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James 2:14–17, 24,26 ESV

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Luke 24:1–7 ESV, abridged.

***24** They went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. ² And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ Behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. ⁵ And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.”*

Peanut butter wonder.

This is Easter and you’re going to have to be patient with me. It won’t be until the tail end of my sermon that I’m going to talk about the resurrection of Jesus.

When I was a Catholic school kid, Mass was still offered in Latin. I assumed that this was because Jesus spoke Latin. Not true. As it turns out, Latin was indeed the official language of the Roman Empire, but the Empire consisted of a large

number of ethnic regions that had been both forcibly and nonforcibly pulled into a single nation that eventually reached from what is now Great Britain to north Africa. People in these conquered and absorbed locations spoke their native tongues, and for the most part, only the very elite members of the Roman Empire – a tiny number of people comparatively – actually spoke Latin. In the time and place where Jesus lived, Greek was the international language and Aramaic was the language of the people; Jesus was probably fluent in the second and had a good knowledge of the first. Hebrew was the sacred language. There's a good chance he could read a certain amount of Hebrew since he taught in the Temple. But there is zero evidence that he spoke Latin at all. The reason the Catholic Church adopted Latin was, because the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its official religion, and it became the home of Christianity. I was very disappointed, as a boy, to learn that the Latin vulgate Bible, used by the Catholic church for hundreds of years, was created by Jerome in the late 4th century – long, long after the original Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek. The word vulgate is related to the word vulgar. Both words mean “ordinary” or “common”; Latin was the common language of Rome, and things that are vulgar are crude or common.

By the time I was an altar boy in sixth grade, I was all too aware that Jesus never spoke Latin, and the Bible was not written in Latin, and so it took some of

the spark out of my excitement for learning this dead language. But altar boys had to know Latin in order to say prayers during Mass; in particular, we traded Latin lines with the priests as we stood or kneeled on the altar while praying before the congregation. I'm going to tell you a story about my misadventures in speaking Latin during Mass. First, let's look at our first Bible quote.

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. Verse 24, which is the second to the last sentence of our passage, has been the cause of a lot of controversy over the centuries. Again, it says: *²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.* It seems, in isolation, to say that it's not true that we are saved simply by having faith in God. It seems to say that we need to earn our way to an eternal life with God by doing good things while we are alive. But looking at it in context of the larger passage, what it says is that if you say you have faith, but your actions

don't indicate that you truly are following the teachings of Jesus, then your faith is false. Our actions, our works, are indicative of our true faith.

The Book of James is a letter that is thought to have been written by the brother of Jesus or by a follower of James who dedicated the letter in his name. If it was a follower of James, the brother of Jesus, who led the church in Jerusalem, then the letter was probably written in the early second century. Recent academic studies have suggested that the letter is actually authentic, in that it represents the oral teachings of Jesus' kid brother, written down by a disciple of his and then circulated as a letter. The letter is written in very polished Greek by a gifted writer who was probably very literate – something that probably would not describe a member of Jesus' poor, lower class family. Analysis of the letter indicates that the author was unaware of events that occurred in the year 70 A.D. and after. This strongly suggests that it is a contemporary letter, written during the life of the brother of Jesus. It is also not structured like a true letter of the time, since it does not have a prayer-wish at the beginning, a personal greeting at the end, nor any mention of to whom the letter is specifically written. It might well be an authentic, written version of the actual oral teachings of the younger brother of Jesus Christ.

The letter focuses heavily on the relationship between faith and works, or faith and actions. James emphasizes that believing in God is the beginning of faith,

but that a true, deep faith is illustrated via the actions of a person. However, almost in contradiction to this, James says that being saved, being promised an eternal life with God is actually a gift from God, not something that we can achieve entirely on our own. We can't just decide that we are going to go to Heaven. It's naïve to think that we are in charge of our salvation, via actions and faith. Salvation involves effort by both us and God; it is a collaborative effort. We believe, we live Christ-like lives of generosity, forgiveness, and empathy, and in return, God chooses to embrace us. As far as our side of the bargain goes, James makes the point that the teachings of Christ, as described in the Gospels, is the key to salvation. That is how we learn to believe and do the things that are required of a true person of faith.

James teaches us the importance of our actions via an analogy. He describes the futility of discovering a hungry and ill-clad brother or sister, and then offering only consoling words. We immediately see how ridiculous this would be. We've all heard the term "empty words", and that's what the fake believer offers. James goes on to make a reference to Abraham. In Genesis, God promises Abraham that he, Abraham, would be the seed of a great nation. Indeed, the Old Testament, in particular, the Book of Isaiah, describes Abraham as the father of the Jewish nation. James says that Abraham was justified, saved, by his works, his actions. In other words, God judged Abraham to be righteous because of Abraham actions, not just

his raw faith. Abraham proved his faith was deep and real by offering his son Isaac on the altar in obedience to God. Abraham even lifts his knife to sacrifice his son, and an angel of God stops him, saying that Abraham has now proved his faith. As James says, Abraham's faith was "completed" by his actions.

