

The New Testament letter of James is challenging. It pulls no punches as it describes the way Christians ought to be. James insists that good works have a place in the life of a Christian. Not only that, but James goes so far as to say that faith without works is dead. Who was James to talk that way? Well, he was Jesus’ half-brother, a natural child of Joseph and Mary. James had been a skeptic of Jesus’ claims, and that’s probably saying it nicely. Yet seeing his dead brother come back to life convinced him that Jesus was in fact the Son of God, the promised Messiah. James built the rest of his life on Jesus’ resurrection. James rose to prominence in the Jerusalem Christian Church. What he wrote had authority, and still does.

It’s no coincidence that when you read what James wrote, it sounds an awful lot like Jesus. Like Jesus, James tells stories and paints word pictures to get his point across, and like Jesus, his main point is blunt. James calls his listeners and readers to repentance. He says, if you don’t turn away from sin you will destroy yourself. Yet with God there is mercy. There is forgiveness of sins; there is a new beginning. James’ message is unsettling because Jesus’ message is unsettling. Jesus wants you to grasp the depth of your sin and the height of God’s love; what Jesus wants to give you is a new you, but to receive that new you, you’re going to need to be absolutely humble and honest with Him. James is trying to tell you that. Do you want to hear it?

James does something very much like Jesus when he uses short story to get us to think. Here’s the story: A religious person bumps into someone and notices that he is half naked on a cold day, and he hasn’t had a wholesome meal for ages. This religious person says, “*Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well*” but does nothing about this person’s needs. James then asks, “What good is this person’s faith?”

This bears a strong similarity to Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan; the religious professionals pass by the person in need while the social outcast helps the person in need, and Jesus asks, which one was a neighbor to the victim?

Everyone knows the answer to both of these stories. The Samaritan was the neighbor because he moved to help. In James’ story, what good is the person’s faith? Not much, in fact, it might be dead. The problem with these stories is not that they are too hard to understand. The problem is what they expose. To say that we understand the point of what James and Jesus are saying is a scary thing, because we know our own inconsistencies. We remember the times we have essentially said to people in need, “keep warm and well fed,” and passed by on the other side of the road. And human nature is such that we can hear the good news: you are not saved by your works, and think to ourselves, “Great! I don’t have to do anything.” And it’s that, more than anything, that I think James is warning us against. A life of faith is not a life of inactivity. Faith is not a dead, lifeless thing.

So how can we sort this out? Let’s start here. James, Jesus, and the apostle Paul, for that matter, all agree—we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus alone, and, a living faith results in

works of love and service. Or as Martin Luther once put it, “We are saved by faith alone; but faith is never alone.” Or as the hymnwriter Paul Speratus once wrote: “Faith alone can justify; works serve our neighbor and supply the proof that faith is living.” You may have heard the classic illustration of a fruit-bearing tree, a picture made stronger by the fact that Jesus himself used the language of vine, branches, and fruit. The fruit, or works, that you produce, are not the cause of salvation, but the result of salvation; the result of being connected to the vine, Jesus. Redemption comes from having roots down in Jesus, and his life, flowing to you, makes works appear on your branches.

Yet it’s hard to stop thinking about the guy who said, “Keep warm and well fed,” and didn’t do anything to help, because we’ve all been there. We’ve all made that choice. And that can gnaw at your conscience. Faith without works is dead. Is my faith actually dead? Am I living a lie?

Let me encourage you a minute. If you’re worried that your faith is dead, it’s not. I say that because if your faith really was dead, you wouldn’t care. Make sense? If faith was not alive in your heart, you would simply be given over to yourself and doing whatever you want to do, and the things of God wouldn’t even cross your mind. But if you are concerned about the health of your faith in Jesus—if you do want to do more good than you’re currently doing, your faith is alive and kicking. Please be encouraged by that.

There is a flipside, and it’s not as positive. If you routinely look down your nose at people in need, and think of reasons not to help them; if the truth is that you’re not helping or serving anyone besides yourself, but identify as a Christian, James is saying, you have a disconnect, and your faith is flatlining. If that’s too close for comfort, there’s even good news for you.

It’s this: God in Christ gives life to dead things. The ultimate example is Jesus himself. After dying under the weight of our sin, Jesus was restored to life. Every Christian baptism ever since is nothing less than a restoration of life. God excels at bringing things back from the dead. He will breathe life into your faith if you confess your need for him. It is not too late for him to resuscitate the life of your spirit. As it says in the 23rd Psalm, “He restores my soul.”

So, let’s review. “Faith alone can justify; works serve our neighbor and supply the proof that faith is living.” We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus alone, but faith is never alone; a living faith results in works of love and service. Do you know why this matters, beyond your own internal spiritual condition? It matters because these works of love and service are how Christians have changed the world from the very beginning. It is the unique Christian response to the tragedies of the world—to find someone to care for, to give to, to support. It is to mirror Jesus to our shattered world, to show and tell of Him, to confirm His words of life with a life of love. Put your roots down into Jesus; let your faith breathe; and be who He makes you.