

# How to Have a Faith that Works

Message for Sunday, February 9, 2020  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** James 2:14-26

## Children's Message:

I have something very special with me today. I enjoy birds, and at our home, we have a bird feeder right in front of our living room window. When the birds come, it's wonderful to watch them. I like pet birds, too, and that's what I wanted to show you. This bird is easily frightened, and that is why I put this cover over the bird cage. Let's be very quiet and I'll lift the cover.

*Inside the cage is a cat!* This bird is very special. It has colours that I have never seen on any other bird. The feathers are also unique; the feathers are so fine and delicate; again, I've never seen anything like it. *By now the children will be bursting to tell me it's not a bird at all; it's a cat!*

What do you mean it's not a bird? Of course it's a bird! I can prove it. What is this metal thing? Right, it's a bird cage. And what goes in a bird cage? Birds. So this must be a bird. *Let the children argue with my logic.*

Let me get this right. You're saying that just because something is in a bird cage, doesn't mean it's a bird. Is that right? We can tell something is a bird by having feathers, a beak, two legs, and so on. I think I agree with you; this is not a bird.

Let's think about that. So, if sitting in a bird cage doesn't make something a bird, then sitting in a church doesn't make a person a Christian. What makes a person a Christian is someone who loves Jesus, and who follows Jesus' teaching. The Bible says you have to show your faith by your actions. You have to live it, not just sit it.

**James 2:14, New Living Translation:**

**What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?**

Thanks to Harvey and Patsie Moore for this idea in their book *The Mysterious Marvelous Snowflake*.

**Message** "How to have a faith that works"

## 1) Faith is more than believing

Have you ever noticed how weird our language is? For example, there is no butter in buttermilk and no egg in eggplant. There is no ham in a hamburger and no apple in a pineapple. Quicksand works very slowly and boxing rings are square.

These words say one thing, but they mean something else. They are inconsistent. Now when words do that, we can chuckle over it, how funny our language is.

But when people do that, it's not funny, not funny at all. When people say one thing but they don't really mean it, we call that lying and hypocrisy. In the Bible passage we're reading today, James talks about people who claim to have faith in Jesus Christ, but their lives show no evidence of this.

**James 2:17-20, New Living Translation:**

So you see, it isn't enough just to have faith. Faith that doesn't show itself by good deeds is no faith at all — it is dead and useless.

Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." I say, "I can't see your faith if you don't have good deeds, but I will show you my faith through my good deeds."

Do you still think it's enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror! Fool! When will you ever learn that faith that does not result in good deeds is useless?

That's pretty blunt; but sometimes you need to be hit over the head with a 2x4 in order to get the idea that something is important.

Friends, this is important! Faith in Jesus Christ is vital in our relationship with God. But that's only the beginning of the relationship, not the conclusion. What happens next is just as important.

In the last hundred years or so, there has been a movement in the church, particularly in North America, which has emphasized *faith* in Jesus Christ, but has neglected *action* in response to the Gospel. Millions of people became Christians, apparently thinking that all they needed to do was to sign a little card indicating that they trusted in Jesus Christ as their Saviour. I'll give you an example.

Jimmy Carter was President of the United States from 1977-1981. One day during that time, American newspapers splashed headlines announcing, “Larry Flynt converted; Ruth Stapleton Carter leads pornographer to Christ.” Ruth was the sister of the President, and Flynt was the publisher of *Hustler*, one of the worst pornographic magazines of the time.

It seems that Ruth Carter hadn’t impressed upon Flynt that being a Christian also meant a change in one’s priorities and values. Flynt kept right on publishing *Hustler*; nothing had really changed in his life.

Chuck Colson tells a similar story in his book *Loving God*. Micky Cohen was the head of an organized crime syndicate in Los Angeles. Through contact with some Christians, Micky himself became a Christian. But he kept on his business activities. When confronted about this, he said, “You never told me that I had to give up my career... There are Christian movie stars, Christian athletes, Christian businessmen. So what’s the matter with being a Christian gangster?”

You can see this trend if you sample the hymn books used in many churches. There are plenty of songs about loving Jesus, praising Jesus, trusting Jesus, but nothing—*absolutely nothing, not one word!*—about working for justice or caring for the poor. Check this out for yourselves: the grey hymnbook we sometimes use, *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, is an example of this.

