Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Dead Faith, Part 1
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
Code: 90-7

James chapter 2, and I want to speak to you tonight on the subject of dead faith. Now looking at James chapter 2, verses 14 through 26, I want you to notice just three verses which highlight the thesis of this passage. First of all, verse 17, "Even so, faith if it has not works is dead being alone." Then verse 20, "But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?" Then verse 26, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." Three times in the passage, James refers to a faith without works being a dead faith.

Now this introduces to us a very important subject: the matter of dead faith. Faith that has no product, that gives off no evidence. And it is my constant fear, frankly, that many, many people within the framework of Christianity and involved to one degree or another in the church, possess nothing more than that kind of faith...dead faith. And I also believe that not only are there many people who have nothing but dead faith, but I also believe that modern evangelism fails to recognize that. It seems to be willing to overlook that. And if need be, redefined saving faith to include dead faith...rather than deal with it honestly. We can only hope and pray as I frequently do that the church today will confront dead faith as James confronted it.

Now dead faith, as we will see, is a form of non-saving belief. It is a belief that does not save. It is a belief that brings a person up short of regeneration, redemption and the new birth. It is religion without reality. And the distinguishing mark of dead faith is the absence of something, and that is the absence of righteous works.

Now let me mention to you just by way of contrast so you'll understand what we're talking about, that there is a non-saving kind of works, there is a non-saving, I suppose we could call it a kind of faith, a kind of belief, there is a non-saving faith that works legalistically. In other words, there are people who do a lot of what appear to be good works. In Matthew chapter 7, "Many will say, Lord, Lord, have we not done this and done that and prophesied in Thy name, cast out demons, done many wonderful works? And He will say, Depart from Me, I never knew you." Now there is a non-saving faith. They believe in something and they do some works that appear on the surface to be good works. There is a non-saving faith that does works in the flesh. That's the legalist. That's the spiritual phony. That's the one who appears to be a believer but is a false believer. The one who wants everybody to believe that the works they do are done by the Spirit but in fact they're done in the flesh.

But here in James, we're not talking about a non-saving faith that does works in the flesh, we're talking about a non- saving faith that doesn't have any works. Here is the presence of...or the absence, I should say, here is the absence of any evidence of salvation. So what you have here is a person claiming to be a Christian without absolutely no evidence. There are people who claim to be Christians and there's enough sort of religious activity going on to make us think that's evidence, and that's why we can't always separate the wheat from the tares, right? But, there are also people who claim to be Christians and we look at their lives and we see nothing to give us any evidence that they're truly regenerate.

So, what James has in mind is not legalism, but antinomianism, or lawlessness. Not the false faith of the legalist who cranks out certain religious deeds in the flesh, but the false faith of the antinomian who thinks it's just enough to believe and if you believe you're okay and you can live any way you want to live. That's the dead faith that James has in mind. This person feels he believes in God. He believes in the facts about God. He may believe in the facts about Christ. He may believe in the facts of the gospel. But he feels no compulsion to live righteously. He feels no strong inclination to do the works of true goodness. He has no hunger for godliness.

So, we could conclude, looking at these two kinds of things, legalism and antinomianism, that the legalistic kind of non- saving faith would be the presence of some external good works. And we therefore conclude that the presence, and mark this carefully, the presence of external good works does not necessarily mean a person is a true believer, right? The presence of external good works does not necessarily mean the person is a true believer. People can falsify that. But, the second kind of non-saving faith which James deals with does tell us that the absence of any good works proves a person is not really a Christian. So the presence of good works may not prove they are, but the absence of good works proves they aren't. To that person, then, James gives the attention of his text.

Now this is not a subject that James introduces in chapter 2. In fact, he introduces it in chapter 1. Let's go back to chapter 1 and at least get a little bit of an insight into the fact that this is a concern with James, so much so that it occupies a great portion of this epistle. In chapter 1 verse 22, James says this, "But ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves."

