

# Relationship of Faith and Works

James 2:14-26

## Intro

There is a serious problem facing the church today, it is called easy believism. Easy believism is in regards to those who believe they're saved because they said a prayer but with no real conviction of sin and no real faith in Christ. Praying a prayer is easy but there is more to salvation than mouthing words. It involves a change of heart and behavior.

The Bible is very clear that our actions reveal a lot about who we are. The genuineness of a profession of faith in the Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord is evidenced more by what a person does than by what a person claims to be. A person who professes to have faith in Christ but does not live a Christ-honouring life is a fake. True faith in Christ will always lead to a changed and transformed life.

This is what James addresses here in this passage of James 2:14-26. He clearly states that faith without works is dead (James 2:20), and a dead faith is not a saving faith. If there is no evidence of growth and good works, we have reason to doubt that salvation ever truly took place. Jesus said, *"Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*<sup>20</sup> *Therefore by their fruits you will know them"* (Matthew 7:19-20).

The Bible is clear that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone. The essence of this teaching is found in Ephesians 2:8-9: *"For by grace are you saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast."* So we see that faith, given as a gift by God, is what saves us. But the next verse tells of the results of that salvation in Ephesians 2:10, *"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."* Folks that is the fruit, the good works

Rather than being saved by some easy act of our own wills, we are saved by the work of God, by His will and for His use. We are His servants, and from the moment of salvation by faith, we embark on a journey of good works that are the evidence of that salvation. If there is no evidence of growth and good works, we have reason to doubt that salvation ever truly took place.

James wants to be sure that Christians understand that the faith that saves is an active, obedient faith! It's a faith that produces good works and deeds. A faith that produces fruit, especially the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-26).

Throughout the epistle James warned the people who think that they are believers, but if they don't control their tongue and if they are only hearers of the word, but not a doers then they deceive themselves.

Basically James is teaching about the daily practice of being a true Christian. If I have faith, faith in God and faith in Christ – then I will live a certain way.

- I will be a doer of God's Word.
- I will control my tongue.
- I will not show favoritism.
- I will speak and so do. I will walk my talk.

Through the book of James there is this emphasis on the activity, the conduct, and the behavior of those who have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the main theme of the book of James.

### **The Test of Faith**

James' objective in this passage of James 2:14-26 is to answer the question, "What is genuine, saving faith?" This question is one of the most important questions of Scripture because it deals directly with a person's eternal destiny. The most frightening deception in this life is to think that "I have saving faith" when in God's eyes it is not genuine saving faith, but a superficial faith.

James insists that a living faith will prove itself in the production of good works. There is no contradiction between faith and works. They are not totally distinct concepts but rather two inseparable elements in salvation. James insists that works are not an 'added extra' to faith, but are an essential expression of it.

In this passage James is echoing the teaching of Jesus. Jesus said some of the most stringent words ever spoken at the end of His Sermon on the Mount to those who surely thought they were saved. He warned, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who **does** the will of my Father who is in heaven.*"<sup>22</sup> *Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?'*"<sup>23</sup> *Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"* (Matthew 7:21-23).

To reiterate, James is concerned that his readers understand the nature of genuine, saving faith so that they do not have to hear those fateful words from the Judge of all humanity say, "*I never knew you. Depart from Me!*"

The purpose of James is to urge his readers to recognize and accept their need for a living, active faith and to challenge them to test their own faith by the fundamental criteria that "*faith without works is dead (or useless)*" (James 2:20). James insists that a saving faith is a living faith, proving its genuineness by what it does.

But it is a misconception to assume that his purpose is simply to stress the importance of good works. James is not advocating works apart from faith, but he is concerned to show that a living faith must demonstrate its character by its deeds in obedience.

When one reads James you might think that he is contradicting Paul. Because Paul says we are not saved by works but saved by the grace of God through faith (Eph. 2:8-9) whereas James emphasises works.

But in reality James stresses the work of the believer in relation to faith while Paul stresses the work of Christ in relation to faith. James is concerned that the outcome of faith be the fruit of good works (James 2:14). On the other hand Paul is concerned that the object of faith be Christ, unmixed with self-reliance or self-righteous works that don't honour the Lord.

### **False Superficial Faith**

In the Gospel of John Jesus addressed the false or superficial faith of some of the people in His day. For example in John 2:23-25 we read, "*Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name beholding His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part,*

*was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man."*

These "believers" in John 2:23-25 were not saved. These so-called believers did not have a saving faith at all. They merely nodded in assent when they saw the miracles that Jesus did.

These were nominal believers whose only interest was the miracles. Jesus did not need their testimony for He knew what was in man. These people had not accepted Him with saving faith, but rather they accepted Him as a powerful miracle worker. They had not believed on Him as Lord and Saviour of their lives – they simply believed on Him to be a miracle worker.

It takes more than believing in miracles for a person to be saved. Seeing the signs and believing in them would be a good beginning; in fact, even the disciples started that way and had to grow in their faith. Then Jesus proceeds to describe the evidence that one's belief is not just intellectual assent but has to result in a genuine changed heart and life.

Jesus therefore was saying to those religious Jews who had believed Him, *"If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine"* (John 8:31). To abide in Jesus' word is to obey and do what He says. So Jesus like James specifies "abiding" in His Word (which will determine what one believes and consequently how one behaves). This is the proof that their belief was genuine, and a saving belief.

