

How Faith Works

James 2:14-26

Let's talk about *how faith works*. **Pray**

Many people talk about the subject of “faith” or “believing” today.

- Several years ago George Michael sang, “You gotta have faith, faith, faith.”
- Prince of Egypt: “There can be miracles if you believe”
- Today's mantra is “believe in yourself.”
- “Every pizza is a personal size pizza if you'll believe in yourself.”

This text deals with a *specific kind of faith*: saving faith.

- True faith vs. false faith.
- One is a living, vibrant, active, real faith.
- The other is a psudeo faith, a cheap faith, a faith w mere words.

This is an incredibly important passage because of what's at stake.

James is hits a real problem that we have today in much of modern day evangelism and church growth strategies which produce many “professions of faith” but not near as many true “possessions of faith.”

- Some church leaders will attempt almost anything to increase their evangelism numbers. Jonathan Dodson gives a few examples in his book on evangelism, *The Unbelievable gospel* (pg 209):
 - Fake baptism technique. One church plants people in the audience to come down front as if they're going to be baptized in order to create a tipping point for those “on the fence” so that they too will come froward. And they are told to move intentionally through the highest visibility areas and the longest walks.
 - I can't imagine the apostle Peter attempting such a method on the day of Pentecost or Paul on Mars Hill!
- In evangelism, we must make sure that we aren't viewing people as projects, as the means to increasing our numbers, of puffing up our ego, but actually loving people and caring for them. And we do this by truly communicating the gospel, and leading them to genuine repentance and faith.

God does use as mass evangelism efforts, the # of real conversions are often inflated.

- One evangelism ministry estimates that 16,000 conversions occurred in about a six year period in their crusades, but say that only 10 percent of these “decisions” resulted in long term personal behavior. (Ibid)
- A friend recently told me about a church that said they had 8,000 people “professed faith,” but only 3,000 were actually baptized, and only 100 made their way into a small group.

- To be sure, God often saves people in these contexts, because He is sovereign and good, but the numbers are often inflated, and many aren't actually converted, but are given a false assurance.

James is not impressed with droves of people who “profess faith” but don't actually “possess faith,” who don't actually demonstrate a true, vibrant faith.

The whole book of James has addressed the issue of real, living faith.

The Bible teaches that...

1. We are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9)
2. We are declared righteous in Christ by faith (Gen 15:6).
3. Faith is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9)
4. The Word of God is the instrument for creating saving faith (Rom. 10:4; Jam 1:18)
5. We walk by faith not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7)
6. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6)
7. Whatever we do apart from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23)

James' main point is this:

***Saving faith results in good works.
Real faith bears real fruit.***

Some think that Paul and James are in conflict, but they're not.

- I'll say more about that in a moment, but remember how Paul spoke of faith in the book of Romans – “the obedience of faith” or “the obedience that springs from faith.” That's exactly what James is saying. There's an obedience that springs from faith.
- **James in Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 also shows that they are together! (Zack Brady)**

They both share the following beliefs:

- **Grace** is the source of our salvation.
- **Christ** is the basis for our salvation.
- **Faith** is the means of our salvation.
- **Works** are the evidence of our salvation.
 - We are not saved by works but for good works (Eph. 2:8-10).
 - It's not that we are saved by **half and half** – a mixture of faith and works.

**“We are saved by faith alone,
but the faith that saves is never alone.”**

Faith bears fruit. This is the plain teaching of Scripture, and once again James is echoing Jesus. (**Matt 7:16-20**)

James 2:14-26

- **3X we read that faith that does not function is dead or worthless (v. 17; 20; 26).**

- It's dead in the sense that **it can't save; it can't justify.**
- Real saving faith produces genuine works.
- More specifically here, we see that **real faith always manifests itself in active, practical, Christian love in relationships. (Duncan)**

“The Gospel comes with a house key.” (Rosaria).

It leads to love, hospitality, and practical acts of service.

That's the type of works I think he has in mind – love.

The examples here are *compassion*, and the *first half of the chapter* is all about how faith loves, and it doesn't show partiality.

Does James Contradict Paul?

This passage drove Martin Luther to call James, “an epistle of straw” and even felt like “throwing Jimmy [James] in the stove”!

- **We don't have to throw Jimmy in the stove!**

First, what's the problem? This question is brought up when you compare these passages for example: Romans 3:28, 4:1-5 compared to James 2:21, 24.

Romans 3:28

²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Romans 4:1-5

⁴ What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?

² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...

James 2:21, 24, 25

²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?

²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

²⁵ And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

Are they contradicting each other?

- **No. The Bible is not just “holy,” it's also “harmonious.”**
- **It is consistent in its message, and that's one of the most amazing things about the Bible.**

They are actually complimentary not contradictory.

Once again, the answer lies in rightly understanding context.

- Abraham.** Both James and Paul use the exact same text to teach justification by faith – **Gen 15:6**. It's the foundational text.
 - The tricky thing about James is that you have to **get verses 21-24 in the chronological order to see that he and Paul are lock step**.
 - Faith came *before* Abraham's offering of Isaac (Genesis 15:6-22; Rom. 4:1-10), but James mentions the Isaac offering before Abraham's belief.
 - The Isaac event was 30 years after God declared Abraham righteous.
 - Abraham was over 100 years old by this time.
 - James then is saying that **the Isaac event demonstrated Abraham's faith; it wasn't the basis for it.**
- Terms: Declared Righteous/Validation.** ("dikaioo"). Both James and Paul use the term **justified**, but with two different meanings. **We say "football" others mean "Soccer!"**
 - When Paul uses the term he means "the act whereby God declares the believing sinner righteous." It means "acquittal," "a verdict of innocence," or "declared righteous."
 - But James write a good bit before Paul. And he uses it differently.
 - It can mean "validate, evidence, demonstration, or proof of righteousness."
 - "Wisdom is justified by her deeds" (Matt 11:19).
 - The existence or value of wisdom is demonstrated by her actions.
 - It demonstrates it to be authentic.
 - James is saying then we "demonstrate" our faith by our works.
 - Abraham was "justified" or "validated" or "proved to be genuine" by works (2:21)
 - A person is justified or "validated" or "proved to be genuine" by works. (2:24)
 - It also can carry an idea of the final judgment.
 - In the end, Abraham will be justified, vindicated, because his faith proved genuine.
- Emphasis: Root/Fruit.** Paul *usually* emphasizes the **root** of justification, which is faith in Christ alone. James emphasizes the **fruit** of justification, which is good works.
 - Paul focuses on the **MEANS** of our salvation: We are saved BY God's grace.
 - James wrote about the **OUTCOME** of salvation good works.
 - (There are occasions, however, where Paul emphasizes the fruit of justification as well. See Galatians 5:6; Eph. 2:8-10.)
 - You cannot teach justification without sanctification.
- Problems: Works Righteousness/Easy Believism.** James and Paul are not standing face to face with each other with contrary views on the gospel; rather, they are soldiers in the same army fighting back to back against two different enemies, preserving the same gospel.
 - Paul was fighting **works-righteousness**. People saying that you could be saved by doing "works of the law."

- James was dealing with “**easy believism**” those who **claim/profess to believe but have no fruit to give evidence to it. He’s dealing with hypocrisy in the church.**
 - The key word is “**claim**” or “**says**” – you “claim” you have faith.
 - They’re some who have made a profession but aren’t really disciples.
 - If **that decision doesn’t lead to abiding and lasting change, then there’s a problem.**
 - **It may start with a decision, but it’s more like a marriage. It’s a covenant relationship.** It’s true, it’s lasting, It changes you.

With that said, **James gives us three type of faith; and only one is sufficient...**

3 Types

#1: Dead Faith – A claimed faith without the fruit of love is useless (2:14-17)

A. Empty Confession (14)

“He says he has faith.” – there’s nothing there though.

I can say, “I’m a Yankee fan” but there would be no fruit with that confession!

- It’s just ascent to some ideas.
- There’s no corresponding affections for Christ, and acts of service, love for the church, the mission of God, etc.
- There’s no willingness to submit to the Scriptures in all areas of life, as a disciple.
- This is “**Bible belt faith**” – this person believes in Jesus like they believe in **Abraham Lincoln**.
 - A **historical character**, sure. A person to **admire**, yes. A tip of the hat of **appreciation**, yep.
 - But his/her confession has not given way to a changed life.
- “If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation...”

What good is it? It’s no good.

B. A Lack of Compassion (15-16)

A failure to display compassion shows a lack of saving faith.

- Look at this picture.
 - It’s a “**brother**” or “**sister**.”
 - So James has a **fellow believer** in mind.
 - They lack “daily food.” They lack “clothes.”
 - **They are hungry, miserable, and publically shamed.**
- **Response:** If you just say something religious, “Go in peace, keep warm, eat well” – that’s like a common benediction you would pray over someone.
- What good is that?
- “God bless you man.” “I’ll pray for you.”
- 1 John 3:17, "Whoever has the world's goods and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" It doesn't.

