

Wiseguy

Studies in the Book of James

Text

James 2:14-26

Topic

If you say that you have saving faith, James says, "Show me" by helping your destitute brother or sister, rather than sending them away hungry

Title

"Show-Me Don't Play"

Introduction

Each of the states in the US has an official slogan to encourage tourism. They are often printed on license plates. We're familiar with many of them:

- Florida is *The Sunshine State*.
- Montana is *Big Sky Country*.
- New Mexico is *The Land of Enchantment*.
- *Virginia is For Lovers*.

The writers over at Comedy Central have suggested some unofficial state slogans:

- Arkansas - *Literacy Ain't Easy*.
- Hawaii - *Haka Tiki Mou Sha'ami Leeki Toru* (which translated is, Death to Mainlanders, But Leave Your Money).
- Kentucky - *Five Million People, Seven Last Names*.

- North Carolina - *Tobacco is a Vegetable.*
- Rhode Island - *We're Not Really An Island.*

If I asked you, seriously, which state is *The Show-Me State*, I'd bet most of you know it's Missouri.

There are several stories concerning the origin of the "Show-Me" slogan. The most widely known story gives credit to Missouri's U.S. Congressman Willard Duncan Vandiver for coining the phrase in 1899. During a speech in Philadelphia, he said:

I come from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs and Democrats, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. **You have got to show me.**

(I suppose it needs to be updated to read "Republican," since Missouri was a yuge-ly red state in the recent presidential election).

In the Bible, James is the "show-me" preacher. In our verses, he says, "**Show me** your faith without your works, and I will **show you** my faith by my works" (v18).

You simply cannot "show" faith without works; genuine faith works.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Show Me Your Faith By Serving Others, and #2 Show Me Your Faith By Showing Jesus.

#1 Show Me Your Faith By Serving Others

(v14-17)

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached the Gospel and three thousand Jews received Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Not long after, another five thousand were saved at once. We read, too, that men and women were being saved on a daily basis as ordinary believers shared the Gospel one-on-one.

A majority of these new converts had traveled from all-over the Roman Empire to attend the annual feast. After getting saved, they lingered in Jerusalem, wanting to learn as much as they could about Jesus directly from the Twelve. Local Jews opened-up their homes and showered hospitality upon them. In The Book of Acts we read,

Act 4:32 Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.

Eventually the majority of these visiting believers returned to their own homes outside of Jerusalem and Judea, to their regular lives and occupations, and to their synagogues.

It wasn't too long before waves of severe persecution hit the believers in Jerusalem. Many Jerusalem Jews were forced away from their homes and occupations out into Gentile territories. Most were poor already, but fleeing from persecution meant leaving everything behind. They were effectively refugees.

If you were a Messianic Jew who had been forced out of your home, dispersed out into Gentile territory, where would you seek help?

That's right - from the existing Messianic Jewish communities in those Gentile territories; from Messianic Jews who, just maybe, you had shown hospitality to some years earlier, after they were saved and hung around Jerusalem to learn about the Lord.

Evidently at least some of the more settled Jews were not given to showing them hospitality. Seeing their brothers and sisters in great need, they pronounced a blessing upon them, but sent them away without helping them.

James was not happy about it.

Jas 2:14 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?

Many of you know that this section of James' letter has caused all sorts of theological trouble.

We like to say that salvation is by grace, through faith, *plus nothing*. James seems to say - and I emphasize *seems* - that salvation is by grace, through faith, *plus works*.

You may have heard that the Reformer, Martin Luther, rejected the Book of James on account of this faith/works dilemma. That he thought it was in conflict with the writings of the apostle Paul.

Truth is, Luther vacillated on the Book of James. Lutherans after him offer the following analysis:

Paul was dealing with one kind of error while James was dealing with a different error. The errorists Paul was dealing with were people who said that works of the law were needed to be added to faith in order to help earn God's favor.

Paul countered this error by pointing out that salvation was by faith alone apart from deeds of the law (Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:21-22). Like James, Paul **also** taught that saving faith is not dead but alive, showing thanks to God in deeds of love.

James was dealing with errorists who said that if they had faith they didn't need to show love by a life of faith (James 2:14-17). James countered this error by teaching that faith is alive, showing itself to be so by deeds of love (James 2:18, 26).

Perhaps an alternate translation of verse fourteen will help. The ISV has it, "What good does it do, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but does not prove it with actions? **This kind of faith** cannot save him, can it?"

The **kind** of "faith" that produces absolutely no spiritual changes in a person's life; or, worse, the person acts contrary to Christian character; *that kind of faith is not saving faith.*

James and Paul **both** teach that salvation is by faith alone *and* also that saving faith is never alone, but shows itself to be alive by deeds of love that express a believer's thanks to God for the free gift of salvation by faith in Jesus.

Jas 2:15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food,
Jas 2:16 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?

