

Faith and Works – Friends, or Foes?

#9 in series “Doing What We Believe”
(A Study in the Book of James)

Are you a Christian? Have you been born-again? Do you know with certainty that you are a heaven-bound, child of God?... How can you know with any measure of assurance that you are?... And for that matter, how can you have any sense of certainty that someone else is truly a child of God?

Well, the answer to those questions has generated a great deal of debate through the centuries. Many argue that because they have gone through certain rituals prescribed by a church that they have “dotted every I, and crossed every T” that was required for them to become a Christian... Others have argued that their assurance rests upon a memory. They remember an experience they had, perhaps in their childhood, when they “prayed ‘the sinner’s prayer’” – and someone told them that they were now saved – so they base their entire hope upon that memory of such an experience as being all they need to be assured that they are going to one-day go to heaven...

But are any of those answers enough? Can the fulfillment of certain religious rituals, or the one-time emotional experience of praying and “asking Jesus to come into your heart” be enough evidence to be convinced that you are heaven-bound?

Well, to be honest, I don’t know why people have debated this issue for so long – because, right here in what is perhaps the oldest book in the NT, we have God’s Word that speaks to how one may tell whether they, or anyone else is truly a Christian... In short – there is EVIDENCE of life-changing faith in their life!... In other words – if your one-time religious decision, or experience did NOT bring about such inward change as to now cause you to love the Savior, and hate your sin – you should not be so certain that you ever “got the real deal” when it comes to salvation...

When James wrote this letter, he minced no words. He did not – in the language of boxers – “pull any punches”. He was direct and clear in stating that there are clear indicators to one having genuine-saving faith.

Many over the years have tried to pit two Biblical writers against each other. The Apostle Paul, and the brother of Jesus – James. Both, as we will see, had a lot to say about the relationship between faith and works... But, don’t be mistaken – they did not disagree with one another. We can’t arrive at that conclusion by reading what either one of them wrote!

- As we will see, James stresses the work of the believer in relation to faith... Paul stresses the work of Christ in relation to faith.
- James is concerned that the outcome of faith is genuine evidence of faith – a fruitful life (2:14). No one should confuse *profession* with *possession*... Paul is concerned that the object of faith is Christ – and that trusting in Him is without any mixture of self-reliance or self-righteousness.
- James writes shortly after the resurrection, when the church was Jewish and the Old Testament well known... Paul writes later, when the conversion of Gentiles raised questions never asked or thought of earlier.

These brothers are in perfect harmony concerning the doctrine of salvation, they are just writing from different angles.

As we read the portion of God’s Word that we will focus today – pay attention to several key words –

- Faith (11 times, 14, 17, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26)
- Works (12 times, 14, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26)
- Believe (3 times, 19, 23)
- Justified, or save (4 times, 14, 21, 24, 25)
- Dead, or useless (4 times, 17, 20, 26)

James 2:14-26 (NASB)

¹⁴ What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 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? ¹⁷ Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

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.” ¹⁹ You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. ²⁰ But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? ²² You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 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. ²⁴ You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. 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? ²⁶ For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

How can you tell if someone is right with God?... How can you really tell if you are? You can tell – not simply by what is said – but by how what is said to be believed – has really changed one’s life.

As James addresses this issue, let’s think through his reasoning, that is clearly inspired by the Holy Spirit... We begin with –

1. A Rhetorical Question

In verse 14 James proposes the question –

¹⁴ What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can [Lit. *the*] that faith save him?

This question has been debated for a long time... The issue boils down to this – What exactly is necessary for one’s salvation?... Some groups have gone the legalistic route and basically trusted in their “good works” to save them... Others have said the mind is most important and physical actions aren’t. Therefore, just believe and you will be OK... It’s a fundamental issue and one that James covers in great detail here.

Keep in mind that James is a practical book so it is natural he will emphasize the practical side. Is faith without works of any use? Can that faith save him?

James gives an illustration to prove his main point – that that faith without works is dead... It goes like this –

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 (Or *warm yourselves and fill yourselves*),” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?

To say it another way – suppose that another Christian, who is in need comes to you for help... With smooth words you bless them and act as if you care for them. Well, judging only by your words it would appear that you have great love, compassion, and mercy for this person – BUT you do nothing tangible to help this person... They go away exactly the same as they came – in need... Your beautiful words did nothing to meet their need. The rhetorical question is – what use is that?... The obvious answer is – NONE...

Such a scenario is hypocritical – it would more truthful and honest to say – “*I won’t help you. I don’t want to help you.*” The implication is that words are not as important as actions... Empty words are useless.

The same is true in the issue of faith/works. Words of faith without action to back them up is just hot air. Completely useless, hypocritical, and false.

This is sobering isn’t it?... What is our reaction when people need help? Do we actually help them out or just cop-out by only saying “*I will pray for you*”?... If we say we will pray for them, do we really pray for them?

What is the main point of verses 15-16?... Actions are more important than mere words!

James says it better in –

¹⁷ Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself (Or *dead by its own standards*).

