

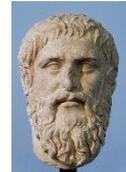
Sermon Series: Wisdom that Works

#4 Faith is not just lip-service James 2:14-26

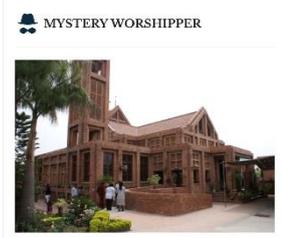
Intro

www.shipoffools.com is a satirical website that scrutinizes the gap between **what churches say they believe** and **what they actually do in practice**. Editor Simon Jenkins says, “Our aim is to help Christians be self-critical and honest about the failings of Christianity...honesty can only strengthen faith.”

The title “Ship of Fools” comes, as you may know, from the ancient writings of **Plato**.¹ In *The Republic*, Plato took a pot shot any organized society with leaders of little or no expertise, and this modern website aims similarly at the Church.



There’s an entertaining section called **“Mystery Worshipper”**. An anonymous person attends a church to report back to the website on their experience (a bit like that TV show “undercover bosses”). They even sent a mystery worshipper to a church that I previously visited far away in **Pakistan**.²



Here’s a photo of the **very pulpit** that I preached from many years back.



The report by the mystery worshipper about that church was very **favourable** toward the priest and people. It commended them for:

- a **generous welcome** at the front door,
- **hearty singing** of hymns,
- a **biblical sermon** about God’s mercy and justice only 23 minutes long, &
- **friendly fellowship** after the service.

“I would be happy to be part of this church”, concluded the mystery worshipper.

¹ Book VI of Plato's Republic, caricatured leaders of any organised society as a ship with a dysfunctional crew and untrained captain, unlikely to meet its destination without mutiny occurring along the journey. The allegory represents the problems of governance prevailing in a political system not based on expert knowledge

² St Thomas’ Anglican Church Islamabad

But the report disappointed and disturbed me because of its **inadequate criteria** for judging the health and wellbeing of Christian community! I still don't know if the joke was on me? Was the report itself is meant to be ironic? You see, **not once** did the mystery worshipper ask **whether the church practices mercy** or whether it **advocates for justice for the poor** and needy.

It's one thing to **make claims**, but **can you back them up as genuine with actions?** The great 19th Century French artist, Gustave Doré, lost his passport while traveling through Europe. When he came to a check-point he was asked to produce the document by the officer in charge. Doré explained that he lost his passport and told the man he was Doré the artist. The officer said that people often parade under a false identity, and he would have to somehow prove that he was Doré. He quickly took out his workcase and began to sketch the view from that spot. The officer looked at the sketch and said, "Now I am sure you are Doré. No one else can draw like that." Doré could prove his claims by his acitons. He gave practical proof of the validity of his claim.



It's one thing for Christians to claim they believe in a **God Who is merciful and just**, but quite another to prove such claims as genuine! The mystery worshipper could have asked, **“Do your claims of faith present any real profit to people in need?”** That's the very question the Apostle James raised with Christians long ago in chapter 2 of his Letter, saying:

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister³ is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

At the time I visited that church in Pakistan, it supported an amazing **primary health care and literacy mission** among **the poorest and neediest** people of the city. I travelled for many days with a young health worker from the church. Her team of nurses went “door to door” meeting the various



³ It's important to note the Gospel should profit equally both men and women, the later specifically mentioned in the Greek. Roman and Jewish societies relegated women and children below such charity or priority.

practical needs of the “naked” and hungry of the bastis, or slums. That church’s claims to faith in God on Sundays was **proven publicly as genuine** day upon day by its **deeds** of mercy.

If James were **our** mystery worshipper here today, he may well ask us, as in verse 14, “**What profit is it** to others if you say you have faith in God but **do not** express that faith in good deeds of mercy to the needy?” The unhealthy situation in the early church that James was addressing had to do with the Jewish **Laws of “almsgiving”**.⁴



Poor and needy Christians in the house churches, it seems, were going **unclothed and unfed**. Instead, as caricatured by James, such people were offered a prayer and a blessing and sent on their way!

