

February 2, 2014  
Authentic Christianity

*Authentic Christianity Risks*  
James 2:14-26

**Opening words:** This is sermon number three in my seven-part sermon series on James, *Authentic Christianity*. Each one of these messages revolves around a different character that must be present in discipleship. In our scripture for today, James brings up the topic of Christian authenticity itself. Your Christian witness must include both words and deeds. However, it must also must include a certain amount of risk. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, James 2:14-26. Today's message is called *Authentic Christianity Risks*.

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**James 2:14-26** What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? <sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> 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? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

<sup>20</sup> You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless<sup>[a]</sup>? <sup>21</sup> Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

<sup>25</sup> 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? <sup>26</sup> As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

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How many of you remember the name Harry Houdini? He was one of those great characters in American history, yet his story began in Hungary. He was born in Budapest in 1874. The family moved to America when Harry was young. At first, his father was the Rabbi in Appleton, Wisconsin. A few years later, the family moved again to New York City. It was in the Big Apple that Harry tried show business. At first, he tried being a professional magician, with little success. Then, he tried escape acts. We know his name because of those acts. For a twenty-year period, Houdini performed with great success in the United States. He freed himself from jails, handcuffs, chains, ropes, and straitjackets, often while hanging from a rope in sight of street audiences.

His most famous stunt came on July 7, 1912. Houdini was taken to the middle of New York's East River. Once in position, he was locked in handcuffs and leg-irons, then nailed into the crate which was roped and weighed down with two hundred pounds of lead. The crate was then lowered into the water. Houdini escaped in fifty-seven seconds. When the crate was pulled to the surface it was found still to be intact, with the manacles inside. It is a mystery to me. Can I ask you a question? Would anyone here consider doing that stunt? (I don't even want to get into New York's East River!) Harry Houdini was a daredevil. Do the people in your life consider you a daredevil? Do the people in your life consider you a risk taker? Do the people in your life consider you a coward? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

This morning we are looking at the end of the second chapter of James. The topic for today is authenticity. He reminds us how valuable and important it is to be genuine in our faith. True discipleship must contain both words and the right deeds. In other words, you are supposed to be able to tell people what Jesus means to you. You are supposed to be able to tell people what Jesus has done for you. You are supposed to be acting in a way that demonstrates to the world your appreciation for this great gift of salvation. James says simple words are not enough. After all, talk is cheap. James says simple good behavior is not enough. After all, you can't earn your salvation. Words and deeds must go hand in hand. Verse 14 says it clearly, *what good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?*

To underscore this single point, James gives us three examples. The first is as contemporary as this morning's newspaper. Authentic Christianity can't ignore basic human need, clothes and food. That is why we participate in food drives. We must respond. The second example comes from the twenty-second chapter of Genesis. After a lifetime of waiting for a son, Abraham is in position to sacrifice his son, Isaac, at God's request. It is not a story about child abuse. However, it is a story about having the right priorities. Let there be no doubt about it. Abraham's top priority was God. The third example is Rahab. Do you remember her story?

It comes from the second chapter of Joshua. The Israelites had been wandering in the wilderness for forty years. During that time period, they experienced the very best and the absolute worst. Their lives were in a constant state of flux, and only three things remained constant. The first was God, their spiritual leader. The second was Moses, their earthly leader. The third was this great promise of a future home, the Promised Land. Then the unthinkable happened - Moses died. I find it to be one of the cruelest things in the Bible. God did not permit Moses to enter the Promised Land. He only saw it from the distance.

The mantle of responsibility was placed on a new leader, Joshua. Change is not easy. It would be his job to lead the people into the Promised Land. That was not as easy as it sounds. The land was occupied by other people and they didn't want leave.

It would take a military action. Joshua seemed to be the perfect leader for them. He was as much a warrior as a priest. Being a wise military man, he desires information about his enemy. So he sends two spies into this foreign land. They are to report back to him when they return. It sounds kind of funny, but it is Bible. As soon as the spies get into the Promised Land, they enter the house of a prostitute, Rahab. God has always used the oddest people to do his work. When the authorities come to arrest the spies, Rahab risks everything. She hides the spies and sends the authorities off in another direction. She could have been executed for either one of those things. History is such a funny thing. We remember Rahab as a hero. The people of Jericho remember her as a traitor. It is safe to say, Rahab saved the invasion. She risked everything for God. How big of a risk are you willing to take for God? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Years ago, a ship wrecked off the New England coast. A young member of the coast guard rescue crew said, "We can't go out. We'll never get back." The grizzled old captain replied, "We have to go out. We don't have to come back." Most of us can relate to the young man. We are simply afraid to go. Have you ever noticed how many cowards there are in our society? Fear often paralyzes us.

Several weeks ago, I was talking to a man during the coldest day of this cold winter. The temperature was well below zero, and he longed for the warmth of Florida. I said, "I wish I could get on a plane and fly south." He said, "Not me! Those jets come down faster than they go up! I would drive." I said, "You know you are in more danger driving to Florida then flying to Florida." He said, "I know. That is why I am staying home." Fear has a way of paralyzing us!

