

Time of Grace Ministry
What's Got to Change in Your Life?

James 2:14-26
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Pastor Michael Novotny

We are loved by God and get into heaven as a free gift through Jesus, right? So wait, does that mean you can do whatever you want and God will still accept you in the end? Or does that mean you actually have to earn your way to heaven and be a good enough person to be accepted by God in the end? Confusing questions, right? Pastor Jeske's going to help us find some great answers in the Bible. It's coming up next on Time of Grace.

Pastor Mark Jeske

The Bible is not written as a dogmatic doctrine textbook. You will find biography, you will find letters or the churchy word for that is epistles. And you will find prophetic vision language; sometimes even dream narrative. The holy writers used metaphors and similes – you know, comparative words. There are flashbacks and flash aheads. God uses all kinds of – he'll use hyperbole or exaggeration. He uses understatement and sarcasm; all of those tricks to add some juice to his amazing message. And the Bible, like our writing today and a lot of our speech today, uses air quotes. Do you know what air quotes are? That's when - it's a bit of sarcasm; it's a form of sarcasm. Or irony; when it's the opposite of what you'd think. It's a way of using a word but you don't really mean the word. I have probably the most famous example of air quotes in the entire Bible that I would like to savor with you today so let's have a look.

Open your Bible to James 2 and let's see if you can spot the air quotes, which I think will help you grasp James' line of thought, his message, which I also hope you agree with me is critical to a well-rounded, understanding of our life with God. The basic message of the gospel of God's grace is this: That he looks at jerks and fools and sinners like you and me and says, "I love you unconditionally because of nothing you have ever done. Your life is irrelevant to me. I just know you're dying and you smell. But I've got a solution and it starts with my deciding to love you without reference to how much you may or may not have deserved it. That's called grace. It is a hundred percent done, a hundred percent God's doing, nothing is left to chance, and there's nothing you could ever do that would disqualify you from being loved by God for his mercy is bigger than all of your sins piled together in one gigantic manure heap. That's grace. And he simply gives it to you. And the astounding and almost unbelievable fact is that on the cross of Christ on Good Friday on Calvary, God actually pardoned the world. Even those who don't believe in him yet, even those who had not even been born, you were pre-forgiven before you were even born and committed your first sin. You were forgiven even before you existed. That's grace.

Simultaneously with that is when people are brought to faith by the Holy Spirit, they now have the power of the Spirit working within them and they now have the lights turned on. By

possessing God's word, they know now how they should live? Now having been saved, how can we serve and please God? This is equally true and God does not settle for the way you are right now. And it is James' burden, his mission task in his five chapters, is not to describe the grace side; that apparently he felt was adequately done in other ways or God let him know I don't need you to articulate that part. What I am sending you to write down, James, is to wage war on hypocrisy and lame excuses from people who say, "I believe" and that's enough. You've only got to believe to go to heaven, right? Okay, I believe. Case closed. Now I can go live any way I want.

And see, that is a seeming contradiction. It doesn't matter how you've lived; it matters intensely how you've lived and your knees get a little wobbly like, "Which is it? I want to know which it is so I know how to act." They're both true. Remember your hammock? Swing at peace between those two thoughts. If you get nervous and wonder where does my help come from? Lift your eyes up to heaven; it comes from him. If you're wondering does it matter how I live? Does he expect me to be holy? The answer is yes; he expects nothing less of you than to be just like him.

And now let's let James talk to us. James 2 – our story today begins in verse 14: "What good is it, my brothers," he's talking to fellow believers; you are his family. "What good is it if a person would claim to have faith but have no deeds to go with it?" And can you guess what you can't see that's flanking the word faith? Air quotes. You know I was going to say that, right? How can you have faith but no deeds? Answer: It's impossible. Real faith always has life-changing examples to reveal it. That's beyond dispute; assume it. It is all one continuum. If you truly are saved, you've been blessed by God's grace, you've come to believe it through the power of the Holy Spirit working through word and sacrament, and you live it. That is not an option; that is not like something you can have as an add-on. That is not something you maybe or maybe not can choose to have as a feature of your life. Real faith leads to change lives; it's a packaged deal. And do not allow yourself or people you love to luxuriate in the hypocrisy of thinking that all I need is facts in my head and that's enough. Your life matters and James will not let you wriggle away.

