

Week 6: Faith Without Works Is Dead

The Place of the Passage

To this point in his letter, James has been making the case that once the new birth has happened to a person, it should result in a life of doing God's word. In the first part of [James 2](#), he began working that principle out in one specific example—his readers' wrong practice of showing partiality to the rich and powerful. Now, in [James 2:14–26](#), he returns to the principle itself, arguing theologically and biblically for its truth. Faith, James argues, always results in a life of obedience and good works. And a "faith" that does not do so is not saving faith at all; it is, rather, dead faith.

Works: Actions and attitudes, either good or bad. True faith in Christ will inevitably produce good works that are pleasing to God. Good works, however, can never be the basis or means of salvation, which is by grace alone through faith alone.

The Big Picture

Faith, if it does not produce works, is not really faith at all; it is dead faith that does not save.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, [James 2:14–26](#). Then review the listed passages and write your own notes on the following questions. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible, pages 2394–2395, also available online at www.esvbible.org.)

Faith without Works ([James 2:14–17](#))

[James 2:14](#) and [James 2:17](#) best encapsulate the author's main point in this section of his letter. What is his main point? When he says that faith needs to "have works" in order to be saving, does he mean that works need to be added to faith, or that works should naturally grow from faith?

Look at the three times James uses the word "faith" in these four verses. Each time, he is talking about something that is actually less than—and therefore not at all—genuine, saving faith. What textual clues do you see that would signal James's understanding that this is not genuine faith? (Hint: The first time he uses the word, he says "if someone says he has faith," not "if someone has faith." What similar clues show up in the second and third uses of the word?)

James's understanding of the relationship between faith and works seems to be something like the planting of a seed. If a seed (faith) is truly alive, it will produce a plant (works). If it doesn't produce a plant, however, it does not do any good to grab a plant and stick it into the soil above the seed. That doesn't make the seed any more alive; it is still dead! In the same way, James is not saying that faith is dead until works are added to it. On the contrary, faith is only alive if it naturally produces good works—in the same way as a seed is only alive if it naturally produces a plant. Adding good works to faith no more makes faith alive than cramming a plant on top of a seed makes the seed alive. Understanding that, explain [James 2:17](#) in your own words.

Response of a Critic ([James 2:18–20](#))

In [James 2:18](#), the author begins a brief conversation with an imaginary opponent. “You have faith and I have works,” the opponent says. In other words, some people have faith and others have works, but both aren’t necessary. James counters by asserting that, no, faith and works are vitally connected. “Show me your faith apart from your works!” he challenges. “You can’t! Because the way you know faith is alive—the way you show it to be real—is by the works that come from it.” How does James’s comment about demons’ “faith” in [James 2:19](#) help to establish his point?

What’s the difference between merely correct theology and genuine, living faith.

Examples of Abraham and Rahab ([James 2:21–26](#))

After taunting his imaginary opponent by asking if he wants to be shown that faith which doesn’t issue in works is useless, James uses the examples of Abraham and Rahab to illustrate his point. In [James 2:21](#), what does the phrase mean which says that Abraham’s “faith was completed by his works?” (Hint: a seed comes to maturity in a plant.) Is he saying that faith is alive but deficient until we add works to it? (Hint: Is a seed alive but deficient until we add a plant to it?)

The word “fulfilled” in [James 2:23](#) has the sense of “reaching its intended goal.” James is saying that Abraham’s belief in God (and his resulting justification) reached their intended goal and came to maturity in his act of obedience to God when he offered Isaac on the altar. Is this understanding (that faith grows to maturity in a life of obedience) different from what Paul teaches elsewhere? Can you think of any verses from Paul’s letters that teach the same thing?

[James 2:24](#) has caused significant confusion among Christians, because it seems to formally contradict Paul’s teaching that we are in fact justified by faith alone. Justification, however, has two different meanings in Scripture. On the one hand is Paul’s somewhat technical use of the word to mean “a judicial declaration, an acquittal and declaration that a person is to be regarded as righteous.” And Paul says that this justification happens through faith alone, on the basis of Christ’s righteousness alone. On the other hand, however, is an older and more common meaning of justification as “a public presentation of a person as being righteous” (e.g., [Matt. 11:19](#); [Luke 7:29](#); [Rom. 3:4](#)). Think of it as the difference between a wedding minister’s pronouncement that a couple are man and wife and his public presentation of them to the congregation as people who are acting in a way that is consonant with the pronouncement he has just made. Keeping in mind that James probably wrote his letter several years before Paul wrote his epistles, which of those two senses of “justify” do you think James is using here?

