

Scripture: James 2:14–17 /

Title: Faith Without Works Is Dead Faith / Translated by Karen Julien

1.

Over the past few weeks, as we celebrated Easter, we have been talking about the resurrection. Starting this week, we are returning to the Book of James, which we previously studied. James writes this letter to Christians of the Diaspora who were scattered and living in different places. James was deeply concerned about complete, mature faith. He wanted the Diaspora Christians who would read this letter to understand what true and complete faith really is. James wrote his letter to diagnose the problems in their faith and then offer a response. It is almost like a prescription that doctors give to patients in a hospital. When we go to the hospital to see a doctor, the doctor gives us different recommendations based on our illness or physical condition.

In my case, I have had high cholesterol for a very long time. When I saw an endocrinologist, the doctor first told me to attend a dietary education class. It was a class that explained which foods I should avoid and which I should eat. Then, after a few months, when my blood test still showed that my cholesterol had not returned to normal, the doctor recommended medication. In the same way, James gives us wisdom on how to have complete faith. He is trying to show us what we are missing because we lack wisdom.

So what does James mean by “complete” or “mature”? Completeness means starting at the beginning, following the necessary process, and reaching the final destination. It means going from start to finish. It means having everything in place.

From chapters 2 through 5, James gives twelve teachings that lead us toward complete faith. In the first half of Chapter 2, he spoke about discrimination. In the second half of chapter 2, he gives the second teaching, which is about true faith. James calls the opposite of true faith “dead faith.” Dead faith is faith that is only an empty shell. It is useless faith. The purpose and power of faith is to save us. But if our faith is dead, we cannot receive salvation through it, and that is a serious matter.

If we compare dead faith to a tree, it is like a tree that has already died. It has no leaves, no flowers, and no fruit. The tree next to our house is exactly like that. It still has the shape of a tree, but because it is dead, it has no flowers and no fruit. A person with dead faith has no fragrance of Christ, and certainly no fruit. So what kind of faith does James call “living” and “complete”?

2.

James says that true faith is faith that acts. Faith that acts is different from faith that only knows or only listens. Some people hear many things but do not act on them. Some people, when they hear the Word, talk as if they already know everything. They say, “Yes, I know that passage. I have heard that many times before.” But as soon as they turn around, they forget it. Of course, hearing the Word is necessary for our faith to grow. But for us to personally experience whether the Word is truly right, we must live according to it and put it into practice.

Earlier, in James 1:22–25, James compared those who hear the Word but do not act on it to people who look at their face in a mirror. They look in the mirror and say, “Oh, there is something on my face,” but even after seeing what is lacking, they simply turn around and walk away. James says that people who hear the Word but do not act on it are deceiving themselves.

Do you believe that the gospel can change people and set them free? What is the gospel? If we summarize the gospel, it is the proclamation that Jesus Christ died for our sins, rose again, ascended to the right hand of God's throne, and became both Lord and Christ. Within this proclamation of the gospel, there is a challenge and a command directed toward us. What challenge does the death of Jesus Christ on the cross give us? We must think about why Jesus Christ carried the cross and died. We cannot simply stop at saying, "I guess Jesus died." Why did Jesus die?

He was nailed to the cross in our place because of our sin. He bore the cross, even though it was not His sin, to save sinners like us. If that is true, then we must first acknowledge that we are sinners. We must repent of our sins. We must give up everything that we have treated as our master and receive Jesus as our Lord.

In other words, we must put an end to the life in which the treasures of our hearts have ruled over us, and we must receive a new life in which Jesus rules over us. That is the challenge contained in the proclamation that Jesus died on the cross. What challenge is contained in the truth that the Lord who died has risen and is seated at the right hand of God's throne?

It challenges us to accept God's reign and to acknowledge that God rules over our lives and our daily routines. We must also accept that God rules over this world and desires to establish His kingdom here. In other words, we must realize that our daily lives are part of God's kingdom. The gospel contains both the challenge and the command to build God's kingdom in the midst of our everyday lives. When we practice this gospel in our own lives, we can personally experience how the gospel changes us and helps us grow.

3.

James calls us to live by practicing the gospel that we have heard. Practicing the Word means more than simply choosing a single Bible verse and trying to apply it. It refers to a consistent way of life that is worthy of the gospel. It means choosing and living out a way of life that is fitting for the gospel. It is a holistic transformation of life.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:1, Paul says, "You learned from us how you ought to live and to please God, as in fact you are doing. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more." Paul is saying that as citizens of God's kingdom, Christians must choose and live a way of life that reflects who they are.

Both James and Paul say that there is a vessel that holds the way of life of God's kingdom. That vessel is a community. Think about making muffins. What determines the shape of the muffin? The mold or container that holds the muffin batter determines the shape.

