



Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit

Fruitless Faith

A Sermon
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Delivered by

C. H. SPURGEON,

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"Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone."—
James 2:17.

WHATEVER the statement of James may be, it could never have been his intention to contradict the gospel. It could never be possible that the Holy Spirit would say one thing in one place, and another in another. Statements of Paul and of James must be reconciled, and if they were not, I would be prepared sooner to throw overboard the statement of James than that of Paul. Luther did so, I think, most unjustifiably. If you ask me, then, how I dare to say I would sooner do so, my reply is, I said I would sooner throw over James than Paul for this reason, because, at any rate, we must keep to the Master himself, the Lord Jesus Christ. We ought never to raise any questions about differences of inspiration, since they are all equally inspired, but if such questions could be raised and were allowable, it were wisdom to stick fastest to those who cling closest to Christ. Now the last words of the Lord Jesus, before he was taken up were these, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," and what was this gospel? "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved." To that, then, we must always cling, but Jesus Christ has given a promise of salvation to the baptized believer, and he has said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, and whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

Here it is clear he promises everlasting life to all who believe in him, to all who trust in him. Now from the Master's words we will not stir, but close to his own declaration we will stand. Be assured that the gospel of your salvation as a believer, with a simple confidence in Jesus Christ, whom God raised from the dead, will save your soul, a simple and undiluted reliance upon the life and death, and resurrection, and merit, and person of Jesus Christ, will ensure to you everlasting life. Let nothing move you from this confidence: it hath great recompense of reward. Heaven and earth may pass away, but from this grand fundamental truth not one jot or tittle shall ever be moved. "He that believeth in him is not condemned, but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed on the Son of God."

The fact is, James and Paul are perfectly reconcilable, and they are viewing truth from different standpoints; but whatever James may mean, I am quite confident about what Paul means, and confident about the truth of the two.

A second remark. James never intended, for a moment, nor do any of his words lead us into such a belief, that there can be any merit whatever in any good works of ours. After we have done all, if we could

do all, we should only have done what we were bound to do. Surely there is no merit in a man's paying what he owes; no great merit in a servant who has his wages for doing what he is paid for. The question of merit between the creature and his Creator is not to be raised; he has a right to us; he has the right of creation, the right of preservation, the right of infinite sovereignty, and, whatever he should exact of us, we should require nothing from him in return, and, having sinned as we have all, for us to talk of salvation by merit, by our own works, is worse than vanity; it is an impertinence which God will never endure.

"Talk they of morals, O! thou bleeding Lamb,
The best morality is love of thee."

Talk of salvation by works, and Cowper's reply seems apt:—

"Perish the virtue, as it ought, abhorred,
And the fool with it, who insults his Lord."

What James does mean, however, is this, no doubt, in brief and short, that while faith saves, it is faith of a certain kind. No man is saved by persuading himself that he is saved; nobody is saved by believing Jesus Christ died for him. That may be, or may not be, true in the sense in which he understands it. In a certain sense Christ died for all men, but since it is evident that many men are lost, Christ's dying for all men is not at all a ground upon which any man may hope to be saved. Christ died for some men in another sense, in a peculiar and special sense. No man has a right to believe that Christ peculiarly and specially died for him until he has an evidence of it in casting himself upon Christ, and trusting in Jesus, and bringing forth suitable works to evince the reality of his faith. The faith that saves is not a historical faith, not a faith that simply believes a creed and certain facts: I have no doubt devils are very orthodox; I do not know which church they belong to, though there are some in all churches; there was one in Christ's Church when he was on earth, for he said one was filled with devils; and there are some in all churches. Devils believe all the facts of revelation. I do not believe they have a doubt; they have suffered too much from the hand of God to doubt his existence! They have felt too much the terror of his wrath to doubt the righteousness of his government. They are stern believers, but they are not saved; and such a faith, if it be in us, will not, cannot, save us, but will remain to all intents and purposes a dead, inoperative faith. It is a faith which produces works which saves us; the works do not save us; but a faith which does not produce works is a faith that will only deceive, and cannot lead us into heaven. Now this evening we shall first speak a few words upon:—

