

Faith with Hands and Feet
Part Ten: Living Faith
James 2.14-26

David Henderson

March 26, 2023

Before we go any further, I want to introduce you to Melody Henderson . . .



. . . the newest addition to our family! This beautiful little lady is our granddaughter Melody Grace Henderson. She is the already-well-loved little sister of Shepherd and Rosie. We can't wait to get down to Charlotte to meet her and fold her into our love!

Speaking of being folded into love, would you join me in our shared reading?

Shared Reading

We are the beloved of the Lord.
In love He created us.
In love He came to us.
In love He died for us.

In love He makes us His own –
folding us into His love
transforming us by His love
sending us out in His love

By our love this world will know that we are His –
by our love this world will see Him in us –
as He lives His life of love in us and through us,
to the glory of God.

Amen! Don't you find every time you say that, it sinks in just a little bit further?

* * *

Some of you may have seen the article in the Wall Street Journal earlier this week about some scientists at MIT who have brought their amazing analytical skills to bear on one of the most important conundrums in human experience:



Is it possible to twist open an Oreo so that you end up with equal amounts of cream on both wafers?

Crystal Owens, a PhD student working with a team of other scientists at MIT, published an article in a recent issue of the journal called *Physics of Fluids*. The article was titled “On Oreology, the fracture and flow of ‘milk’s favorite cookie”.

Building on research done at Princeton in 2016, and which is now being followed up and verified by scholars at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, Crystal and her team used equations to calculate the viscoelasticity of their “yield stress fluid,” which, of course, is the Oreo’s cream center, trying to determine whether there was some way to separate an Oreo with equal parts cream on both sides.

Then they used a rheometer, which they renamed an Oreometer, to twist Oreos open at all sorts of different speeds, from a twist taking five minutes, which still resulted in the cream ending up on one side, to a twist one hundred times faster than a human could do it, which caused the cream to go flying off into the air.

All of which raises questions about what exactly you scholars are spending your time doing over in the corridors of Purdue University.

The results? After studying more than a thousand Oreos of all different flavors and styles, they concluded that the cream at the center of an Oreo almost always sticks to one wafer when twisted open, regardless of what technique you use.

The initial question was: is it possible to twist an Oreo apart in a way that kept the cream on both wafers?

But the question behind the question is: what really is the relationship between the cream and the wafers in an Oreo cookie?

If the ideal was a single wafer with cream on top, wouldn't they sell it that way?

And if the cream is meant to be enjoyed separately from the wafers, wouldn't they sell sleeves of Oreo wafers and tubs of Oreo cream?

And as you're busy separating the cream and the wafer, is there some threshold where what you have is no longer an Oreo?

And I suppose the question behind the question behind the question is: why in the world are we talking about twisting Oreos apart and what constitutes an Oreo?

* * *

For the past couple of months we've been walking our way through a letter written by James, who was both the brother of Jesus and also one of his followers.

This morning we listen in as James tells his brothers and sisters in Christ to put their rheometer away, and stop trying to twist apart the Christian life, and separate out faith from works. When we do that, according to James, when we try to pull apart what we believe from how we live, we cross a threshold beyond which, whatever it is we have, it is no longer the Christian life.

A lot of people see the passage we're about to look at this morning – James 2.14-26 – as the heart of the book of James. That's a pretty common way it has been understood for the last five hundred years or so.

But I've come to believe that the section we're looking at this morning isn't the heart of the book of James. It is really an aside that James makes on the way to his main point – a really, really important aside, but it is an aside nonetheless.

James' main point is found just around the corner, right at the center of the book, in chapter three, where he contrasts two ways of living out our Christian faith, one that leaves God out of the picture, and one that puts God right at the center of the picture.

One is the wisdom of this world, that reveals itself in quarreling and self-seeking and division, and the other is the wisdom that comes from above, wisdom that shows up in a life of peace, mercy, patience, and love. Living a life of love: that's what this book is about from beginning to end.

But like all good communicators, James has a sense of how his readers might be responding to what he's said so far. So James stops at this point in his letter and anticipates an objection that is likely forming in the minds of a number of his readers. Maybe it's been forming in your mind as well.

In the two chapters that lead up to this section James has been focusing on things like how we deal with trials and temptation, and how we view widows and orphans, and how we respond to people who are hungry and people who are rich and people whose views are different from ours and people who have wronged us.

James hasn't mentioned the cross once. Or forgiveness. Or the atonement. Or justification.

Wait a minute, James. This is a Christian letter from a Christian leader to Christian believers in the Christian New Testament, but you aren't focusing on the cross, or on forgiveness of sins, or on salvation?

Instead, you're focusing on taking care of people in need and extending a welcome to people who are different from us, and showing mercy to those who have hurt us, and being careful about our words when we talk with those who disagree with us?