In verse 17 James answers his question and shows the point of his illustration. This is the key point in the passage. Faith with no works, is dead. A major point of James' letter is that genuine Christianity is seen in everyday life!

What does true faith look like in the real world?

In chapter one, we learned that trials test true faith... Perseverance in trials is an indicator that a person's faith is real and that they are truly saved.

In chapter two, there is another test that will reveal true faith – and that is works... The point is similar to the one at the end of chapter 1 about hearing/doing. Knowing a lot of things/hearing a lot of things is pointless unless we do what we know is right... What does living faith look like? What kind of works might follow living faith? What does dead faith look like? Is dead faith a real faith? What warning should we take from this?

Well, as we continue through this passage, we get the answers to those questions.

2. An Analytical Process

The process of analysis often involves comparing and contrasting concepts and issues. That is what it means to juxtapose two, or more things... That is what James is doing in verse 18.

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."

Verse 18 shows us the proper perspective we should have on the faith/works issue. Instead of getting into an argument where one believer is saying he has great faith and another believer focuses only his own works, the believer should simply demonstrate his faith BY his works... In fact, there is no other way we can show our faith except by works...

Faith, by itself is invisible and intangible. You can't touch and feel "faith". You can't smell or see "faith"... Someone might say that they have faith, but it is impossible for anyone else to know that they do unless that faith is demonstrated in what they do. Faith is demonstrated by works.

How can you yourself even be sure that you have genuine faith if you are not living it out?... If you say something like; "I know I have genuine, Christian faith, because I feel it in my heart?" – be careful:

Jer. 17:9 (NASB) "The heart is more deceitful than all else, and is desperately sick; who can understand it?"

The heart is deceitful and wicked. It is easy to trick ourselves into thinking we are saved, simply because we believe some accurate doctrines like – "justification by faith", and "once saved always saved"... James is giving us a tangible test to confirm if our faith is dead dogma or dynamic, living, breathing truth that is live out in our everyday lives... Being truly saved *will* affect how we live.

A.A. Hodge (1823-1886) – Archibald Alexander Hodge was an American theologian –
"Faith must have adequate evidence, else it is mere superstition."

You need to keep clear in your mind and heart that "works" are a result of "faith", not the other way around.

A.W. Pink – "In contradistinction to the Gospel of Christ, the gospel of Satan teaches salvation by works."

Of course, God's Word is the most reliable and authoritative on this –

Eph. 2:8-10 (NASB)

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. And just what would be those "good works" that we are now to do as an expression of our having come to faith in Christ?... In short, it would be whatever He commands us to do.

A.W. Tozer – "Faith, as Paul saw it, was a living, flaming thing leading to surrender and

obedience to the commandments of Christ.” (Paths to Power)

John 14:15 (NASB) “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”

Sometimes I will wake up in the middle of the night with Sunday’s message burning in my mind. That happened early in the week, and I had to simply get up and write down those thoughts... The burden I was struggling with was – how to think through this relationship that “faith” has with “works” and clearly understand what God is saying through James... Here is what I came up with:

Two Inseparable Truths

Faith – what we believe:	Works – what we do:
The reason for our works.	The evidence of our faith.
The purpose behind our works.	The proof of our faith.
The explanation for our works.	The confirmation of our faith.
The logic behind our works.	The testimony to our faith.
Motivates our works.	Substantiates our faith.

Perhaps Mr. **Anonymous**, the most quoted author, said it best – “Faith in many ways is like a wheelbarrow. You have to put some real push behind it to make it work.”

3. A Theological Perspective

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

This statement may well be a reference to what the Hebrews call the *Shema* –

Deut. 6:4 (NASB) “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!”

Notice – Satan and his band of demons have this level of orthodox doctrine... They know the Father, the Son, and the Spirit exists – they’ve seen Him! They know God is Triune! They know of His power – they saw His creation, and they even know that His judgment is coming!... It causes them to tremble! Yet – they hate God with all of their being! They fight against Him with everything they have – even though they *know* He is real and that He is the Judge, Who will one day cast them into the pit...

So, what is their failure, if they know this basic level of truth?... They fail in the second part of the *Shema* – the command in –

Deut. 6:5 (NASB) “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

This verse shows us very clearly that mere head-knowledge – knowing even these great truths about God – does not save... Even acceptance of the fact that God is true doesn’t save. Merely having the right doctrines doesn’t save...

Verse 19 tells us that it is possible to believe in God and not be saved... It tells us that it is possible to be a theist and still go to hell...

Here is a simple litmus test to administer to yourself: Do you believe that the One True God exists? – Yes – good – so far you have the same faith the demons do... Do you have enough understanding of this One True God that you fall down before Him with “fear and trembling”? – If not – then you don’t even have the level of understanding of Who He is that the demons do!... They know that level of truth – and it will never save them! And yet, there are many people who claim they are saved – but their lives do not reflect any difference in their values, thoughts, desires, actions or life-style than even the most ardent atheist they know! They have a foolish notion that God is merely “*The man upstairs*”, and never even fall to their knees out of the realization that if He administers justice toward them – they are in trouble!...