In the same way, what forms us into people who live like Christians depends on the vessel into which we place the gospel we believe. That vessel is a community. When James speaks about doing and practicing the Word, he is not talking about individual practice alone. He emphasizes practicing the Word under the assumption of community. Why? Because the gospel of God's kingdom assumes community.

If the kingdom of God could be built by one individual alone, God could have simply taken Moses and built it. But because the kingdom of God is formed through community, God worked through the twelve tribes of Israel, even though it was difficult, to establish His kingdom in the land of Canaan. That is why the entire story of the Exodus and the settlement in Canaan unfolds not as the story of an individual, but as the story of a community.

The gospel we believe must be practiced and lived out through the vessel of community. Sometimes we hear people say, "I can live out my faith by myself. Do I really need the church?" But that is not complete faith. Complete faith is expressed through the way of life called community. That is why the Book of James continues to diagnose the broken condition of the community and calls it to be restored into a whole and mature community. Please remember this: our faith can become complete through community, and our faith is practiced through community.

4.

In today's passage, James addresses his readers as "my brothers and sisters." In what kind of group do we use the language of brothers and sisters? We use it in a family. James is calling Christians to live according to family ethics. Why has our church chosen to use the titles "brother" and "sister" instead of titles like deacon, senior deaconess, or elder? It is because we believe that our church is a family community bound together by the blood of Christ.

Even within the church, some people still use titles such as "doctor" or "teacher." But "brother" and "sister" are deeply gospel-centered and biblical titles. They are meaningful titles because they affirm that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. James gives a specific example to emphasize the kind of faith that must be practiced within the community.

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and has no food for the day. But some people merely say, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat well." James asks whether it is truly complete faith if we only speak words and do not give our bodies what they need.

If we are truly a family community, then it is natural for us to feel a deep bond with one another. If we are family, then it is natural for us to feel a sense of responsibility for one another. If we see a brother or sister who is poorly clothed and hungry, yet feel no responsibility and do not care for them, then that is not family.

In the past two sermons, we talked about Jesus coming to His disciples by the Sea of Galilee. As Jesus prepared a warm breakfast for them, we reflected on His hospitality toward His disciples. The fact that Jesus prepared breakfast for the disciples who had abandoned and betrayed Him showed that He still accepted them as His family and His household. The table of hospitality was the warm heart of Jesus, who received them as family and took responsibility for them.

Over the past two weeks, my mother and my three older sisters visited me. More than anyone else, I felt especially grateful to my wife. Hosting four members of one's in-law family is not an easy thing. And how difficult must it be to cook, wash dishes, and prepare meals for nine people? Even so, I could not help but be grateful to my wife for joyfully taking on that responsibility. I believe it was possible because she considered them family. My sisters also considered me family, so they gladly made kimchi and brought dried vegetables for me because they knew I liked seasoned vegetables. That is what family is.

Hospitality means opening my home. It means inviting someone to my table. Hospitality is the posture that says, "I will take responsibility for you." Hospitality can truly be called responsible love. Through today's passage, James asks the members of the family community, whom he calls brothers and sisters, to practice responsible love.

5.

Why does God ask us to practice complete faith through community rather than as isolated individuals? It is because God Himself exists as a communal being. The triune God exists in love and service, with each Person giving Himself as a gift to the others. And God asks us, who are made in His image and called to resemble Him, to live in that same way.

God asks those who believe in Him and follow Him to become a witness community that practices love and hospitality. Starting this summer, we are planning to form new small groups, which we call “mokjang.” The reason we have small groups is clear. We believe that through the house-church community called mokjang, our faith becomes complete. We believe that the gospel of God’s kingdom is embodied through mokjang, not as isolated individuals, but as a community.

Through community, we will practice responsible love and service toward one another. God has given us mokjang because He desires us to become a witness community that practices love and hospitality, and to grow together toward completeness within that community.

Today, the mokja, the small-group shepherds, will meet to form the new mokjang groups. You may be assigned to someone you do not like or with whom you feel uncomfortable. But through that person, we can learn complete love. I hope we will learn how to embrace and love people who are different from us.

Through hospitality toward each person in the community, we can become a witness community. A witness community is a community that testifies to and reveals to the world that God is alive. There is only one way to show the world that we are disciples of Jesus Christ: we must love one another.

The disciple John also emphasizes the importance of this communal way of life in 1 John 3:16–18:

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

By practicing a life of hospitality that takes deep responsibility for the needs and difficulties of our brothers and sisters in the community, we can grow toward complete faith.

Our church has many people who come to Mayo Clinic to build their careers and stay only for a short time before leaving. Even if they are not able to put down deep roots in our community, if they can experience love and service here and be reminded of God, then we are fulfilling our mission as a witness community.

Hospitality is an expression of true faith that witnesses Christ to those outside of Christ.

When we practice a communal way of life marked by hospitality and mutual responsibility, our faith can become complete.