Now where there are no deeds, where there is not a doing of the good works, if you're not a doer, then you are deceived if you think you're a Christian. Where there are no deeds of faith to prove genuine spiritual life, the person is deceived. By the way, the word "hearers" here is a very interesting word. In the Greek it is the ancient word used for auditors. Do you know what it means to audit a class? It means you just go, you don't really participate. You don't necessarily do the study. You don't do the work. You don't officially belong. You don't get a grade. You have no sense of accomplishing. You're just auditing. And that's what he says. If you are not a doer of righteous

deeds, but if you're just auditing Christianity, you're not saved. If you're just auditing the course, you're not redeemed. Faith for them is no more than a carnal glance, a very brief acknowledgment of God, a brief acknowledgment of Christ.

Look at verse 23 and 24, "If any man be an auditor of the words, (not really seriously involved) and not a doer, he's like a man beholding his natural face in a mirror." And mirrors in those days, by the way, were made out of polished metal and no matter how well it was polished there would be because it was basically made by hand, there would be a lot of wrinkles and so forth and so on and you wouldn't see yourself nearly as clearly in a mirror made of metal as you would today in a glass one. And so, the only way you could really see what you'd look like in a mirror was to get very close, look very carefully and rather at long length at the mirror. Move it around a little bit to make sure it was really you were seeing and not a reflection of the imperfection in the metal. A casual glance at that kind of mirror would leave you with an incomplete picture of yourself.

So, the one who is an auditor of Christianity, of the Word of God, rather than a real doer whose made a full commitment is like a man who casually beholds his natural face in a mirror. He looks at himself and he goes on his way. It's a quick glance. It's a casual look. And immediately forgets the kind of man he is. This is the person who just glances at truth and moves on, never really understands the full desperation of his condition. He never really makes anything more than a shallow contact with the truth. He thinks everything's well. He likes what he sees and he walks along. He thinks he's religious.

Verse 26, "If any man among you thinks he is religious and doesn't bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, the man's religion is empty." He's a deceived man. He takes a quick glance--oh, yeah, I believe that. Goes on with the same pattern of life, doesn't give any evidence at all of a transformed life. His religion means absolutely nothing. It is absolutely useless.

Now look at verse 25, backing up a verse, "Whosoever looks intently and in a prolonged way, continuing to look into that mirror which is called here the perfect law of liberty--another term for the Scripture--and he continues to look in it, he's really going to get a view of himself, he will not be a forgetful auditor of the truth but a doer of the work and this man will be blessed in his deed."

So, the character of this man that looks very briefly and takes a glance is delineated here by virtue of the fact that he's in contrast to someone who takes a long look and continues looking to really understand God's truth, to really understand who He is and that's the key. So here you have James, in chapter 1, introducing then the guy or the gal, the man or the woman who makes a casual overture to Christianity and moves along and never really sees the picture truly or clearly or carefully. So, James then in chapter 1 introduces to us the reality of non-saving faith.

And he's very concerned about this because he realizes that in the church there are people who can be self-deceived, self- deluded and ultimately damned. And I believe that this must always be a concern of anyone in evangelism. And you know me well enough to know that it is a concern because I bring it up very often in the text of Scripture. We must warn people about dead faith, about that casual glance toward Christianity that's nothing more than that. Multitudes, believe me, multitudes of people have gone to hell who believed there was one God, who believed in Jesus Christ, who believed He died, who believed He rose, who believed there was a salvation, but they never genuinely believed in that God. They never gave their life to Christ. They never appropriated His death and resurrection and they never received personally the gift of His salvation. There are many people who possess that casual glance of dead faith.

And I want you to know, and I'm going to share my heart with you a little bit, that my life personally has been marked by those kinds of people. I can't tell you about all of them but I'd like to tell you about some of them in my own life.

When I was a high-school student, I had a very close friend. In fact, in my days in high school, he was closer to me than any other friend that I had, with maybe one or two exceptions...very, very close. We spent a lot of time together. I spent time at his home. He spent time at my home. We participated in athletics together. And we had a great friendship.

On several occasions, as deeply as two high-school students could ever do it, we discussed theology. He came from a family that proported to be Christian. His father was in the car business. I even was employed by his father for a time. He and I in the summers were the repossession team of the car dealership. Which is a very interesting job, by the way. But we were very close.

