James 2:14-26 *Screendoor on a Submarine*

***Follow the Leader in our Hearts***I sometimes think of the Christian life as a game of “follow-the-leader.” You know the game: a bunch of kids get in a line, and one is designated as the leader. Then the leader marches all over the playground, climbing under and over obstacles in unusual ways, maybe flapping their arms like a chicken or walking like an Egyptian, and everyone in the line is expected to do exactly what the leader does.

That’s the Christian life. We talked about it several weeks ago when I mentioned the old WWJD bracelets. Ask yourself: “What Would Jesus Do?” and then do that thing. We talked about it some last week also. We saw that the theme verse of James is James 1:22: “Do not merely listen to the word…Do what it says.” The Christian life is a life of action. A life of imitation. A life of following.

But imagine a playground game of follow-the-leader where one child never gets off the teeter-totter. All the other kids are saying: “Come play with us! Get in line!”; but the child says: “Oh, I am playing, I’m just following in my heart.”

How often do we do that to Jesus? How often do we play “follow-the-leader” with Jesus; but instead of actually doing what Jesus does, we spiritualize it, we water it down, we say we are “following Him in our hearts”?

Listen, **Jesus says some things that are pretty plain to understand**. He says:

19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. (Matthew 6:19-20)

That’s pretty plain, right? What’s He saying?

He’s saying live simple. Don’t accumulate a lot of stuff. Give things away.

How’d Jesus live His life? As a homeless man, right?

So how are we supposed to follow what Jesus says there? What would it look like to play follow the leader? We should live simple. We shouldn’t accumulate a lot of stuff. We should give things away.

And yet—all too often in the American church—we get a hold of verses like this and we “spiritualize” them. We have a lot of stuff. We have multiple cars and closets full of clothes and shoes for every occasion. And we like our stuff. So we say the point of what Jesus is saying in these verses is that we don’t make our stuff more important than Jesus in our heart. What matters is that we live these verses out in our hearts.

So we memorize these verses, and we study them, and we quote them to each other—but what we manifestly do not do is live them out. Actually giving stuff away—and I don’t just mean stuff that’s ready for Goodwill, I mean stuff that works and is in fashion and you would still use—actually giving stuff away is just too radical.

**Or again, Jesus says:**

“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” (Mark 16:15)

Again, the meaning is pretty plain. The implications are obvious. And yet we twist and squirm until we can tell ourselves Jesus doesn’t mean us. What matters is that we believe it is important for the gospel to be preached in all the world. We support the idea of missionaries. Maybe we give some money so somebody else can go. Maybe we say a prayer for God to bless all the missionaries when we think of it.

But for most of us, the idea that Jesus might mean we should actually, physically go into all the world… That He might be calling us, and our families, to change location for the sake of sharing His good news… that’s just too radical.

Look, I’m not trying to just blast everybody here. I’m not claiming I’ve got this down any better than any of you. I struggle with how often I twist the meaning of what Jesus says so I can just keep doing what I’m comfortable with. But I think we’ve got to talk about that struggle.

“Follow-the-leader” is not that tough of a concept. You do what the leader does. Period. And yet, even though we claim Jesus as our ultimate leader, far too often we find ways to not actually do what He does. To just follow in our hearts. We’ve got to face up to the fact that we do this. And we’ve got to do something about it.

Because our scripture passage this week is clear: Christianity that is not actually lived out does not work. We must put into practice what we say we believe.

The scripture is **James 2.** We are going through the book of James in 6 weeks. It’s a 5 chapter book, and I spent two weeks on chapter 1. That means I have one week per chapter left. I’m going to read all of chapter 2, but our focus today will be on the second half. The topic in the first half we’ll circle back to in a couple of weeks. **So, James 2, starting with verse 1**:

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. **2**Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. **3**If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” **4**have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

**5**Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? **6**But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? **7**Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

**8**If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. **9**But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. **10**For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. **11**For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

**12**Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, **13**because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? 15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 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? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

18 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.

19You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

20 You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21 Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. 24 You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

25 In 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? 26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

***The Bible By Rich Mullins***The point of this passage is pretty simple. **Faith without deeds is useless.** That’s the point: Belief without actions, trust in Jesus without obedience to what He says, claims of Christianity without works that are in keeping within Christianity… useless.

Let me take a minute to explain the sermon title. Last week, I referenced the DC Talk album JesusFreak, and I talked about the way so many of its songs shaped my thinking as I was coming out of college and entering seminary. Well, if that was my favorite album, my favorite Christian musician at that time of my life was Rich Mullins. I’ve talked about him several times before too. He’s the guy who wrote “Awesome God” and “Hold me Jesus” and “Sometimes by Step.” He died tragically in a car accident in 1997.

Well, he wrote a song based on James 2. And I want to give you just a taste of Rich Mullins’ music. Maybe I’ll create a revival of interest in Rich Mullins. It’s a quirky song, but I think of it every time I read this passage. It’s called “Screendoor”.

**<<First 39 seconds of YouTube video for “Screendoor”** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcvBsNcIzu4> >>

That’s good stuff. Genius. “It's about as useless as a screen door on a submarine/faith without works baby, it just ain't happenin'.”

