
Into Thy Word Bible Study in James

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James 2: 14-26: Do Faith and Works Go Together?

General idea: Real, impacting, effectual faith will have results. It will be lived out! Faith is received alone, but it does not just stand alone; it is to be shown. Faith will be backed up by the proof that it is present in a person. If there is no proof, there is a good chance that the vessel is empty of faith. If the label says “coke,” and when you open it and pour it in a glass, all that comes out is “chicken feathers,” you may come to the conclusion that the label and contents do not measure up to each other. The same case is with faith. Faith is given and received by Christ’s work of grace alone. James’ point is not that salvation requires works, an effort to receive it or even to cement it; rather, real faith will result in an outcome that backs it up. Faith will be lived out in the believer’s life, thinking, words, and actions. Faith will create initiative from the realization of who we are in Christ, and then we will live out our lives in Him, through His power and because of our convictions.

Many commentators have suggested that James was reacting against Paul; however, James predates Paul, and they compliment and complete one another rather than contradict. James was reacting to pious, fraudulent Jews as well as the new Christians who were buying into their lies and demonstrating a useless, meaningless un-impacting faith. Also, at this time, many Christians wanted to join the Zealots and overthrow the Romans. James places the emphases on impacting faith, doing good with it, not harm (James 1:26-27; 2:19).

The type of *faith* James is referring to here is not genuine, *saving faith*; rather, it is the acceptance of our Lord’s precepts. There are three types of faith, *saving* (Eph. 2:8-9), *practicing* (2 Cor. 5:7) and *intellectual* (James 2:14-26) or sometimes referred to as *dead* faith. Faith that is not powered by Christ, and then *practiced* by our trust and obedience, is useless, false, dead, and even demonic! Thus, this passage is not about salvation, but rather how we are to live (Rom. 3:24; 14:23; Heb. 11:6; 1 John 5:12).

Vs. 14-17: James is using a rhetorical statement here. *What good is a faith of words and no actions?* His point is that we are not to claim faith or brag about faith if we are doing nothing with our faith. This type of faith is phony. Faith is demonstrated by substance and connection, how we choose to live our lives and touch others for Christ. It shows how our morality is applied. If we ignore our brothers and sisters in the Lord, or in the world, while we boast we are in Him, what good is our faith? Our demonstrations are ineffectual, and even detrimental to others. Faith is not a substance that is to stand unused (1 John 3:16-20).

- *Faith*. James uses faith here as an “Academic Affirmation.” This means having a mere intellectual understanding without trusting in Christ as Savior and Lord. For James, faith was not just an allegiance to doctrine; rather, it was to be a lifestyle. It was not just an idea to believe in, but rather the purpose for our lives. Faith is not to be passive, but rather active; it is the living Spirit living in us, empowering and growing in us (Gal. 5).
- *Works/deeds* refer to ethical behavior. Real faith is never to be hidden, indifferent, or independent.
- *Naked*. God asks us to demonstrate our Christian life by helping out others in need, especially the poor. Right thought will create right actions. This is not about salvation; it is about our gratitude in Him and our obedience to His precepts.
- *Go in peace* was a Jewish farewell blessing and saying. It means, *may the Lord bless you and go away from me*. It is saying to someone, *stay warm*, while you are in a warm home with a spare coat and they have no coat and are out in the cold. But, the Law explicitly commands us to provide hospitality (Deut. 10: 17-19; 15:7-8; Isa. 42:3-4; 58:6-7; Matt. 14:14-21; 20:34; Mark 1:41; Luke 4:18). Many Jews did; however, many refused and used their faith as the reason not to give help to others—a perverted reason.
- *Dead* is a saying that means *totally useless, words without actions*. It is a lifeless corpse from whence the spirit has departed. James is saying when we do not demonstrate our faith we are as lifeless a dead body where the spirit/soul is gone! This does not mean we lose our faith; rather, we never had it.

Faith is not just an academic subject, something we just debate and talk about, nor is it about emotions; rather it must be real and it must be the motivating impacting force within us. If we have faith and do nothing with it, we are being illogical and absurd. Saving faith is a living faith; it will have genuine results! Thus, our desire, as Christians, will be to put into practice the precepts of the Lord, not because we earn anything, but because we are grateful for what we have and desire others to have it, too. Our faith will have activity that tells others and God that our faith is real.