"What good is it to claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such," now here are massive air quotes, "Can such faith save him?" Answer, of course: No. "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes." So somebody you claim to have as a fellow believer, a member of your congregation, somebody within your family, somebody with whom you have a relationship is without clothes and daily food and you say, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and be well-fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead." And once again, for the third and final time, faith there is not true genuine faith, it's air quote faith. It's hypocrisy faith. It's pretend faith. It's poser faith. It's posturing faith. It's religiosity but it's not real faith.

James said, "Well, someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds,'" as though the two can exist. There you might say there's air quotes around both of those because the reverse is true, too. There is nothing a human being can do that is pleasing to God if it is not linked by faith to Jesus Christ the Son of God. That's why so many people are going to be shocked on Judgment Day

when they say, “Man, I did all kinds of stuff. I paid my taxes, I cut my grass, I helped a little old lady across the street once. I actually shoveled the widow’s snow next door once or twice a winter. I have good things that I’ve done.” If they’re not connected to faith, faith in Christ, they smell and God sees all the cheesiness and selfish, self-servingness of it all and just says, “Be gone, I don’t know you.”

So deed without faith – worthless. Faith without deeds – worthless. They are a seamless continuum. “Show me your faith,” air quotes again, “without deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do.” Your deeds validate whether or not there’s real faith as to what you really believe. “You believe that there’s one God? Good for you; even the demons believe and they shudder.” A young man told me once who had gone through catechism class in his youth and now as a man in his twenties was saying, “I don’t need to go to church. I know all this stuff. I know what I need to know.” I hope God lets him live long enough to grow out of that pathetic, immature, childish attitude. But you know what he was saying because you’ve probably thought – and maybe you’ve even said it – but you probably all thought stuff like that, too. You can excuse your lack of spiritual development by saying, “Well, I know the rules. I know the drill. I’ve got my ‘Get out of hell free’ card and I know that no matter what kind of mess I make on this earth, in heaven I just go, “Whoops, see, I believe in Jesus! Jesus!” And you whip the card out and you say I know the secret password to heaven. Some people who pull that will say, “Jesus, here I am!” And he’ll say, “Who are you? I don’t know you.” Because without a real faith, your pretend faith, your hypocritical faith, is worthless too for a faith disconnected from deeds of love isn’t really faith.

These are hard words but do not dilute them. Let them smack you. Let these be a wake-up call, for you and I are Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde people, aren’t we? And we still drag around our sins and there’s a saint inside of us, as well. That’s another of the Bible’s many head scratching contradictions that you are simultaneously a wretched sinner and a holy saint at the same time. Hang your hammock between those two trees and swing at peace with God and take your nap because you need them both to know who you really are.

James said: “The demons believe and shudder.” Just knowing the facts is not enough. That isn’t faith. “You foolish person,” James writes. He just – are you going to let him talk to you like that? He just called you fools. Are you going to let him talk to you like that? Probably you should. The Greek word that is used – it’s a little hard to translate – it means literally you empty-headed idiots. You’re empty; there’s nothing inside your head. If you talk like that, you don’t have a thought in your head. You’re an empty-head.

“Do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?” Remember Abraham, he says, “he was considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. You see that his faith and his actions were working together.” Does that make sense to you, what I’m saying? What James is saying? Faith and deeds of love and compassion and mercy and obedience to God are organically one and the same; they flow back and forth to each other. His faith was made complete by what he did. Did Abraham’s life matter? Did his obedience matter? Yes, it did. “Scripture was then fulfilled that said Abraham believed God and it was credited to

him as righteousness and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does not by faith alone." There are air quotes around "faith alone."

"In the same way, it was not even Rahab" – may I dare to call her the ex-prostitute? She may have had a seedy way of life before the spies got to Jericho. I hope though that she showed her love for the Lord as she experienced Israel's God and decided that the Israelites had it right and that her native Jericho-ians had it wrong and she threw her lot in with Israel's God. My hope is that she left behind her former occupation and found another way to earn her bread.

