

James 2C

- After what we heard from James last week, I'm surprised you've returned
 - I certainly felt convicted over what James taught
 - And I acknowledge this is tough material
 - I didn't structure my teaching with an intent to entertain or soothe with light-hearted stories
 - What I did do – and am doing – is wrestle with this text for hours and days
 - Because my job is to get this right, as best I can
 - And then my job is to share it with you as God has revealed it to me
 - And to leave it to the Holy Spirit to tell you what to do with what you learn
 - And I admit that makes for one heck of a downer sometimes
 - But if you're like me, the conviction soon gives way to this thrilling recognition of how awesome our God is
 - And of how important my life is to God, that I can live in such a way that I bring Him glory
 - And nothing matters more to God than His glory
 - And I get excited at the prospect of serving Him in the days He gives me
 - And then I see the wisdom of God's word in the way it propels me forward into a life that does good works
- We ended on v.17, as James makes his point clear
 - If our faith doesn't yield good works to the glory of God, is it a useless faith
 - It is useless for others who are in need of our works of charity and service

- It is useless to ourselves because our eternal reward is based on works done in faith
 - If we arrive at the judgment moment without works, we will come through the judgment moment empty handed
- Most importantly, a faith absent works is useless to God
 - As Jesus said:

[Matt. 5:16](#) “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

- The light is a symbol for our faith in the Gospel, and Jesus told us to let our faith shine in such a way that the world sees our good works and glorify God
- As I reflected on this part of James’ letter, I was forced to confront many assumptions I have made about my own life and about scripture itself
 - Perhaps you have done the same thing this week
- I wondered if I was pleasing the Lord in my works
 - I hope He is pleased in my teaching and pastoring
 - But even if that were true, is He pleased with my works as a husband, or father or in my secret thoughts?
 - Is he pleased in my prayer life or in the way I spend my money or in the way I spend my free time?
- I found myself asking more and more what will the Lord say to me on my judgment day about these things
- And in terms of Scripture, I’ve found myself taking a second look at a number of passages where Jesus or other New Testament writers tell us to take the judgment seat moment seriously
 - Paul, for example, describes the judgment seat of Christ this way:

[2Cor. 5:9](#) Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.

[2Cor. 5:10](#) For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

[2Cor. 5:11](#) Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences.

- Paul says we should have as our ambition to be pleasing to Christ
 - Knowing we will be judged by Him and rewarded accordingly
 - And Paul adds, whether good or bad
 - There can be a bad outcome to that judgment
 - And a bad judgment is the result of a Christian who lives a life without striving to please His Master
 - That's a life lived without a fear of the Lord
- Look how Paul begins his next thought...knowing the fear of the Lord
 - Have you wondered why Paul was so tireless in his efforts to spread the Gospel?
 - Why did Paul place himself in harms way and endure such misery at times?
 - And why did he do it willingly?
 - He says he did it because he knew the fear of the Lord
 - And he let his fear and respect and awe and desire to please His Lord drive him to a life of good works
- So in Chapter 2 up to verse 17, James has made this simple argument
 - We must pay attention to how we respond to the tests of our faith
 - We must take these test seriously and set our mind to passing them
 - And "passing a test" is an opportunity to do good deeds or good works
 - In fact, we must set our minds on the goal of living a Christian life that produces good works of faith
 - By serving in our gift, seeking ways to spread the Gospel and in all we do glorifying God

- James then argues we must be dedicated to this path, because we are to be judged according to the Law of Liberty
 - This judgment is one of works, not a judgment for sin
 - But it still brings the possibility of a bad outcome
 - And if we haven't shown works of mercy, then why should we expect our judge to show mercy to us at that moment?
- Instead we will see a harsh judgment
 - Because that will be the outcome for a believer who lives a life absent good works
 - They will have a faith, but it is a dead, useless faith
- Now James was a smart man, and he was guided by the Holy Spirit
 - So he anticipated what some might argue to refute his concerns
 - James anticipated that some might try to counter his argument and claim that Christians do not need to worry about such things
 - And he offers that argument in v.18

James 2:18 But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."

