



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

So You Say You Have Faith?

James 2.14-26

Introduction

1. From a variety of specific topics in James, we're focusing today on *faith*.¹
 - a. The noun *pistis* (243) and cognate verb *pisteuō* (241) are used 484 times in the New Testament; 19 are in James (108 verses; 1748 words).
 - b. Thus we see why we read that "without faith it is impossible to please him" (Heb 11.6); faith is "ultimately the essence of the Christian religion itself" (Barth, 92).
2. But what is faith? In both the world generally and among religious people, we hear a variety of answers. To illustrate, here are a few statements I've collected.
 - a. A skeptical view of faith as essentially irrational.
 - 1) A boy reportedly defined faith as "believing what you know ain't so."
 - 2) Bertrand Russell: "We may define *faith* as a firm belief in something for which there is no evidence. When there is evidence, no one speaks of *faith*" (in Peter, 178-179).
 - 3) H. L. Mencken: "Faith—an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable" (in Peter, 178-179).
 - 4) Richard Robinson: "Christian faith . . . Its essence is the determination to believe that there is a god no matter what the evidence on the question may be" (Robinson, 121).
 - b. More positive assessments.
 - 1) William Barclay: "To the writer to the Hebrews faith is a hope that is absolutely certain that what it believes is true, and what it expects will come" (re: Heb 11.1).
 - 2) John Willis: "Faith is 'the precious cornerstone of a sure foundation' on which genuine life in God rests" (citing Isa 28.16).
3. As noted, we're focusing on faith as it is presented in the epistle of James.
 - a. The noun is used 16 times, the verb three times (verb—2.19, 23).
 - b. It appears most in 2.14-26 (noun, 11 times), but not only there (see 1.3, 6; 2.1, 5; 5.15).

¹ Chapter 1: trials and temptations (2-4, 12-15), prayer, wisdom (5), double-mindedness (6-8), contrast of the lowly and rich (9-11), God, giver of good gifts (16-18), anger, speech (19-21), doers of the word (22-25), and true religion (26-27).

Chapters 2-5: discrimination (2.1-13), faith and works (2.14-26), speech, particularly strife (3.1-12; 4.1-10), true and false wisdom (3.13-18), judging (4.11-12), arrogant traders (4.13-17), rich landowners (5.1-6), a call for patience until the Lord returns (5.7-11), oaths (5.12), prayer (5.13-18), and restoring the wandering (5.19-20).

- c. I do not think faith is *the* theme of James, but I do think it is integrally connected to the theme: James is about pleasing God, which we noted, is impossible without faith.
- 4. So, we'll survey what James shows about faith's components and then focus on what faith should look like in real life. We begin by defining New Testament faith.

Body

I. *Pistis* in the New Testament world.

- A. The term is part of a word family (πειθομαι; *peithomai*) that refers to persuasion, conviction, and commitment "and always implies confidence" (Spicq, 110).
- B. How was *pistis* used in the Greek world?
 - 1. In popular-level writings (papyri), it was typically used as a legal term and "its predominant meaning is 'guarantee, security'" (Spicq, 111).
 - 2. It entailed respecting a commitment and fulfilling an obligation (Spicq, 112-113).
 - 3. It was also used to describe complete loyalty and fidelity (Spicq, 114, 116).

II. Hebrews 11.1 is the closest thing to a definition of faith we have in the New Testament.

- A. As translated in the NIV 1984: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."²
- B. "Being sure of what we hope for."
 - 1. "Being sure of" (ὑπόστασις; *hypostasis*) has to do with (1) the essential nature or actual being of something with (2) a secondary meaning involving the ideas of a guarantee or title deed that bore evidence of ownership (Bauer, 1040-1041).
 - 2. In view of the idea of something that "underlies visible conditions and guarantees a future possession," Moulton and Milligan, who studied the papyri, suggested the translation, "'Faith is the *title deed* of things hoped for" (Moulton and Milligan, 660).
 - 3. Spicq agreed: "Thus faith is the true title attesting to one's ownership of the heavenly property that one hopes for, and thus the guarantee that one will obtain them in the future" (Spicq, 112).
- C. "Certain of what we do not see."
 - 1. "Certain" (ἐλεγχος; *elengchos*) referred to presenting evidence to prove something and the kind of evidence a lawyer would take into court (Bauer, 315).
 - 2. This is not certainty that comes by sight, but by faith, knowledge received via testimony (see 2 Cor 5.7; Rom 10.17).
 - a) Can someone fool us with false testimony? Yes, but we can also sometimes be fooled by our senses.
 - b) But testimony can also be verified (see John 20.30-31; 1 John 1.1-3; etc.).
 - 3. Biblical faith is not the result of ignoring evidence, but is based on the evidence.

III. James 2.14-26 helps us define it more completely.

- A. Real faith begins with *knowledge* of God.
 - 1. James 2.14-26 assumes the foundational idea we saw in Hebrews 11.1.

² The 2011 NIV translates, "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." ESV reads, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

- a) He said the confession that “God is one” (see Deut 6.4) is a good thing (v. 19) but was concerned that some thought a confession of assent was enough.
 - b) James emphasized that “Abraham believed God” (v. 23), citing a statement (Gen 15.6) made about Abraham years before he sacrificed Isaac.
 2. From Genesis 12 to 22, Abraham learned some things about God and his friendship with him (v. 23) that led to the implicit trust he exhibited when told to sacrifice Isaac.
- B. Real faith *trusts* God because we know him.
1. This story illustrates both the kind of trust involved and the reason for it: A girl told a friend she had ten pennies. The other girl looked in her hand, saw only five, and said, “You only have five pennies.” The first girl replied, “I have five now, and my father told me he would give me five more tonight. So, I have ten.” Her father’s character made the promised transaction as good as done (Green, 172).
 2. James reminds us why Abraham “offered up his son Isaac on the altar” (a statement of fact; v. 21): he “believed God” (from Gen 15.6) (v. 23).
 3. His belief was based on what he had learned about God from Genesis 12-21; Hebrews 11.17-19 sheds light on Abraham’s thought process.
 4. James assumes this attitude of trusting confidence in other texts where he refers to faith (Jas 1.3, 6; 5.15), and in his encouragement to endure oppression by remembering that the Lord is coming (5.7-11).
- C. Real faith is *active* for God.
1. Both Abraham and Rahab (vv. 21-25) went beyond mere profession and trust.
 2. We also see this in James’s other uses of “faith.”
 - a) Do we take God at his word and “count it all joy” when facing trials (1.2-3)?
 - b) Do we seek wisdom without wavering (1.5-7)?
 - c) Do we act on the word in line with our faith in “the Lord of glory” (2.1) with regard to other people, especially those most in need (1.22, 27; 2.5)?
 3. James challenges the popular idea that accepting the truth of certain doctrines is the sum total of real faith.
 4. “In a day when people often confuse justification by faith with justification by *profession* of faith, we do well to hear James’s concern” (McCartney, 279).

Conclusion

1. An old story tells of a man who fell over the edge of a cliff and was clinging desperately to a scraggly tree on its side. Calling desperately for God to help him, he was rewarded with a direct answer. He said he wanted to be rescued and responded to God’s question about the matter by saying he really did believe in him. “Do you really believe?” God asked again. “Yes, yes, I believe!” the man exclaimed. And God said, “Then, let go.” After a pause, the man asked, “Is anyone else up there?”
2. We say we know about God. That’s a good start. We feel we trust God. That’s progress. But have we let go? That’s real faith. If you’ve been putting off responding to him, why not “let go” and come to Jesus?

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www.davidanguish.com

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