I can remember in my mind very vividly an occasion when we went out as high-school seniors because we felt the compulsion in our hearts to do some witnessing. And so we decided that a really good place to do that would be in Pershing Square down in Los Angeles. And we decided that since everybody else down there got their soapbox and preached, we'd get ours. And we were full of holy zeal, you know, and went down there and we began to evangelize Pershing Square.

And, you know, there are all kinds of soapbox orators down there and we were just another in the parade. But for us, it was a very important time. And then we had opportunity, I remember, to share personally with some people about faith in Jesus Christ. This young man came to our church where my father was the pastor. I never really had much discernment, as look back on it now, but I never for a moment thought he was anything less than a Christian.

We separated when we went to college. Two years later I happened, on an occasion, to run into him, I think it was some kind of a school reunion. I can't exactly remember and he informed me that he in the intervening two years had become an atheist. And I want you to know that I was absolutely

shattered. Not only was I shattered personally, but I really didn't have a sophisticated enough theology to know what to do with him. I didn't have a category to put him into. But to this very day, that young friend of mine has a very vivid face in my mind and I have been unable to set him aside. And it has plagued my heart that through all those years he possessed a dead faith which ultimately manifested itself, but I was never discerning enough to know that. And so, in a very real sense, he went right through my fingers without my ever confronting that.

I remember when I went to seminary, I had another friend, a very close friend. This young man had everything going for him. He was an exceptional young man in every way...in every way, just stood out in a crowd. If there was anything that anyone could do, he could do it better...outstanding student, musician, athlete, you name it...incredibly gifted young man. And I thought, "Boy, what success he'll know in the ministry. If I can ever...if I can ever come up to his shoe tops, it will be a remarkable thing." Very, very gifted, all the finest background, family, education, everything. And there he was in Talbot Seminary studying for the ministry and getting excellent grades. And we had so much fellowship together and we had a lot of fun together. And seminary is not all fun, we also had a lot of grief together...battling through our courses. In those days you went to seminary in three years and you were done in three years and that was the way it was. And so it was very intense. And it was sort of like being in combat together, your lives really got knit together. We were taking 16 to 19 units a semester and all of us working in church ministry at the same time and some of us courting our wives to be and it was a wonderful and busy time.

And then after we graduated and looked ahead to all the hopeful things in life, and began to go our separate ways, we had a little group of about five of us and God has so singularly blessed those...four of those, that it's really amazing...amazing. Four of them are being used in really marvelous ways in the service of God. But, not this young man. In fact, he rejected completely the faith. I was told that there was introduced into his home a Buddhist altar.

And as I thought back on that, I don't understand that. At that time I couldn't understand it. I wonder why I couldn't see the...the fact that that faith was dead faith, that there wasn't anything there. Oh maybe he was legalistic, and maybe the masquerade was so good I couldn't see it but I experienced that and it was painful.

And then I came to Grace Church. And I remember a girl coming forward at the end of a service over in the chapel and she...she was so excited to receive the Lord Jesus Christ. And everybody was talking about what a sorted life she came from and isn't it wonderful that she is now a Christian. And within the next month we were hearing her give her testimony at various places and it was really wonderful, in home Bible studies and that kind of thing. And then all of a sudden a young man came to me one day and said, "By the way, do you know this girl is going around here soliciting sex from our young men in the college department?"

I couldn't believe that. I said, "Well, you know, she's a new Christian and maybe you're thinking of before she became a Christian." So, I got a hold of her and I asked her to come to the office and I called her on the phone and I said, "If you have been a professional prostitute as you have given testimony to, I want you to come and see and I want you to bring your little book with all the names and addresses of the men you serve."

And I think at the time she was somewhat shocked by it all, so she brought her book. And I said, "I want you to demonstrate to me the genuineness of your salvation by giving me that book." That's the last I ever saw of her. For a young pastor, I think maybe my first year of ministry here, that was a very painful experience. The cumulative effect of these things has made me very, very aware of dead faith.