Real faith is not indifferent, it is involved.

- Can that faith save him? A faith that does not show practical acts of mercy? No!
- Genuine faith produces genuine change.

Acts of mercy are not the basis of salvation, but they display the fruit of salvation.

- 1:18, 2:5 – salvation is a result of God's gracious, powerful work.

Acts of mercy display the *evidence* of real faith.

- We don't help the poor *to be saved*; we do so because *we are saved*.
- Acts of mercy are the overflow of real faith.

“Mercy to the full range of human needs is such an essential mark of a Christian that it can be used as a test true faith. Mercy is not optional or an addition to being a Christian. Rather, a life poured out in deeds of mercy is a sign of genuine faith.” (Keller)

The gospel transforms our hearts and our lives.

We don't serve those in need out of *guilt*, but *because of grace*.

Listen to Spurgeon on Matthew 25:

“The saints fed the hungry and clothed the naked because it gave them much pleasure to do so. They did it because they could not help doing it; *their new nature impelled them to do it*. They did it because it was their delight to do good. They did good for Christ's sake, because it was the sweetest thing in the world to do anything for Jesus.” (Spurgeon)

Real faith will manifest itself in deeds of love.

The Tongue in our mouths and our shoes go in the same direction.

C. The Obvious Conclusion: Dead Faith Is Useless (17)

- A profession of “faith” without accompanying deeds of love is worthless.
- Your so called faith has made no difference in anyone's life; therefore, it's useless.
- Real faith bears fruit, and it is useful. See: Matt. 3:8; John 15:8

James is after a “lived-out faith,” not a “claimed faith.”

#2: Demonic Faith – An orthodox faith without work is just demonic (2:18-19)

V. 18: Another objector says, “Faith and works are separable.” James disagrees!

- It's like being on a long flight, “**Chicken or pastor, chicken or pasta?**” The stewardess doesn't care (until they run out of one). But you can have either or.
- Someone is making that argument – “**Do you want faith or works? Either is fine.**”
- **James says “no!”** You don't have real faith if you don't have fruit.
- You haven't understood the gospel.
- The believer is a changed man or woman.

- No transformation, no salvation.

The gospel is not an abstract idea floating around in the head,
but something that transforms you.

V. 19: James uses a bit of **sarcasm** here in order to say: **One may hold to the right theological idea about God, but not have real faith either.**

Right thinking without a changed heart, and the practical outworking of love is also deficient faith.

There's a difference in **knowing some truths and knowing God.**

19a: The Demons:

- **Believe in God**
- Every Jewish person quoted the Shema (Deut 6:4).
- James says the **Demons believe the Shema** – that God is one.

They believe a lot of things we believe...

- Believe in the deity of Christ (Mk 3:11-12)
- Believe in the existence of a place of condemnation - cf. Lk 8:31
- Believe Jesus will be the Judge! - Mt 8:28-29

They actually have accurate theology – we observed this in our study of Mark.

But **Real faith is not mere *intellectual ascent to facts*.**

Good theology is not an end in itself; it's a means to end.

Additionally, verse 19:

Real faith is also not mere *emotional response*.

- They also **believe in God and are afraid (v. 19)**
- **They tremble.**

This faith is useless (20)

- ***Because real faith involves a changed heart, and willful obedience.***
- **Therefore, remember Paul's words, "Examine yourself." (2 Cor 13:5).**
- **Faith actually works. Real faith works.**

Simon the Sorcerer had demonic faith (Acts 8:13).

- Luke records, Simon "**believed and was baptized**" (8:13).
- **But he attempts to buy spiritual power, and Peter says to him:**
"21 You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.
22 Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." (Acts 8:21–23)

“Simon the sorcerer’s faith foreshadows the multitudes who week after week have said their credal ‘I believes,’ but have neither faith nor fear of God. Tragically Hell will have its share of people who are monotheistic, Trinitarian, orthodox and *lost*.” (Kent Hughes) In some sense, the demons faith is better than a Simon’s faith because at least the demons shudder.

Dead faith and demonic faith *are deficient faiths*. What we need is...

#3: Dynamic Faith: Abraham and Rahab are examples of real faith (2:20-26)

V. 20: James takes up the issue again, and this time will bring **OT support**.

- Dead faith doesn’t save.
- A living faith, a dynamic faith does save.
- These two examples show that faith leads to deeds.