- James speaks as if he were an objector, who disagreed with James' argument
 - Now before I explain to you what the objector is saying, let me tell you that this verse and the ones that follow are often misunderstood, even among many evangelical Christians
- So to help clear things up, let me ask you a question
 - How would someone object to James' teaching?
 - For example, would someone try to contradict James by proposing that it's perfectly OK to have faith but no works?
 - Would anyone ever argue that point?
 - Not in my experience

- Arguing that faith without works is a perfectly acceptable option for a Christian doesn't even make sense
 - So this wasn't an argument that James was worried about either
 - Instead, James worried about the opposite argument
 - He is worried that someone might argue that there is no such thing as a believer who has faith without works
 - Or said another way, James worried that someone might argue that every true believer must produce works
 - And therefore, a faith that produces no work would not be true faith
 - And we have certainly heard many teachers making that claim
 - So James poses that same argument himself in v.18
 - An objector might say, "You say that a man may have have faith by itself, but can that man show me his faith without works? No."
 - How can you show faith without works? You can't, since faith itself is invisible
 - A believer can only show faith by works
 - Therefore, a true faith must have works
 - And if a faith has no works, then it is not a true faith
 - So, the objector is suggesting that James is worried about something that he doesn't need to worry about
 - True faith will always produce works, so why spend time worrying about people who lack works...they aren't believers in the first place
- James wanted to raise this question because he knew it was a thought in the church, both then and now
 - And then James makes the counter-argument to dispel it, to challenge it

[James 2:19](#) You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

- In v.19 James refutes this argument so powerfully that it immediately shuts up anyone who might argue otherwise
 - James makes an example of the demon realm to disprove the objector's assumption that a sure belief automatically produces behavior consistent with that belief
 - James says do you believe God is one
 - He's referring to the Jewish Shema, the confessions of the Jews found in Deuteronomy 6:4

[Deut. 6:4](#) "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!

- This statement from Scripture is not a statement of the Gospel
 - James is purposely not using an example of belief in the Gospel, because his point is not about who is saved
 - He is arguing a general point about the relationship between any belief and behavior
- So James says that when a person accepts a statement of Scripture to be true, they do well
 - But now James wants the reader to consider whether a strong belief must always result in behavior consistent with that belief?
 - Or is it possible to have a strong belief and yet still act in ways that are inconsistent with that belief?
- To prove his point, James says consider Exhibit A: the demon world
 - Demons are fallen angels
 - They were once in heaven serving the Living God
 - They knew the goodness of God and they understood His power
 - And when Lucifer rebelled against God, a third of the angelic realm rebelled with him
 - And together, these rebellious angels have come under judgment and are appointed a place in the abyss and later the Lake of Fire

- In the meantime, these fallen angels – or demons we call them – serve Satan as they await their judgment moment
- James points out that these demons also believe that God is One
 - Again, notice that James didn't say that they believe in the Gospel
 - Rather, the demons know that God exists, that He is the only true God
 - They have this knowledge from firsthand experience
 - It doesn't even require faith on their part
 - They have seen Him
 - They know He is real and that He has real power
 - They also know He will be their judge
 - And they know that He will hold them accountable for their sin in rebelling against Him
 - You see proof of their belief and understanding in the Gospels when Jesus encountered a legion of demons

[Luke 8:28](#) Seeing Jesus, he cried out and fell before Him, and said in a loud voice, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg You, do not torment me."

[Luke 8:29](#) For He had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. For it had seized him many times; and he was bound with chains and shackles and kept under guard, and yet he would break his bonds and be driven by the demon into the desert.

[Luke 8:30](#) And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him.

[Luke 8:31](#) They were imploring Him not to command them to go away into the abyss.

- They immediately recognized Jesus, they knew Him to be Lord
 - They called Him by name
 - And they anticipated that Jesus would cast them into the abyss, into Hell
 - The demons know all these things
 - Their belief is absolutely 100% sure
 - They have no doubt about what their future holds

- And yet James says that belief only produces a shudder
 - A unique word in the New Testament, it means to shiver in fear
 - James is saying that these demons are so certain of their coming judgment, they are shivering in fear
 - And yet that belief in God didn't stop them from rebelling against Him
 - It hasn't brought them to repentance
 - They continue rebelling today
- So to the objector who says that a true faith will always result in works consistent with that faith, James asks you to consider the demons
 - Demons know the same thing you know
 - In a sense, demons have an even better understanding of God than we do
 - And yet they aren't living a life of good works for God
 - So should we assume that a believer's belief in God will always compel him to produce good works?
 - The obvious answer is no. There must be a conscious decision to follow that faith with behavior
- Some might argue that Christians are different than the demons because we have the Spirit
 - And the indwelling of the Holy Spirit ensures we are brought to good works
 - But Scripture never makes that promise
 - It promises us that the Spirit is a deposit and a guarantee of our future inheritance in Christ
 - But Scripture also teaches clearly that the degree of our inheritance is in our control and not assured
 - And if we're not careful, Paul says in Ephesians 4:30 that a believer can grieve the Spirit