You see, I am not like a traveling evangelist. I don't blow into town, unload my gospel message, count the hands and leave. I have to stay. And I see who drops through the cracks. I mean, I'm not into numbers. I'm not into statistics. Because if you stay long enough, you're going to find out usually where there's living faith and where there's dead faith.

I had a young man come in, I think maybe in the third year of my ministry. He said, "I'm a homosexual. Can you help me?" You know, at that particular time, there's a certain amount of invincibility in a young man, I figured I can help him. I've got the Word of God and the power of God and I can help him. So I had the privilege there of giving him the gospel and praying with him and he opened his heart and he prayed a prayer. And I thought it looked so good. He said, "Now what am I going to do about my homosexuality?" He said, "I'm so tempted I can't control it. It's just...it's out of control to the point where it's a multiple experience every day for me, every day of the week." And he said, "I want to change that."

I said, "All right, I want you to take a notebook and every time you do that, every time you do a homosexual act this week, I want you to write down what you did specifically and then you can turn all those sheets into me at the end of the week when we meet." He said, "Okay."

He came back a week later and he said to me, "Guess what? I don't have anything written down." I said why? He said, "I didn't do anything." He said, "I can't believe it, but just having accountability to you and not wanting to tell you I did that and bear the shame of that caused me not to do it."

I said, "Let's do this every week." I never saw him again. There was never any fruit so whatever he professed to believe was nothing but dead faith.

I remember a man in our church very active, a teacher in our church. We decided to meet for prayer every Tuesday morning at six o'clock and we met for a year and we prayed, the two of us, and

sometimes someone else. At the end of which time he walked away from everything. I remember chasing him down in the night, going in to a home other than his own home where from which he had left his wife and family. And awaking him in the middle of the night, I think Jerry Mitchell was with me that time, and saying, "What in the world are you doing turning your back on everything that we have taught and known and shared and prayed for through a year?"

You see, these kinds of things stick in your mind. I told the people of this congregation some years ago about a plane trip from St. Louis where I was seated next to a young man. And this young man leaned over to me and said, "I don't want to bother you, sir..." He didn't know me, he just sat down next to me. But he said to me, "Ah, you wouldn't know how I could have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, would you?" Absolutely unbelievable. And my first reaction was..."Ha-ba-ha-ba-da, this can't be happening." He says, "I just need to know Christ." He said, "I'm on my way to Los Angeles." He was a football star from the University of Kentucky, just graduated, coming to Los Angeles to work for a man who was an elder at Grace Church at that time. They've since moved away.

I couldn't believe that would sit down next to me a guy who was coming out here to work for one of my close friends, an elder at the church and the guy wouldn't even know who I was, he just asked me that question. I gave him the gospel and we prayed together on the plane. We got here and I baptized him the next week. I went off to preach a week's meetings in Palm Springs and he said, "Could I go with you so you could disciple me?" And he..we spent a week together, or a portion of a week. He had dinner with Patricia and I and all of our kids for several weeks and then he disappeared and haven't seen him in all the years since.

I could go on and on. Let me tell you about someone who showed up at our church not long ago...some time last year, really. He came...he called me on the phone one Sunday. He said, "You've got to help me." I said, "I can't believe it's you." He said, "It's me." I said, "Where you been?" He said, "I'm a drunken bum." I said, "I can't believe it." Because you see, this young man had been a pastor, a pastor of a church. He had been student in seminary, tremendous promise, great mind but he had become a drunken bum, left his wife, left his church, left his kids, drank himself into oblivion over a period of about three years and became a hobo, destitute. But he said, "I've got to have some help."

I said, "You show up Sunday and I'll help you." So he came to church that Sunday, I couldn't believe it when I saw him. He showed all the scars and all the marks of broken bottles over his face...some of you met him. His name is Mitch. And he said, "I don't have anywhere to go." He had everything he owned in the world on his backpack. And he said, "I don't have anywhere to go." I said, "Come to our house and you can live with us."

