

**Lesson Six**  
**THE TEST OF GOOD WORKS**  
**2:14-26**

In this section, James discusses the relationship between faith and works. This is an important matter, for our eternal destiny depends upon it. Paul states in Ephesians 2:8-10, **“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”** Paul taught clearly in Romans 3:28, **“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.”**

In light of this, many have seen what appears to a contradiction between Paul and James in that **in** James 2:24 we read, **“Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.”** In order to reconcile these positions, we must first look at:

**I. THE RHETORICAL QUESTION STATED - v. 14**

**“What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?”**

James states the question using the example of a person who says he has faith, and yet has no works. The person is desiring to set faith over against works as belonging in two separate categories. James defines the question **“can faith save him?”** The question calls for a negative answer on James’ part, in that he replies to the question in verse 17, **“Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.”** Understood in this way then the question becomes “is it faith that saves, or is it faith plus works that saves?” If this is the true form of the question, the James’ pursuing argument cannot be reconciled with Paul’s argument.

The problem is brought on by a mistranslation in our Authorized King James Version. The statement **“can faith save him”** should be translated “can that faith or such faith save him?” The marginal reading corrects this in the KJV and all the modern translations follow this rendering. The question is then changed to “can the kind of faith that has no works save a man in the final judgment of God?” James is then not contrasting faith and works but is contrasting two kinds of faith; one being dead and deficient, the other being living and genuine. The one kind is a professing faith, the other is a productive faith. There is a difference between a profession of faith and a possession of faith. How can the difference be discerned? James explains by presenting to us three kinds of faith and only one is true saving faith.

**II. A DEEDLESS OR DEAD FAITH - vs. 15-17**

**“If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.”**

James now proceeds to give a concrete illustration of an abstract principle. He pictures a brother or sister who attends the assembly, and is in extreme poverty. They are in need of clothing and food. James doesn't describe the circumstance which brought about the need, his point is that the church is confronted with an opportunity to minister to the needy. God has provided the people with an opportunity to **"Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."** (Matthew 5:16). Instead of helping the fellow believer, those who had only a profession of faith become uncomfortable in the presence of needy people. A spokesman for the group asked the needy to leave the assembly. In doing so they were given not food and clothing, but very pious words of well-wishing that their needs would be taken care of in the future, by either themselves or someone else. It was the common problem of not wanting to get involved. The congregation became guilty of what John cautioned about in I John 3:17, 18, **"But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth."**

James applies the principle behind his illustration by affirming that the kind of faith which people say they have, which does not produce good deeds or works, is a worthless thing, yes, it is a dead or lifeless faith. Dead faith is not saving faith. It touches only the intellect and goes no further.

### **III. A DEMONIC OR ORTHODOX FAITH - vs. 18, 19**

**"Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble."**

James' position is that true faith and works cannot be separated. This is objected to on the ground that faith and works are separate entities which were given by God as spiritual gifts; some have the gift of faith, and others have the gift of works. James sharply rejects this idea and challenges his objectors to give one example of true faith which did not result in good works.

In verse 19, James further describes the kind of faith he is criticizing. The content of his reader's faith was very orthodox. They believed in one true God as opposed to the polytheism of the pagans. They were commended for this, they were not heretics. But James points out that the orthodoxy of the faith professed does not guarantee that it is a living faith. Faith must be followed up with actions. The opponents of James were holding that as long as you believed the right things, your conduct was unimportant. James links this kind of faith with that of the demons. The demons had a correct view of God also, but it did not change their conduct. There are no atheists or agnostics among the demons. What else do demons believe? What is their profession of faith?

- (1) They believe in the Deity of Christ (Mark 3:11).
- (2) They confess the authority of God's word (Mark 5:12,13).
- (3) They believe in a place of future punishment (Matt. 8:29).
- (4) They believe that Jesus will be their judge (Luke 8:31).

What is the effect which this faith has upon the demons? They tremble or shudder with horror at their future destiny. But does the faith of demons change their character or conduct? Do demons do good works? The man with the dead faith was touched only in his intellect. But the demon's faith goes deeper, it touches both the intellect and the emotions: they believe and tremble! But just because one has believed and trembled at the future judgment of God, does not mean they have saving faith. Saving faith includes something more, something which can be seen and recognized. It is a changed life which all can observe by their good works. James is then asking his opponent, "You foolish person, are you willing to confess that your faith is as barren as that of the demons?"

#### IV. A DYNAMIC OR LIVING FAITH - vs. 20-26

***"But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."***

James has now described two kinds of faith that can never save the sinner: a dead faith (the intellect alone), and a demonic faith (the intellect and the emotions). He now concludes his theme by describing the only kind of faith which can save a person, which is a dynamic or living faith, a faith which is real. A faith which has the power to change a life. A faith which has its origin in the spiritual rebirth and flows from the Holy Spirit of God. A faith which make a new creature of out a dead sinner.

