

James 2:14-26 “Faith Without Works is Dead”

Often people make claims that are inconsistent; here are a few exaggerated examples.

It is an absolute fact that all truth is relative. I believe in freedom of speech, if you agree with me. I love my wife, and my two mistresses. I eat healthy and drink a 2-liter soft drinks every day.

In Luke 6, Jesus pointed out an inconsistent truth claim, He said, *“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.”*

Jesus point here is that to make the claim that he is Lord, while not obeying Him is a deceptive inconsistency.

Well, today we are going to see in James chapter 2 that James is concerned about the same type of dangerous inconsistent truth claim.

Claims like, “I have faith, but I don’t have works.” I love God, but don’t care for my brothers and sisters in Christ. I call Jesus Lord, but I don’t do what he commands. I believe in sound doctrine, but I can’t be bothered with obedience.

James says that when the claim of faith does not line up with actions, that faith is dead, that type of faith does not save.

READ James 2:14-26

OUTLINE

1. (14-19) The claim of faith.

a. If someone says he has faith (14-17).

b. Show me your faith (18-19),

2. (20-26) The hall of faith.

a. The Patriarch (20-24).

b. The Prostitute (25).

c. The Body (26).

1a. If Someone says he has faith (14-17)

James says, *“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

James says, if someone SAYS he has faith but does not have works, can THAT faith save him?

It will be helpful for us as we go through this section to understand how James is using the word faith here.

The Greek doesn't help make a distinction in James different usages of the word “faith”. It is always the Greek word “pistis”.

However, often when he uses the word “pistis”, he means only a claim to faith, not true, saving faith.

And his conclusion is that the type of faith that does not save, which often he will just refer to as faith, is the type that does not produce works.

OK, so to make what I said a little simpler, just know that sometimes in this passage James is going to use the word faith to refer to a claim to faith, not actual faith.

James gives two examples of what he calls “that faith” the faith that produces no works.

First, he brings back the subject of having mercy upon and caring for the needy.

This was obviously a problem that existed in the churches that James was addressing.

Remember in 2:1, he talked about showing favor to the rich and looking down on the poor brother.

Also, in chapter 1:27, he talked about how “true religion” is caring for orphans and widows in their distress.

Here in 14-17, James brings back the poor brother and sister.

He says, one of you sees a brother or sister poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and you say to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you don’t give them anything that they actually need.

He says the empty statement without any actual help is just as beneficial to the poor as the claim of faith is to the person whose faith produces no works.

So, a claim to faith, saying you have faith, without works is like someone who speaks empty words into a needy persons life, but does nothing to help them. James says, that faith is dead.

That faith is not seen, it is not visible. And that brings us to point **1b. “Show Me Your Faith” (18-19)**

James says, *“But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!*

The statement “show me your faith” is VERY important for understanding James’s teaching on faith in this chapter.

James isn’t saying that Faith plus works saves you. He is saying that faith is **seen** through works.

Mark alludes to this aspect of faith in Mark 2. When the friends of the paralytic men lowered the man in the house so that he could be healed by Jesus, the text says that Jesus “saw their faith.” (v. 5). Because it moved them to act out of love for their friend.

The new birth may not be invisible, but the life it produces is visible.

James gives another example of faith that does not save.

He says that if you believe that God is one, you do well. In this, he is referring to what is called The Shema.

The Shema comes from Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

This became an orthodox creed for Old Testament believers that they recited every day. This is a core, foundational truth for the Christian faith.

And James commends the person who says that they believe in the “Shema”. You do well.

However, he goes on to say, demons believe this too. Demons are not atheist. They don’t believe in false gods. They have even been in the presence of the one true God.

Their theology is good. But they do not have faith. Their will and their actions are not changed because of what they believe.

Demons do not have the heart of God or desire to please God, even though they believe in God.

But James says that the Demons at least have the proper response to God in the midst of their orthodoxy, they “shudder”.

Unlike someone who has been deceived by a claim to faith, the demons may not have true faith, but at least they are terrified because of what they know about the God they refuse to serve.

