in feel wherever you kicked it and it performed well, flying off the foot. The stamp on the underside of the ball proudly shouted its credentials, "Genuine Leather." This ball was the real deal.

Today's passage is James 2:14-26 and it is about authenticity – what makes a genuine Christian.

James has been addressing general problems that trip-up people of faith through these first two chapters, offering exhortations surrounding individual struggles such as trials, temptations or anger. Before moving on to conduct that impacts others such as showing favouritism, becoming judgemental and dishonouring the poor.

The thrust of today's passage is that authentic Christian faith will issue in good works and only this kind of faith justifies, making us right with God.

James has already laid a foundation for this teaching in Chapter 1 when he writes about the importance of faith “maturing” in verse 4 and that the word of God faithfully heard must be lived out in the life of the disciple in verse 22. Furthermore, James specifically mentions in chapter 2, that the recipients of a mature, active, faith will be the poor and needy in our midst - verses 3-6.

As we approach our passage today James addresses a further problem in the early church and still today, where people who claimed to be Christian, argued that their mere mental assent to one God, with no resulting works, was a sufficient faith.

James sets up a series of arguments, challenging these false claims and arguing that a truly authentic Christian faith is one of faith leading to works – only this kind of faith will justify.

The first challenge to an authentic faith, in verse 14, is from those who say you can possess faith without works.

James asks the rhetorical question if this kind of faith can save you? Before offering the following illustration. Read verses 15 and 16 along with me...

“If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”

Put yourself in the shoes of those in need for a minute. You are cold and hungry, but then you are noticed by members of your own church and when they notice your predicament, rather than helping you, the only response they muster is to send you away. That’s what is meant by the phrase “Go in peace.”

When was the last time you heard that phrase? At the end of our service, when the Minister is sending out the congregation to be faithful in the world.

Here, the context is different, but the direction is the same, these desperate people are being dismissed by these people who claim to have a faith, and yet they do nothing.

Confronted with an opportunity to do something for their brother and sister, they want nothing further to do with them. It’s very much like the Priest and Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, passing by on the other side. (Luke 10:25-37)

Their empty words and lack of action reveal a hardness of heart, much like the pointy end of the fake brown plastic football, which when kicked brings only pain, on-top of their already painful situation.

James doesn’t mince his words. He says that this kind of faith, which isn’t driven to do good works, is dead.

The second challenge to people possessing an authentic faith is from people who say, “you have faith and I have works” in verse 18.

This is the classic relativist position which seeks to make both points of view equally valid. This is the position of the soft, malleable centre of the fake brown plastic football, when kicked there it doesn’t go anywhere – its useless.

“You have faith and I have works,” still seeks to give validity and a place at the table for the ‘faith alone’ position.

To further highlight the uselessness of the ‘faith alone’ position – James uses a comparison in the most confronting of ways.

In verse 19, James first commends the ‘faith alone’ position by having a right start - believing in one God. Monotheism is the starting point for the Judeo-Christian faith as it is written, Deuteronomy 6:4 *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”*

This is good! But! Their faith hasn’t moved them into action – to make a difference in the world, to reveal faith in God to the world by their works.

The corruption of their position is made clear by the comparison James employs, who says that even demons believe in one God. And what happens to them in their belief? They are moved by this belief! They shudder!

So if demons can be moved into action, by their belief in the one true God; how can anyone say that mere faith in God with no actions can be of any use?

In his closing argument, James serves up his *piece de resistance* to show any doubters once and for all, that faith without works doesn’t save.

James presents two faithful people from the Old Testament, the first Abraham, a giant of the faith. The second a much more unlikely figure of Rahab the prostitute. Both, James states, were justified by God because of their works, as James writes in verses 21, 24 and 25.

For Abraham it was his willingness to obey God in sacrificing his son Isaac in Genesis 22 which in itself is not unproblematic. For Rahab in Joshua 2, it was her obedience having declared the one God which led her to defy the orders of the King of Jericho and shield the Israelite spies.

Now you might think that this ‘justification by works’ in these 3 verses in James, hits up against the Christian truth expressed in Romans 3:28 where Paul writes, *“For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”*

This apparent contradiction is helped by realising that Paul’s ‘faith’ and James ‘faith alone’ are two different concepts, because Paul’s ‘faith’ implies the works of obedience to Christ, whereas James’ ‘faith alone’ is devoid of works and is only a mental assent to the one God which doesn’t include obedience.

So when James writes that Abraham and Rahab were justified by their works, he means that their works came from their faith in the one true God.

Authentic faith, James says in relation to Abraham is this, verse 22, *“You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.”*

This summary helps to gather up James’ argument that a faith in God which is mere mental assent, is not a saving faith, it is actually, dead.

An authentic Christian faith in Jesus Christ, on the other hand, will lead to good works, in particular, helping to alleviate the needs of the poor and those who have fallen on hard times within our community.

In response to God's word today, I'm mindful more than ever of the creeping needs that are emerging and will emerge within our Church family as our country and world head into difficult times.

If you are in need in any way, can I encourage you to share it with your church leaders and not to keep it to yourself.

Second, how nimble are we as a church community to meet the emerging needs in our church for meals, clothing or crisis accommodation?

Authentic Christian faith issues in works. What works is God calling us to do as individuals and as a church community, both now, and in the days ahead?

If you feel God is speaking to you with ideas, then please do be in touch. Amen.