I. WHAT KIND OF WORKS THEY ARE WHICH ARE NECESSARY TO PROVE OUR FAITH IF IT BE A SAVING FAITH.

The works which are absolutely necessary are, in brief, these: First, there must be *fruits meet for repentance*, works of repentance. It is wrong to tell a man he must repent before he may trust Christ, but it is right to tell him that, having trusted Christ, it is not possible for him to remain impenitent. There never was in this world such a thing as an impenitent believer in Jesus Christ, and there never can be. Faith and repentance are born in a spiritual life together, and they grow up together. The moment a man believes he repents, and while he believes he both believes and repents, and until he shall have done with faith he will not have done with repenting. If thou hast believed, but hast never repented of thy sins, then beware of thy believing. If thou pretendest now to be a child of God, and if thou hast never clothed thyself in dust and ashes; if thou hast never hated the sins which once thou didst love: if thou dost not now hate them, and endeavour to be rid of them, if thou dost not humble thyself before God on account of them, as the Lord liveth, thou knowest nothing about saving faith, for faith puts a distance between us and sin; in a moment it leads us away from the distance between us and Christ; nearer to Christ, we are now far off from sin. But he that loves his sin, thinks little of his sin, goes into it with levity, talks of it sportively, speaks of sin as though it were a trifle, hath the faith of devils, but the faith of God's elect he never knew. True faith purges the soul, since the man now hunts after sin that he might find out the traitor that lurks within his nature; and though a believer is not perfect, yet the drift of faith is to make him perfect; and if it is faith to be perfected, the believer shall be perfected, and then shall he be caught up to dwell before the throne. Judge yourselves, my hearers. Have you brought forth the fruits of repentance? If not, your faith without them is dead.

Works of secret piety are also essential to true faith. Does a man say I believe that Jesus died for me, and that I hope to be saved, and does he live in a constant neglect of private prayer? Is the Word of God never read? Does he never lift up his eye in secret with "My Father, be thou the guide of my youth"? Has he no secret regard in his heart to the Lord

his God, and does he hold no communion with Christ his Saviour, and is there no fellowship with the Holy Spirit? Then how can faith dwell in such a man? As well say that a man is alive when he does not breathe, and in whom the blood does not circulate, as to say that a man is a believer with living faith who does not draw near to God in prayer, that does not live indeed under the awe and fear of the Most High God as ever present, and seeing him in all places. Judge yourselves, ye professors. Are ye neglecting prayer; have ye no secret spiritual life? If so, away with your notion about saving faith. You are not justified by such a faith as that; there is no life in it; it is not a faith that leads to the Lamb and brings salvation; if it were, it would show itself by driving you to your knees, and making you lift up your heart to the Most High.

Another set of works are those which I may call *works of obedience*.

When a man trusts in Jesus, he accepts Jesus as his Master. He says, "Show me what thou wouldst have me to do." The Father shows what Christ would have him to do. He does not set up his own will and judgment, but he is obedient to his Master's will. I will not tonight speak of those who know not their Lord's will, who shall be beaten with few stripes, but I do fear me there are some professors who are living in wilful neglect of known Christian duties, and yet suppose themselves to be the partakers of saving faith. Now a duty may be neglected, and yet a man may be saved; but a duty persistently and wilfully neglected, may be the leak that will sink the ship, or the neglect of any one of such duties for the surrender of a true heart to Christ does not go such and such a length and then stop. Christ will save no heart upon terms and conditions; it must be an unconditional surrender to his government if thou wouldst be saved by him. Now some will draw a line here, and some will draw a line there up to this, and say, "I will be Christ's servant"; that is to say, sir, you will be your own master, for that is the English of it; but the true heart that hath really believed saith, "I will make haste, and delay not to keep thy commandments; make straight the path before my feet, for thy commandments are not grievous." "I have delighted in thy commandments more than in fine gold." Now, sons and daughters of sin, professedly, what say you to this? Have you an eye to the Master, as servants keep their eye to their mistress? Do you ever ask yourselves what would Christ have you to do? or do you live habitually in the neglect of Christ's law and will? Do you go to places where Christ would not meet you, and where you would not like to meet with him? Are some of you in the habit of professing maxims and customs, upon which you know your Lord would never set his seal? You say you believe, you have faith in him? Ah! sirs, if it be a living faith, it will be an obedient faith.