"She was considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction" from their pursuers. "As the body without the spirit is dead so," – air quotes – so-called hypocritical "faith without deeds is dead." What better time could there be than the beginning of the year to have resolutions? And I think the secret to doing something that will matter and that will last is the same secret that I think leads to successful evangelism. One of the things that has always paralyzed me about being a better witness to my faith is that the world around me seems so enormous. So many atheists, so many agnostics, so many unbelievers, I don't know where to start. And outside of our country, the numbers explode into the billions and so the paralysis of how enormous that task is then makes me do nothing.

You know like when you have a small task, it's easy to rouse yourself and get up off your couch and do that one thing and then you can sit down again. But if you look out at your house and you see paint peeling everywhere, rotten wood, a gutter hanging sideways and about ten shingles missing and a broken window up at the attic and broken chunks of concrete up on the sidewalk going around the side of the house, you might stand out there at eight o'clock on a summer morning and just look at everything and go, "I think I'm ready for a nap" because the enormity of it overwhelms you.

You know your life is a half-baked mess. You know there are many features of your life that are not under control; under control of the Spirit of the Lord. You know that; I know that, too. And you know that about me; you don't even have to ask and it's all true. I admit it. I completely cheerfully tearfully admit it to you. If you let all of it weigh down on you, you'll be so depressed you will do nothing so pick one thing and that's my – I'm being James – I'm going to get in your grill today and here's the Jeske challenge: Pick one aspect of your life that you know is not under the control of the Spirit that is not what it ought to be; just one thing.

Now there are two kinds of people here today: Those that know their one thing and those that don't know their one thing and I get both. I've probably been both at different times in my life. I may even be both right now. Some of you know what your one thing is. You are living in some kind of rebellion against God and you know it and you try to keep this crust on the outside so people don't know but on the inside, you know you are at war with the Son of God over something going on in your life. You may have some kind of sexual relationship that you know is wrong but you can't stop. You know that what for some people is harmless gambling with a little money, you play a little game, some money games, ah, you win, you lose whatever, it's chicken – it's just small amounts of money and you walk away from it and you can leave it be for six months and not even notice; not even miss it. But maybe your thing is that you can't stop

gambling. You have gambling fever and you are throwing away money that should be going to support your family; you're wasting it. You maybe have got a crust of respectability where you can hang out at a party and drink socially but then you go home and you have about eight more drinks until you pass out and your drinking is out of control and you know it. That may be your thing that you need to work on this year.

You may have on the surface of it, you look like a fine ordinary family but your marriage is miserable and you know it. Or you may think you may be sort of in church people Pharisee mode and think, "Well, I've got one or two little small little features I could, you know, I could maybe give my spouse a few more cards or I could get the little lady flowers maybe a little more often. Like okay, I'm about ninety-eight percent of the way there. Just one small little push and I'll have it up to one hundred percent. Just one or two little, minor little peccadillos and they're not even sins – they're just peccadillos." And so to that portion of you wherever you are, whoever you are, I'm in your face again and I'm going to say: Do you have the courage to ask your spouse what your one thing maybe ought to be? Do you have the courage to ask your mother: What do you think I need to work on most, mom? Do you have the courage to say to your father: As you look at my life, where do you have the most fear and regrets? What would you change in me if you could? Do you have the courage to ask your children: How am I doing? Do you have the courage to ask people at work, somebody you trust and know, how am I doing? If you could change one thing about me, what do you see in me, like a buddy system. How am I doing? Because our capacity for self-delusion is so great.

So whichever you are – maybe you're mused; the two kind of mused together – as the year begins, I invite you to pick one thing to work on. Don't be overwhelmed by everything but pick one thing where you are going to do what James invites, challenges, and even commands you to do and that's let your faith flow into your life. Don't hold it up; let it go and admit where you are a work in progress. Repent of it and let the guilt and fear of your past failures be washed from you completely. Not only are we starting a new year, you are starting a new year with God, too, and your record book of failures has been washed clean. You're starting over. Today is a new day and his grace is brand new to you not only day by day, but year by year, as well. So fresh slate, clean start.

