

## Just Have Faith – James 2:17-18

### Scripture Reading: James 2:14-18

#### Introduction

This morning, we are continuing our sermon series titled “Beyond the Bumper Stickers” as we take a look at our second Christian cliché, “Just have faith”

“Just have faith” is what Christians often say to one another when they don’t really know what else to say

You may well have heard that advice from a Christian friend the last time you went through a rough patch in your life

Or how about when you had a serious question about something you read in the Bible or something you heard in a sermon or when your experiences caused you to maybe wonder if God was asleep at the wheel

At those times, “Just have faith” can seem like an overly simplistic answer and many a doubter has become disillusioned with Christianity when the only answer they received to their desperate inquiry was “Just have faith.”

And frankly, when you’re in the midst of a crisis, hearing someone say “Just have faith” doesn’t help

It’s one of those surface level answers that sounds spiritual but only serves to make a person feel like they are deficient in some way without actually addressing their issue

I mean, what are you supposed to do with an answer like that?

Is a person who is hurting or doubting or struggling supposed to just gin up some extra faith to make everything okay?

I picture the person receiving that advice suddenly smacking themselves in the forehead and saying, “Why didn’t I think of that? Thanks!”

Then we hear people talk about having faith when things turn out better than they expected them to with phrases like, “I knew things would work out if I just had faith!”

And when people seem to float through life without being concerned about the difficulties of life they may well tell you, “Those things don’t bother me because I have faith”

And they only serve to further entrench the idea that faith is a sort of talisman or good luck charm that makes life easier

The Bible has a great deal to say about faith and yet many devoted Christ-followers continue to have a distorted view of faith

And when saying, “Just have faith” we really mean something more like, “Hang in there” because we can’t think of anything else to say

And we mean well when we say it but the shorthand we use falls far short of what we should be saying all because we don’t have a sufficient understanding about faith

So this morning we are going to begin by looking at **what faith is**

Then we will consider **what faith does**

And, lastly, we will discover the most important element of faith or **what faith needs**

#### I. What Faith Is

Many people have tried to define the faith of Christ-followers

Mark Twain once sarcastically defined faith as “Believing what you know ain’t so.”

And Harvard professor Steven Pinker described faith as “Believing something without good reasons to do so.”

And the famous atheist Richard Dawkins once said “Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is believe in spite of, or even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.”

While we suspect that Mark Twain, Steven Pinker, and Richard Dawkins are wrong we might well have to concede that our typical approach to faith and our admonishing others to “Just have faith” might well be a factor in people thinking the way they do

So, what is faith?

Looking at **Hebrews 11:1** we read the most often referred to biblical definition of faith:

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

The Greek word translated in Hebrews 11:1 as “faith” is *pistis*

And according to my Greek lexicon, *pistis* means “that which is completely believable or that which can be fully believed and is worthy of belief based on evidence or proof”

*Pistis* is the same word that Greek philosophers such as Aristotle used to describe the unstated premise, or basis, of an argument – the thing that is so obviously true that it doesn’t need to be said

Faith is necessary and completely unavoidable if people are to even function and everyone is a person of faith even if they try to deny or negate biblical faith

Even Richard Dawkins, the atheist who called faith the “great cop-out” is a man of faith because he has faith in the laws of nature – that they exist and that they are constant and consistent

Richard Dawkins doesn’t walk around tethered to fixed objects out of fear that he might randomly be flung into outer space – he has faith in the law of gravity

Faith is the basis of life in the same way that mathematical reasoning is the basis of knowing that two plus two equals four or that sense perception tells us that fire is hot or that the rotation of the earth means that the sun will rise in the east and set in the west tomorrow

We don’t even bother to explain those things because they are *pistis*

And the New Testament writers used the Greek word *pistis* for belief in God and knowledge about God and trust in what God tells us because to their way of thinking, faith is the unstated premise of life itself and without it nothing makes sense

Faith as we find it conceived of in the Bible is the exact opposite of how Twain, Pinker, and Dawkins have defined it

**Romans 10:17** tells us, “...*faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*”

So we see that faith is confidence because of knowledge – not because of a lack of knowledge or in spite of knowledge

When the Bible speaks of faith it means complete trust in God because of His revealed character and dependability

It’s trusting in the future on the basis of demonstrated faithfulness in the past