Living faith produces what I shall call *separating works*. When a man believes in Jesus, he is not what he was nor will he consort with those who were once his familiars. Our Lord has said, "Ye are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." Now Christ was not an ascetic; he ate and drank as other men do so that they even said of him a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, because he mingled with the rest of mankind; but was there ever a more unearthly life than the life of Christ? He seems to go through all the world a complete man in all that is necessary to manliness, but his presence is like the presence of a seraph amongst sinners. You can discover at once that he is not of their mould, nor of their spirit, only harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners. Now such will the believer be if his faith be genuine, but this is a sharp cut to some professors, but not a whit more sharp than the Scripture warrants. If we are of the world, what can we expect but the world's doom in the day of the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ? If ye find your pleasure with the world, you shall meet your condemnation with the world; if with the world you live, with the world you shall die, and with the world you shall live again for ever, lost. Where there is no separation there is no grace. If we are conformed to this world, how dare we talk about grace being in our souls; and if there be no distinguishing difference between us and worldlings, what vanity it is, what trifling, what hypocrisy, what a delusion for us to come to the Lord's table, talking about being the Lord's sons, when we are none of his? Faith without the works which denote the difference between a believer and a worldling is a dead, unsaving faith.

Now I have not said that any believer is perfect. I have never thought so, but I have said that if a believer could be a believer altogether, and faith could have her perfect work, he would be perfect, and that in proportion as he is truly a believer, in that proportion he will bring forth fruit that shall magnify God and prove the sincerity of his faith.

One other set of works will be necessary to prove the vitality of his faith, namely, *works of love*. He that loves Christ feels that the love of Christ constraineth him; he endeavours to spread abroad the knowledge of Christ; he longs to win jewels for Christ's crown; he endeavours to extend the boundaries of Christ's and Messiah's kingdom, and I will not

give a farthing for the loftiest profession coupled with the most flowing words, that never shows itself in direct deeds of Christian service. If thou lovest Christ, thou canst not help serving him. If thou believest in him, there is such potency in what thou believest, such power in the grace which comes with believing, that thou must serve Christ; and if thou servest him not, thou art not his.

This proof, before we leave it, might be illustrated in various ways. We will just give one. A tree has been planted out into the ground. Now the source of life to that tree is at the root, whether it hath apples on it or not; the apples would not give it life, but the whole of the life of the tree will come from its root. But if that tree stands in the orchard, and when the springtime comes there is no bud, and when the summer comes there is no leafing, and no fruit-bearing, but the next year, and the next, it stands there without bud or blossom, or leaf or fruit, you would say it is dead, and you are correct; it is dead. It is not that the leaves could have made it live, but that the absence of the leaves is a proof that it is dead. So, too, is it with the professor. If he hath life, that life must give fruits; if not fruits, works; if his faith has a root, but if there be no works, then depend upon it the inference that he is spiritually dead is certainly a correct one. When the telegraph cable flashed no message across to America, when they tried to telegraph again and again, but the only result following was dead earth, they felt persuaded that there was a fracture, and well they might; and when there is nothing produced in the life by the supposed grace which we have, and nothing is telegraphed to the world but "dead earth," we may rest assured that the link of connection between the soul and Christ does not exist.

I need not enlarge. We should just put it into that one sentence: "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord. Bring forth, therefore, works meet for repentance." And now we turn to the second point with more brevity:—

