James 2:17-18 So also, such “faith” if it is alone and has no works, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

Perhaps the first thing that we need to do is remind ourselves of the intent and purpose of the writing of the book of James. The first thing to understand is that James is writing to Christians, to those already called to faith in Jesus, to those who already proclaimed that Jesus was their Lord and Savior from sin. But James has seen a problem. James saw Christians proclaiming faith but not at all living that faith. In other words, a whole bunch of Christians doing nothing but giving lip service to the Lord. These are the people who concluded: “I believe in Jesus but I don’t believe in church.” I believe in Jesus, but I am going to live in adultery anyway.” “I believe in Jesus but I don’t watch my tongue or curb my speech in any way. After all, everybody talks the way I do!”

Now I don’t want you to miss this fact. I don’t want you to miss the fact that James is addressing Christians, Christians who knew the wonder of Jesus, knew the forgiveness of sins and its gift of eternal life but Christians, who for whatever reason, were not living, were not striving to the glory of God in their lives. In other words Christians who let sin have the upper hand. Christians who by and large were really following the world and its ways rather than our Lord and his ways. In other words, James is clearly writing to you and me, to any and all who know the wonder of Jesus and yet we find our faith challenged and filled with doubts. We find our faith wavering because, well, the reasons for our faith wavering are quite numerous. It might be that to show our faith causes us to lose friends. It might be that living our faith is sure to get us contempt from the world around us. It might be as simple as the fact that we have read things, seen things, heard things that cause us to doubt the veracity and truth of God’s Holy Word. In other words, this book of God’s Word is just for us! It is here to help us keep our focus.

Let’s then take a look at this section of God’s Word and consider this theme: **A LIVING FAITH.**

I am not sure why so many of us wrestle with this issue. I say that because there are so many other things in this life that we grasp and understand as being true because it is just the way it is. What do I mean? My favorite way of expressing this is to speak of firefighters. What makes a person a firefighter? Because they declare it so? Because they have read a firefighter’s manual and believe that they fit the bill of what is said? Because they went to some store and bought a “firefighter” hat or maybe even a firefighter’s badge and have these things in their possession? What makes a firefighter?

Every one of you here would agree to what a firefighter is. The person has gone through rigorous and specific training. The person has been examined and passed, a base examination of not only on their knowledge of fires, putting out fires, and dealing with fires, but also a knowledge of basic rescue procedures in order to save lives: their lives and that of those who need rescuing. But that is not all. This person then needs to be accepted by a firefighting company as a member of the team, as someone who can be trusted to follow orders, show bravery, show proper care and concern for not only the fire they are fighting but even for their fellow firefighters. That person becomes a member of the firefighting company. They regularly attend meetings, training seminars, keep themselves in good physical condition and are ready at any time to report for duty, face danger and carry out their responsibilities. What I have just said is absolutely true. I might have missed a small detail here or there, but all of us recognize that these are the base things that make a person a firefighter. I think we would all agree that we wouldn’t want anything less than these standards for those who one day might be called to rescue us or to save our home from fire.

Now, let’s just ask this question. “What do you think the Fire Chief would do if the following were true of any one of his firefighters?”

It is discovered that there were so many fires lately because one of the firefighters, since he so loved fighting fires, was going about setting the fires. So far in the fires he has set, two people have died.

One of the firefighters no longer shows up for training, seminars, meetings, but shows up for fires without any equipment. That firefighter when spoken to simply says: “You don’t need to go to the firehall or have equipment to be a firefighter!”

A firefighter, fully trained, always reading his fire fighters manual, never shows up to any fires. When asked he says, “I just don’t have time for a fire. My schedule is busy. I believe you can be a firefighter without actually going to any fires.”

One of the firefighters, always at everything, never misses anything, but argues with everybody about what is to be and how things should be done. This person is constantly complaining against the chief, constantly telling the other fighters what to do because they are doing it wrong, and often, his actions and attitude constitutes a great danger at fires!

Do you remember our question? “What do you think the Fire Chief would do if the following were true of any of his firefighters?” Action would be taken. The Chief is going to be sure of his facts. The one setting the fires, that person is immediately arrested and trust me, is no longer a member of the fire department. The others are spoken with, worked with, and when they clearly show that they are not going to change their heart or mind about anything, are going to be fully and clearly released from the fire department and maybe in a few cases, should a person show up at fires to hinder the work, that person would be arrested and then told to stay away. If you are going to do things contrary to what firefighting is all about, then you cannot be a firefighter. And each and every one of us would cheer and applaud the proper and right decisions of the Fire Chief.

Anybody here who doesn’t understand I am really talking about the Church, about our faith and what that faith is all about? That’s exactly what James was doing is his epistle. He is writing to put a halt to some of the problems that were happening. He is writing to show that there are some clear lines that need to be paid attention to when you are a person of faith. Let’s look closer.