So, Patricia is always gracious, welcomed him into our home with our little family and we took him in. And it wasn't easy. Sometimes he got blasted drunk. And Rich Hines got involved and sometimes he

had to sleep in Rich's camper. And we moved him into a house down here and he smashed all the glass and pounded through the doors and beat up his roommates and it was tough, very tough. But we hung in there and I went down there a couple of times when he was finally moved in with some guys that were going to support him and help him. And every time I found a bottle, I took him in the bathroom while I poured it down the drain. And we tried and he came along and he began to share and we employed him at the church and he began to give his testimony. And he started to preach at the mission and he said, "I'm back where God wants me and I'm repentant and all the years are past, the years of sin."

And then it started all over again. And he told me it was over. He was leaving. He was going back to drink. He was found in a gracious man who took him in to live with him for a little while, he came home one night and he was in bed with some street walker. We put him in a detox center. We did everything we could possibly do. And he knew the truth. He could have stood in this pulpit and preached a sermon you never would have forgotten...tremendous power as a preacher, great gifts. But he left to go back to his bottle and to go back to a woman that he wanted to live with who was in the occult. Believed all the right things, dead faith...absolutely dead.

We have to take that into account, beloved. And that's the thing that James is concerned about and that's the thing that I'm concerned about. Those are only a few samples. I could give you many, many more...I don't need to, you understand. And if you ask me why this is of grave concern to me, this is why...my life has been dotted with a long history of those kinds of people and I want to at least have the honesty to admit that there are many, many more people like that who give an initial acquiescence to the facts of the gospel but there's never any product. They may carry on a masquerade for a while but when you really look closely there's nothing there. And these are the people, and others like them, that have given me a strong passion for this matter of dead faith because these are people who were so intimately involved in my life and I didn't even discern as I ought to have discerned in all cases.

So, you see, I'm not into the "hit" and "count heads" evangelism, okay? I"m not into that. I'm not into how many hands were raised, how many cards were signed kind of stuff. I can't just accept that on the surface because I have to live with the heartbreaking reality that there are people who do make some kind of overture to the gospel but that thing is dead, produces nothing. And James speaks to this matter with a bold practicality.

Now the background of the text at least we'll introduce tonight. The background of the text is this, chapter 1 verse 1, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered abroad." Now we know at the very outset that he's writing to Jews...twelve tribes scattered abroad. He is writing to Jewish people who have now identified themselves with the Christian faith. In fact, if you'll notice in chapter 2 verse 21, he says: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works?" And the word "our" embraces not only James but all the Jews to whom he writes who were

also the children of Abraham by race. He's writing to Jews.

Now you have to understand this. Here are Jews who have embraced or become attached to the Christian faith. Now I want you to understand what the attraction was for some of them. Some of these Jews had really had it up to here with legalism. They had been lifelong sort of engulfed in a system of works righteousness. It was a heavy, heavy guilt system. They were told they had to do works and earn their own salvation. They couldn't do them. They knew they broke the law of God. The laws that were heaped upon them were a burden that was beyond description. Jesus identifies them in Matthew 23 as a very heavy weight, hard to be carried. And so here they've lived lifelong within the confines of Judaistic traditional legalism, in bondage to a works' system of religion and here comes the gospel of grace wafting along on the wind. God loves you, He sent His Son to die for you. He wants to free you from your sins. He wants to free you from the bondage of the law. He wants to free you from guilt. He wants to set you free in Christ. Boy, does that sound good.

So, what you have then is the Jews who have lived lifelong under the system of works now welcoming grace and saying, "Hey, all we have to do here is believe. In Judaism we have to do this and do this and do this and do this and keep doing it and keep doing it and keep doing as long as we live, here you just believe." And this is a gospel that sounds really inviting to them. This is a joyous alternative to the guilty-producing burdens that came from Judaism. And so, tired of the legalism and tired of the weight of failure to comply the unbearable pressure to perform for approval, the high fear factor that they lived under, they had run to the message of Christianity, a message of freedom and faith...just believing.

It sounded too good to be true to some of them. And some of them, obviously, misunderstood the freedom. They went too far. They supposed that there was nothing to do but believe the facts. And since works were not efficacious for salvation, the gospel made that clear, they just figured works weren't important at all. So they just eliminated that and figured you just believe and go on with your life and that's it.