The Bible treats faith as knowledge that we are justified in having

**So, far from being “blind” or “ignorant” biblical faith is trust that is grounded in documented reality**

And the more time we spend in studying the Bible – in reading about how God has worked in the world and among his people in the past – the more knowledge and understanding and certainty we gain – the more faith we possess

But faith is a gift from God according to **Romans 12:3** and it’s not something that can be willed into existence or produced by people

And that’s part of why it can be so frustrating to be told “Just have faith”

But faith also isn’t meant to simply be a possession – that’s another fallacy found in the statement “Just have faith”

God doesn’t give us faith just so we can say we have it because faith has to have a purpose or it is meaningless

That would make faith the rough equivalent of belief and those are two related but quite different concepts

Belief is an opinion or a judgment in which a person is fully persuaded – but a belief actually requires nothing of the person who holds it – belief is a very cheap commodity that can be held onto or released rather easily

Faith includes belief but it is so much more than that and faith is meant to have a purpose

So let's consider next what it is that faith is for – what faith does

## **II. What Faith Does**

Faith is different from belief in that faith includes taking action in accordance with one's beliefs

I have used this example in the past but it's a simple one that makes an effective illustration of the difference between belief and faith

I can look at a chair and fervently believe that it would support my weight and keep me from crashing to the floor

But, until I bend my knees and actually sit down on it and trust it to keep me from crashing to the floor, faith doesn't exist – it's taking action that changes belief into faith - **faith must be demonstrated or there is no faith**

James points us to the purpose of faith when he asks in verse 14 (**James 2:14**) –

*“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?”*

And we read his pronouncement in verse 17 (**James 2:17**) that *“faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead”*

Then, to prove his point, in verse 18 (**James 2:18**) he challenges such a person who says he has faith but not works to demonstrate his faith without doing anything

What James challenges there is an impossibility because faith is nothing more than a claim that cannot be proven one way or the other without the faith leading to action

Because it's by acting that we demonstrate we have faith at all

Biblical faith is characterized by and inseparable from works and genuine faith will naturally be demonstrated by action

Look again at the argument put forth by James in verses 15-17 (**James 2:15-17**) –

*If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

That passage always reminds me of this Peanuts comic strip [Peanuts.jpg] and I always wind up feeling bad for Snoopy

The person who is cold and hungry isn't going to be convinced by charitable words when actual charity is absent

And neither is anyone going to be convinced of a professed faith when action based on that faith is absent

If we truly believe something we will naturally follow through and act according to that belief – it's the action that makes faith alive

Now we need to understand that James wasn't contradicting Paul and proclaiming a works-based salvation

James would have wholeheartedly agreed that we are saved by faith and not by works so that no one can boast as Paul wrote in **Ephesians 2:8-9**

We have to look at verse 14 very carefully so as to not miss what James actually says (**James 2:14**) he is talking about someone who *claims* to have saving faith but shows no outward evidence of that faith

In other words, James is simply saying that genuine saving faith will result in good works

Paul even says as much in **Ephesians 2:10** which follows immediately after his teaching that we are saved by faith and not by works when he says believers are “[God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

So we see that there is no disagreement between James and Paul and even saving faith will result in works if it is genuine faith

I find it interesting that one of the marks of a true conversion is that the new believer automatically begins to tell others about Christ

Having just experienced saving faith they get to work because at that point they clearly see and truly grasp the *pistis*, the reality of who God is and what he can do

It’s only later that believers tend to sit back in idle “faith” and wait on God to work thinking that doing so is somehow more spiritual

But to sit back and say you are exercising faith in God instead of acting responsibly and doing what is clear from God’s Word is dereliction of duty, distortion of the doctrine of providence, and a misuse of the concept of faith

I encourage you to take the time to read through Hebrews 11 which is known as the Bible’s Hall of Faith

Spend some time there and notice how everyone who is mentioned and commended for their faith took action as a result of their faith –

Even if that meant they submitted to torture and death for God’s sake, each of them acted in accordance with what they proclaimed to believe

And that points us directly to our final point – the most important element of faith or what faith needs

### **III. What Faith Needs**

Some of the false ideas we have about faith are that our faith needs to be pure, unwavering, and we need to have an abundance of it

But, while it would be nice to see all of those characteristics present in our faith, none of those things really matter all that much

Because what really matters when it comes to faith is the object of our faith and that our faith leads to action

Look with me at **Luke 17:6** where Jesus says,

*If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed* – If you had even very small faith