Some Jews who had recently become Christians in 1st Century Palestine and Syria were quick to **abandon Laws of giving to the poor** they had previously practiced as a religious requirement. In Judaism of those times, to not practice almsgiving **threatened one’s status as a truly faithful Jew**.

Having now heard the **Gospel of Jesus** that James refers to as the “Law of Liberty”⁵, some Jewish converts to Christianity were rejecting the former rules and regulations of religion, including almsgiving, claiming **faith in the one true God is all that’s required of any person**.⁶ To them, James wrote, you must understand, **faith that leaves people naked and hungry is no faith in God at all! It’s a dead faith**.

This passage in James has been **greatly misunderstood** over the centuries. It was a political football of the **Protestant Reformation**. For example, Martin Luther called *The Letter of James* a “**gospel of straw**”, believing James contradicted the Apostle Paul by speaking of works that justify. After all, as Luther celebrated, Paul writes of how people are “**justified**” before God by faith in Jesus Christ **alone**.⁷ James on the other hand says, “**faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead**.” Which apostle is right?

⁴ Jews, before they became Christians, thought alms-giving was a way to salvation. Ben Sirach wrote, “Water will quench a flaming fire, and alms maketh an atonement for sin.” In Tobit we read, “Everyone who occupieth himself in alms shall behold the face of God, as it is written, I will behold thy face by almsgiving.”

⁵ James 1:25

⁶ James’ audience asserted that monotheistic faith (belief in one God) was sufficient for one’s salvation. Compared to the Roman and Greek world of polytheistic beliefs, Jews and Christians made a distinctive claim.

⁷ E.g. Galatians 2:16

Other reformers, such as John Calvin, helped to navigate the debate, showing that Paul, in *Romans* and *Galatians*, was addressing a **different situation** to James as summarized in the following table:

James	Paul
Faith = simple Montheism	Faith = trust in Jesus Christ
Works = Christian mercy	Works = obeying the Laws of Moses
Judaistic “faith” v Christian works	“works” as laws v Christian faith
“Justification” as outworking	“Justification” as initiation

Paul’s references to “works” and “faith” in his New Testament Epistles must be carefully contrasted to James’ use of the same words written to a different context altogether:

- Paul was calling out Christians who **wanted to add works of the Law** of Moses to their faith in Jesus to merit the acceptance of God.⁸
- James, on the other hand, called out those who **claimed that right beliefs are all that matters**, not what you do in good works!⁹

Calvin summarized a solution to the apparent conflict this way, saying:

“Faith alone justifies, but faith that justifies is not alone” (John Calvin)

So, it turns out this passage in James 2 **wasn’t about faith vs works** of the Law in the first place. It became known as such later in history amidst great political upheaval in the Church. Instead, James is still addressing his **major theme** in this letter, that of **riches and poverty**. He is still arguing that there **should be no poverty in the churches** if the Gospel of Jesus is truly understood! In fact, James goes further than the boundaries of Christian fellowship by **saying faith in God and living mercifully towards all people is inseparable**. Look at verses 18-20:

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my

⁸ Like the “Pelagians” later in history who said “we’ll work our way to heaven”.

⁹ Like “Antinomians” (meaning lawless ones) criticized for saying “we will ride on faith to heaven and do nothing.” Paul and James provide a complementary view, striking down both heresies. Paul says in Eph. 2:8-10, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

faith. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?

James is no slouch with satire himself! He cheekily points out how **demons** like those Jesus encountered in the Gospels¹⁰ held “right” beliefs about Jesus’ divinity, yet they have no place in God’s plans. What, **good, then, are claims** of right beliefs that **don’ t produce godly acts of mercy? No good at all!**

In verses 21-25 James leads his Jewish/Christian audience through a **bible study** pointing to familiar heroes of faith from of old:

²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ²³ Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road?

