

## THE COMPASS

### **GETTING THROUGH THE DAY: Practical Wisdom from JAMES**

#### **Part 4:**

## **The Fungus of Faith**

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Aha! It appears I have found a contradiction in the Bible!

“Faith” vs. “works”.

First the Bible says I’m saved by faith — I’m made right with God not by obeying certain rules, but by placing my faith, or my trust, in what Jesus Christ did for me — standing in as my substitute when he died on the cross.

That’s faith.

**Romans 3:28** says I’m **justified by faith apart from observing the law.**

I’m made right with God by this simple decision on my part.

**Galatians 2:16** says it again: **...a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ....**

And **2 Corinthians 1:21,22** says this gift from God is airtight.

The moment you made that decision, God committed himself to you.

**2 Corinthians 1:21,22: God ... set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.**

Based on my faith decision, you’re in! It’s a done deal!

**Ephesians 1 and 2** both say it again.

I’m “saved by faith”; faith is all it takes.

But then I look at the book of James — which we’re studying in this series — and I come to this passage, where he seems to want more from me:

**James 2:**

**14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?**

**15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.**

**16 If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?**

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

**18 But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do....**

Whoa! How did we get to this point?

A minute ago, my faith was all I needed.

Now James is pulling a fast one on me: he’s saying I need something else, something more. I need works to go with my faith.

What’s up with this?

Was my faith enough for God, back there where I made my decision to trust Christ, or was it not?

I want a straight answer.

James goes on to give a couple examples to support his claim — Abraham, from the Old Testament (**Genesis 15**); and Rahab (**Joshua 2**).

He says God considered these people “righteous” — in other words, they were right with God — for what they *did*.

James wraps up by saying: **You see that a person is justified by what he *does* and not by faith alone (James 2:24).**

“Not by faith alone!”

After Paul has written elsewhere in the New Testament, **...It is by grace you have been saved, through faith ... not by works!**

It looks like a total contradiction. What is going on here!

Is my faith going to save me, or is it not? Is my decision to trust Christ enough for God, or is it not?

I’m justified by what I believe, not what I do — and I’m justified by what I do, not by what I believe.

How can both opposing statements be true? How could God let them both into the Bible?

I think we can find the answer in a surprising location — at the North Pole.

Above the Arctic Circle.

That’s where you find something called Arctic lichens.

A lichen is a tiny plant — actually two plants in one.

Each lichen is comprised of a fungus and an algae.

The bulk of the lichen is a meshwork of minute, threadlike fungal filaments — and embedded within this network are multitudes of microscopic one-celled algae.

The fungus is anchored by its zillions of roots to a surface, so it provides a place for the algae to live.

It also absorbs the moisture that the algae need to survive.

The algae is the food-producing member of the partnership — and sorry, lichens do not do the Atkins diet: the algae gives the fungus mostly carbohydrates.

Actually, lichens don’t only live at the North Pole; they live in Antarctica too, and all over the world — the rain forest, the desert.

They grow on rocks, trees, bare soil, gravestones, buildings, sun-bleached bones, even the backs of certain bugs.

At the poles and in mountain ranges like the Himalayas, they live through deadly cold.

In the desert they live on rocks that are literally too hot to touch.

They’re so efficient that they can thrive where no other plant life can survive.

In one experiment, lichens were baked for 7 hours at 434 degrees F, more than twice the temperature of boiling water, and they survived.

I can think about the design of a lichen, and I can see a model for our lives.

My faith is a fungus.

It anchors me to the rock. It attaches me to God. It absorbs the living water of God’s Spirit.

But that's not all there is to life.

My deeds are the algae.

My deeds feed my faith.

The stuff I do produces the nourishment that my faith needs to keep hanging on to the rock.

It's not that the fungus doesn't exist alone — it's just that in such a harsh environment, it will die pretty quick without the algae.

And it's not that the algae doesn't exist alone — it's just that without a place to call home, it will blow away, get squished, and die.

My faith completely justifies me before God — my decision to trust Christ was all God needed to make his commitment to me.

But between that moment and the moment my physical life comes to an end, there's a whole lot of living to be done.

What will become of my faith between the beginning of the story and the end of the story?

