

Faith Without Works – James 2:14-26

About 25 years ago, when the Miller Brewing Company was rolling out their tastes great, less filling ad campaign . . .

Leadership magazine published a cartoon that pictured a conventional looking church with a large billboard out front advertising its ministry; The billboard read:

The Lite Church

24% FEWER COMMITMENTS

HOME OF THE 7.5% TITHE

15-MINUTE SERMONS

45 MINUTE WORSHIP SERVICES

ONLY 8 COMMANDMENTS – YOUR CHOICE

AND JUST 3 SPIRITUAL LAWS

EVERYTHING YOU’VE ALWAYS WANTED IN A CHURCH . . . AND LESS!

While no God-honoring church would ever say such things, I sometimes wonder if that’s the attitude and experience of some who are already *in* the church
People in whom there’s no – quickening of conscience, feeding of the mind, opening of the heart, commitment to the things of God, and consequently *no real faith* (Hughes)
No real faith that makes a *real* difference in how they live

Unfortunately, that’s nothing new – that was the situation James addressed 2000 years ago
And his purpose then as now, is to alert us to the problem, tell us what real faith is, and urge us to embrace it and live it, if we haven’t already – it’s about faith
James 2:14-26 (v14-17)

The first of 3 main truths that James is trying to get across, is that . . .

Faith without works is useless faith (v14-17,26)

James is exposing the person who professes a genuine belief in God and the truths of his word, but has nothing to show for it – it’s just words

He says *he has faith*, but he has no *works* – there’s no outward evidence of an inward transformation

A person’s works could be the fruit of the Spirit displayed in every day living . . .

To helping an old lady across the street

It could be a consistent devotional life, to joining a Bible study in prison

It’s an all-encompassing term to include any behavior that honors God

And if our lives are characterized by general lack of such things – what good is our faith?
What good is it, he asks – rhetorical question meant to elicit a neg answer – it’s no good
Faith without works is no good – it’s *useless*
That’s the word James uses in v20

It’s useless because it’s just words, and it’s useless because it’s . . .

Uncaring – faith without works is uncaring

That’s his point by way of illustration in v15-16 . . . once again, it’s no good

In fact, it’s really callous

James is like – if that’s how your faith works, it’s useless; it’s *dead*

That’s what he says in v17

Understand that v15-16 are not the main point, but an example meant to *illustrate* the pt
Which is – that the profession of faith without works is as useless as the glittering words of a callous person, who fails to act on behalf of the poor

It has no redeeming value; It’s just *dead*

To make sure we get it, it’s the last thought he leaves us with at end of the passage in v26
Faith without works is so useless, we just as well not have it at all

- Then, in v18, he anticipates the objections of someone who has such a useless faith
Someone who shows no signs of being saved, but claims they are (v18)

This is called a diatribe – common literary device in the 1st century . . .

Where the author engages a hypothetical person, devil’s advocate, to advance argument
Most likely, the objector uses the pronouns “you” and “I” to refer to 2 people different than himself and James

His point is that faith and works are separate entities – perfectly legit in and of themselves
The two don’t need to be married (the objector would say), so what’s all the fuss?
That’s the objector’s point when he says, “*You have faith and I have works*”

To which James replies (18b) – *Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works*
IOW, if there’s no outward evidence of your faith, it’s not real faith

That’s the second thought he’s trying to get across to us in these verses
Faith without works is not real faith (v18-23,25)

The existence of *real* faith is proven or shown by the works it produces
No real works, no real faith

Real faith is more than just faith alone – that’s the point of v18

And in v19, still responding to the hypothetical objector (and don’t miss the sarcasm here), he says (v19)

You believe that God is one – most likely a reference to the Shema from Deut 6:4

Repeated by every God-fearing Jew every time they gathered in the synagogue

It came to represent all that their religion stood for – it was the great summation of their faith like the Apostle’s Creed

James uses it to say – so what; so what if you believe all the right things

What do you want, a medal?

Even the demons believe; And *shudder* because of it

Even *they* acknowledge the truth; And understand it’s implications

But what does it get them? Nothing!

Why? Because real faith is more than head knowledge

Who cares what you believe if it doesn’t make any difference in your life?

If the truth doesn’t touch your heart and affect the way you live? God doesn’t

One commentator – “It is a good thing to possess an accurate theology, but it is unsatisfactory unless that good theology also possesses us.” (Moo, 130 re Mitton)

Real faith is more than just faith alone; More than head knowledge

- Real faith is more than lip service (20-23,25)

It’s more than *saying* you trust, and *thinking* you believe – it’s acting on it

Anything else is foolishness from a foolish person (v20)

There's an interesting word-play in Gr that gives an added bite to this rhetorical question
The word for *works* in 20b is erga; Word for *useless* is argos, meaning "does not work"
So the question reads something like this – Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from erga, doesn't argos . . . that faith apart from works doesn't work?

Want me to prove it to you? Let me tell you about Abraham and Rahab (v21-23, 25)

James cites these two examples to say that . . .

