

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JAMES

FAITH ENERGISED BY WORKS!

Read James 2:14-26

Introduction

We all know that the Bible teaches that God gives eternal life to anyone who simply and only believes in Jesus Christ for it (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; etc). In this message, we come to a passage in James 2 that on first glance, seems to say exactly the opposite. We have said that faith without works gives eternal life, but James 2 says that faith without works is dead. We have said that we are justified by faith alone, but James 2 clearly says that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.

This passage has caused so much confusion and controversy over the years, that some have even tried to remove it from Scripture. Martin Luther, for example, that great reformer who battled the Catholic church over the issue of how to receive eternal life, called the book of James, “a right strawy epistle” meaning that there was nothing in it but wood, hay, and stubble. He was so insistent on justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, that he had trouble reconciling these truths with the teachings of James. We will see that with a careful and contextual study of this passage, there is no problem in reconciling what James writes with what Paul and Jesus taught. But the context is the key.

The Principle Established: True Faith will be accompanied by Action.

“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?” (v14)

James thought it impossible that someone could genuinely have saving-faith with no works. But someone could say he has faith but fail to show good works. So, the question is valid: Can that kind of faith save him?

James wrote to Christians from a Jewish background that discovered the glory of salvation by faith. They knew the exhilaration of freedom from works-righteousness. But they then went to the other extreme of thinking that works didn't matter at all. James is taking them on and did not contradict the Apostle Paul, who insisted that we are saved not of works (Ephesians 2:9). James merely clarifies for us the kind of faith that saves. We are saved by grace through faith, not by works; but saving faith will have works that accompany it. As a saying goes: faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone; it has good works with it.

Paul also understood the necessity of works in proving the character of our faith. He wrote: *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10)*. He also wrote: *This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. (Titus 3:8)*

Essentially James is asking, "Can faith exist by itself, unconnected from the rest of one's life?" And his answer is a resounding. No way! Faith without deeds is a dead faith!

An Example of Dead Faith.

“If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 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? Thus, also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (vv15-17)

To fail in the simplest good work towards a brother or sister in need demonstrates that one does not have a living faith, and we can only be saved by a living faith in Jesus. Under these two of nakedness and hunger, he comprehends all the calamities of human life, which may be relieved by the help of others; as food and clothing contain all the ordinary supports and comforts of life, Genesis 28:20; Matthew 6:25; 1 Timothy 6:8.

To say “be warmed and filled” means you know that the person in front of you needs clothing and food. You know their need well but offer nothing to help them except a few religious words. What is the profit of that? Real faith, and the works that accompany it, are not made up of only spiritual things, but also of a concern for the most basic needs — such as the need for comfort, covering, and food. When needs arise, we should sometimes pray less, and simply do more to help the person in need. We can’t sometimes pray as a substitute for action.

This is the first time James speaks of a dead faith. Faith alone saves us, but it must be a living faith. We can tell if faith is alive by seeing if it is accompanied by works, and if it does not have works, it is dead. A living faith is simply real faith. If we really believe something we will follow through and act upon it. If we really put our trust and faith on Jesus, we will care for the naked and destitute as He told us to do.

What are some marks of saving faith?

- It is faith that looks not to self, but to Jesus Christ.
- It is faith that agrees with God’s word, both inwardly and with words.
- It is faith grounded in what Jesus did on the cross and by the empty tomb.
- It is faith that will naturally be expressed in repentance and good works.
- It is faith that may sometimes doubt; yet the doubts are not bigger than the faith nor are they more permanent than the faith. This faith can say, “Lord I believe; help my unbelief.”
- It is faith that wants others to come to the same faith.
- It is faith that says more than “Lord, Lord” as in Matthew 7:21-23.
- It is faith that not only hears the word of God but does it, as in Matthew 7:24-27.

The Faith of Demons

“But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!” (vv18-19)

Now James goes one step further by highlighting the difference between bare intellectual assent and living faith. Does a demon believe in the existence of the One God? Of course. He has a pretty acute awareness of spiritual realities. That belief also is frightening to him. He trembles in fear. But does he "believe" in the sense of "have faith"? No.

The Amplified Bible, which can be tediously wordy at times, has a very helpful way of translating the Greek word *pisteuō* -- "to believe." At John 3:16, for example, the Amplified translate, "... whoever believes in (trusts, clings to, relies on) Him...."

In Greek, as in English, the verb "believe" can refer to intellectual assent or conviction, as well as a trust in (in a religious sense). Usually (though not always) the grammatical construction is different. In James 2:19, the construction makes clear the idea of intellectual assent to the concept rather than reliance and trust in God.

It is possible, you see, to have faith without love. I have met many people who had impeccable Christian beliefs, but no discernible love for God. Their thoughts were in order, but their love was cold. Just like

the demons, they believed in the truth, but did not then submit their lives, hearts, and souls to follow the True One.

See how deadly this is? Many Christians that will sit next to you in church this Sunday will believe right things but have in them no love for God. They may even live a moral life, but their heart has not been changed. It is still self-centred, not God-centred, motivated by self-interest rather than love for others. Thus, they can say pretty words to their poverty-stricken Christian brothers and sisters -- "I wish you well! Keep warm and well fed!" -- but not lift a finger to help them. This kind of faith that has no actions to express it is truly stillborn. It has the shape without the life.

Abraham as an example of living faith.

“But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” (vv20-24)

James will now use the Old Testament to demonstrate what he has already said about the character of a living faith, showing that a faith that is not accompanied with works is a dead faith that cannot save. Abraham was justified by faith long before he offered Isaac (Genesis 15:6). But his obedience in offering Isaac demonstrated that he really did trust God.

James properly estimates that Abraham actually did offer Isaac his son on the altar, even though the angel stopped him from actually killing his son. Yet he had offered Isaac his son in his firm resolution and intentions and would have surely completed the act had not God stopped him. Abraham was so complete in his obedience that he counted Isaac as dead and set him on the altar.

Faith and works cooperated perfectly together in Abraham. If he never had believed God, he could have never done the good work of obedience when asked to offer Isaac. As well, his faith was proven true — was completed, was made perfect — by his obedient works.

The “faith only” that will not justify a man is a faith that is without works, a dead faith. But true faith, living faith, shown to be true by good works, will alone justify. Works must accompany a genuine faith, because genuine faith is always connected with regeneration — being born again, becoming a new creation in Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17). If there is no evidence of a new life, then there was no genuine, saving faith.

Rahab as an example of living faith

“Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” (vv25-26)

Significantly, James used two examples of a living faith — Abraham (the father of the Jews) and Rahab (a Gentile). James perhaps is subtly rebuking the partiality that may have developed on the part of Jewish Christians against the Gentile believers starting to come into the church. Rahab demonstrated her trust in the God of Israel by hiding the spies and seeking salvation from their God (Joshua 2:8-13). Her faith was shown to be living faith because it did something. Her belief in the God of Israel would not have saved her if she had not done something with that faith.

The lesson from Abraham is clear: if we believe in God, we will do what He tells us to do. The lesson from Rahab is also clear: if we believe in God, we will help His people, even when it costs us something. As

much as you can have a body with no life (a corpse), so you can have a faith with no life — and faith without works is a dead faith, unable to save.

We can think of an apple tree, where is the life of the tree? It is in the root, and underneath the bark of the tree in the trunk. The life is not in the apples, the fruit that is displayed in season; but if the tree is alive, it will produce apples in season.