II. SOME FACTS THAT BACK UP THE DOCTRINE THAT "FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD."

These facts show that it is evident to all observers that many professors of faith without works are not saved. It would be very ludicrous, if it were not very miserable, to think of some who wrap themselves in the conceit that they are saved about whose salvation nobody but themselves can have any question. I remember a professor who used to talk of being justified by faith who was most assured about it, when he contained most beer. Such professors are not at all uncommon, sad is it to say so. They seem at the moment when their condemnation seems written on their very brow to all who know them, to be most confident that they themselves are saved. Now, brethren, if such cases are convincing and you entertain no doubt, but decide in their case, apply the same rule to yourselves, for although you may not plunge into the grosser vices, yet if you make your homes wretched by your selfishness, if you fall into constant habits of vicious temper, if you never strive against these sins, and the grace of God never leads you out of them; if you can live in private sin, and yet pacify your conscience, and remain just as you were before your pretended conversion; when you sit in judgment and pronounce the verdict on others, feel that you pronounce it upon yourself, for surely for one sin that is openly indulged in, which is manifested to you in the dissipation of your fellow-creatures, it is not hard for you to believe that any other sin, if it be constantly indulged and be loved, will do the same to you as it does to him. You know men who have not faith, but have a sort of faith, are not saved. It must be true, or else where were the Saviour's words, "Straight is the gate and narrow the way, and few there be that find it"? For this is no straight gate and no narrow way, merely to be orthodox and hold a creed, and say, "I believe Jesus died for me"; but it is a very narrow gate so to believe as to become practically Christ's servants, so to trust as to give up that which Christ hates. Truths which Jesus bids us believe are all truths, which, if believed, must *have an effect upon the daily life*. A man cannot really believe that Jesus Christ has taken away his sin by such sufferings as those of the cross, and yet trifle with sin. A man is a liar who says, "I believe that yonder bleeding Saviour suffered on account of my sins," and yet holds good fellowship with the very sins that put Christ to death. Oh! sirs, a faith in the bleeding Saviour is a faith that craves for vengeance upon every form of sin. The Christian religion makes us believe that we are the sons of God when we trust in Christ. Will a man believe that he is really the Son of God, and then daily and wilfully go and live like a child of the devil? Do you expect to see members of the royal court playing with beggars in the street? When a man believes himself to possess a certain station of life, that belief leads him to a certain carriage and conversation, and when I am led to believe I am elected of God, that I am redeemed by blood, that heaven is secured to me by the covenant of grace, that I am God's priest, made a king in Christ Jesus, I cannot, if I believe, unless I am more monstrous than human nature itself seems capable of being, go back to live after

just the same fashion, to run in the same course as others, and live as the sons of Belial live. We see constantly in Scripture, and all the saints affirm it, that faith is linked with grace, and that where faith is the grace of God is; but how can there be the gift of God reigning in the soul, and yet a love of sin and a neglect of holiness? I cannot understand grace which abideth for ever to the inner man; and for this man to give himself up to be a slave of Satan is a thing impossible.

Faith, again, is always *in connection with regeneration*. Now regeneration is making of the old thing new; it is infusing a new nature into a man. The new birth is not a mere reformation, but an entire renovation and revolution: it is making the man a new creation in Christ Jesus. But how a new creature, if he has no repentance, if he has no good works, no private prayer, no charity, no holiness of any kind, regeneration will be a football for scorn. The new birth would be a thing to be ridiculed, if it did not really produce a hatred of sin, and a love of holiness. That kind of new birth which is dispensed by the Church of Rome, and also by some in the Church of England, is a kind of new birth which ought to excite the derision of all mankind, for children are said to be born again, certified to be born again, made members of Christ and children of God, and afterwards they grow up, in many cases, in most cases, let me say, to forget their baptismal vows, and live in sin as others do. Evidently it has had no effect upon them, but regeneration such as we read of in the Bible changes the nature of man, makes him hate the things he loved, and love the things he hated. This is regeneration: this is regeneration which is worth the seeking: it always comes with faith, and consequently good works must go with faith too. But we pass on to the last matter, which is this:—

III. WHAT OF THOSE MEN THAT HAVE FAITH, AND THAT HAVE NO GOOD WORKS?

Then what about them? Why, this about them, that their supposed faith generally makes them *very careless and indifferent*, and ultimately hardened and depraved men. I dread beyond measure that any one of us should have a name to live when we are dead; for an ordinary sinner who makes no profession may be converted, but it is extremely rare that a sinner who makes a profession of being what he is not is ever converted. It is a miserable thing to find a person discovering that his profession has been a lie. A man sits down, and he says, "Why, I believe," and as he walks he is careful, because he is afraid of what others might say. By and bye, he begins to indulge a little. He says, "This is not of works; I may do this, and yet get forgiveness." Then he goes a little further away. I do not say that perhaps at first he goes to the theatre, but he goes next door to it. He does not get drunk, but he likes jovial company. A little further and he gets confirmed in the belief that he is a saved one, and he gets to much confirmed in that idea that he thinks he can do just as he likes. Having sported on the brink without falling over, he thinks he will try to say, if Satan wants raw material of which to make the worst of men, he generally takes those who profess to be the best, and I have questioned whether such a valuable servant of Satan as Judas was could ever have been made of any other material than an apostate apostle. If he had not lived near to Christ, he never could have become such a traitor as he was. You must have a good knowledge of religion to be a thorough-faced hypocrite, and you must become high in Christ's Church before you can become fit tools for Satan's worst works. Oh! but why do men do this? Oh! what is the use of maintaining such a faith? I think if we do not care to get the vitality of religion, I would never burden myself with the husks of it, for such people get the chains of godliness without getting the comforts of godliness. They dare not do this, they dare not do that; if they do they feel hampered. Why don't they give up professing? and they would be at least free; they would have the sin without the millstone about their neck. Surely there can be no excuse for men who mean to perish coming to cover themselves with a mask of godliness! Why cannot they perish as they are? Why add sin to sin by insulting the Church through the cross of Christ?

