

## **Making Sense: Conclusion: On Faith & Works: James 2:14-26**

### ***Introduction:***

Well, People of God! Here we are. This side of Thanksgiving. A little more, I pray, aware of what we ourselves have to be thankful for. A little more topped-off with gratitude than we usually are, maybe, because our society is a little more turned toward gratitude than it usually is.

And we've been talking, for a few months now, about our society, about how we can best make sense of the way it's shaped us, and make sense out of the things that we are continually exposed to.

Today we're done with that. We've achieved it, been made perfect, and can move on. I'm kidding.

What I want to do in the next 15 minutes is review some of the things we've talked about, and look at what James has to say about what it really means to make sense of anything. My big hope is that we can, when we're done here, be people who do a better job, all around, recognizing the lies we tell ourselves about the way the world is, and living up to Jesus when it comes crashing in on us. Let me pray for us!

### ***Prayer:***

As we've talked about the world we live in, and what it means to follow Jesus in it, there have been a handful of common themes that have come up again and again and again.

***Themes: Christians have to have a Jesus-centered ethical framework.***

Over and over we've been called back to the simple truth that for a Christian, our choices are meant to be ones that faithfully match Jesus' character. Jesus is our standard for what's good: nothing a political party tells us, nothing an economics class teaches us, nothing a blogger blogs or a poster posts, or a preacher preaches gets to top this. When we committed to following Jesus, we committed to his definition of what's good, and right, and true.

When we read the news, hear the news, are forced to face how fallen and broken the world around us is, there's only one standard for us, and it's whether we line up with Christ or against him, act as Jesus or as the accuser of people he died to save. The good we pursue is bigger than us, the expression of the love of God in every place everywhere. And yet, it's made real, actualized, in our individual acts of faithful integrity. More about that before the end.

But this theme has persisted throughout our series: The Spirit will grow us to be more like Christ than we are now if we have the smallest desire for it. We'll

make good, right choices--ones that line up with Jesus, and act out his life right in the middle of ours.

***Themes: Division is the devil's easiest trick.***

We've seen, over and over, the reality that we are continually being divided against one another. When he was accused of acting on the devil's behalf even while he was taking the devil out, Jesus once said the truism that "a house divided against itself can't stand." And, like our enemy always does, the devil, who can't come up with any wisdom himself, stole this and has persisted in using it against those God made and loved.

We live in a time where sides are poaching us. Where we're being divided, and the news we're told is told to us in order to persuade us to first take a stand against someone, and only sometimes, later, with someone. Our society runs on credit, oil, and division.

We're being trained by what we hear to forget the fact that Jesus loved us while we were God's enemies, the fact that we're no more faithful or righteous or morally pure than the ones we're called by other people to hate or fear, and the fact that Jesus was meant to be the last scapegoat the world had.

We talked specifically about our allegiances, and how our first allegiance is to Christ, always. I claimed that to live well as "citizens of Heaven" we have to first

acknowledge the way our patriotism can turn to nationalism. We were invited to ask if we're living in a way that promotes the interests of God or the interests of our nation, our party, our state, our club, or any other group that calls us to its side. There may be no conflict; there may be great conflict.

And of course, the greatest trick that those who demand our allegiance use to persuade us to their side is to call us to be pragmatic, reasonable, realistic, instead of faithful.

And finally if there is conflict between our lives--what we say, what we listen to or promote, what we believe about things like violence, enemies, retribution, compassion, and loyalty, what we cheerlead or reminisce about, whatever it is--if there is conflict between the values we're living with and the values Christ calls us to live with, we have to, simply...start to change. Embrace conversion.

***Themes: Without others, we're blind to the way the world really is.***

Over and over we were brought back to the idea that we're simply blind to reality if we're spending most of our time with people just like us--in age, in race, in power, in class, in language, in affiliation. If most of our time is with people who look like us, talk like us, then we're wearing blinders to the truth of the human experience.