Faith without deeds is useless. It’s playing “follow the leader” with Jesus without actually getting off the couch. It’s like putting a screendoor on a submarine—it’s not gonna work. Just believing is not enough. We must do what the Bible says.

The whole passage is pretty much about this one point. As I said, we’ll come back to the first 14 verses later when we talk about James’s views on money. But the point of those verses is pretty simple: if we say we love our neighbors as ourselves, but then show preferential treatment to people according to how much money we have, then our walk does not match our talk.

That leads James into this discussion of faith and deeds. **That’s the set up for verse 14:**

14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

For the rest of the chapter, James just keeps saying the same thing in different ways. As I look at the passage I can see three different lines of argument James uses to make his point. 3 arguments that faith without deeds is as useless as a screendoor on a submarine.

***Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire!***First, James talks about what he calls **dead faith.** Dead faith. He says that **when our actions don’t match our words, our words are meaningless. Verses 15-17**:

15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 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? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

James is a good preacher. He uses great illustrations. Imagine you’re walking down the street and you see a man wearing a raggedy t-shirt and holding a sign that says “Hungry.” And suppose you walk up to him and say: “Hey man, it’s pretty cold out here. I hope you can warm up soon. And you’re hungry? Well I sure hope some food comes your way.” And then you walk away.

Now, as you walk past this man, can you say to yourself: “Boy, I just did that man a whole lot of good. He’s gonna be warm and well fed because of me”? Should you be patting yourself on the back for the good you’ve done?

Nooooo! You have absolutely not helped this man. Your words are meaningless. To say you want him to be warm without helping him get a coat or a warm place to be, to say that you want him to be well fed without helping him get food, is tantamount to lying.

If you want your words to be meaningful, then you need to put your money where your mouth is. You need to walk the talk.

It’s not enough to just say you want your nextdoor neighbors to come to church. If you really mean it, then you have to go invite them.

It’s not enough to just say you don’t want the elderly in the nursing homes to be lonely. If you really mean it, then you have to go visit them.

It’s not enough to just say you want the hungry children to be fed. If you really mean it, then you’ve got to join the campaign to end hunger, you’ve got adopt a Compassion child, you’ve got to give your money and your time and your prayers.

Talk is cheap. Actions speak louder than words.

In fact, James says that if a person claims to have faith but has no deeds, then that person doesn’t even have saving faith. In verse 17 he calls it dead faith. Then, down in **verse 26,** he says it again:

26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

If our actions don’t match our words then our so-called faith is like a lifeless, rotting corpse. It’s like a raccoon on the side of the road—you know, one of the raccoons that didn’t make it. It’s dead. It’s useless. It’s not real.

That’s pretty startling. That’s pretty blunt. But that’s what the Bible says. Faith that is not accompanied by action is dead faith. It cannot bring you back to life.

Your salvation is at stake here. You cannot be saved by faith that has no deeds.

***The Demons Shudder***Let’s move to James’s second argument. Remember, this whole passage makes the same point, it just uses slightly different arguments to make it. So now James talks about what we’ll call **devil faith.** Devil faith. He says that **when our actions don’t follow what we believe, we are no better than demons.**

This is pretty startling too. If your faith is not accompanied by action you have devil faith. That’s pretty stark. But before James gets to the demons, he writes this, **verse 18**:

18 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.

James imagines someone saying: “Well, you show your faith through what you do. I show my faith through what I believe. But it’s all the same faith.”

Maybe people are just wired differently, you know. The argument goes like this: Some people like to think about and study Christianity. Some people want to be active and get things done. Some people have the gift of faith. Others have the gift of deeds. It’s just different personalities. Different temperaments.

A little more than a hundred years ago, the American Church faced something known as the “Social Gospel” controversy. Some Christians were being influenced by new scientific theories and became convinced that miracles couldn’t happen: never was a virgin birth; Jesus didn’t rise from the dead; that sort of thing. So they redefined Christianity to be all about making the world a better place. Jesus’ teaching was the important thing. The Church has to feed the hungry, work to end war, fight racism, and so on. Doesn’t matter if Jesus was really the Son of God. His death on the cross didn’t really mean anything—except maybe an example of great love. Doesn’t really matter, even, if God is real. Loving people is the main thing.

A lot of people reacted against this, as you might imagine. A group of leading professors and preachers wrote a series called “The Fundamentals” which defended the idea that the Bible is true—in all its particulars.

In some ways, you can still see the remnants of this controversy in the different denominations today. The word “fundamentalist” has become a bad word—but those churches that follow in the tradition of the original fundamentals tend to be known as evangelicals today. The words “social gospel” don’t get used as much today, but churches that follow that tradition are often known as “mainline” or “liberal” churches.

I consider myself an evangelical. I think this church would fall on the evangelical end of the spectrum.

But the thing is, if you are an evangelical, then when you hear about churches that emphasize action—running a soup kitchen, fighting sex trafficking, that sort of thing—the suspicion can sometimes be that it must be a liberal church. That it doesn’t really believe in Jesus. That it preaches a social gospel.