James uses the word "faith" in two senses. In one sense it meant that kind of mental assent that even the demons possess or believe (James 2:19). Such faith or belief, he said, is not sufficient to save; as the demons believe in the existence of God but they are not saved. It must be a faith instead that is living and gives evidence of life in good works. "Works" to him were the outworking of saving faith.

On the other hand, by "faith" Paul meant a genuine belief that issues in action. He spoke of a faith that works through love (Galatians 5:6). When Paul said we are not saved by "works" he meant works of a legal nature by which people supposed that they could gain merit before God. Thus, when we consider the meaning of these words in their contexts, both Paul and James believed the same thing. Each was emphasizing a certain facet of the truth. Paul believed that individuals are saved only by faith, a faith that is alive and working. James also believed that people are saved by faith, a faith that is more than just a mental assent, but one that produces good works, good fruit.

Theologian John Blanchard put it well when he said that, *"The evidence of saving faith is not how much you believe but how well you behave."*

Dr. Billy Graham also echoed James' concern when he said, *"Faith that saves has one distinguishing quality; saving faith is a faith that produces obedience, it is a faith that brings about a way of life."*

Another theologian by the name of C. E. B. Cranfield correctly observed, "The burden of this section is not (as is often supposed) that we are saved through faith plus works, but that we are saved through genuine, as opposed to counterfeit, faith."

Satan is the master deceiver. Since salvation is through faith, it is not surprising that he works overtime to lead people astray on the matter of saving faith. If Satan can get someone to think that he or she will get into heaven because of their many good deeds, apart from faith in Christ, Satan is perfectly content to watch that person devote their entire life to good deeds. Also if a person who was born and raised in the church thinks, "I'm going to heaven because I believe in Jesus as my

Saviour”—but, his faith is merely intellectual and it doesn’t affect his daily life—Satan is happy with such false faith.

### **James 2:21-26**

James 2:14-20 described a dead faith but now James 2:21-26 shifts to a saving faith providing examples that it manifests itself in the production of good works.

James takes these two examples of a dynamic faith that present a contrast between Abraham, the father of the Jews and Rahab, a Gentile, woman who was a harlot. Their common characteristic was a faith that proved itself as genuine by their works of obedience.

What they believed determined how they behaved. Both behaviors were far from easy for in Abraham's case God asked him to sacrifice his only son and the other a woman was asked to put her own life on the line to save two Hebrew spies. But their faith was genuine because they proved it by their works, works of obedience to God.

You see, faith and works are like the light and heat of a candle; they cannot be separated.

**James 2:24**, *“You see then that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.”*

James clearly has shown that there is a connection between faith and works as in the case of Abraham and Rahab. While it is true that works do not really reveal what a person believes, works are intimately connected with faith for works help faith mature.

**James 2:26**, *“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”*

Just as the spirit energizes and makes the body useful, so works energizes faith and makes faith productive and profitable. As Christians we will all stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ and be judged for our deeds. Look with me at 2 Corinthians 5:9-11, *“Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him.”*<sup>10</sup> *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has **done**, whether good or bad.*<sup>11</sup> *Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences.”*

When we stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ (the Bema) the question will be “Was your faith profitable or dead and useless?” Believer, don’t take this lightly; there is a day of reckoning. Our faith has to produce works!

### **Conclusion**

Can a person believe in Jesus and not have good works? No, you can’t just believe in Jesus and not produce good works. Jesus said, *“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your **good works** and glorify your Father who is in heaven”* (Matt. 5:16). Those who neglect to do good works are missing out on all that God has for them here and now, and they are ruining their witness in the world, and will miss out on the rewards they could have had in heaven.

Are works important? Yes they are. They will save us from a negative judgment at the Judgment Seat of Christ, they will help in our witness before people, and they will glorify our Father in heaven. If the works of faith are not present, the authenticity of one's faith is in serious question. Genuine faith, faith that does result in salvation, must acknowledge the Lordship of Christ and so respond to Christ's word with actions of obedience. As Jesus said, *“He who **does** the will of my Father who is in heaven”* will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21).

In conclusion I want to us to look at two crucial verses in this passage of James 2:14-26. After James says, *“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?”* (James 2:14) He then gives a practical example of how that faith produces deeds. The example is in James 2:15-16, *“If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food,<sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?”* James is giving an example of faith accompanied by action; a faith that produces deeds. Faith does something especially for those who are in need, those who are deprived of the necessities of life. Professed compassion without kindness and care is phony.

Jesus spoke of this in Matthew 25:31-46 about the sheep and the goats when all the nations are before Him to be judged. This is what Jesus said,

*“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. 33 And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 35 for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 36 I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’*

*“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 38 When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? 39 Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ 40 And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you **did** it to one of the least of these My brethren, you **did** it to Me.’*

*41 “Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: 42 for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; 43 I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’*

*44 “Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ 45 Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you **did not do** it to one of the least of these, you **did not do** it to Me.’ 46 And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”*

Dear precious ones, this is very, very serious. Faith without works is dead. If you profess faith in Christ then do what He commands us to do, demonstrating His love and compassion to those around us that are in need, you are doing it to the Lord.

Let us put our faith in action by doing good works for those God brings into our path.