

## *Faith Is Not Enough • James 2:14-19*

It's not a new question: "Can a person be saved from sin and go to heaven just by claiming faith in Jesus Christ?" What if there is no difference between his life and the lives of non-Christians? What if she is always selfish and mean? What if he seldom attends church? What if she defies God's moral standards for sexual purity? What if a man abuses his wife and children? What if they never give a nickel to the church or charity? What if they never help others who are hurting or helpless?

As long as a person says, "I have accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior from sin" will all sins be forgiven? Is it an unconditional guarantee that this person is a Christian who will forever live in heaven?

No one is better qualified to answer this very important question than Jesus himself. It was Jesus who said in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

That's a sobering statement! According to this statement some people are going to show up for heaven and Jesus is going to bar the gate. They will say, "Lord, I'm a Christian!" and Jesus will answer, "I don't even know who you are. Get away from me."

We need more information. And more is taught in James 2:14-19. There is says:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

Back to the original question: "Can a person be saved from sin and go to heaven by just claiming faith in Jesus Christ?" The answer is a qualified "yes". Faith is all it takes as long as that faith includes action. But if someone just says the words, "I'm a Christian," that's not good enough. So let's get some more explanation from James 2.

There are two questions that kick off this section of James. They assume the answers inside the questions. We have questions in English where the answer is built into the question. They are questions like, "Who is buried in Grant's tomb?" Or, "When do we celebrate the fourth of July?" Unless you are really slow you can probably take a pretty good guess at what the answer to those questions are because the answer is built in.

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Greek grammar, the language in which the New Testament was written, requires that the questions found in James 2 be answered "no". "What good is it if someone claims to

have faith but has no deeds?" The answer is "no good". The answer is built in. "Can such faith save someone?" Absolutely not!

Now wait a minute. If this is correct, there are going to be a lot of surprised people on the other side of death. There may be millions of men and women who said they were Christians only to discover at the most inopportune time that they are not. But by then it will be too late. They will discover that they have been tragically excluded from heaven forever. That is because just saying something does not make it true.

When Charleen and I were married, a car came along with her in the deal. It was a 1957

Chevy. At the time I thought the car was quite ordinary. If I had realized that '57 Chevrolets would become such popular collector cars, I might have treated the car with greater respect.

About a year after we were married I sold her car to a man who said he would return with the rest of the money in a week. He said it and he may have meant it, but I never saw him again. Two years later I received a phone call from a man in Illinois who said that the car was still registered in my name.

We've all had similar experiences in which people make promises but never follow through. Words aren't enough. Every day millions of people make millions of promises that mean nothing. Sometimes they are liars, but often they just deceive themselves into believing that something is true because they say so.

Verbal contracts without cash to follow don't mean much. Promises that aren't kept are worthless. Words without action simply are not enough.

James makes up an example of his own. Suppose there is a Christian who doesn't have a coat for cold weather or food for dinner. A fellow church member says, "Oh, I really wish you well. You just keep real warm this winter and don't miss a meal!" What possible good does that do? What difference do these words make? Words don't keep you warm and good wishes don't fill a stomach. Saying something without follow-up is no different from saying nothing at all. In some ways, it's worse!

The point here is that words of faith without follow-up behavior don't mean anything. For me to say, "I am a Christian" without behaving like a Christian means zero. It means that I'm really not a Christian at all. Or, as James puts it, "...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

Now there are some people who may say that people are different. Some people have faith. Other people have works. It's just different ways of being a Christian. One isn't better than the other.

"Not so," says James. It's not either/or; it's

both/and. To be a Christian you can't have one without the other. They are both connected. If someone has faith without good deeds, there really isn't any faith. If someone has good deeds without faith, that person isn't really a Christian because the only way to become a Christian is through faith in Jesus Christ.

James, the brother of Jesus and the author of the book of the Bible named after him, comes up with a smart proposal. He says, "Show me your faith without deeds ...." You can't do that; it's impossible. Since faith is invisible, you have to do something to prove it exists. So James says, "I'll tell you what. I'll do my good deeds and then you'll know that I have faith."

All of this is not given just to be some kind of clever argument. It is as practical as can be because whether or not a person is a Christian determines eternal destiny. Where we spend forever totally depends upon our relationship to God through Jesus Christ.

How can I know for sure that I am a Christian? The Bible explains that there are two parts to the answer. The first part is by faith in Jesus Christ alone for forgiveness of sin and eternal life. That faith is initiated with words directed to God in prayer. They can go something like this: "God, I confess that I'm a sinner and I need a Savior. I trust Jesus Christ to be the only one who can do that for me."

