

## ***Faith that Works***

*James 2:14-26*

Sometimes it's rather easy to discern whether a claim someone makes is true. For example, if someone says, "I am a runner," you could simply ask them, "How many miles did you run in February?" If they said, "I ran about a hundred miles," you'd conclude, "Wow, you ARE a runner." If they said, "Well, I haven't actually gone running in about a decade," you'd conclude, "You WERE a runner, but not so much anymore." Sometimes it's easy to discern whether a claim is true.

But how would you discern a claim like, "I have faith in Jesus Christ"? What criteria would you use to discern whether or not that person actually has the type of faith that saves them? That's the topic of our passage in James 2 this morning. Like a dog with a bone, James relentlessly takes hold of this issue and won't let go. In verse 14 James states his thesis that "faith without works is useless." By the end of the chapter, he will have restated that thesis four times, and he will have illustrated it, answered objections, and given two examples from the Old Testament. By the end of the passage there will no doubt how a person can evaluate the claim, "I have faith in Jesus Christ."

***Faith without works is useless; such faith does not save a person. (James 2:14)***

In verse 14 James lays out the main point that he will argue and illustrate in the next 12 verses:

14 What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works?  
Can that faith save him?

Imagine, James says, that a person says, "I have faith." Yet that person "has no works"; he doesn't actually do the core things that someone who follows Christ should be committed to doing. Back in 1:26 James said that "pure and undefiled religion is to visit widows and orphans in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." In 2:8 James mentioned "loving your neighbor as yourself."

James asks that if a person says, "I have faith," and yet doesn't do these things, "can that faith save him?" The implied answer is "no." That is not a "saving faith." Therefore, the answer to his first question, "What use is that type of faith?" is "none at all."

If James' thesis here sounds harsh, remember that in the new covenant when a person has faith, s/he doesn't merely have a vague belief in God; it isn't merely being a spiritual, positive person. If you have faith, you believe that Jesus, God's unique Son, in an act of infinite humility became one of us to identify fully with humanity and then to die for our sins. If you have faith, you believe that Jesus experienced everything the world threw at Him for your benefit: He was misunderstood, rejected, and ridiculed (even by His own family - for a time); He was wrongfully convicted of blasphemy against His heavenly Father by people who didn't even know God; He was beaten, spat upon, flogged; He had spikes driven through His hands and feet and then lifted high on a cross and left to die. If you have faith, you say to God, "My well being in this life and my

destiny in the next rests in my confidence that Jesus did all of that for my benefit.” In response to that faith, God removes your sin, places His Spirit within, and makes you His daughter or son. Because you are a new creature in Christ with new appetites, you begin following Jesus as a disciple, learning to obey everything He commanded, learning to live as He lived. You say what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5, “The love of Christ controls me. . . since He died for me, I will live for Him.”

Since that’s what it means to have faith in the context of the new covenant, I believe James is making an obvious statement here. It’s inconceivable that you can have *that* kind of faith without your life being affected to the point that you live for Christ (however imperfectly).

***A real-life scenario of faith without works. (James 2:15-17)***

This would have been a true-to-life example in the churches who received this letter.

15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?

“Brother or sister” indicates that he’s talking about a fellow believer who is in need of clothing and food. James says that if you send away that person with words only, what use/profit is that? The implied answer is “none at all.” In that day, “Go in peace” (*shalom*) was a common way that Jewish people said goodbye (much like we might say, “Take care.”). That parting word is fine, but what the brother or sister really needed was food and clothing.

In verse 17 James restates his thesis and gives the parallel point concerning faith:

17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

“Even so” (i.e., in the same way) if you have faith but no works, that faith is dead.

***Lame objections to “faith without works is dead.” (James 2:18-20)***

In verses 18-20 James addresses a couple of possible objections to the idea that faith w/o works is dead. The Greek language of the first century didn’t have quotation marks, so translators supply them. Since translators disagree about how much of verse 18 was spoken by James’ opponents, different translations have the quotation marks in different places. The NASB understands verse 18 this way:

18 But someone may well say, “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”

I will spare you a description of the 8 or 10 various ways that scholars understand the punctuation and therefore the meaning of this verse. I agree with the the understanding that’s reflected in the NIV and the ESV:

18 But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

James has an opponent say that **some people have faith** and **other people have works**. The idea is that just as different Christians have different gifts, so too some Christians excel in faith and others excel in works. They don’t have to go together.