## 2) Faith includes believing

Some of you know your Bible well enough that by now you’re wanting to jump up and say, “But what about ‘salvation by faith alone’?”

This is one of the basic doctrines of the Protestant Reformation. It was a response to the corruption in the church in the Middle Ages, where people could “buy” forgiveness for their favourite sins, and thus keep right on doing them. Or, if they were too poor for this, they could work off their sin by doing penance, much like you might exercise off the calories from a chocolate bar.

This doctrine of *salvation by faith alone* is based on Bible passages like these ones written by the apostle Paul:

Romans 3:28, Today’s English Version:

For we conclude that a person is put right with God only through faith, and not by doing what the Law commands.

Ephesians 2:8-10, Today’s English Version:

For it is by God’s grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God’s gift, so that no one can boast about it. God has made us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus *he has created us for a life of good deeds*, which he has already prepared for us to do.

The key point is that forgiveness of sin comes through faith in Jesus Christ: especially in what Jesus has done for us by giving his life for us as a sacrifice on the cross. He took our sins away. There is absolutely nothing that we can do to earn our forgiveness. The price is already paid. That’s what “salvation by faith alone” means.

## 3) Faith is also about doing

So, do Paul and James contradict one another? Does the Bible argue against itself? If so, which one is right?

I think both are right. Paul is talking about how one *becomes* a Christian. James is talking about how one *behaves* as a Christian. Paul is talking about the steps leading up to a commitment to Jesus Christ. James is talking about the hereafter—and I don’t mean what happens after you die, but rather what you do *here, after* you’ve made that commitment.

I’ve met some people who tell me that the reason they’re not interested in church or Christianity is because of what they’ve seen Christians do. That’s what happens when we don’t follow through on our faith.

Paul even says this in that passage above from Ephesians. Look at the part I put in italics: “*he [i.e., God] has created us for a life of good deeds.*”

Our purpose in life is to love and serve God and the people around us. God created us for that very purpose.

John Calvin, one of the people who led that Protestant Reformation, summed up this whole debate thus:

**“While it is true that we are saved not by works but by faith alone, the faith that saves is never alone.”**

I want to emphasize why the way we live as followers of Jesus is important.

Malcolm Muggeridge was a well-known and respected journalist in Great Britain. He was also an atheist, and was quite powerful in describing his reasons for rejecting faith in Jesus Christ. Many people were convinced by his writing to also forsake their faith.

Then, at age 79, on a trip to India, Malcolm Muggeridge met Mother Teresa. Here was a woman who had little interest in and no time for debates. She had devoted her life to serving Jesus, and the way she did that was by loving the poor and the rejects of society. This is the woman whose philosophy of life is summed up in a few words:

**“The biggest disease today is not leprosy or cancer. It’s the feeling of being uncared for, unwanted — of being deserted and alone.”**

Muggeridge was so moved by his experience that he wrote a whole book about Mother Teresa (*Something Beautiful for God: Mother Teresa of Calcutta*). His memory of her was vivid:

**“When I think of them in Calcutta, as I often do, it is not the bare house in a dark slum that is conjured up in my mind, but a light shining and a joy abounding. I see them diligently and cheerfully constructing something beautiful for God out of the human misery and affliction that lies around them. One of their leper settlements is near a slaughter-house whose stench in the ordinary way might easily make you retch. There, with Mother Teresa, I scarcely noticed it; another fragrance had swallowed it up.”**

And so, at age 79, atheist Malcolm Muggeridge asked Jesus Christ to come into his life and make him into a new person. Asked to explain his conversion, Muggeridge said he could resist all the great books and all the great sermons. But when he

saw Mother Teresa in Calcutta with the poor, he said, “If this is it, I’ve got to have it!”

### **Next Steps:**

- Pray: Thank God for forgiving you for your sins. If you haven’t already trusted God for this forgiveness, right now is the time.
- Remember: this has nothing to do with how good a person you are. It’s all about how good God is, to do this for you.
- And now live for God! Use your life to bring love and hope and peace and joy to others, in both your actions and your words.