Will it thrive? Will I feed it? Or will it starve and die?

**Hebrews 10:24: ...Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.**

Will I engage in works, in deeds, in activities, that will nourish my trust in God, my communication with God, my relationship with God?

I don't have to — God's committed to me regardless — but if I do, I'll truly live. I'll thrive. I'll flourish.

When I do the deed of sharing my energy with someone who's fatigued, expressing the love of God to that person, I'm healthier for it.

When I do the deed of giving out of the resources that God has entrusted to me, expressing my trust in God's promise of provision for me, I'm healthier for having done that deed.

When I share my faith with someone, expressing Christ's love, I'm healthier. It's good for me, as much as it's good for the other guy.

Good works are food for the soul.

Paul wrote to his pals at Thessaloniki, in Macedonia, and recognized the relationship between faith and works:

**1 Thessalonians 1:3: ...your work [is] produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.**

He says in **1 Timothy 1:4: God's work ... is by faith.**

In fact, right after Paul tells the Ephesians that it's **by grace you have been saved, through faith ... not by works** — he immediately goes on to say:

**Ephesians 2:10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

Good deeds are our destiny!

God saves us and has good deeds already lined up for us to accomplish.

We get on board with his program for blessing the world.

We become his ambassadors to the world.

This is his main strategy for reaching more of the people he loves so much:

## 2 Corinthians 5:20 We are ... Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us....

This isn't cause for guilt. *Oh no, I've got to do good works.*

It's the effect of love. *Oh yes, I've got to do something for the One I love!*

You know how it is when you fall in love.

It changes the way you behave.

If I say I've fallen madly in love with someone, but then you observe no change in my conversation or my behavior, you'd be saying, "Uh, Doug, are you sure this is the real thing?"

In our relationship with God, he's the initiator; we're the responders.

He loves us — we accept his gift — and then we naturally respond with the behavior of someone who is gratefully in love.

And the only way I can really *show* God my love for him is to do good stuff.

There's nothing God needs — there's nothing I can offer him that he didn't already give to me first!

So if I want to give something to him, I have to give it to the other people whom he also loves.

In **Matthew 25:40**, Jesus tried to explain this. He said when we express love to people in need, we're expressing love to God.

When we do good to people, we're doing it to God.

People are God's representatives to me — and vice versa.

People in need are perfect targets for the overflow of God's love into my life.

People in need are "God in disguise."

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Some people, on the other hand, go the opposite way. All works, no faith.

I have a number of friends whose lives are filled with good works.

They put me to shame.

They volunteer, they donate blood, they're community activists, they help the needy, they contribute, they are "good deeds" personified.

But they don't see any need to get right with God. They don't acknowledge anything like sin, so they don't feel the need to be saved from its dangers.

They don't buy **Hebrews 9:27**, that says we're **destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.**

They don't believe God's telling the truth when he says we need to be saved from our sinful state in order to spend eternity in heaven.

These folks are all algae; no fungus.

They've placed their faith in the algae alone — producing the food — but they have no anchor. No roots holding onto the rock.

Someday they'll die, and there won't be a home to go to.

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I want this to be optional. I want it to be a good idea, but not the end of the world if I don't go there.

If I'm comfortable with faith but uncomfortable with works, I want that to be ultimately OK.

If I'm comfortable with works but uncomfortable with faith, I want that to be ultimately

OK.

But in reality, we're not looking at an optional deal here.

James says (**James 2:17**) faith without works is *dead*.

His language is strong because the stakes are high.

He says dead, and he means dead.

We can find another picture of faith and works in another unexpected place — under the ocean.

Look at a coral reef. It looks like exotic rock. But it's animal life.

A coral is a marine animal.

How can you tell it's even alive? Here's how: it moves.

The most massive corals, which are believed to be the slowest-growing individual organisms in the animal kingdom, may take 5 years to grow a single inch.

But they are growing. They are changing. They are moving. They're alive.

Look at the saguaro cactus. It's a sprinter by comparison to coral. In the first five years of its life, a saguaro grows an inch a year.

They don't even begin to grow arms till they're retirement age: 65 years old.

A saguaro looks static. It looks stationary. But it's growing. It's changing. It's in motion. It's alive.