I think that this was more than a hypothetical case. More than an illustration. Given the scenario I laid-out earlier with regards to Jews being scattered by persecution, *I think this was happening in real time.*

Jews recently forced to flee Jerusalem were ending-up in the synagogues of settled Jews already dispersed throughout the Empire.

In the opening verses of chapter two, James introduced a situation in which a "poor man in filthy clothes" came in to the assembly.

Doesn't it sound like he is continuing his illustration by picking up where he left off - with this poor man?

"Naked" is translated from a word that can mean *without adequate clothing*. Driven out of Jerusalem by persecution, it wasn't long before your clothing would be soiled, at the least, and eventually tattered. It wasn't long before you'd run out of money for daily necessities.

The poor man in filthy clothes wasn't initially treated badly; he was invited in, to stand or sit during the service. The Rich man was given preferential treatment; but the poor man wasn't turned away.

Afterward, however, he was being sent on his way with only a blessing. They ended their service with the doxology, then sent the poor man off without helping him.

"What does it profit?" can be translated, "your words are worthless." To put it in our own slang, James was telling them, "You need to put your money where your mouth is."

James had also, in the previous verses, talked about loving your neighbor as yourself. It would have evoked thoughts about Jesus' teaching on the Good Samaritan, because it was in response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" that Jesus told that story.

The Samaritan stopped to help the robbed and beaten Jewish stranger, getting him to safety, and providing for his physical needs for some days afterward.

Yet here these Jews were, turning away one of their own. Dismissing him or her with a blessing wasn't really an option.

Jas 2:17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

If this sounds harsh, we're forgetting something Jesus said. It's a rather long passage; bear with me as I read it.

Mat 25:31 "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.

Mat 25:32 All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.

Mat 25:33 And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

Mat 25:34 Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

Mat 25:35 for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in;

Mat 25:36 I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'

Mat 25:37 "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink?

Mat 25:38 When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You?

Mat 25:39 Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'

Mat 25:40 And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'

Mat 25:41 "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels:

Mat 25:42 for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink;

Mat 25:43 I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.'

Mat 25:44 "Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?'

Mat 25:45 Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.'

Mat 25:46 And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

James wasn't the only one who thought that saving faith was shown by works.

It was one thing for the Jerusalem Jews to show hospitality for the converts *at* and *after* the Day of Pentecost. It was all excitement, and revival, and miracles.

Now, a decade-and-a-half later, those Jerusalem Jews were targets of persecution. The persecution hadn't reached the outlying areas, but if you helped a refugee, that might cast suspicion on you. It was dangerous, and the local Jews were ignoring the need.

I've expanded this beyond helping the naked and destitute to say that you show your faith by serving others.

Take inventory of your ministering to others. Is **your** faith working?

#2 Show Me Your Faith
By Showing Jesus
(v18-26)

People almost universally think that having a job description is essential to success in the workplace.

I'll tell you one place where I've seen having a job description be detrimental: in the Church.

Let me give an example. Christians have a tendency to think in terms of the *gift* or *gifts* of the Spirit they have been given. That's great; you *should* stir-up the gift or gifts God has given you, and use them to serve others.

However, it's never an excuse to forgo serving because what is needed is not your gifting.

I think that is part of the background for the confrontation in verse eighteen.

Jas 2:18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

The objector says, of James, that he has "works," while they have "faith."

We might say that the two men are *gifted differently*, so that one has the gift of faith, but not the gift of works; and vice-versa.

The implication is that the person with faith has no real obligation to help the needy, *because it's not in their spiritual job description*.

They might even go so far as to say that pronouncing a blessing over the needy brother or sister is all that God wants them to do.

James wants his readers to know that he isn't talking about their gifts. He's talking about something far more basic. **Every believer, who has saving faith, must show it by his or her works.**

He challenges believers to "show me" faith. **You can't do it without works.**

Jas 2:19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe - and tremble!

All Jews - whether saved or not - "believe that there is one God." As part of the practice of Judaism, Jews each day would repeat these words from the Book of Deuteronomy, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (6:4-5).

James' audience were men and women who had recited that creed all of their lives, every day. Then, one day, they were exposed to the Gospel. Their eyes were opened to see that **Jesus** was and is God. They were saved - born-again.

Their lives were radically transformed from within, as they were filled with God the Holy Spirit. Old things passed away; all things became new.

In verse nineteen, I see James reminding them of where they'd come from. As Jews, before Jesus, they believed in One God - *but they didn't know Him.*

James pointed-out that even demons believe in One God. They "tremble" at the reality of being consigned, eternally, to the Lake of Fire.

A Jew - or a Gentile - who believes in One God, but is not born-again, will share the same fate as demons.

God had saved them *from* that fate, and *for* good works. They go hand-in-hand.

Jas 2:20 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?