This sounds more like a Jewish moral code than a Christian theological work. Aren't you missing something, James? Faith is about forgiveness of sins, not about giving a coat to a widow or giving a welcome to a stranger.

If you came to Christ and Christianity through the gospels, then much of what James says will sound familiar to you. In fact, there are so many times that James either quotes or references the teachings of Jesus that some people think the book of James is essentially a sermon on the Sermon on the Mount.

But if you came to Christ and Christianity through the epistles and the teachings of Paul, which many in the evangelical church have, then what James is writing could sound pretty unfamiliar and even a bit unorthodox.

Maybe you've found yourself having some of the same questions as we've been walking through James. So let's listen as James stops and answers this really important potential objection on the part of his hearers.

James 2.14

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?

I've always appreciated the New Living Translation, which I think does a great job of staying true to the original versions of the text but also does a great job of interpreting its meaning. Here's how the NLT translates verse 14:

James 2.14 NLT

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?

James 2.15-16

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

James 2.17

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

My saying to someone, “Keep warm and well fed” without doing anything to meet their needs is my saying words that are empty of meaning. Just as my confessing “Jesus is my Lord” (Romans 10.9) without living a life that demonstrates my allegiance to Him as King is also my saying words that are empty of meaning.

James 2.18-19

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

Faith *that* isn’t adequate from a biblical perspective. Even the evil one believes *that*. What his existence is utterly void of is *allegiance*. Faith *in*.

Then James turns to scripture, and points to two different examples that strengthen the point he is making. The first example is from the life of Abraham. James brings to mind the story of Abraham trusting God so much that he was willing to obey God even when it potentially meant sacrificing his son.

James 2.20-22 (referencing Genesis 22)

You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

James 2.23-24 (quoting Genesis 15.6)

And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

I still remember when my New Testament professor Gordon Fee asked us to write a paper dealing with the seeming contradiction between what James writes here in 2.24

and what Paul wrote in Romans 3.28. Here is the New American Standard translation of both, which is the one that follows the Greek wording most closely:

James vs Romans?

Romans 3.28	A person is justified by faith apart from the works <i>of the law</i> .
James 2.24	A person is justified by works and not by faith <i>alone</i> .

Hmmm . . . what do you think? A contradiction? Sure looks like it on the surface.

But then when you spend a little bit of time with it, you notice two important differences.

First, Paul is talking about works *of the law*, which refers to trying to please God and satisfy his requirements through our own effort to keep all God's commands. Paul says no one can do that. What he's saying is this:

A person is justified, a person is made right with God, completely apart from their earning it through obedience to the law.

James, on the other hand, just says works, not works of the law, by which he means good works, good deeds, the very sorts of acts of love that his book has been filled with up to this point: caring for the poor and needy, not showing favoritism, being kind and patient with those with whom we disagree, and so on.

Those are evidence that faith is present. Like a pulse that shows life is present. Or smoke that shows that fire is present. Love is the evidence that faith is present.

The other important difference is when Paul speaks of faith, and James speaks of faith alone. It sounds at first like James is doing the very thing he tells us not to, which is to separate our faith and works and contrasting the two. But he isn't.

Using a rhetorical device of his day that makes it sound like he is contrasting two opposites, what he's actually saying is this:

A person is justified, a person is made right with God, by works *that prove faith is present*, and not by faith *alone*.

Here's how the New Living translation captures this verse.

James 2.23-24 NLT

And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith." He was even called the friend of God. So you see, *we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone*.

Now James comes to his second example, this one about the pagan prostitute Rahab in Jericho, whose story about rescuing the Jewish spies is told in Joshua chapter two.

James 2.25 (referencing Joshua 2)

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?

And then he concludes his aside with this.

James 2.26

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

So here's the question that sits at the heart of this passage: What exactly do we mean when we talk about faith?

We saw as we walked through this passage that thinking of our faith in terms of our relationship with *sin* and thinking of our faith in terms of our relationship with our *savior* are two different things.

Do I have faith *that* my sin is forgiven, or do I have faith *in* Jesus who forgives my sin . . . and who asks me to give my life back to him in return?

As Christians we have both of these dimensions of faith, of course, but I'm convinced that one of the biggest reasons for the anemia of that we see in some parts of the church and one of the biggest contributing factors in its poor reputation in the world is that we think those are the same thing. And they are not.

Matthew Bates is one of a growing number of New Testament scholars who have gone back and taken a closer look at the word that is behind the biblical idea of faith and belief.

He says that the biblical meaning of faith is both fuller and more beautiful than we have been led to believe. "Faith" was the word that was regularly used in the ancient world to describe a subject's loyal devotion to a king.

He gives the example of Josephus, a Jewish general who lived during the time of Jesus, saying to a rebel leader: "Repent and believe in me – put your faith in me", almost exactly the same words Jesus used with his followers. But what he meant when he said that was: "turn away from your present rebellious course of action and become loyal to me, give your allegiance to me."