- Faith and works go hand in hand (21-23,25)
If you hear nothing else this morning, hear *that*
It is *the* main thrust of this entire passage – faith and works go hand in hand
You cannot divorce one from the other when it comes to life in Christ

Nor can you lift v21 out of context here, and separate it from v22-23

Otherwise you could easily conclude that salvation is based on works

That's definitely *not* what James is saying because he immediately follows it w/ the statement in v22 – *You see that faith was active along with his works*

To which you might be thinking, how does pointing out Ab's works make me see that his faith was active with his works? I don't *see* that

Well, James assumes you know the story of Ab, and are familiar with Gen 15:6 which he cites in v23 that . . .

Abraham believed God [there's his faith because he believed in God's promise of a natural descendent], *and it was counted to him as righteousness* [there's his justification – his right standing before God]

James assumes you know that Ab's faith was right there *with* his works when he offered Isaac on the altar

He assumes that because you know the story, that *you see* that Ab's faith and works went hand in hand

Not only that, but . . .

- Ab's faith was foundational to his works – it came first
V22b doesn't say his works were completed by his *faith*, but rather, that his *faith* was *completed* by his *works* – faith came first

But the implication is that his faith was *incomplete* without his works

When Abraham put his faith in God's promises, God gave him, then and there, the status of a right relationship with him . . .

Before he had done any works, years before he was circumcised as a mark of that status, and several more years before he went up on the mountain to sacrifice Isaac

On the basis of Ab's *belief*, he was declared righteous, apart fr, and before, anything else
That's Paul's point in Rom 4

But his faith was *completed* or perfected, and God's declaration of righteousness was *fulfilled* (given its ultimate significance; v23), when he *obeyed*

When the rubber met the road

Which brings us full circle to his main point, that faith and works go hand in hand

So in v21, when James says that *Abraham* [was] *justified by works* – he means that he was *shown* to be right before God by his act of obedience

An obedience that completed and perfected his faith, and gave the fullest significance to God's declaration of righteousness

All of which resulted in friendship with him (23b)

The same friendship you and I enjoy, if our faith is real

- The same things are true of Rahab

Having heard of the power of God, and confessed openly to the Israelite spies that she believed him to be Lord of heaven and earth (Josh 2) . . .

She *acted* on her belief/faith – hiding the spies, and then helping them to escape

As a result, James says that she too was justified – shown to be right before God, because of her good works in doing the right thing

Whether you're a celebrated patriarch or a sanctified prostitute – real faith works

Faith without works is not saving faith (v14,24)

Faith without works is useless faith; Faith without works is not real faith; and . . .

Look back at v14 – *Can that faith save him?*

Another rhetorical question based on the Greek grammar, requires a "no" answer

Faith without works is not saving faith

It makes no difference in your eternity/salvation

You might say it like this – If your faith hasn't changed you, it hasn't saved you

So far so good, until you get to v24, where, if you're familiar with your Bible, James seems to contradict Paul

Paul says **Rom 3:28** – *We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*

Whereas James says (**James 2:24**) – *You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*

At first glance, it seems like a contradiction

Paul is saying – faith alone saves; James is saying – works with faith saves

If both were written under the inspiration of the HS, then both are true, and therefore they *cannot* contradict one another

So the question is, how do we reconcile them?

1. Justified means two different things

It's the same word, but has two main meanings in Scripture

The first pertains to a declaration of righteousness – that's Paul's primary usage

We are declared righteous by faith, apart from works

The second meaning has to do with proof – that James' usage

A person is shown to be right before God, by works *with* faith

So Paul would read – a person is *declared* righteous by faith

And James would read – a person is *shown* righteous by works

2. They are writing from two different perspectives

Generally speaking, Paul is talking about the *means* to salvation

God's requirements for salvation *before* conversion

While James is talking about the *outcome* of salvation

God's requirements for our lives *after* conversion

We are saved by God's grace, through our faith (our response of belief/trust), not of works – Eph 2:8-9

Our salvation in no way, is *brought about* by our works – Paul is clear about that

But once saved, our faith should *always* be accompanied by works – Eph 2:10

And the point James is making in this passage is that if our faith is not accompanied by those good works, it's not real faith

And if it's not real faith, it doesn't save, no matter how sincere you are

3. They're writing for two different reasons

Paul was talking to people who were all about *legalism* . . .

The belief that adherence to the Law, doing good works, saves you

While James was talking to people who were all about *license* . . .

The belief that justification by faith is an excuse to party

They were treating their salvation as fire insurance

“Just keep me out of hell, and in the meantime, I'll do whatever I please’

“I'm free in Christ aren't I?”

So writing for two different reasons, to two different groups of people, it's natural that they would focus on and emphasize different aspects of our faith

Far from contradicting one another, they're standing back to back fighting for the same thing – real faith; faith that works

When we have that kind of faith – it saves our soul

When we don't – it looks like this . . .

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If you profess Christ as Savior/Lord, but there's not much to back it up . . .

If you say you have faith, but there are no works . . .

The time is now to get right with the Lord

To give him your heart

To trade in your fire-insurance, and put your faith to work