Several years ago, I was at the Canfield Post Office. I was standing in line to buy my stamps. It is not a large lobby, so I could hear the clerk waiting on the person ahead of me. The man was charged \$25 to overnight a package to downtown Youngstown. When the man left, I walked up to the clerk and said, "For \$25, I would have driven that package downtown." The clerk responded, "It happens all the time. People are afraid to go into Youngstown." I believe bad things can happen anywhere. Fear has a way of paralyzing us!

The church is part of our society, so we shouldn't be surprised to find fear within our walls. I see it all the time. Every Sunday morning I am looking out for visitors. They never sit up with me in the chancel area. They sit out with you! Sometimes they sit next to you. Later, I will talk to long-time worshippers and ask, "Did you talk to the person next to you?" Most of the time, people say, "No!" "Why?", I ask. "Because, I didn't know them. I didn't know if they were new or not. I didn't want to welcome him or her and find out they had been here for years. I didn't want to look foolish, so I said nothing at all." Fear has a way of paralyzing us!

Annually, on Good Friday we go to Green Haven cemetery to observe the death of Christ. It is a natural place to be because it pounds home the point that Jesus really did die. As the service gets closer, I talk to people to promote the service. Every year, I get the same response. "No way!" Some tell me they are afraid of ghosts. For others, the fear is much more personal. One guy said it clearly, "Someday I am going to spend every day in that cemetery. I don't want to go early, because I don't want to be reminded of my own death." Fear has a way of paralyzing us!

One of my regrets in life is, I never got a D. Min., a Doctor of Ministry. It would not have helped me in my career. However, it would have filled a void in my life. My seminary years were hard, and I feel like I missed so much. There was a time I really toyed with going back to school. I never did because I always had an excuse. I didn't have the money. I didn't have the time. Something was always happening here or at home. My dyslectic eyes would make it impossible. Now my excuse is, I am too old. Can I be honest with you? The reason I never got a D. Min. is fear. I know I am not the smartest person in the world, and I was afraid I would fail. I didn't want to tell you I failed. I really didn't want to tell my children I failed. I was afraid of failure, so I never tried. Have you ever been paralyzed by fear? How many churches do you know that are paralyzed by fear?

My wife, Kathryn is planning mission trip to Ukraine. The sixteen-member mission team is leaving on May 20 and will return on June 4. If you haven't heard, the Ukrainian people are not happy. They are divided over the future of their country. Everyone agrees they need help. Everyone agrees they are not strong enough to go it alone. The eastern half of Ukraine wants to reunite with Russia. That is what they have done historically. The western half of the country wants to join the European Union. It looks like the government is leaning toward Russia, so western people are rioting. Every morning, I wake up and wonder what is happening in Kiev. Kathy's mission team is scheduled to go to Kiev at the end of their trip. If the situation grows worse, they won't go to Kiev, and will fly home from Budapest. Some people have suggested they shouldn't go at all. Geographically, they will be hundreds of miles away from the rioting, but that is too close for some. What would you do? Do you go to Ukraine and help the orphans? Do you stay home where it is safe? Are you willing to risk your personal security? Fear has a way of paralyzing us!

Rahab was a risk taker. She did two things to put herself in danger. First, she hid the spies. Second, she lied to the authorities. There is no other way to say it. She put her life in danger. Put yourself into the story. Would you have helped Rahab hide the spies? Would you have turned the spies over? How big of a risk are you willing to take for strangers?

Our world has no shortage of human need. I don't need to read you a list; you know the list. God expects us to do something to help. The problem is, we are afraid. That is why we are more comfortable with charity than we are with missions.

Charity involves collecting things for strangers. Missions involves getting personally involved with people. The chances of getting the needy of this world to come to our little piece of property is slim. That is why we have to go, and that will take a certain amount of risk. Are you willing to risk your personal security? Authentic Christianity involves a certain amount of risk. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

How many of you remember Evel Knievel? He is remembered as an American Daredevil. In his career he knew many highs and many lows. (He broke 37 bones.) His stunts grabbed national attention. He got into being a daredevil for one reason, money. He was not making enough money as a motocross racer, so he decided to promote his motorcycle stunts. His first stunt was to jump over a box of rattlesnakes and two mountain lions. That stunt got him a sponsor. Soon, Knievel was regularly jumping his Harley Davidson over rows of cars, trucks, and even the fountains at Caesar's Palace. His most famous stunt came in 1974, when he attempted to jump the Snake River Canyon on a rocket-propelled motorcycle called the X-1. A malfunction caused the bike's parachute to prematurely open and ruined the jump, but the media storm surrounding the event had already cemented Knievel's reputation as the king of all daredevils. Would you ever jump over a box of rattlesnakes? Do you consider yourself a daredevil? In authentic Christianity, there is a certain amount of risk taking. How big of a risk are you willing to take for God?

Will you please pray with me?