James’ response is, “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” The implication is that you can’t really show somebody your faith directly because it’s such an intangible confidence/trust in Jesus; it has to be shown by how you live.

In verse 19 James addresses just how inadequate it is to have a type of faith that is exclusively intellectual or purely doctrinal. He makes reference to the *shema* (Deuteronomy 6 - “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!”) when he writes:

19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

Believing that “God is one” is essential and good. But James points out that the demons (i.e., angels who have rebelled against God) also have that type of faith: they believe and shudder in fear. Even though their doctrine about Jesus was correct, they obviously didn’t have genuine saving faith (fallen angels actually can’t be saved). James is saying, “Come one! Your faith HAS to be better than the demons’!”

Believing what is true about God is essential. But if that belief is purely intellectual and doesn’t produce works, it is useless (verse 20). James states his thesis for the third time:

20 But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?

Faith that is never demonstrated by works is a useless faith. [see NOTE 1]

Let me emphasize here that James isn’t saying, “If you aren’t doing good works, you better get busy and do some!” If we lack works, we should examine our faith - whether or not we really believe the gospel. We’ll return to this in a few minutes; but for now I want us to remember that James is **ultimately interested in our faith** that produces good works.

### ***Biblical examples of “faith that works.”***

In verses 21-25 James establishes that in the Old Testament, people of faith also had works. James mentions two people who in some ways couldn’t be more different but in terms of faith and works were identical. James is telling us that it doesn’t matter whether you are the most revered person alive (like Abraham) or a prostitute (like Rahab), if you

genuinely believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will have the type of faith that saves you and that shows up in good works.

**Example #1: Abraham** (James 2:21-24; see Genesis 22:1-19, Genesis 15:6, Hebrews 11:17-19)

James makes reference to the account in Genesis 22 in which God commands Abraham to take his son Isaac to Mt. Moriah and sacrifice him. This is a shocking command 1) because God forbids child sacrifice throughout the OT, and 2) Isaac was his son through whom Abraham's descendants would become a great nation. The main clue we're given for this command is that God was "testing Abraham" (Genesis 22:1) to prove that Abraham's faith was genuine (see James 1:2-4).

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

As you may know, James' statement that Abraham was "justified by works" has sparked great debate in light of the fact that Paul would write some years later in Romans 4 that Abraham was justified by faith and NOT by works. This is only an apparent contradiction, not a genuine contradiction. I'll give a simple explanation that doesn't really do justice to the complexity of the problem, but I hope it helps.

First, James and Paul were using the term "justified" in two different, equally-valid ways. When Paul wrote that Abraham was justified by faith, he was saying that he was **declared righteous** by his faith. He points back to Genesis 15:6 which says that after hearing God's promise to bless and multiply his descendants, "[Abraham] he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." God justified - declared him righteous - because of his faith.

When James wrote that Abraham was justified by works, he was saying that he **demonstrated that he was righteous** by his works. James points back to Genesis 22 and the account of Abraham offering up Isaac his son on the altar, an event that happened several years after Genesis 15 (when he was declared righteous). James is supporting the argument he's been making throughout this passage: genuine, saving faith (Genesis 15) is demonstrated by good works (Genesis 22).

Second, James and Paul were referring to two very different things when they mentioned "works." Paul was talking about the "**works of the Law**" - keeping the demands of the old covenant (circumcision, the dietary laws, the sacrifices) and James was talking about "**good works**" such as loving your neighbor and showing compassion to people in need - basic types of obedience.

Notice how he continues in verse 22:

22 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;

Abraham's faith was acting, informing his works. As a result of his works his "faith was perfected" - meaning it was became mature. Over the years our faith should grow and mature.

In verse 23 James does quote Genesis 15:6, the verse Paul used to teach that Abraham was justified by faith. Significantly, James argues that *that* Scripture was fulfilled when Abraham sacrificed Isaac.

23 and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God.

In Genesis 15:6 Abraham believed God and was declared righteous. In Genesis 22 that faith in God was brought to fullest expression (it was fulfilled) when Abraham obeyed God by sacrificing Isaac. Consequently, "he was called the friend of God." [See NOTE 2]

James' conclusion (for the fourth time):

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

People demonstrate and prove that they have saving faith by the works that flow from that faith.

**Example #2: Rahab** (James 2:25-26; see Joshua 2, Hebrews 11:31)

Read Joshua 2 when you have the chance. I don't have time to recount what happened in detail, but basically Rahab gave shelter and protection to the two spies that Joshua sent into Jericho.