The Canadian white cedar is believed to be, over the course of its lifetime, the slowest-growing plant on the planet; some of them can't make 15 feet after 50 years.

You go to Canada and look up at a white cedar and you realize that the reason it's so tall is that it's about 800 years old: it may have gotten there at a rate of as little as 4 inches a year.

But it's growing. It's changing. It's got movement. It's alive.

Maybe the way to think about faith and works is to look at nature and draw this analogy: "Faith" is life. "Works" is movement.

No matter what living thing you inspect, it moves.

Even the corals and cactuses, that seem to be so still, are moving — because they're alive.

If you have faith, you'll have works — if your faith is alive, you'll be in motion.

You'll be doing something. There will be evidence of it.

Something that's alive but never moves, never changes — is dead.

I had a pet turtle as a kid. It rarely moved, but it did move.

When it finally truly stopped moving, that was a clue: a turtle without movement is dead.

Faith without works is a dead turtle. (I'm just trying out various analogies here, in hopes that something connects with you.)

Where were you born? Well, you didn't stay there, did you? No, you got out of that hospital room, you went home, you went out from time to time. You've been all around.

You're given the gift of life, and what do you do with it? You don't stay put. You get in motion. You grow, you change, you move!

Faith is like life — you're alive. You just are. God gave it to you as a gift.  
Works are like motion. You are going to give off evidence of your faith, if you've really got faith — in the same way that plant and animal life gives off evidence of life, as long as they're really alive.

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I think James's friends were cool with Thing 1 but not too keen on Thing 2.  
I think they were OK with "Love God" but not too crazy about "Love people."  
They were OK with "faith," in principle — but not really fond of "works" if that meant getting their hands dirty, making an effort, making sacrifices, going out of their way, whatever.  
And James was concerned — because he knew if they didn't get going, they were going to die.

Personally, I would like to engage in a faith that was totally theory, no practice.  
Totally head knowledge, no action.  
But I would die.

And the more I translate my faith into works — the more I love people, the more I interact with people, the more I strive to meet needs, the more I reflect the love of Jesus in practical ways into the lives of those around me, the more I give, the more I sweat, the more I sacrifice, the more I do Thing 2 ... the more Thing 1 is worth.

The more I love people, the deeper my love for God grows. The more my relationship with him means to me. The more my trust in him deepens. The more at peace I am when a problem presents itself. The more confident I am when a challenge comes.

Why? Because I've been exercising. I've been moving. I've been changing and growing. I've been using the gift that God gave me — the gift of life, the gift of faith.

When I've been doing Thing 2 consistently, then at crisis time, Thing 1 is strong. I know God is there. I don't have to go through an initial panic phase. My "faith" is alive, because I've been "working" it.

That's just how God designed people to function: Thing 1-ing and Thing 2-ing simultaneously, each feeding the other.

I don't really have much interest in living my life as a coral or a Canadian cedar or a cactus.

I want to be bamboo! Yes!

Bamboo grows 3 feet a *day!*

You can almost sit and watch it growing.

I want to be a Lady Banks rose, like the ones in our backyard — we're trimming those things all the time just to keep them from overgrowing the patio furniture and strangling it to death. They grow so fast!

I want to be a moose antler. That's right, a moose antler. Moose antlers grow an inch a day. No other animal life on the planet grows as fast — unless you count cancer cells.

Except — wait: there's E. coli.

The E. coli bacterium. The little guy that causes food poisoning.

It doubles in size every 20 minutes; that's 70 times faster than the fastest-growing

cancer cells.

E. coli grows so fast, if your body's natural defense mechanism didn't stop it, you'd have a million *gallons* of E. coli in just 24 hours.

That's fast. That's growth. That's movement. It's alive.

I want to live a faith that's obvious. A faith that really moves.

I want to be like the guy Jesus described in **Matthew 17:20: ...if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.**

I don't want to hold back. I don't want to hide. I don't want to be coral or cactus.

I want people to have no choice but to say, Look at that guy. He loves God. He's burning up the road. He's going for it. The power of God's love is just flowing out of that guy's life into the world around him.

It's not just a static faith with him; it's working.

But you know what? It's not just good deeds with him ... it's his faith that makes him go.