So, what about Latin and me? Well, by the time I was an altar boy, the Latin Mass was giving way to the English Mass. The Catholic Church in Rome had made a monumental decision to allow priests to offer the Mass in the native language, the vulgar language, if you will, of the people in the congregation. But there was apparently still an informal rule among some orders of Catholic priests to periodically offer what was called a full "high" or Latin Mass. As it turned out, there was a priest in my parish who was stiff and a bit cold, and nobody liked him very much. But he had a twin brother who was also a priest. To be honest, I don't remember for sure if this was an identical twin, but I think he was. We'll call the priest in my parish Tom and his brother Joe. One morning, I was across the street, in my grammar school, in class. The principal came over the intercom and said that Buzzy King was to go across the street and help Father Tom's brother say a Mass. I was of course delighted to get out of class. I also loved being in my church. But when I got over there, I learned something that freaked me out. Father Joe told me that he had just realized that he needed to fulfill his responsibility of periodically

holding, or saying, a Latin Mass. The problem was that I had never properly learned the Latin prayers that I was supposed to recite during a Latin Mass. I didn't know what to do. I didn't fess up my ignorance, not because I was too proud to admit it, and not even because I was afraid of getting in trouble. I simply wanted very badly to serve God by being an altar boy. So, I went out on the altar, in front of an early weekday congregation of mostly elderly people, to assist with a Latin Mass.

The Mass started out like any other. The actions that I performed were the same as always. I rang some bells, handed the priest his giant Bible to read from, things like that. At one point, we knelt down, facing the altar, with our backs to the congregation, and it was time to say one of those Latin prayers. I was supposed to trade lines with the priest. Now, I didn't know Father Joe, but his brother Tom was a no-nonsense guy, and I imagined how Father Joe would react when I let him and the congregation down. Father Joe said the first line in loud, clear Latin. I panicked. Amazed at what I was doing, I heard my voice as if it was someone else talking, someone far away. I began to fake my Latin. In the most sincere, prayerful tone I could muster, I quietly mumbled something like "Holy thunder, peanut butter wonder." I did not fool Father Joe. But it turned out that unlike his brother, he was fun loving. So, he lowered his voice, nudged me in the side, and in a low, almost inaudible voice, said something like: "Give me a chocolate bar, and I'll play the

guitar.” We went on like this for a few minutes, trading nonsense that the congregation, since they couldn’t really hear it, couldn’t tell wasn’t the real thing. He seemed to be enjoying it. His voice took on a tone of amusement as we prayed.

After the Mass as over, as I was in the room behind the alter, changing out of my vestments, Father Joe came over to me. He slapped me on the back. He said something like, “I see you don’t know your Latin.” I admitted that I had never learned the Latin prayers that altar boys were supposed to know. He said that it was okay, that the people in the congregation didn’t know the difference. I said something like, “But God knows.” He got a very thoughtful look on his face. He said that we weren’t saying the Mass for God. We weren’t praying in Latin for God. We were doing it for those people, and the whole reason why the Latin Mass was being replaced with an English Mass was because it was time for people to understand what was happening, that the Mass shouldn’t seem like a magic ceremony. It should be real. He said he never liked saying Latin Masses, because indeed, the people in the congregation had no idea what was going on.

Father Joe said that he could tell that I was a good kid, a good altar boy, that I clearly believed in God. He said there was something in my attitude that showed I wasn’t being disrespectful. He said that I knew that the important thing was that I did my best to offer a service to the people in the congregation. I didn’t know my

Latin, but I knew that I had to do my job somehow. He told me that it took a lot of nerve to kneel on the altar and spit out a bunch of B.S. But my actions gave those people what they needed: a Mass, a way to calmly focus on God, to connect with their creator and to offer themselves up. He told me that Christians believe that our actions are very important, that just having faith isn't enough. He said that he could tell that I did truly want to serve God. He then offered to tutor me on my Latin before I had to say those prayers with his brother, Father Tom, whom, he said, would not be as amused as he was. Father Joe did teach me the Latin prayers.

But what does all this have to do with Easter? Consider our second passage. It's from the Gospel of Luke. In it, a group of women have come to cover Jesus' body with ointment and spices. It was a sort of ancient embalming, spices to kill the smell of decay and ointments to help preserve the body. But Jesus' body has disappeared. Part of our passage says: *He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.* You see, Jesus had faith. Jesus also showed his faith through his actions. He suffered horribly and died. For all people. The point is that, our faith is in God, but Jesus' faith is in us. And he was willing to pay for his faith. As it turned out, he rose from death. I believe that this was in part, to symbolically show us the spiritual payoff

of proving our faith with our actions. Virtually none of us will ever prove our faith like he did his. We're not asked for much; God only asks that we serve with what we have. My Latin gifts were very limited, but, as a panicked boy, I did my best in the moment to serve. Perhaps I should have fessed up and found an altar boy who knew his Latin to do the Mass. But God does not ask perfection of us – not at all. He just wants us to do what we think is truly the right thing to do at any instant. It's amazing that Jesus was willing to be tortured and crucified, and then rise from death, and then be so flexible, so kind and generous with us. Please pray with me.

God, help us discover as we go through our days and nights on this planet how we can turn our faith into actions. Lead us to serve others in your name, just as Jesus served us in your name. Inspire us to do what Jesus did and value the lowest rung of society as much as we value those with the most wealth and power - again, just like Jesus did. And may we be creative in our works. May we surprise ourselves with the things that we do to serve in your name, and may we openly attribute our actions to the fact that we are Christians – so that society sees that believers can be genuine, truly Godly people like Father Joe. We know that you do not ask perfection of us, and that you make it easy for us to serve. It's what is in our hearts that matters as we make what are often very imperfect decisions each day. And despite our imperfections, we will rise again to live forever. Amen.