Vs. 18-20: Faith is not just belief; as James tells us, even the demons believe in God. Belief does not save. Faith has a deeper aspect, rooted in our trust and obedience and planted in us by Christ’s work on the cross. It will have involvement, partnership, and heart. We are fools if we think all we need is to believe in God and take comfort that our salvation is assured. Our assurance, then, is not in Christ, but rather in our feeble thinking.

- *If someone says was* a literary device to demand evidence, to say “show me.” It was meant to introduce a subject to answer an objection. In other words, you cannot show me because your argument is unreasonable.
- *Faith* is like the wind. We cannot always see it, but we can see its affects. Not to have deeds with it is like having a flashlight but no batteries.
- *Show me*. James challenges those with faith to show their faith with outward fruit. James is not saying doctrine is unimportant; rather, if it is real in you, then it will be shown in you. The Jews were required to declare the oneness of God every day and then exercise their faith in Him. Many chose to only proclaim their faith, but did nothing with it. God reads our heart; others read our deeds. Thus, we are sometimes the only gospel a non-saved person ever sees!
- *One God*. James places the emphasis beyond just believing in the One God, the hallmark Jewish *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-5). The Jews were resting their faith on their words alone. Faith, to many people, has become merely an intellectual exercise; but, there is far more. There must be trust, too! It is not enough just to believe, if you have correct doctrine. So what? What have you done with it?
- *O foolish man*. This is a very strong reprimand to wrong thinking and wrong behaving. It is very reminiscence of the “fool” in Proverbs, and how judgment falls on him. Don’t be the fool (Luke 7:35)!
- *Dead*, here, means not to have any fruit, as in *no response from it*.

God did not call us just to a creed; He called us to a way of life that includes thinking, faith, reason, and action. It is not about just right thinking or right doing; it is the synergy of the two. In this way, we can look after His sheep and be His hands and feet in the world; we can be what we are to Him and then show it to others (John 21:16).

Vs. 21-26: The Patriarchs were the principal models for Judaism (Deut. 7:7-9; 2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8). Abraham’s offering of Isaac was the climax of his faith. For James to point them to Abraham, was the ultimate means to make his case. The context is living according to God’s precepts—not for salvation, but rather as a response that our salvation has impacted us and is real (James 1:19-20). The Jews were being challenged that they must not only know the law, they must obey it too, or it is meaningless (2 Cor. 3:15). It is the same with the Christian; we do not have the Law, nor need conditions for our salvation. But, what good would our salvation be unless we are transformed by His precepts into our character. Here, James uses Abraham and Rahab, two opposites in personality, experiences, gifts, and call, yet united in faith.

- *Abraham* was saved by his faith in God (Gen. 15:6; 22; 26:4-5). What Abraham did was prove his faith by trusting in God and then backing up that trust by his obedience to God's directive, even though it seemed irrational to offer up his only son, for whom he had waited so long.
- *Justified* normally means to be reconciled to God as Paul uses this term. James uses it as a proof. It is not just the profession of faith that is important; it is the possession of faith that matters. James is using this term to indicate being aligned with faith, as Paul does. *We are justified*; this means God declares us righteous before Himself by the merit of Christ's redemptive work alone, by our faith alone. No meritorious deeds are worthy or necessary from us to receive salvation (Eph. 2:8-9). However, as Martin Luther pointed out, *not by a faith that is alone*.
- *Made perfect*. The perfect is when true faith is visible and produces fruit. Faith and works are separate definitions and ideas, but they go together synergistically and are never separated from a true follower of Christ.
- *Rahab* trusted in God and she was saved. She then hid the spies sent from Joshua. She knew the city was judged and doomed and that the Hebrews were God's own. She was willing to sacrifice herself so that God would be honored and so that perhaps her family could be saved too (Josh. 2:1-21; 6:17-27; Heb. 11:31).
- Paul also was saved by trusting in God. Then, his life was radically transformed, so he put the same, if not more, energy into equipping the church as he had in trying to destroy it (Rom. 4:1-5). Paul and James do not contradict. Paul tells us outright that faith will have a response to it; thus, Paul and James do not contradict, but rather complement. Salvation is a gift, not a reward (2 Cor. 5:10)! Salvation is by His grace, condemnation is by our works. Thus, Paul places the focus of faith on its root saving force while James emphasizes its results. Paul describes the fire of faith and James the smoke; they complement one another well!
- *Faith without works is dead/Not by faith alone*. Here is the statement that brings the controversy. However, it is misunderstood. James is not saying we are saved by works! He is saying, *you are saved, but big deal if you do nothing with it!* None of our deeds can save us; salvation comes only by what Christ has done. The point here is there is an evidence for it. In theology, this is called "Antinomianism" meaning to say, *Jesus is my Savior*, but not to trust in Him, and *I do not need to obey His precepts and morals*. The balance is that we are saved by Christ alone, by faith alone. However, it will be demonstrated if it has taken root in us.