In his book *Salvation by Allegiance Alone* this is how Bates sums up what faith means from a biblical perspective:

“Faith in Christ” is above all “allegiance to Jesus the King.”

Faith is not about our relationship with our *sin*. Faith is about our relationship with Jesus who not only pays for *our sin* on the cross, but who also purchases *us* on the cross – our lives now belong to him, and he invites, he expects, a response of total and unqualified allegiance.

As soon as that’s how you understand faith, in this personal and devotional way, then the whole faith/works tension completely disappears.

“Faith in Christ” is above all “allegiance to Jesus the King.”

Which explains why you see crowns all over the place around here.

Think back to the Oreos. Our trust in Jesus as Savior and our allegiance to Jesus as King aren’t separate things that can be pulled apart from each other. They are a single thing.

James is trying to get us to look past Christian faith as a *category* – either I am or I’m not – and to look at Christian faith as a *catalyst* that drives and shapes every part of my life.

Here’s an example that might be helpful.

Think about what happens when you join the military. When you sign up, you don’t have to pay anything. You don’t have to accomplish anything first. There’s nothing you have to earn ahead of time. All you have to do is take the oath of enlistment and you’re in. From that moment on, they feed you, clothe you, house you, and pay you.

Sound familiar? Sounds a whole lot like the Christian faith.

Here’s how that oath goes when you join the US armed services.

I, _____, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear *true faith and allegiance* to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God.

You are in the military the moment you say that oath, long before you’ve ever been given an order by a commanding officer or been shipped off to a hostile context and been required to take up arms and defend your country.

What would that oath mean if you said those words but you carried on living your life just as before, without reference to your commanding officers or your duties to your country?

You noticed that the oath uses the words “faith” and “allegiance” interchangeably to describe the commitment that you make to your country and to those who are in authority over you

You are a soldier the moment you make the oath, but from that moment on every part of your life is to reflect your new faith, your new allegiance. If it doesn't, it's fair for you to ask, and it's fair for others to ask, if you really are a soldier of the US Armed Forces, no matter how short your hair is or what uniform you happen to be wearing.

The same is true when I become a follower of Jesus.

In Romans 10.8-10 Paul says,

[This] is the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

There's the Christian oath of enlistment. “Jesus is Lord.”

What would that oath mean if you said those words, but you carried on living your life just as before, without any reference to the One who is King and Lord? Without being obedient in any way to the royal law of love? Without submitting to the King's authority?

Remember, in the New Testament, just like in the Army oath of enlistment, “faith” and “allegiance” are interchangeable in describing the commitment we make.

You are a Christian the moment you profess your faith, but from that moment on every part of your life should more and more reflect that new faith, that new allegiance to Christ the King. If it doesn't, it's fair for you to ask, and it's fair for others to ask, if you really a *follower* of Christ.

We enter into the Christian life by confessing that Jesus is Lord and believing in our hearts that he rose from the dead, and we experience forgiveness for our sins and reconciliation with God through no effort of our own, no work of obedience, as sheer undeserved gift.

But what we enter into is not a Christian category but a Christian *life*, one marked more and more by our complete and unqualified surrender to Jesus as king, by a life in which we resemble Jesus more and more each day, in which our hands and feet look more and more like his.

That relationship of relinquishment will eventually touch every single part of our lives. The decisions we make, the way we talk, how we treat others, what we do with our possessions, how we face trials, how we respond when we've been wronged, and so on.

We become friends of God. How could that not change us to become more and more like the one we love? As Catherine of Siena says, "He is making of us another himself."

We are shown to be right with God by *what we do*, not by faith alone.

* * *

"Faith in Christ" is above all "allegiance to Jesus the King."

My confidence in Jesus as Savior is the same things as
my commitment to Jesus as Lord which is the same things as
my surrender to Jesus as King.

That's biblical faith.

Is that your faith?

Have you put your confidence in,
have you made a commitment to,
have you surrendered your life to,
Jesus as King?

Is there evidence of that kind of surrender in your life?

Those who know you and love you – is that what they would say explains your life?

What stands in the way of your full surrender to Jesus as King?

Has all this talk about Oreos made you hungry? Well, there is a world around us that hungers to see lives that reflect deep allegiance to Jesus and demonstrate deep love in the name of Jesus.

Give him your full allegiance now, this morning, right now. Turn the whole of it over to him. Here, Jesus, it's yours.

Jesus, we exist because of you and we exist for you.
To live our lives for you who alone are worthy,
For your glory, our God and King

We give you our full allegiance
And resolve to live our lives in such a way that we return our love to you
we share your love with others
and we pour out your love on this world
with hands and feet that become your hands and feet, Jesus.