First, he reminds them of the **inseparable connection between faith and action** in **Abraham**, the “father” of all Jews. His faith was genuine because of his works. He believed God's promise to make a great nation of his offspring¹¹, and that belief was proved genuine in his follow-through on God’s Word.¹² Faith is **not proved genuine by mere words** or claims, only by actions.

Secondly, and consistent with James’ Gospel-inspired equality for men and women in the Church,¹³ he highlights the **example of Rahab** from the Book of Joshua, a **disreputable pagan woman** who came to believe in the God of Israel. She is **commended** for her faith **in the hall of fame** listed in Hebrews chapter 11. Her claim to have faith in God was proved genuine, not by mere words, but

¹⁰ E.g. Mark 1:24

¹¹ Genesis 12, 15

¹² Genesis 22

¹³ E.g. James 2:15

by **her actions in helping the messengers** sent from Israel to Jericho to escape, to thus survive, and for Israel to succeed in their quest.¹⁴

Whether male or female, great or small, Jew or Gentile, revered or reviled, James shows that the same principle holds true that faith in God without good godly deeds that follow is dead.

James hammers home this major point of the chapter in verse 26, saying:

“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.”

Some Christians today argue that **it’s having right beliefs about God** (claims of faith) that are of **most importance**. Some Evangelical Christians today say things like, "Since social justice doesn’t save anyone from sin, so we can leave humanitarian good deeds to others." Others say things like, "If it helps people to hear and respond to the Gospel we preach, then acts of mercy are a good idea." But the Scriptures declare that **faith and good works are inseparable**, if faith is genuine.

James effectively says, **“show me how the poor and needy** are treated in your church and **I’ll show you whether true salvation is present or not”**.

The Apostle Paul testified with agreement, saying, “...though I have faith to remove mountains and have not [sacrificial love for others] , **I am nothing**” (1 Cor. 13:2).

Early in the 18th Century, soon after his Aldersgate experience¹⁵, **John Wesley** preached from this pulpit in Oxford a great sermon about faith in Christ alone for salvation. The impact of his preaching is ever lauded, but did you know that



¹⁴ Joshua 6:25

¹⁵ Where Wesley’s heart was “strangely warmed” when he heard even the preface of Luther’s commentary to the Letter to the Romans read aloud. It was then, for the first time, though already an ordained minister, he knew that Christ’s death on the cross alone merited his salvation.

his life outside the pulpit proved his **faith that genuine** by way of **inseparable good deeds of Christian mercy**.

When Wesley was in Oxford College he began to give to the poor all that he did not need to live on. He made 30 pounds that year, and he lived on 28. He gave the rest to the poor. The next year he made 60 pounds and still lived on 28. He gave the rest to the poor. He kept on making more but living on the 28. God did not require that of him, or of any other person, but **his faith was not something for mere profession, it could not help but produce mercy**. There was no "be warmed and be filled," with Wesley.

Wesley went on to found and pioneer the medical dispensary in London, a home for widows, and a school for poor children.¹⁶ His faith stands as an exemplar **of the teaching of James chapter 2**, that claims of believing in God are **proved genuine in acts mercy and justice**. If faith in God is not profitable for others, as James points out, it is of **no profit to us either**.

When we reflect on our **own congregation** in the light of James chapter 2, I'm encouraged by the **ample evidence of genuine faith** in Christ that is seen in daily acts of good deeds by our church members. Such ministries as our partnership with Common Grace for reconciliation action, the support and recent fund raising for brothers and sisters in **Myanmar** suffering under military rule and the generous giving to refugees and asylum seekers in our city are but a few examples. But it's the reports of acts of **kindness and mercy** by people like you that often get back to me that fill my prayers with great thankfulness to God. Genuine faith in Christ is truly evident according to the criteria James chapter 2 offers us and we should thank God that this is so.

We should never forget the lesson given by **the ultimate mystery worshipper**, the Apostle James, who said, "I by my works (my good deeds of Christian mercy) will show you my faith."

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¹⁶ He also founded a loan fund for the poor. He was so concerned for the sick that he studied the anatomy and medicine on the side. He even wrote a book called Primitive Physic that went through at least 23 editions.