Now, what in my life needs to improve? Set that before you, write it down, pray about it, and maybe even ask a buddy or a family member. This is what I'm going to work on this year. Help me. Hold me accountable when I'm not showing any progress, when I'm messing up. If my problem is losing my temper, don't let me blow it off and blame others or make excuses. When you see me go off, when you hear angry words start to come out, give me the timeout or give me the sign and let me know that I'm starting to lose my struggle again. And when you hear kind and building-up words come out of my mouth, then clap and cheer for me and let me know that my effort is paying off. It's like if you lose thirty pounds and nobody notices, you might think all that agony I just went through for nothing! Nobody even notices the new skinny me.

In the same way, we can do great things for each other in clapping and cheering for the progress that God's struggling saints are making, as works in progress, working on lifting up their game. Not just because it's a game but because this brings joy to our Lord who loves it when we serve

him and serve each other, when we become brokers of his treasures to help the men, women, and children around us who may struggle where we have something that can be helpful to them. When we stop hurting people and look to build them up.

Write it down, think about it, pray about it, and then revisit it and check yourself and measure how am I doing? And keep that as your theme this whole year. That's my challenge to you. And as we head into offering time in a few seconds, let me invite you to take that to the Lord, whatever you've chosen, if you accept my challenge, take that one thing and take it to the Lord and let it be your project for this New Year.

May God give you strength to live a life that's pleasing to him, Amen.

Pastor Michael Novotny

I'm so glad Pastor Jeske helped us to wrestle with that question because the tension between the free gift of God's grace and the necessity of following God and doing good works is something we all have to live with. It's never easy, you never completely resolve it; you just live with that tension. When you take sin maybe not so seriously and people are getting hurt, God wants us to hear about works. And yet, when we realize that we're never going to be good enough, that we're struggling and striving and repenting, we just need to know about faith; faith in Jesus and God's unconditional love. I pray this message today helped you deal with that tension; to live a life of faith where you rest in God and work so hard to thank him for his unconditional love.

As we continue to wrestle with this tension between faith and works, let's ask our heavenly Father to give us wisdom and bless us in a word of prayer.

Dear God, we desperately need your help with this. And if we just focus on Jesus and faith and not on obedience, people will live in sin and they'll hurt each other and they'll drift away from you. But God, if we just focus on works and obedience, people are going to be so burdened that they'll never find the freedom that Jesus came into this world to give. And so, we pray today for help. For every one of us as we look into the mirror trying to figure out if we should apply faith or works, for every one of us who's raising children, trying to figure out the right way to discipline and raise them so that they find the freedom and joy of following you in faith. And for all of us in the church, God, that we can encourage one another to take sin seriously but to take your forgiveness and unconditional love just as seriously. God, help us. We want to do this right but without you, we can't. So help us in the days to come. I thank you, God, already because I know how you're going to answer this prayer. You love to help people figure out this tension. So please bless us, bless our faith and bless our church families. We ask this all, Jesus, in your powerful name, Amen.

With Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mike Novotny, and your faith, which expresses itself through works because of Jesus, it all starts now.



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James 2:14-26: ¹⁴“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. ¹⁹You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. ²⁰You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³And the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,’ and he was called God’s friend. ²⁴You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. ²⁵In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

Points to Ponder

1. Read James 2:14-17. According to this section, what good is faith without deeds?
2. James gives a couple examples of faith in action. How was Abraham’s faith “made complete” by what he did?
3. Your faith and your actions work together. What does that mean?

4. How does what James says here fit with the rest of the Bible that says we aren't saved by our works?

5. Are there areas in your life where you could change your actions to align more closely with your faith?

Blessed by God's grace for your salvation, you are able to believe it and have faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. Now having been saved, your life changes to a life of faith in which your beliefs are displayed in your actions as you live to serve and please God. Faith without deeds is dead. Your actions show that faith is in your heart. Faith and deeds of love and compassion and mercy and obedience to God are one and the same—they flow back and forth to each other.

What else does God say?

Ephesians 2:10: For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Matthew 5:16: Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.