And you want to know something? There are people today who still teach that. "Just believe, don't worry about the rest. And just believing in God and believing in Christ was sufficient to make them right with Him." All this flows out of their oppressive legalistic background, so the new message of Christian freedom, the new message of grace and faith, it looked so good. It looked like total relief from any required duty. And I want you to understand the psychological phenomena here. I've seen it many times. I've seen it...I've seen it with people that I've known personally...even within the context of the church.

Let me give you an illustration. I know a young man, he's a basketball coach now. This young man was raised in a very strong legalistic church environment. And it confined him. And then he was exposed to some teaching that said, "Hey, don't worry about your sin. Hey, you don't have to confess

your sin...why, that's all taken care of, just believe, don't worry about your sin, don't confess your sin." I remember sitting down with him one evening after a basketball game which he played. We were sitting, drinking a chocolate milkshake, I'll never forget the scene. And he said to me, "Wow, man, I have just discovered the greatest truth." I said, "What is it?" He said, "I don't have to confess my sin. I don't have to be concerned with my sin, man. It's all under the blood...Wow!"

Sad. Let me tell you, it wasn't uphill spiritually from then on. I remember a young couple that came to this church. And they came out of a very legalistic church experience where everything was prescribed to them, the way they cut their hair, the way they put their clothes on, what they believed, what they thought about politics in general and economics and everything else in the world, every thought, every action, every attitude was prescribed. Everything was very legalistic. It was a very negative environment.

And they came over to Grace Church--lovely young couple. And they couldn't believe it because we were enjoying our Christianity. We were happy. We were enthusiastic. We were loving Christ. And we weren't confined to a whole bunch of Christian tradition, you know, bondage not biblical bondage. And they started to enjoy that freedom and they enjoyed it right into drinking, right into adultery, and right into liberalism.

It all looked so good and it was an overreaction to everything in the past. It's heartbreaking. And I think with all the vision for ministry that was in their hearts at one time, lost. The Lord knows whether they belong to Him, I don't really know where they are now. But that helps me to understand what's going on here. See, these Jewish people see this as so good and they run to it only because it's a relief from their legalism and they don't understand the reality of it. So you have to understand that context.

So, here are these people who say, "Hey, we believe." But you look at their life and there's nothing. There's no fruit of righteousness. You remember the song, I used to sing it as a kid, "Only believe, only believe?" I don't like that song. Maybe that just reflects a dead faith.

Well, now you know what the passage is going to be about. Come back in two weeks and I'll try to explain it to you. Let's bow in prayer.

We just sense, Lord, that You've been with us, tonight. What a wonderful fellowship we've enjoyed. Thank You for letting us sing the songs we sang. We thank You that the songs are not just songs but they're truth...how wonderful. Thank You for the testimonies we've heard of Your grace. We thank You for Your Word. Even though we've just begun, we just ask, Lord, that You'll help us to understand this passage and help us in this matter of evangelism, to be concerned that faith be living faith, that's producing righteous deeds as a pattern of life and not dead faith that belongs to someone who just took a casual glance at the truth and said, "Oh yeah, I believe that," and thought that was

enough.

Help us, Lord, in leading other people to Christ, to have the thoughts of James in our mind and warn about dead faith, to remember the words of our Lord Jesus who said, "If you continue in My Word, then are you My mathetes alethos, My real disciple...if you continue in My Word." Help us to remember the Lord's words about those false prophets when He said, "By their fruits you shall know them."

Help us, I ask You, tonight, to examine first our own hearts to be sure ours is a living faith, not perfect but a faith that's producing righteous deeds, love for You, for Your people, for Your Word, fruit of the Spirit, so many things. And then, Lord, help us as we've been sensitive to our own heart and the faith that we possess to become very sensitive to the faith of those around us. I thank You, Lord, through the years that You have allowed me to learn lessons from these people in my life, lessons that make me sensitive to this and make me hesitant to legitimize someone's faith until I've seen the fruit. And I pray, Lord, that You'll be glorified because in this congregation the people bear much fruit for Your glory. We'll thank You in Christ's name. Amen.

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