That firefighter setting fires is exactly like that Christian who is out there living large in sin and declaring that it is a good and right thing to be involved in this sin. And yes, those proclaiming Christianity and yet working against their Lord and Savior are going to cause souls to be lost. This person is not a Christian, but clearly an unbeliever deluding themselves. Hebrews 10:26-29 is clear. It starts, **“For if we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received a full knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains any sacrifice for sins…”** And then verse 29, **“How much greater punishment do you think will be deserved by the person who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who considered insignificant the blood of the covenant, by which he was sanctified, and who insulted the Spirit of grace?”**

The next two firefighters represent those who consider church and going to church a needless and foolish thing. That is not what our Lord Jesus encouraged. And what happens when you are no longer hearing the properly applied gospel of Jesus and the Law of God? You begin to think your faith is about who you are and what you do. You forget that we are all sinners. You forget the call to repent. You forget the real point and purpose of faith. Nor should we neglect to mention that in despising church you despise your call to spread the gospel, encourage your fellow members and be a part of the means of grace, the only means by which God tells us he works in our hearts and minds. It is very possible your faith is no longer a true faith. What does the word say? **“If salt has lost its flavor, how will it become salty again? Then it is no good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled by people.”**

We can turn to James for a clear understanding of this truth. James 2:10-11 says, **“In fact, whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles on one point has become guilty of breaking all of it. For the one who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not commit murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.”**

Seriously apply these words. You might argue that you haven’t committed this or that sin and therefore have no fear of being condemned. Yet the context is that of showing favoritism, literally of being condemning, if you would dishonoring. James says that is sin and it is clear by these words he finds that sin spoken of in the context of the Seventh Commandment. We are warned by Jesus that to hate our brother is to commit murder (Matthew 5). Now expand what is said. If you don’t commit adultery but you despise the Sabbath? If you don’t despise the Sabbath, but always misuse the name of the Lord your God. I don’t steal anything, and yet covet lots of things. If we are sinners, then we need the Lord Jesus Christ. We need his forgiveness and encouragement, his love and compassion which is found and revealed for us in God’s Holy Word, the very point of the Church! The Word is our foundation in everything!

The final example that I used was that firefighter who, let’s just say, had a bad attitude. Again it is really a matter of grasping that if your life is lived against and goes against the Holy and revealed will of God then there is clearly a problem with your faith. What makes any of us think we know better than what God’s Word declares? That’s always where the foundation must lie. It must lie with God’s Word and what it declares not with what we think and assume we know. Now I point that out because time and time again I have run across people who claim faith but what they do, what they proclaim they believe is contrary to the very Word of God. Or, and this is a big problems today, there are those who think that you can believe this or that because that’s how I see it and read it. No, Dear people, it is about what God has said and clearly means. Scripture interprets Scripture not Terry interprets Scripture!

What does that leave us with? With what James says. **“I will show you my faith by my works.”** What that means is that Jesus will shine in my life. He is the Light of the world and I am to be a reflection of that light of Jesus. Therefore…!

God’s Word declares the truth and horror of sin. There is a right and a wrong. There is a good and an evil. We, every single human, is guilty of sin in thought, word and deed. Every sin, big or small, condemns us to eternal hell and damnation. It is because of sin, that God sent his Son Jesus.

Jesus came to not only live the perfect life we could not, but then to offer himself as the payment for our sins. Jesus died on the cross to pay for sins. It wasn’t just a human act of injustice it was an act of righteousness by our Holy God for the sake of the souls of the world. Jesus took our hell. Jesus took our punishment deserved for every and any sin we have. That is the point of Jesus.

Jesus and the Father then send the Holy Spirit into our lives. The Spirit works through the gospel in Word and Sacrament. The Holy Spirit gives spiritual birth, life and salvation in and through faith in Jesus. That faith in Jesus leads us to grasp the wonder, work and marvel of Jesus. In and through Jesus, trusting and clinging to Jesus, we are granted forgiveness and eternal life.

The Holy Spirit also leads us to lives of sanctification. He not only calls us to faith, but then causes us to live that faith, to have a faith filled with good works to the glory of Jesus. I don’t have to do these works, they just happen because the Spirit causes them. I love my neighbor, curb my tongue, put God before all, and strive to bring glory to God. Now here is the thing we need to grasp. We are lousy at doing what God says! We sin again and again in so many ways. Our sinful nature fights against our faith and it is a devastating battle. I will tell you point blank, without Jesus we lose the battle.

But we repent, we are sorry and we strive against sin. It is this point that James is hammering on in his little epistle. James sees to many Christians deciding that since Jesus died for them they can just do whatever, because they are “saved.” Not so. Faith needs to be striving to do what is pleasing to God in every way.

The main good works to be found in our lives are: trust in Jesus, repentance for sin, striving to follow Jesus because he forgives, trust in Jesus, repentance for sin, striving to follow…I think you get the point. Faith no longer exists when we miss any of these steps, especially if we are not striving against sin, because of Jesus’ gift of forgiveness and life given by the Holy Spirit in the means of grace found in Church.

I pray we hear the plea of James. Not just lip service to Jesus, but works of service in a life moved by Jesus, a life filled with good works. Amen.