"Do you want to know" means "are you willing to learn." James wants to show them, from their own Scriptures, that saving faith has *always* shown itself by works among the heroes and heroines of faith.

Jas 2:21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?

Abraham, of course, was the physical father of the Jewish nation. He was, and is, the spiritual father of all those who are saved - Jew and Gentile alike.

His greatest test of faith was God asking him to offer his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. Abraham never hesitated.

Jas 2:22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?

I'm sure that, in synagogue school, the average Jew had been told that story a gazillion times; and, each time, they understood that Abraham's obedience showed them what they couldn't see - his faith.

Jas 2:23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS ACCOUNTED TO HIM FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS." And he was called the friend of God.

William MacDonald has a great take on this:

True faith and works are inseparable. The first produces the second, and the second evidences the first. In the offering of Isaac we see a practical demonstration of the faith of Abraham. It was the practical fulfillment of the Scripture which said that Abraham was justified by believing.

Jas 2:24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

In Genesis 15:6 we read that Abraham believed in the Lord, and God counted it to him for righteousness. Abraham was therefore justified by believing; in other words, he was justified by faith.

It is not till we come to Genesis 22 that we find Abraham offering up his son. It is then that he was justified by works.

As soon as Abraham believed in the Lord, he was justified in the sight of God. He was saved. He couldn't be any more saved. But then, seven chapters later, God put Abraham's faith to the test. Abraham demonstrated - to mankind - that it was genuine, saving faith by his willingness to offer up Isaac. His obedience showed that his faith was not merely a head belief, but a heart commitment.

James next mentions Rahab.

Jas 2:25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?

Joshua sent two spies to do recon before attacking Jericho. Their presence became known, and they were being hunted. Rahab the harlot took them in and hid them - effectively committing treason. She protected them and, when she had diverted the search party, "sent them out another way."

Another great lesson from synagogue school which showed that Rahab's faith - even though she had very little knowledge of the God of Israel - was shown to be genuine by her works.

Simply put, James was pointing-out to his readers that they already believed what he was teaching them. They knew, from their own Scriptures, that faith *works*... And therefore that faith without works is like a corpse without life.

- How would it have been if Abraham refused to offer Isaac?
- What would Jews have thought if Rahab had turned-in the spies?

He didn't, and she didn't, precisely because they had true, saving faith that prompted obedience - no matter the consequences.

Neither of them said, "I have faith, and don't need the works of obedience that show it."

The Jews turning away their naked and destitute brothers and sisters were understandably afraid of repercussions.

What would Abraham have done in their situation? Or Rahab?

Whether it was actually being verbalized as an excuse, to say, "You have faith, and I have works," was a lame, nonbiblical excuse.

[Jas 2:26](#) For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

If, after pointing this out, a Jew continued to refuse help and hospitality, it might be they were never saved in the first place.

This is where it gets tough. If a professing believer doesn't do what is clearly right, they are either *unwilling* to do it, or they are *unable* to do it.

- By unable, I mean that they lack the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and cannot obey God. They are not saved.
- By unwilling, I mean that they choose sin over obedience. They are carnal.

I can't be sure of their faith in Jesus, because I can't see their heart. But I can raise the concern that they are not saved, because "faith without works" of obedience is "dead."

There is something else I want to point out. There is something in common, and marvelous, about the two examples James used.

Abraham and Rahab both show Jesus in their works:

- As most of you know, Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac is a picture of God the Father sacrificing His Son, Jesus. What Abraham was stopped from doing, God the Father would do centuries later, and on that same spot. Abraham was showing Jesus.
- Rahab was promised she'd be delivered from destruction in Jericho but only if she tied a scarlet cord outside her window. As early as the first century, commentators such as Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Ireneaus, Origen, and others saw this scarlet cord as a symbol of the blood of Jesus. She, too, was showing Jesus.

Works must show the world Jesus to have true, eternal value.

Microsoft founder Bill Gates is not only the world's richest person, he's also one of the most generous. His organization, The Gates Foundation, is dedicated to eradicating diseases and helping the world's most poor, and he's committed to giving away almost his entire fortune.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, he revealed that part of the inspiration for helping others is based on religious principles. He told the magazine,

The moral systems of religion, I think, are superimportant. We've raised our kids in a religious way; they've gone to the Catholic church that Melinda goes to and I participate in. I've been very lucky, and therefore I owe it to try and reduce the inequity in the world. And that's kind of a religious belief. I mean, it's at least a moral belief.

Is he saved? David Frost asked Gates, "Do you believe in the Sermon on the Mount?"

"I don't. I'm not somebody who goes to church on a regular basis. The specific elements of Christianity are not something I'm a huge believer in."

Gates is not showing Jesus. While his good works alleviate much suffering, they do not offer eternal rewards, or warn of eternal punishment.

While you are contemplating your faith and its works, remember that you want to show others Jesus in all that you say and do.