Warren Wiersbe describes this faith in the following manner:

Dynamic faith is based on God's Word, and it involves the whole man. Dead faith touches only the intellect; demonic faith involves both the mind and the emotions; but dynamic faith involves the will. The whole person plays a part in true saving faith. The mind understands the truth, the heart desires the truth, and the will acts upon the truth. (Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol. 2, p. 355).

True faith then leads to action or obedience, and this obedience is not an isolated event, it continues throughout the whole life and manifests itself in good works. This is what Paul so clearly sets forth in Romans 6:17, 18, ***"But God be thanked (source), that ye were the servants of sin (disobedience), but ye have obeyed (will) from the heart (emotions, desires) that form of doctrine which was delivered you (intellect). Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness (obedient actions, good works)."***

## A. Living Faith Illustrated

James now proceeds to give two illustrations of how works cannot be separated from saving faith.

### 1. Abraham the Father of the Hebrew Race.

The first is that of Abraham, the father of the Hebrew race and the model father of all believers (Romans 4:16, 17; Galatians 3:29).

Verse 21 picks up the Old Testament incident in which Abraham showed his willingness to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice unto God (Genesis 22:1-18). Verse 23 refers to the incident in which **“Abraham believed God, and it was imputed (credited) unto him for righteousness.”** (Genesis 15:6). The incident in which Abraham believed the promise of God that he was to have a son, occurred at least thirty years before he offered up Isaac (Genesis 22).

James introduces the doctrine of justification to us in this section. It is an act of God whereby He declares and considers righteous the believing sinner on the basis of His promise to the believer. It is an act, not a process. But since God is invisible and the believer's faith is invisible, how can others tell if a person is justified, since the transaction takes place between God and the sinner privately? The example of Abraham answers the question. It was not by Abraham saying he had faith. No, his faith was demonstrated to others by his works; particularly in the act of his offering up of Isaac. A changed life which obeys God's will is the visible evidence before men of a person whom God has declared justified.

Verse 24 presents James conclusions about Abraham which is based on his explanations in verses 21 through 23. Abraham revealed the reality of his faith when he was willing to offer up Isaac in obedience to God's command. James does not claim that God justifies His people on the basis of their deeds. That would be human merit. James is insisting that saving faith must show itself in a visible commitment to the word of the Lord and compassion for others. Faith alone will bring salvation to anyone, but saving faith does not come alone. It is accompanied by works which show the genuineness of faith. We are not saved by faith plus works, but by a faith which works.

### 2. Rahab, the Harlot.

The second illustration given by James to prove that works cannot be separated from faith, is seen in the example of Rahab, the harlot. She stands in stark contrast to the character of Abraham. He was a prominent Hebrew, and a moral man. She was an insignificant Gentile and an immoral woman. James shows how both are saved in the same manner. By a faith which acts in obedience to the will of God. For brevity's sake, James does not tell us when Rahab became a believer, he only describes her good deed in protecting the spies sent into the land by God.

The entire account is recorded in Joshua 2. James does not give us the content of Rahab's faith, but it is described in Joshua 2:9-11. Rahab heard the word of God and knew her city (Jericho) was condemned. (Her intellect was informed.) This truth affected her and her fellow countrymen to the point that their hearts **“melted within them”** with fear (The emotions were stirred). But she responded with her will (faith), and she did something about it. She risked her own life to protect the Jewish spies. She proved her faith by her works or actions.

## **B. Concluding Argument**

In verse 26, James concludes his argument by comparing faith without works, to a body without a spirit. It is dead. Thus a person who says they have faith but lacks works is spiritually as lifeless as a corpse. An intellectual faith, entombed in a creed affirmed by the intellect, has no more usefulness than a body without a heartbeat. That person will not be saved in the day of God's judgment.

The story is told that the Devil had a meeting with his demons to decide how to persuade men that God was nonexistent. Since they themselves believed in his existence, they wondered just how to do it. One demon suggested that they tell people Jesus Christ never really existed and that men should not believe such fiction. Another demon suggested that they persuade men that death ends all and there is no need to worry about life after death. Finally, the most intelligent demon suggested that they tell everyone that there is a God, that there is Jesus Christ, and that believing in Him saves, but all you have to do is profess faith in Christ and then go on living in sin as you used to. They decided to use this tactic, and it is the tactic the Devil is still using even today.

James, chapter two, summarizes the nature of pure and undefiled religion: Do not discriminate in your dealings with others, and prove the reality of your faith by doing compassionate deeds for others.