When men make a profession of religion, and yet their works do not follow their faith, what about them? Why, this about them. *They have dishonoured the Church*, and, of all others, these are the people that make the world point to the Church and say, "Where is your religion? That is your religion, is it?" So it is when they find a man who professes to be in Christ, and yet walks not as Christ walked. These give the Church her wounds; she receives them in the house of her friends; these make the true ministers of God go to their closets with broken heart, crying out, "Oh! Lord, wherefore hast thou sent us to this people to speak and minister amongst them, that they should play the hypocrite before thee?" These are they that prevent the coming in of others, for others take knowledge of them, as they think religion is hypocrisy, and they are hindered, and, if not seriously, they get, at any rate, comfort in their sin from the iniquity of these professors. What their judgment will

be when Christ appeareth it is not for my tongue to tell; in that day when, with tongue of fire, Christ shall search every heart, and call on all men to receive their judgment, what must be the lot of the base-born professor, who prostituted his profession to his own honour and gain? He sought not the glory of God. What shall be the thunder-bolt that shall pursue his guilty soul in its timorous flight to hell, and what the chains that are reserved in blackness and darkness for ever for those who are wells without water and clouds without rain? I cannot tell, and may God grant that you may never know. Oh! may we all tonight go to Christ to be our complete Saviour in very deed and truth. Then shall we be saved, and then, being saved, we shall seek to serve Christ with heart, and soul, and strength.

Lest I have missed my mark, this one illustration shall suffice, and I have done. There is a vessel drifting. She will soon be on the shore, but a pilot is come on board; he is standing on the deck, and he says to the captain and crew, "I promise and undertake that, if you will solely and alone trust me, I will save thy vessel. Do you promise it; do you believe in me?" They believe in him; they say they believe the pilot can save the vessel, and they trust the vessel implicitly to his care. Now listen to him. "Now," says he, "you at that helm there!" He does not stir. "At the helm there! Can't you hear?" He does not stir! He does not stir! "Well, but, Jack, haven't you confidence in the pilot?" "Oh! yes. Oh! yes, I have faith in him," he says; "he will save the vessel if I have faith in him." "Don't you hear the pilot, as he says have faith in him, and you won't touch the helm?" "Now, you aloft there! Reef that sail." He does not stir, but lets the wind still blow into the sail and drift the vessel on to the coast. "Now then, some of you; look alive, and reef that sail!" But he does not stir! "Why, captain, what shall I do? These fellows won't stir or move a peg." But "Oh!" says the captain; "I have every confidence in you, pilot. I believe you will save the vessel." "Then why don't you attend to the tiller, and all that?" "Oh! no," says he; "I have great confidence in you. I don't mean to do anything." Now when that ship goes down amid the boiling surges, and each man sinks to his doom, I will ask you, had they faith in the pilot? Hadn't they a mimicking, mocking sort of faith, and only that? For if they had been really anxious to have the vessel rescued, and have trusted in the pilot, it would be the pilot that had saved them, and they could never have been saved without him. They would have proved their faith by their works. Their faith would have been made perfect, and the vessel would have been secured.

I call upon every man here to do what Christ bids him. I call upon you, first of all, to prove that you believe in Christ by being baptized. "He that believeth in Christ and is baptized shall be saved." The first proof that you believe in Christ is to be given by yielding to the much despised ordinance of believers' baptism, and then, having done that, going on to the other means of which I have spoken. Oh! I charge you by your soul's salvation neglect nothing Christ commands, however trivial it may seem to your reason. Whatever he saith unto you, do it, for only by a child-like obedience to every bidding of Christ can you expect to have the promise fulfilled, "They that trust in him shall be saved." The Lord bless these words, for His name's sake. Amen.