Like the guy James imagines in verse 18—we start to think it has got to be one or the other. Faith or works. Either/or.

But to us who might fall more on the fundamental side of things, what James says next is a strong caution. **Verse 19:**

19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

Just believing the right things is not enough! Satan and the demons have great theology! They know all about God, know exactly how He works and what He stands for. Satan has better theology than the most fundamentalist seminary professor in America.

But that doesn’t mean the demons have saving faith! They don’t do what Jesus says. They don’t love, they don’t give, they don’t serve.

And James wants us to know that if we think just believing the right things is enough—then we are no different from the demons! It’s devil faith. You cannot divorce believing from doing. Actual saving faith is shown by our actions. It’s not either/or. It’s both/and.

***The Faith Which Alone Justifies does not Remain Alone***Which leads into James’ third argument, which I’ll call **half-done faith.** Half-done faith. **When our actions don’t complete our faith, our faith is not complete.**

Now, I know that sentence is a tautology. That is, the second half of the sentence merely repeats the first half of the sentence, just re-arranging the words a little bit. But it’s important to see what James is saying—and what he’s not saying. Here he is going to help us see how faith and works fit together. **Verses 20-24:**

20 You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21 Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 **You see that his faith and his actions were working together**, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. 24 You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

The thing about what James is saying here that causes confusion for a lot of people is that it sounds like the opposite of what the Apostle Paul teaches elsewhere in the Bible.

Something Paul wants us to be very clear on is that we are not justified by works, but by faith alone. Remember last fall, when we did the 5 Solas? This was one of them. Faith alone. In fact, Paul quotes the same verse from Genesis that James quotes in verse 23: “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” (That’s in Romans 4)

The point is that there is nothing you or I or anybody else can do to earn our salvation. It is only by Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross that any of us is made right with God. Abraham demonstrates that in that it was by believing in God that he was made righteous with God. We must receive what Christ offers by faith. We are justified by faith alone.

That’s the Apostle Paul.

But James does not disagree with that. In fact, I think James and Paul totally agree. It’s just that they are using the same words in different ways.  
  
Paul says that we are justified by faith alone.  He means that initial justification of being declared righteous in God’s eyes through the righteousness of Christ given to us.

But James says that we are justified by works (by deeds, what we do) and not faith alone because the faith that justifies alone never stays alone!  Real, genuine faith always begins to work itself out in love and good deeds.

And the proof of that for James is when Abraham took Isaac to the altar and was prepared to sacrifice Him in obedience to God’s command. By showing that he feared God in his actions, Abraham showed that his faith was real, that it was made complete by his actions. So you can see that Abraham was justified—not just because he said he was, but because he demonstrated it in what he did.

James doesn’t believe there is anything you can do to make yourself right with God. You can only be justified by faith in what Christ has done. But if that faith is genuine, if it is real, then it will be completed with our deeds.

**The saying goes like this**:

Faith alone justifies, but the faith which justifies is never alone.

We must go from half-Christians (who are not really Christians at all, dead and acting like devils) to whole-Christians who both talk the talk and walk the walk. We must be people who both agree with the teachings of Christianity and follow them (however imperfectly). We must be people who claim to be believers in Jesus Christ and ALSO show love because of it!

Does that make sense to you?  It’s really very simple: We cannot just have faith.  We must have deeds, works, and action, too.  The one simply completes the other.

And in case we are tempted to think that faith AND deeds is good enough for Abraham but we can’t be held to that same standard, James turns from the patriarch to the prostitute to show that this is for everyone.  **Verses 25 and 26:**

25 In 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? 26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Rahab appears in Joshua 2.  She was in the world’s safest city, but she came to believe that God was going to knock it down.  And instead of saying to the Israelite spies, “I hope it all works out.  Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed and watch out for the bad guys!”  She said, “I will hide you.  I will feed you.  I will send the bad guys in another direction. I will put my neck on the line for you.  I believe in your God, and I will show it with what I do.”

She had genuine faith. And eventually, she became a part of the blood-line of the Messiah.

She was like a body with a spirit--alive!  Not like a body without a spirit--dead.

And you and I are being called to the same. We must put into practice what we say we believe. When we play follow the leader with Jesus, we must really follow Him. Faith without deeds is as useless as a screendoor on a submarine.

***The Dream for Hope Church***One of the big knocks on Christianity these days is that Christians don’t look all that different from the rest of the world. Many of the things we are known for could be better characterized as unchristian than Christian: the world thinks we are narrow-minded, bigoted, judgmental, power hungry and more. People say: “The Church is full of hypocrites. They never practice what they preach.”

Well, I have a dream for Hope Church. My dream is that when people look at our church they won’t be able to say those things. My dream is that when people talk about our church they’d say: “You know, those people really do try to live out what they say they believe.”

I know we’ll never get it perfect. I know we’ll wrestle with just how to play follow-the-leader with Jesus in this world, in this culture. But I hope people will be able to say: “They really do take the Bible seriously. They don’t just talk about it, they do it.”

My dream is that we’ll be done with dead, devil, and half-done faith.