Is there any formal contradiction between the following two statements?

1. “A person is judicially declared righteous through faith alone, on the basis of Christ’s righteousness alone.”
2. “A person is publicly presented as righteous—that is, publicly vindicated as being righteous—not on the basis of faith alone, but on the basis of a life of obedience which shows that person’s professed faith to be real.”

Explain how both A and B can be true at the same time. Are James and Paul in contradiction to each other?

In [James 2:25–26](#), the author uses another example to teach this same point—that faith, if it is real, will result in a life of obedience. Is he saying that Rahab was *judicially declared righteous* on the basis of her obedience, or that she was *publicly shown to be righteous* by her obedience?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to reflect on the Personal Implications these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH. James does not at all denigrate the place of faith in salvation. On the contrary, he affirms it over and over again. In [James 2:14](#), for example, he does not at all question the truth that it is faith which saves; he simply takes aim at a certain kind of “faith”—dead faith—and says that it will not save. In [James 2:23](#) as well, the author affirms that Abraham was judicially acquitted through his mere belief in God. He simply goes on to state that Abraham’s justifying faith came to fulfillment—reached its maturity—in a life of obedience. Therefore, James is not in contradiction to Paul at any point. When we realize that the word “justification” is used with two different senses—judicial acquittal and public presentation—we see that James and Paul are fully agreed.

THE NATURE OF FAITH. James uses the word “faith” without ever really defining what he means by it. Nevertheless, we can see hints of his understanding of it in this section. Abraham had faith, and that is described in [James 2:23](#) as “believing God.” In other words, faith is trusting in God to keep his promises. This side of Jesus’ incarnation, faith finds its rightful object in him. We trust Christ to represent us, to live and die in our place, and thereby to save us from our sin.

Whole-Bible Connections

ABRAHAM’S FAITH TESTED. In [Genesis 22](#), God tells Abraham to take Isaac, his son (and the fulfillment of God’s promise to make him a great nation!) and sacrifice him on a high mountain. Abraham, because he trusts God, obeys, though God stays his hand at the last moment. James draws on that moment of testing to show that Abraham’s faith in God was not a dead faith. On the contrary, it was a living faith. He genuinely trusted God, and that trust naturally gave rise to a life of obedience.

RAHAB’S FAITH SHOWN BY HER OBEDIENCE. In [Joshua 2:8–11](#), Rahab tells the Israelite spies that she has heard the stories of how their God rescued them from Egypt, dried up the Red Sea before them, and defeated their enemies. Moreover, she believed that those stories were true, trusting in the God about whom they were told. Her belief, however, did not just stop at an intellectual assent. It worked itself out in action—in the protection of the messengers. The story of Rahab thus makes James’s point quite powerfully. Faith is not just mental assent, nor is it just an intellectual profession. Faith, if it is alive, will result in works. And faith by itself, if it does not result in works, is dead—that is, it is no real faith at all.

Theological Soundings

GOD'S JUDICIAL ACQUITTAL OF US IS THROUGH FAITH ALONE. Both James and Paul are agreed on this. Paul is very clear on this point in [Romans 3](#) and throughout Galatians, and James too is clear in multiple places ([James 1:18; 2:14–17; 2:23](#)) that it is faith which becomes the occasion and the instrument of God's judicial declaration of his people as righteous. We believe in Christ, and we are declared righteous on the basis of his life, death, and resurrection in our place.

LIVING FAITH WILL EXPRESS ITSELF IN OBEDIENCE. This has been James's point throughout his book, but Paul is entirely agreed. In [Romans 12:1–2](#), for example, he writes: "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." And in [Colossians 3:1–3, 12–13](#) he says, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. . . . Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

DEAD FAITH DOES NOT SAVE. Again, James has been very clear about this point, and Paul agrees. In [Ephesians 4:17](#) and 5:3–5, Paul says to professing Christians, "Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. . . . But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God." Simply professing faith in Christ is not enough, Paul says. Your profession of faith must result in a life of holy, authentic obedience.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of [James 2:14–26](#) for your own life today. Note the personal implications for your walk with the Lord in light of (1) the Gospel Glimpses, (2) the Whole-Bible Connections, (3) the Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. [James 2:14–26](#)

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you engage in this study of James. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key

things that the Lord may be teaching you—and to take note of things to review again in the future.