We saw that we're simply not meant to protect our Christian identity. We're meant to protect our faithfulness. And protecting our faithfulness means we're always open to conversion, we know that God still moves, is active, and the Spirit may move us to realize something now that we couldn't get a handle on back then--whenever then was. If I exist to protect my Christian identity, I can't ever have a conversation that might lead to conversion--a change in what I believe right now about love, or life, or God. I just can't. If I exist to protect my faithfulness, then all that matters is discovering how to be more faithful, more often, in more places.

But we saw how important it is that the Church be the community that helps us dialogue well. We practice humility, remembering that we have things to learn from one another. We practice affirming our identity, knowing we have nothing to fear as we have conversations that might lead to conversions in how we think about life and love and God. We call each other out when it seems as if we're not really interested in conversation and dialogue, but really just want to stir things up.

We resist the identity tribalism of the world, and learn to recognize it and resist it together. We live with nothing to prove, nothing to fear, and God's Kingdom to gain as we reveal love by the words and sentiments

we express.

And so we talk with everyone, everywhere, all the time, about anything. But we especially talk with each other. We are the ones who bring up the hard things, because we want God to help us get closer to reality, not further away from it.

***Themes: What we say matters; it reveals what we believe.***

We talked about speaking the truth in love, and the ways love doesn't delight in evil. But we talked about other things that come out of our mouths, too. We could call them habits of speech, although they are, oh, the manifestation of what's in our heart. I mean, the stuff we say reveals what's going on in our guts.

So we looked at nostalgia, and how poisonous nostalgia can be. When the past comes, I invited us not to think, "Yes. It was better back then," but say instead "It was better back then for me." We can, of course, go a step further and consider who had no freedom, no privilege, no opportunity that we ourselves enjoyed. When we appreciate not only what was good about the past, but appreciate the privilege we had to enjoy it, it's a wide open door for the Spirit to empower us to bless the present in creative ways.

We looked at the way we use words that emphasize the distance we have with people rather than the

similarities we have with them. Our habits of speech need to be ones that acknowledge that every single person is entitled to our love. Whatever comes out of our mouths has to be in line with the truth that people are entitled, have a right, to our patience, to our kindness, to our celebration at their blessings, our humility, to whatever words we can say that are for them. We don't act irritably, we don't remember all our complaints, we don't applaud injustice. We put up with everything, trust God in everything, hope for everything, endure everything. We persist. We become love embodied, Christ, for everyone. We exist for nothing less. It's our obligation, clothed in blessing.

When we talk, we use our words to remind each other that we are not entitled to anything, but are blessed with everything. There is no Christian right, no human right, to anything, except, maybe, the right to the love of a Christian. There is no advantage in our blessing, except being taken advantage of, the way we always, in our sin, take advantage of God's never-ending compassion. Ultimately, our habits of speech are aligned with gratitude, with humility, with recognizing that we come into the world having brought nothing with us, and leave it with nothing, too, except the record of good we've done in Jesus' name.

***Themes: We can't face reality and stay in the comfort that we've grown used to.***

Which leads us to a final theme: We can't face the way

the world works and be comfortable. If there's an undercurrent to the messages we've seen, it's this. There is no great comfort in the truth of the world, the way it works and how we often live down to its worst expectations of us. At least, there wouldn't be any comfort in the world, except there is the truth that God takes pleasure in us, loves us unconditionally, hopes the best for us. We are God's beloved in whom God takes great pleasure, who should be listened to when we're deeply centered in that love and the Spirit who makes it real to us.

But if we want to embrace the truth of who we are in Christ, we have to embrace the truth of the way the world works around us, and the ways we excuse our sin, justify its evil, and contribute to its failures.

The things we talked about were deeply uncomfortable at times, because the truth of our worst inclinations is deeply uncomfortable to us. I mean, we called out the ways our favorite voices can slip from truth-speaking into propagandizing, and we celebrate it. We called out the ways our gender itself can blind us to the experiences of others. I went after the way we accept and promote the worst of our society: The way it privileges being male over female, white over black, english-speaking over anything else, rich over poor. And we who are any of those things or all those things end up being forced to examine our place in society, and what we've been given by accident of birth or the

unseen benefits of a system oriented toward our good.