- Others might point to Ephesians 2:10 where Paul says we were created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them
 - Is Paul teaching that a believer's good works are inevitable because God has ordained them to happen?
 - No, Paul is teaching that the course of our works has been established by God, not the inevitability of us following that course
 - God has already decided what works we are to accomplish to please Him
 - So we can't decide for ourselves what works please God
 - But the question remains will I serve Him in those works or do other things that please myself instead?
- So James warns that it's possible for a Christian to act, in a sense, like the demons
 - We can know the truth about Jesus, yet we can still find ways to sin against Him and not live a life pleasing to Him
- If we hold the view that true faith always produces works, we risk making two serious doctrinal errors
 - First, this thinking neutralizes the power of James' teaching in Chapter 2
 - Slowly but surely, we begin to let ourselves off the very hook James is trying to set in our hearts
 - Why worry so much about passing tests or serving the needs of our hungry and poor brothers and sisters?
 - What happens to our sense of urgency?
 - Why would we ever need to re-evaluate our lives and question our decisions?
 - Won't we just rest in the confidence that our faith will naturally produce good works for Christ?
 - Like a plane on autopilot, we can take in the scenery knowing that we'll get to our destination one way or another

- This is exactly the kind of complacency that James is working to end
 - The second problem with this error is even more troubling
 - Making works a necessary demonstration of saving faith moves us perilously close to a Gospel of works
 - Where we suggest to believers that there is something we must do to ensure our salvation
- Fortunately, James makes clear that he is not arguing for such a view by using two Old Testament examples

[James 2:20](#) But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?

[James 2:21](#) Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?

[James 2:22](#) You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;

[James 2:23](#) and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God.

[James 2:24](#) You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

- First, James uses the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac on the mountain in Chapter 22 of Genesis
 - James begins again with his thesis, that faith is useless without works
 - Not absent or false or fake, just useless
 - And his use of Abraham as an example is especially important, because Abraham was declared to be righteous by faith at an earlier point in Genesis 15
 - But in Genesis 22 God gave Abraham an opportunity to display His faith through works, so that Abraham might accomplish something important for God's glory
 - In v.21 James says that Abraham was justified by works when he offered up Isaac
 - As confusing as this verse can be to some Bible students, the proper interpretation is fairly easy
 - It rests on an understanding of the word "justified"

- The word always means declared righteous, not to make someone righteous
- In Genesis 15, God declared Abraham to be righteous on the basis of His faith
 - But in Genesis 22, Abraham was declared to be righteous by his works
- In Genesis 15, it was God's judgment that Abraham be counted (or reckoned as) righteous
 - But in Genesis 22, it was Abraham's turn to make that declaration for himself through his own actions
 - And his obedient actions had the effect of declaring the same things that was already true from God's perspective
- James is saying that when we do good works, we make a declaration about who we are – our testimony
 - Without faith, it is impossible to please God
 - After faith, it is our obligation to please Him – and we do that through good works
- Finally, James uses another example of saving faith put to work

[James 2:25](#) In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

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

- Rahab was the prostitute who believed in the testimony of the invading Jews concerning God's plans to destroy her town of Jericho
 - And when Joshua sent spies into the land, she hid them from the Jericho king
- Her kindness to those messengers was a meaningful act of mercy to men she should have seen as enemies
 - And because she acted on her faith, the spies assured her that she would be saved when the city was destroyed
- She could have remained silent

- She still would have had belief in the God of Israel
- But if she hadn't acted on that faith to protect the spies, then she would have lost her earthly life in the invasion
- James' point is there are benefits for God's glory when we act on our faith and perform works
 - And there are personal benefits when we act on our faith and do the works that our faith requires
- In Rahab's case, the reward was her life was spared when Israel defeated Jericho
 - And her name was preserved in Scripture in the line of Jesus
 - She was the mother of Boaz, the husband of Ruth
- How kind of James to close on the example of Rahab
 - If he had ended on Abraham, perhaps we would have wondered if this goal was out of reach for us
 - Only men of Abraham's stature could obtain such a testimony
 - But then there is Rahab, a harlot James reminds us
 - If she could act on her faith in a simple way, taking in strangers in her home
 - Perhaps we can do the same then?
 - As James reminds us in v.26...a dead body is a very real thing, but it's entirely useless...don't live a life of very real but very useless faith