His choice of examples is brilliant.

- He takes two people who were known as being people who were saved by faith.
- But they are taken from **opposite ends of the spectrum**.
- Abraham – the well-known, admired father of the faith.
- Rahab – the other end of the social spectrum, a shady lady, a prostitute, & a Gentile.
- How were these people saved?

Hebrews probably wasn’t written yet, but it says, they were both saved *by faith*.

- **Hebrews 11:17-19; 11:31**

These two examples also illustrate the **Two Great Commandments**.

- Loving God: (Abraham).
- Loving neighbor (Rahab).

Abraham Authentic Faith (21-23)

Again, it’s imperative that we get the chronology correct here.

Verse 23 is when Abraham first “**believed**” which happened in **Genesis 15:6**.

- That’s the first time the word “**believe**” is mentioned in Scripture.
- It’s the classic text for justification by faith alone, and Paul quotes it twice (**Rom 4, Gal 3**).

Verses 21-22 show the demonstration of his faith...

His faith flowered; it showed itself to be in good working order.

In this way, the Scripture was fulfilled.

- His faith involved actions. It was dynamic. There was change.
- **So after Abraham was declares righteous, he was asked to offer up his son Isaac at Mount Moriah, and Abraham obeyed. (Genesis 22)**
- He had an active faith.

- **He had a life of faithfulness (Heb. 11:17-19)**
- What had happened? His faith acted.

It was a shocking command to offer up His own son, but He did.

- However, God spared Isaac, and a substitute was sacrificed instead.
- **It was a big preview of things to come, when God would offer His own son as the substitute for sinners.**
- **By faith in Jesus Christ, we are changed, and we too are now “friends of God.” (Jn 15:14-15)**
- **We have a new relationship to God. We have new power from God.**

Rahab’s Authentic Faith (25)

Joshua 2

- **The people are ready to take the Promised Land.**
- Jericho was the first major city in the land.
- So Joshua sends two spies to check it out.
- They lodge at Rahab’s house. She protects them, and assists in their escape.
- Later in Joshua 6, her she and her house are saved.
- **In verses 2:9-11 she confesses her faith in Israel’s God, as she recounts the mighty acts God – his might, his majesty and his mercy.**
- The men promise to spare her and her family.

She risks her life for what she believed.

- **Her faith involved her whole person.**

Rahab and Abraham’s actions are very different but they have the same effect – both demonstrate that they have an active faith.

Rahab’s story gives hope to everyone.

- **She’s a total outsider.**
- **A prostitute.**
- **Yet she experiences God’s transforming grace.**
- **She ends up in the genealogy of Jesus, and appears to be the mother-in-law of Ruth.**
- **This is scandalous grace – saving grace, transforming grace.**
- **You too can be saved by grace through faith in Jesus.**

26: Faith is alive and active!

Luther: “Faith is a living, busy, active, powerful thing! It is impossible that it should not be ceaselessly doing that which is good. It does not even ask whether good works should be done; but before the question can be asked it has done them. And is constantly engaged in doing them. He who does not do such works, is a man without faith.”

Spurgeon: [The Christian] serves his Lord simply out of gratitude; he has no salvation to gain, no heaven to lose...now, out of love to the God who chose him, and who gave so great a price

for his redemption, he desires to lay out himself entirely to his Master's service...The child of God work not *for* life, but *from* life; he does not work to be saved, he works because he is saved.

Summary

A. Instruction: Be clear on this teaching.

- **Grace** is the source of our salvation.
 - God welcomes the sinner; his grace draws us to faith.
 - The well-known, morally upright person to the obscure immoral person...
 - Both need the saving forgiveness of God through Christ.
- **Christ** is the basis for our salvation.
 - We rely on his perfect life, death, resurrection for us.
- **Faith** is the means of our salvation.
 - We embrace Christ by faith.
- **Works** are the evidence of our salvation.
 - Real faith bears fruit.
 - When you experience real faith in Christ, it will become "a busy little thing."

B. Warning: Examine Yourself.

- If you are basing your assurance of salvation on some past event that has not brought true and lasting change, then please heed James' word to you.

C. Encouragement: Rejoice in God's work in your life.

- If you are bearing fruit, then rejoice that God has been gracious to you, that he is at work in you, and He will bring this work to completion.
- Then our faith will end in sight.