That's not fun. And the series hasn't really been fun, right? I mean. It's not fun to talk about sin, or the ways the treasures tossed around by a sinful world end up getting caught in our nets instead of in others.

There is no comfort in facing the truth, whatever it is, because the truth has a way of calling out the lies we've grown accustomed to, and maybe even embraced a little.

And one of the greatest truths we have to face is that we're scared of being honest about how off base we ourselves are. Our lives may not be amazing--although they probably aren't terrible--but they're ours. They're known. And there is something deeply unsafe, deeply scary, about change.

### ***Today & The Future: Choices***

If we've been paying attention, this series has left us with only one option when it comes to making sense of the world around us. We can either ignore the world as it is, or embrace it. We can change or not change. We're forced to choose "this day" what world we'll live in.

Will we live in the real world, which is desperate, and broken, and often terrible, even as its salted with common grace, and unexpected joy, and all the best

of humanity? Or will we live in our fairly tidy, recognizable, very functional-for-us version of reality? A world in which we insulate ourselves against the heartache, the lies, the infiltration of the real world? We'll accept the ways we can benefit from the world as it's set up, the ways we ourselves help make it so, and we'll just gather with like-minded voices that keep us from feeling any guilt or shame over our benefit.

### ***Today & The Future: Making Sense***

See, the problem with making sense of the world is that something is demanded of us if we're going to do it. If we really try to make sense of the world, something will be taken from us.

At the least, we'll see the world differently. We'll lose our comfortable perspectives on what's "really going on" as truth replaces them.

But, look, it's in the story we tell ourselves about what's happening "out there in the world," that we find our comfort, that we've made sense of the world. It's in the shorthand lies "Those kind of people are like that," in the self-deception, "I did this by myself," in the glib phrases, "When God closes a door, He opens a window," in the meaningful shorthand jargon, "illegals, fundies, patriots" that we construct for ourselves a view of how the world works that has become functional, useful, safe. It's one that we subconsciously confirm through all sorts of choices we aren't even

aware we make. But it's not the real world; it's just a stand in, one we polish and shine and protect, because to lose it is to lose ourselves. The reason almost no one followed Jesus at first is because he didn't allow anyone who did to have both him and the lie of the world that they wanted. "Let the dead bury the dead," he said.

And for most of us, we more or less think radical life change is for the young. Our days of making big changes are over, unless they're the big changes of retirement. And even then, for most people, retirement means getting to do what we've wanted to do. (Or at least it is until our grandkids need babysat.)

The truth is that we don't want to be any more converted to Jesus than we are. We've got a good, working relationship going, you know? But if conversion has to do with embracing change because we realize the world isn't what we thought it was, the only way forward for us is some sort of conversion.

Because no matter what, the world is not what it was when we started to follow Christ, and our society will not be, in the future, the way it is now. This is true even if Jesus Christ is the same "yesterday, today, and forever." In fact, it's only more true, because Jesus is always asking us to figure out how to live faithfully in the world as it is, not as we wished it would be. To make sense of the world is to first see it for what it is,

embrace it for what it is, and knowing who Jesus is, do a thousand things differently than what we do now. Our words and our deeds change.

**James:**

James says this, today:

***14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 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? 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 my deeds. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.***

He goes from here to give biblical evidence to support this theological position. Always a good idea. We don't need persuaded the way his audience did, I think: We accept what James writes as true.

His point, of course, is that having the correct convictions about God isn't enough. Once we come to accept something as true, it is necessary for us to live differently, in line with the truth we've realized. Once we come to accept something as true, it is necessary for us to live differently, in line with the truth we've realized.