For us, Christianity is not a once for all simple prayer we pray at a crusade or church. It is not to be just an intellectual acceptance or idea. Rather, it is a

lifelong, purpose-driven lifestyle as Jesus as Lord over all (John 3:16-30). The prayer may enter us in our new life—not the prayer itself, but the focus of our faith in Christ. This leads to effectual commitment. If no commitment is shown, then we may not have the real faith and trust in the Lord, or at the very least have never ventured any further in our faith journey than when we first received Him. There is a relation between faith and works. One proves the other. All too often, the focus switches to how faith is to be used for salvation, when it is the Bible view that faith is not academic, but needs to be a part of our daily life.

It is purely by His acceptance of us that we are saved (Rom. 3:23-28; 6:23; 7:18; Gal 3:11; 5:17; Eph. 2:8-9; 1 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5). There is nothing that we can add to it, such as good works or clean living. Justification means that God's righteousness is covering us, protecting us from His wrath and punishment as a blanket! It is like getting a speeding ticket, going to court, and having the judge declare you innocent, even though you were speeding. To God you are clean, covered by what Christ has done for you. This creates our reconciliation to God; we were in perfect relationship to Him before the fall, and now we are again in harmony. Take great comfort; this does not happen overnight. Our faith has grace to it. We will make mistakes and have setbacks, but He is there for us, carrying us through. Allow Him to do so!

The Essential Inductive Questions (for more Inductive questions see [Inductive Bible Study](#)):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me? How am I encouraged and strengthened?
4. Is there a sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
5. How can I be changed so I can learn and grow?
6. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
7. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
8. What can I model and teach? What does God want me to share with someone?

Additional Questions:

1. Do you consider yourself a person who just *thinks*, or a person who just *does*? Do you base your comfort on what you do, or your works? How so?
2. The classic question is *if you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?* Think about your faith; how genuine is it? We will have ups and downs, but our faith should show growth.
3. How does real, impacting, effectual faith have a result to it? Why does faith not just stand alone?
4. Do you believe that James was reacting against Paul, or that they contradict? How so? Why not?
5. Faith is demonstrated by substance and connection. What has that meant in your life? What can it mean for you and your church?
6. How does your faith answer James' question to "show me?"
7. How would you answer this question from a traditional Catholic: When we say by faith alone, "what good would your salvation be without being transformed from His precepts and into His character?"
8. James is saying that when we do not demonstrate our faith, we are as a lifeless, dead body where the spirit/soul is gone! If we have faith and do nothing with it, it is illogical and absurd. How does this make you feel, or convict you?
9. Faith can easily become just an intellectual exercise. So, what can you do to make sure that you are applying far more to it, such as trust and obedience?
10. If James asked you, "What have you done with your faith?" how would you respond?
11. Remember the *WWJD* craze a few years ago? *What would Jesus do?* I did not like that much, because we are not Jesus. It should have said *what would Jesus have me do?* Thus, what will He have you do about your faith development (Gal. 3:2-6; 5:16; Eph. 3:16)?
12. God asks us to demonstrate our Christian life by helping out others in need, especially the poor. What can your church do to be more obedient to this precept?