But there's a second part. The second part is the actions in my life that prove whether or not the faith "took". If the actions are there, I can be confident and if they are not, I should be very worried. It can't be just faith. It can't be just action. It's not faith or action. It's both!

What kind of action? Well, mostly it's the way we treat other people. That's the primary example that the Bible lists. Christian faith is expressed in loving behavior toward somebody else—especially other Christians. But there are other actions listed in the Bible like baptism, church attendance, financial giving, prayer and sharing your faith with others.

But we need to be careful here. Is it possible for someone to treat other people well, be

baptized, participate in church, give to church and charity, pray and tell other people about Jesus Christ and not have Christian faith? Yes, it is possible—not likely, but possible.

Is it possible for someone to have Christian faith but treat other people without mercy, never be baptized, have nothing to do with the church, never give, never pray and never tell anybody else about Jesus Christ? Is that possible? Probably not.

Take demons for an example. Do demons believe in God? Yes, they do. Do demons believe that Jesus died on the cross to pay for all sin? They believe that. Are they Christians going to heaven? No, they are not.

Demons believe, but they don't obey. To be a Christian requires both belief and obedience.

None of this Bible teaching is intended to be just intellectual information. It is intended for personalization—for every would-be Christian to be checked out and be sure that their faith is real.

What should a person do who has doubts? What if I think I have faith but I am worried that it may be just words and not for real? I'll tell you what not to do. Don't try adding actions to faith. In other words, don't decide to start doing all kinds of good things like being nice to people, giving money, being baptized, going to church, helping the poor, becoming a missionary—in order to be sure I really believe. It won't work. Good works never make someone a Christian. Only God can make a person a Christian and God only does it when we really believe in Jesus, accept him as Savior and invite him to transform and rule our lives.

So, what do we do? Have faith that includes action. In other words, the sure way to have faith and action is not through adding action to faith. It is through having real faith that in-

cludes action. Faith is totally believing in God and trusting him. Trusting him to forgive sin. Trusting him with our jobs, problems, money, marriages and relationships. Trusting him enough to promise to obey whatever he asks us to do.

Recently I faced some of these issues in my own life. I was praying one day and trying to decide whether or not to tell God that he can do anything he wants with me and I will trust him. What if he gives me terminal cancer? What if he tells me to quit my job and move someplace I don't like? What if he asks me to give away every dollar and every possession?

I was hesitant. Then I thought about it. Is God trustworthy or isn't he? Will he do something stupid to hurt me? Will he make a mistake? Can I trust him better than I trust myself? Of course I can!

So I prayed. "God, whatever you want from me is okay. I'll do whatever you ask. I'll go wherever you send me. I'll give whatever you expect. I trust you one hundred percent."

Let there be no doubt that this will require actions in my life. Changes. Differences. The actions come as a result of the faith. It is faith that includes actions.

Several years ago I had a strange experience. Just my telling you about it may cause you to decide that I'm the strange one, not the experience. I was in the men's room at Boston's Logan Air-

port. I was washing my hands at the sink when I looked up into the mirror over the sink—and I wasn't there! For a brief moment it was one of the weirdest and scariest experiences in my life.

What I soon figured out was that the design of that restroom was different from any I had ever been in before. The wall in front of me looked exactly like the wall behind me and there

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were no mirrors over the sinks. I was just looking at an identical opposite side of the room. So what I remembered as being behind me was exactly what I saw in front of me. I was really happy to figure that out!

It was a sobering experience because I have always assumed that I was real and suddenly there was no evidence of what I believed. It's a scary thing to say you believe something so important and not have any proof.

Based on James 2, let me ask you if you truly believe that you are a Christian. I hope that your answer is a resounding "Yes! I believe. I have faith in Jesus Christ!"

Now look into the mirror of your actions. What do you see? Are you there? Do your actions affirm that your faith is real?

Let's take a minute for private prayer. Affirm your faith in Jesus Christ. Tell God that you do believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior. Tell him that you believe so much that you will obey whatever he asks. Tell him that you will trust him with everything in your life. Ask him

what actions he wants you to do as an evidence of your faith.

Our God, we know that you hear our prayers. You know every word of every whisper. You even listen to the thoughts of our minds. So we know that you have heard us as we have affirmed our faith in Jesus Christ alone for eternal life and you have heard our commitment that we will trust you no matter what you ask. I pray, our Father, for each one of us who has prayed that you will tell us what you expect of us. May you give us the opportunity to see in the mirror of our actions the faith that is in our hearts. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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