

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church  
Knoxville, Tennessee  
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**“Falling Short: Home-Building”**  
**Joshua 2:1-4a, 15-16 and James 2:14-26**

Recently, one of our deacons said, “I waffle between just saying words of **faith**, often not meaning them or applying them, and **working** for God’s love and approval, like my salvation depended upon it.” He is seeking that sweet spot in between. Maybe you are too. Sometimes our lack of good deeds reflect a shallow faith. Sometimes when we do good deeds, it’s just to make up for falling short. We can wonder, are we ever going to be good enough? To continue our sermon series on Falling Short, let’s talk about that.

**PRAYER: With your Spirit’s help, may we hear your words, O Lord, not mine. Amen.**

The letter of James opens with two theological concepts often held in great tension. Faith or works. Are we saved by one, or the other?

Only a couple decades after Jesus was resurrected, James writes to a community struggling to implement Jesus’ ways. Their challenge is: how to get along, how to live their beliefs, how to determine justice and equality. James helps early believers evaluate their faith; test how faithful they are in representing what Jesus decreed. It’s like he is holding up a mirror to them, noting in their community there is a great disparity between rich and poor, between how some are treated fairly while others are treated poorly, between those who just say they are followers and those who act it out. To me, it sounds like today’s society, our “Scruffy Little City,” and our Sequoyah Church motto to be *inwardly strong and especially the outwardly focused part*.

Overall, James’ letter addresses how to apply Jesus’ command to “love one another.” In this particular passage, though, James questions about what good is faith without works. Can your faith save you, or do you even have any faith, if you don’t do works? Maybe you deal with a restless spirit relating to works. Many do. I do. The Message version of James asks a question this way: “Does merely talking about faith, indicate that a person really has faith?”

We can feel so conflicted. Which is it? Are we accountable for what we **believe**, or what we **do**? Let’s see if digging even deeper into the text helps.

James has heard that the early believers have just been interested in being associated with Jesus. They were flirting with worldly ways and loyalties, maybe just paying lip service to God.

There is a silly comic strip called Herman by Jim Unger. In it, a bride and groom stand at the altar. The minister leans in to the groom saying, “You’re supposed to say ‘I do’, not ‘I’ll try!’”.

They were not invested in fully doing what Jesus invited them to do. James chapter 1 says believers need to be **doers** of the word, not just **hearers** of the word. Chapter 2 is all about building on that.

Some people were engaging with “faith” only on the surface- not meaning a rich, lively trust in the loving, living God; rather a shell, a husk, an empty affirmation, a bare acknowledgement.<sup>i</sup> A body without a spirit. Reminiscent of Ezekiel 37, if you will, describing a valley of dry bones before God’s breath was blown into them in order to live.

James raises the bar so their understanding of faith produces works, ie. when Spirit-led. Their body, as a whole, and individually would be nothing without the breath of God that allowed them to get up and walk around. He hopes for a faith that matters, one that translates belief into action, even if it seems difficult or impossible. A faith that makes differences, even “saves” in the way transformation happens. “Saves” in the applied theology sense. James longs for their faith to be the real thing; that it does what it says; that faith is completed when one puts feet to it.

Abraham knew his faith required him to put faith into action. He wanted to be obedient, even to the point of nearly carrying out the sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Likewise, Rahab, Jesus’ ancestor, was excessively obedient, even to the point of risking her life, when she was hospitable to her neighbor.

The solution to our original question to this problem of justified by faith, or by works is this... The resolve is clearly that these are two sides to the same coin. We have to **believe**, and **show** that we believe. A person is justified by works, and not by faith alone. Works are active along with faith. They are together hand in glove. God helped Abraham and Rahab live out their faith through deeds.

Now, we can’t save ourselves by works in the eternal sense. Actually, we don’t have to do good works at all. We don’t! Granted, that can sound unsettling, even contradictory to what I’ve been sharing, but stick with me. Our eternal salvation is not dependent upon our works. James didn’t need to go into this theology; he knew his audience was already a group of believers like you and me. These Christians had already discovered they were saved eternally- only by Jesus’ gracious sacrificial death and resurrection. But, in believers living and serving together, they were growing to know they were healed, made whole as they were God’s instruments of God’s plan. They were justified by works because their works fulfilled/completed faith! They were and we are “saved to serve” —delivered from sin and death, to show love, justice and mercy.

Do we get the concept? African-American poet and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou, wisely says, “Now that I know better, I do better.”

John the Baptist calls this “producing fruit” in keeping with faith. “If anyone has two shirts, they should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same” (John 3:11). For when the Spirit is stirring in us, we can’t help but want to share. We’ve been given an eternal home, that doesn’t rust or fade away.

As pastor Jay mentioned in the September newsletter cover, James 2 is about what we believe **and** what we do, faith **and** deeds, and how one feeds the other. The key verse, James 2:26, reads, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.” That word “spirit” is the same word as “breath,” meaning that works are to faith, as breathing is to the body. We can’t stop breathing, or else we die and we’re like a corpse! That’s not because breathing earns us anything, but because breathing is the overflow, active work of someone that is alive.<sup>ii</sup>

Put another way, remember how Psalm 127:1 says, “Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders will toil in vain”? If the Lord is in our church program ministries gradually, prayerfully, slowly, safely starting to open up, then we will not have toiled in vain.

If our compassionate outreach to end homelessness or hunger, is born out of the Spirit leading us in planning and execution, then we will not have worked in vain.

If the Lord is in our efforts of studying or teaching, in practicing law or medicine, in our meetings, in our marriage, in our social media, in our United Way donations to relieve those suffering from covid; then we will not labor in vain.

If God is in our masking up for a higher social consciousness, in our defensive driving, in our interceding for another; then we will not be living in vain. If God breaths into us, into our temple body home, then we will live! We will have hope and a future. God’s Spirit is what we need to have in ALL aspects of our lives!

Don’t miss the good news, here. Instead of thinking Scriptures say we have to do more and more, being burdened by deeds, know that the life-giving Spirit guides and directs. It’s not us alone. For example, maybe in a group you’re already in, there are ways you can reach out in fulfilling ways. Pray about it together and be led by the Spirit.

We’re not obligated to; we are free to. We **get** to, out of a deep and abiding sense of gratitude for God’s gift to us in Jesus. We **get** to subject ourselves to one another, doing good works because the Spirit compels us to share the love of Christ, to do justice, and love and show mercy for all God’s children. We serve not on our own strength, though. Let God take that burden off. Even though we want

to do things on our own, we can't. We constantly try to and wear ourselves out doing it by ourselves. I know. I'm tempted to.

Yet, God says:

*Let my Spirit breath in you, bring peace to you.*

*God says, (insert your name here), please let me work through you. Quit going solo. Let me enliven you, otherwise you'll die. Take me in deeply. Any works you are led to do are to be done together with me. Live in my Spirit, walk with me so life can be a joyful response to what I've done and will do. Give up trying to impress me for credit or earn a way into the kingdom through works.*

*In heaven, out of love for you, I've built you a mansion, where you can rest from your labors. Until you get here, remember my Psalm and James' letter. Build a home on earth with a solid rock foundation of faith in Christ, who justifies you. Build a home where the Spirit leads you to do good works that overflow from gratitude.*

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

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<sup>i</sup> The Early Christian Letters for Everyone: James, Peter, John and Judah, N.T. Wright, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p.17.

<sup>ii</sup> Dr. Jay Howell, Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church, September 2020 Tower newsletter