4. A Logical Perspective

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

[] The is an old story that tells of an old Scotsman who operated a rowboat to transport passengers. On one oar he had written the word Faith, while the other bore the word Works. The

point of the story, of course, is that pulling on either oar alone would simply make one go around and around in circles. Both oars must be used to make any progress at all.

In verse 20, James is basically presenting a rhetorical question. It is a question that calls for an obvious answer – “Of course – faith without works IS useless!”... James is arguing that Christianity is robust, healthy and fruitful – and there is to be NO acceptance of anything weaker in your view of the Christian faith.

A.W.Tozer said it much better than I can – “Beware of watering down Christianity until the solution is so weak that if it were poison it would not hurt anyone, and if it were medicine it would not cure anyone.”

5. An Historical Example

Abraham

²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? ²² You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected

(Or *completed*); 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. ²⁴ You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

The whole story is found in Genesis, chapters 12 to 23...

Remember – “justified” is the process by which sinful humans are made acceptable to a Holy God... It is used in Scripture when declaring a sinner righteous in the sight of God, or when showing that one is righteous. (Rom. 2:13, 3:20, 3:24-28)

At this point, I think I will yield to the better thinking and explaining of one of my heroes of the faith – **R. C. Sproul** – “James argues straightforwardly that Abraham was justified by works. When was Abraham justified by works? When he offered Isaac on the altar. To understand this, we need to bear in mind that James is using the term ‘justification’ in a different sense, with a different nuance, than Paul does. Paul deals with the issue of how a sinner is reconciled to a just and holy God.

He uses the term ‘justification’ in its supreme theological sense. James, however, is asking how a person is justified before men, not before God. His question is: How do we know that a person has authentic faith? Jesus said, “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matthew 7:16). James labors in the second chapter of his epistle to show that a person’s true faith is shown outwardly by acts of obedience or works of righteousness. He says, “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do” (James 2:18).

Now, does God need to see your works to know if you have faith or not? Of course not. James is speaking of man’s sight. Paul says that in God’s sight, Abraham was justified by faith (Genesis 15). However, James says that in man’s sight the most telling proof that Abraham was a justified man is that he was willing to obey God even to the point of offering up his only son on the altar.” (Tabletalk, May, 1989, p. 11)

Rahab

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?

We first read about her story in Joshua chapter 2, when Jericho was concurred when God finally sent the Israelites into the Promise Land to claim it... She was not only a Gentile resident of that city, she would have been considered by any society as not being an upstanding representative of that culture. She was a prostitute who risked her own life to protect the Israelite spies who came into the city before the invasion... As a result, she was saved.

Consider the contrast and comparison of Abraham and Rahab:

Abraham	Rahab
A man, called of God.	A woman, rescued by God.

Insider – to the covenant people of God	Outsider – to Israel
Known for being a friend of God	Known for being a rebel against God
Demonstrated faith by what he was clearly willing to do.	Demonstrated faith by what she clearly did.

6. A Declared Conclusion

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

Ours is a living faith – not a dead one! When one truly comes to Biblical faith, saving faith, they know life has come to them on the inside – and it will be expressed on the outside!

Bo Bowman – in a recent FaceBook post said – “I remember when I was lost I hated to even hear the term born again! It wasn’t until God chose to have mercy on me and opened my eyes and mind that I finally understood what it meant to be born again! It was truly like I had been born again! The grass was greener and the skies were bluer! I suddenly had new desires and looked at the world totally different! I finally had hope! I suddenly had desire and hunger to hear and read God’s Word! I’m so thankful to God that He had mercy on me and poured out his grace on me!”

Do you have a testimony like that?

Questions to consider in Community Group

(Too many, so choose which would be best for your group.)

In verse 2:14, James speaks of a person having faith without works and asks, “Can such faith save him?” Can it? Why?

-
- What does living faith look like?
- What kind of works might accompany living faith?
- What does dead faith look like? How do we know that “dead faith” is not real faith?
- What warning should we take from this?
- How can one show his faith without works? Is it possible?
- Chronology is important when it comes to faith and works. Paul explains the sequence in Ephesians 2:8-10. What are those steps?
- A.W.Tozer said – “Beware of watering down Christianity until the solution is so weak that if it were poison it would not hurt anyone, and if it were medicine it would not cure anyone.” How can we be guilty of “watering down” Christianity? What can we do to assure that we don’t?
- What does verse 19 tell us about real belief in God? Is it possible to believe in God and not be saved?
- Why do the demons shudder?
- Does verse 21 contradict with the rest of the teachings in the Bible of justification by faith alone? Is this passage teaching faith by works?
- Which came first for Rahab, her faith or her works? Would her belief in the God of the Hebrews saved her if she didn’t act on it?
- James 2:24 challenges us to work out our commitment to Christ in our daily activities. What are practical ways Christians live out their faith?