*You could say to this mulberry tree be uprooted and planted in the sea and it would obey you*

Jesus may well have been referring to the black mulberry tree which is a large tree with an extensive root system and which was common to the area – so what he was saying was even small faith can do really big things

But when Jesus uses the analogy of commanding a mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea, or of moving a mountain He was in no way suggesting that his disciples were to go out and do those things in a literal sense

Jesus isn’t suggesting we demonstrate our faith by flipping mountains over and hurling trees into the sea

He’s using a hyperbolic illustration to graphically show that even things that seem impossible to us can be done through faith

As long as God is the object of our faith

As long as the things we are attempting are in accordance with God’s will and for His glory

And as long as Almighty God is working through our faith

The key is that the object of our faith is in God

We can also take **Gideon** as an example,

When the angel first approached him while he was hiding in a winepress to thresh his grain the angel somewhat humorously addressed Gideon as “Mighty man of valor” when he was showing himself to be anything but brave or mighty

Then Gideon had to be assured and reassured repeatedly in order for him to obey God’s orders

His faith may not have been great in either quantity or quality but it was enough even though it was mingled with hesitation and fear because his small, timid faith was faith in Almighty God

Or, let’s consider the apostle **Peter**, when he bid Jesus to call him to come to him by walking on the water

This is recorded for us in Matthew 14 and we will begin reading at verse 28 where Peter says (**Matthew 14:28**),

*“Lord if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”*

And Jesus told him to come and Peter successfully left the boat and began walking on the water toward Jesus

He had faith that Jesus could cause him to walk on the water and so he did – until he began to think about what he was doing

As soon as he shifted his faith and began to consider what he was capable of – he began to sink

But notice that as he sank he called out to Jesus for help – he shifted his faith-focus back to Jesus and was saved from sinking

In verse 31 (**Matthew 14:31**) we see Jesus’ reaction, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Which is to say, “Why did you shift your faith to yourself, a little object, instead of continuing to trust me?”

Because as soon as Peter’s faith shifted its focus back to Jesus all was well once more

But, in the cases of both Gideon and Peter, we see that the thing that made their faith real – the thing that changed their “belief” into “faith” was taking action

Gideon raised an army then winnowed it down according to God’s instructions and ultimately carried out a battle plan that made no sense from the standpoint of human logic and allowed God to win the victory through him

And Peter got out of the boat – the rest of the disciples may have believed as Peter did that Jesus could cause them to walk on water but only Peter demonstrated true faith in the matter

As ironic as it may seem, faith can actually be made stronger through doubt because the only thing that truly matters is the object of our faith and that we take action and taking action in spite of doubt leads to stronger faith next time

Let’s look at verse 19 (**James 2:19**) where James shows us a clear example of “dead” faith – that’s to say, *pistis* that does no good

*You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!*

Those two instances of “believe” both have *pistis* as their root word – they are both based on the kind of knowledge that leads to faith

So we see that the demons have accurate knowledge of who God is and what he is capable of but their *pistis* doesn’t lead them to act in accordance with that knowledge

Their knowledge has the correct object but not the action that is required for faith to be a living faith so their faith is dead and never gets beyond the fact of knowing

Faith is more than knowledge, it’s more than wishful desire, and it’s more than having a positive attitude – faith is confidence that leads to action

## Conclusion

As we have seen this morning, there is far more to faith than just having it so to tell someone to “Just have faith” leaves out the most important thing we could tell someone

The Bible encourages Christ-followers to have good reasons for what they believe because knowledge leads to confidence and confidence leads to action

And biblical faith is the firm knowledge of what is real that comes from the most trustworthy source in the universe and, since action naturally flows from true faith, you will know you are faithful when your actions are consistent with what you say you believe

Faith doesn't mean believing things that don't match up to reality in the hope that things might be different

It's acknowledging that God is the greatest reality in the universe and then living as if that proposition is true

So instead of telling someone to “Just have faith” we should endeavor to show them the object of our faith and why

We should take time to show them how our faith in God is well-placed based on God's record of trustworthiness and ability to do what he has said he will do

Because what counts is not the bigness of a person's faith but the bigness of the object of that faith and when the object is God who is ever-present and ready to help a person's faith is anchored in the most secure place possible

And when a person takes their focus off of themselves and their problems and their limited resources and places their trust in God and acts accordingly – then they truly have the living faith that makes all the difference

Let's pray

**James 2:14-18 (page 1012)**

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

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