25 In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

Rahab's "works" of receiving the spies/messengers and sending them out in safety was the demonstration of her faith. As with Abraham, her faith was proved genuine by her works. For the fifth time James states his point:

26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

When a person's body is devoid of the spirit, that person is dead; having a spirit is the essential mark of being alive. In the same way, if a person's faith is devoid of works, that person's faith is dead.

James has established that you can tell if the claim, "I have faith," is true by whether or not a person has works that flow from that faith. James agrees with Paul's statement in Ephesians 2:8-10.

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

We are saved by grace through faith, not through works. But saving faith produces good works. There's a sense in which we are created **for** those good works!

So how do we move forward in light of this teaching?

***If you say, "I have faith," examine your life.***

I you **don't** claim to have faith in Jesus, by all means keep seeking Him through worship, Scripture, and spiritual conversations. But as we've seen, James was concerned about people who say, "I have faith" but don't have works. Because they dismiss their own brothers and sisters with words only (w/o giving food and clothing), they needed to conclude, "My (so called) faith is dead; it doesn't save me; it isn't useful to me or to others."

Some of us here today might examine our lives and come to the same conclusion. You might realize, "I prayed a prayer a long time ago. . . I can give the "right answer" when it comes to how a person is saved. . . But honestly, I don't see evidence of that faith in my life. My heart is cold toward God and toward others. Nothing within me wants to sacrifice my hard-earned dollars for people in need. I'm not too concerned about being obedient. . ." That is the type of self-deception James warns against throughout this book.

Of course genuine believers who have saving faith have periods of disobedience and even seasons when they're pretty apathetic about living out their faith. But if you don't see the types of works that flow from a living faith, it's far better to conclude, "I don't have genuine, saving faith" then to keep on pretending. The rest of your time on earth and all of eternity is at stake. Humble yourself and cry out to God for mercy; believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

If you examine yourself and do see faith **and** works, one of the most strategic things you can do long-term is: ***Cultivate a healthy, biblical understanding of good works.***  
(James 1:22-27, Matthew 5:14-16, Matthew 28:18-20, Ephesians 2:8-10, 1 Corinthians 12:14-26, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, Titus 2:11-14)

For a variety of different reasons many believers have a distorted view of good works. For example, some believers feel like God is a demanding father who can never be pleased. Works become a burdensome obligation instead of a joyful expression of saving faith.

My encouragement is to invest some time meditating on Scriptures such as those listed in your bulletin. Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for correcting our distorted views of God and good works; Scripture can teach us how to think (2 Timothy 3:16). For

example, James 1 speaks of being a “doer of the word and not merely a hearer”; James says that person will **experience blessing**. If you remain in that word and let God write it on your heart, you will eagerly look for opportunities to do good works (instead of asking, “What’s the bare minimum God expects me to do?”). The people I know who view good works this way are the most joyful, satisfied people I know.

**The Lord’s Table:** This morning we will be celebrating the Lord’s Table. The Lord’s Table is an opportunity to dwell on the gospel we believe; the bread reminds us that Jesus’ body was broken for us and the cup reminds us that His blood was shed for us. In other words, at the Lord’s table we are rehearsing our saving faith in Jesus. We are rehearsing our faith that is demonstrated through good works. If anything that’s been shared this morning has been convicting or has gotten your attention, don’t ignore it; talk with God about your faith and your works.

NOTE 1: James says you’re “foolish” or “empty” if you think that it’s fine to have faith w/o works. James uses a play on words (in Greek) when he writes that “faith without **works** is **useless**”: the word for useless (ἀργός) is formed by adding a negative prefix to the word for work (ἔργον); it could be translated “faith without works is ‘not work.’” Douglass Moo therefore translates it, “Faith that doesn’t work doesn’t work” (i.e., it’s useless).

NOTE 2: The concept of Abraham being God’s friend is found in several OT Scriptures (2 Chronicles 20:7, Isaiah 41:8), but the actual expression is found in 1 Macc. 2:52, a non-canonical, Second Temple Jewish document.

NOTE 3: When the king’s men came asking about these two spies, Rahab told them that the men had left (when in reality she had hidden them on the roof of her house). She later expressed that she believed that YHWH had delivered the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt and that He would give them the promised Land. Because of that faith, she took the risk and hid the two spies. Consequently her entire extended family was spared (as recorded in Joshua 6).