We could say that if we only make sense of the world in our heads, then we're not making sense of it at all. Having convictions about what's really going on in the world, what's true about the way the world around us, isn't enough. Convictions don't matter unless they are lived out. In fact, if we believe things about the world, but don't live in line with our beliefs, we're not making any sense. We're just not making sense; we're crazy or delusional. "Faith without deeds is dead [faith]," neither alive nor life giving. Convictions without action are pointless. A private game that everyone loses. No fun, no point.

### ***Conversions:***

There was a moment, a season, a period of life where we wanted desperately to make sense of the world, and we were open to anything that God would do through us to help make the world more like his Kingdom. We surrounded ourselves with people who encouraged us to do the same, to discover what was really going on, to get to the heart of the matter about what we were really here for, and what we could do

with the Holy Spirit's help and guidance and power.

We're more measured now, most of us. Wiser, with greater resources than that time. And we have more to lose, too.

Because we have become people who believe certain things. Our beliefs are manifested in all sorts of ways, as beliefs always are. We have all made sense of the world in a certain way that works for us, helps us to function in the middle of the million questions we mostly ignore.

Can we take stock of the things we might lose if our fragile construct of the world is broken apart again? We wouldn't be in this room--unless we're just incredibly passive people--if we didn't at some point embrace the claims Jesus makes, that what we see is not what we get, and we heard, like Horatio, "There are more things in heaven and earth...than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Can we take stock of the things we have to lose if we give up that part of our identity that isn't built on the way the world works, but built on our bias, our privilege, our comfort, and lies?

We, by ourselves, don't have the courage or the strength to make sense of the world, not really. We can't muster our way past the discomfort. But we can carry each other past it. As we dialogue, as we suspend disbelief, as we speak the truth in love, and

listen well to the perspectives of one another, we can see more clearly than we do evil as it is, and mercy as it is, and Christ in all the 10,000 places he plays.

We've got to consider how deeply invested we are with our framework of the world, our alliances and allegiances, our commitments and biases. We've got to consider how much we have to lose if Jesus cares more about certain things than we thought he did, if God wants more from us than we realized, if the Spirit calls us to love those who we are more comfortable scapegoating and fearing.

Because conversion has to do with loss as much as it has to do with gain, and to make sense of the world, we need converted. Or, we need our conversions, our change of mind and heart, to go deeper than they've gone.

***Ending: We're Needed!***

I'm no good at ending things. I'm terrible with closure. Because there's always more to say, more to do, more to know, right? There's always some nuance to clarify. Let me temporarily end on this:

We will each be forced to face the world as it really is, either at our death or Jesus' return. We'll see all the ways we've lied to ourselves to justify our comforts and shore-up our wealth, privilege, influence, and power.

But we'll also see all the things we've done to give to the world what it's needed most. We'll see the ways we've loved. The ways we've resisted bias, resisted lie, traded our comfort to ease another person's sorrows. We'll see the effects of our good, the moments that our conviction to be like Christ broke tore through some evil prejudice, some evil system, some work of the devil. We'll praise God for the words of blessing we spoke as much as we'll account for our curses. We'll see how our faith led to deeds; our trust in Jesus turned into action for his glory and the good of someone else he died for.

We can do bigger and better things than carefully polish a false view of the world that makes us feel okay. That's not making sense of anything; it's lying to ourselves and those we say we love. We can do greater things than Jesus did, more things that we could ask or imagine, if we are open to losing what we've taken comfort in.

The news isn't stopping. Words are going to rush in on us as soon as they can. We will need to make sense of the world. I simply want us to make sense of it as it actually is, not as we wish it would be. Go back, if it is helpful, to the many things we talked about. Reach out to me and we'll talk about them all day.

As a matter of faith: Resist the devil. Remember our

enemies are not flesh and blood. Don't give up on the world, which we're obligated to love, even as its factions try to gain our allegiance, bribing us for our loyalty, our choices, our souls. Return the embrace Jesus is gripping us with, so you don't slip from him; and embrace those whose view of the world just doesn't make any sense to you, because it's in learning from them, fearlessly, that you'll be able to make sense of yourself and the world as it truly is