

Faith Without Works is Dead

James 2:14-26

James 2:14-26 - "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? ¹⁷ Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! ²⁰ But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? ²² Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? ²³ And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. ²⁴ You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. ²⁵ Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? ²⁶ For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

Background Notes

Down through the centuries of Church history, Christians have discussed and debated the meaning of this passage of Scripture. Many Christians have had problems with these verses, because this passage seems to be saying that salvation is not by faith alone -- there must also be good works, because "*faith without works is dead.*"

Because of this passage, the great reformer Martin Luther referred to the book of James as the "epistle of straw"! It seemed to Luther that James was contradicting the apostle Paul, especially the epistle to the Romans. Romans 4:5 says: "*but to him who does not work, but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.*" And Romans 5:1 says: "*Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Romans 5:1 does **not** say, therefore being justified by **faith plus works**, we have peace with God. No! We are justified by faith alone! So it seemed to Luther that James was contradicting the doctrine of justification by faith that is declared in the book of Romans.

In addition, what about Ephesians 2:8-9, which says, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast*"? And what about Titus 3:5 - "*not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us...*"?

So how can the statement in James 2:17 and 26 that “*faith without works is dead*” be harmonized with other Scriptures that clearly emphasize that we are saved by **faith alone** and **not** by **works**--or by any combination of faith and works? These Scriptures must be all harmonized, because the Bible does not contradict itself. The Bible is God’s Word, and God does not contradict Himself!

Doctrinal Points

1. Faith without works is dead.

Twice in this section we read that faith without works is dead. Verse 17: “*Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*” And verse 26: “*For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.*” So there is no doubt that James was clearly teaching that “faith without works is dead”! And verses 14-16 make it clear that the “works” that James had in mind are the good works of helping people who are in need: “*If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?*”

So when James was talking about “works,” he was thinking about what we normally think of as “good works” or “good deeds”—like helping people in need. So was James teaching that we are saved by a combination of our faith in Christ **and** our own good works? Many people who call themselves Christians believe this. However, James can’t possibly mean this, because that would mean that we’re not saved by God’s grace! If you add works to grace, it is no longer God’s grace. In addition, it would mean that Christ’s death on the cross for our sins was not completely sufficient to pay for the penalty for our sins -- that it was not completely sufficient to save us! After all, His death would not be sufficient to save us if we were required to add our good works to the death of Christ to get into heaven. What a contradiction in the Bible this would be! So what did James mean when he said “*faith without works is dead*”?

James was talking about the **kind** of faith that saves -- the **kind of faith that saves!** There is no contradiction in the Bible here. James did not teach something that is contrary to what the apostle Paul taught. James did not say that our salvation is by works or a combination of faith and works. No! James was **describing** saving faith – he was describing the kind of faith that saves a person. **The kind of faith that saves is a faith that evidences itself in good works!** Good works are **evidence** of saving faith.

Good works are not the **root** of salvation -- they are the **fruit** of salvation! If people say that they have faith, but there is no evidence of this faith in their lives, then their profession of faith is mere talk – just a profession with the mouth. That kind of faith won’t save a person. That’s what verse 18 is all about: “*But someone will say [with the lips] you have faith, and I have works. Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*” In other words, if a person has genuine saving faith, there will be some evidence of good works that can be seen in their lives.

Of course God looks at the heart and can see whether or not a person has saving faith. But man cannot see the heart. The only way to see if a person who claims to have faith, really does have faith, is by the evidence of good works in their life and lifestyle.

You see, in Romans and in James you're getting two different perspectives. In Romans, you're getting the vertical perspective -- God's perspective. God sees the heart. He doesn't have to see any works. But in James, you're getting the horizontal perspective of saving faith -- how man sees evidence of saving faith. Man can't see the heart, but true faith can be seen by the evidence of good works.

Here's an illustration: If a man tells me that he loves his wife, but there is no evidence of this love in his life --for example, if he just sits around and watches sports on TV and eats while his wife slaves away serving him, does he really love his wife? Or does he just **say** that he loves his wife? Where's the evidence that he loves his wife?

I think you understand the illustration. In the same way, without the evidence of good works, talking about faith is nothing more than talk -- it's just a profession. It is not a viable faith at all -- it's a dead faith. Without the evidence of good works, faith is just talk. It's not a living, true faith at all, but a false and dead faith. Faith without works is dead.

2. Abraham and Rahab did works of faith.

In verses 21-26, James mentioned Abraham and Rahab as examples of believers who did works of faith. Abraham *"believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness"* (Genesis 15:6). The apostle Paul quoted this verse in Romans 4 to show that Abraham was saved by faith and not by works.

James did not contradict Paul. James 2:21 says, *"was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?"* That sounds like a contradiction --but there's no contradiction here! The key is in verse 23: *"And the scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for Righteousness.'" In Genesis 15, God had declared Abraham righteous based on his faith. God's declaration was made 30 years before Abraham's "work of faith," the offering of Isaac on Mt Moriah in Genesis 22. But the offering of Isaac proved that Abraham had saving faith! It was evidence that his faith was genuine, not just talk. It was a genuine faith, a saving faith.*

In that sense, you see, Abraham was "justified by works." The "work" that Abraham did (obeying God in being willing to offer up his son Isaac) proved that Abraham had the right kind of faith. It was a work of faith.

The same was true of Rahab. Verse 25: *"Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?"* This verse is not a contradiction to Hebrews 11:31 which says, *"By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace."* James' point here was that Rahab's works proved her faith. Thus she was "justified by works" in the sense that her good

works were **evidence** of her faith in the God of Israel. Her protection of the Hebrew spies was evidence of her saving faith in the God of Israel - the one true God. Her good works were “works of faith.”

It is very interesting that the Holy Spirit had James choose Abraham and Rahab as examples of works of faith, because, apart from faith in the one true God, their works were **not** good works at all! In the case of Abraham, apart from faith, his “work of faith” was attempted murder – the sacrifice of his son! In the case of Rahab, apart from faith, her “works of faith” was an act of treason against her city and countrymen! But these works of faith were evidence of their true faith in God. Abraham and Rahab did works of faith.

Practical Application

Do you believe more than the demons?

Verse 19: *“You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!”* James’ point here is that **saving faith is more than head knowledge!** Why, even the demons believe, at least as far as knowing and acknowledging facts about God and Jesus!

Demons are very orthodox in their knowledge and in their beliefs about God. Demons don’t doubt that Jesus is God and that He is the only way to salvation! But demons don’t have saving faith. They just have “head knowledge.”

Do you have saving faith, or do you just have head knowledge about Jesus? Do you give only mental assent to certain facts about the Bible, God and Jesus? We’ve seen from James 2 that saving faith is evidenced and proved by good works. Without the evidence of good works in our lives, our “faith” may be a mere profession made by mouth only. It may be mental assent or head knowledge only.

If our faith is only head belief, it is dead belief. Do you believe more than the demons?