Now James is going to continue making his case by appealing to the faith of two historical figures, and this brings us to point 2. **“The Hall of Faith” (20-26)**

He starts with the patriarch Abraham, he says, *“Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” (20-24)*

James says, if what I have said so far has not convinced you, and you are continuing with the foolish idea that faith without works is saving faith, let me appeal to our father Abraham.

He says, Abraham was justified by his works when he offered up Isaac on the altar.

James is referring to the account in Genesis 22 where God told Abraham to go up on Mount Moriah and sacrifice his son to God.

Now, as you heard in the scripture reading God did not make Abraham go through with sacrificing his son. God told him to stop and provided a ram as an offering in the place of Isaac.

In Genesis 15, God promised Abraham that his children would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abraham believed this and his belief in this promise was credited to him as righteousness.

James quotes Genesis 15 in verse 23, pointing out the “crediting of righteousness” type of justification. This is what we would call legal or forensic justification. God declared Abraham righteous when he believed.

But, when James says in verse 21 that James was justified by works when he offered Isaac, he is not denying the initial justification in Genesis 15, he is just saying that the works proved out, or “justified” the real faith he had back in Genesis 15.

This might be confusing but bear with me. Let’s now look at the difficult verse 24, where James says, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

This seems to be a direct contradiction of Paul in Romans 2:28 when he says, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.”

Let’s try to clear up this seeming contradiction.

First, James and Paul are addressing different concerns and therefore are using the word justified in different ways.

For some reason when we look at the bible, we think that words ought to always mean the same thing in every context, even if we understand that in our own language that is not true.

Let me give you a few English examples of the same word meaning something different in a different context:

“Why does my dog **bark** at the **bark** on the dogwood?” Same word, but you immediately understand that even in the same sentence, the context explains that one is a sound your dog makes and the other is the outer layer of a tree.

“Why did you **break** my coffee cup right before our coffee **break**?” “Do not **play** with your phone while we are watching the **play**” “He **rose** out of his seat and handed her a beautiful **rose**.”

When Paul refers to Justification in the context of Romans and Galatians, he is dealing with an audience who wants to add their own works to their righteousness.

When James refers to Justification in the context of his audience, he is dealing with an audience who think that their faith doesn't have to produce the fruits of the Spirit in order to be saving faith.

For James, justification is more like vindication or proof. Works justify by proving the claim of faith.

It is also helpful to note that Paul agreed with James in this teaching. In Galatians 5:6, Paul uses the phrase, "faith working through love".

For Paul faith is a "working faith". In Romans 1:5, he uses the phrase, "the obedience of faith." Faith produces obedience.

Both James and Paul teach that true, saving faith is validated by works of obedience.

Sam Allberry says, ***"How can you tell if someone is justified? How do you know if they're considered righteous by God? The answer is not by mere profession of faith. Anyone can claim to be trusting in Christ. You could train a parrot to say it. NO, "faith alone" (in the sense James is using it in these verses) is insufficient. The real evidence is how that faith moves someone to obey what God has said to them."***

Now, in James' Hall of faith, he uses a second positive example: Rahab the Prostitute.

He says, *"And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?" (25)*

James uses two very different people in his examples.

One was a rich man, the father of the Jewish people and the other was a female, gentile prostitute.

I can't help but think that James is still subtly making his point that God does not show partiality when he grants faith to individuals.

The point is the same with Rahab as it was with Abraham. Her faith was not mere profession, or intellectual assent to certain doctrines, her faith acted.

Rahab did not turn to the Jewish spies in her land and say, "I believe in your God, and I hope you escape the soldiers, now go in peace, be safe and be victorious!"

No, she acted. She did express faith in the God of Israel, but she also hid the spies and deceived her own people when they tried to find them. By faith, her actions made her an enemy of her own people and an ally of God's people.

Now, I want to make one last point about verses 20-25. The section I am calling James "Hall of Faith".

Please turn to what we normally call the hall of faith in Hebrews 11.

In this chapter, the author of Hebrews defines faith as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. But he makes clear that faith is not just an idea, faith does things.

Look at verse 8: By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance.

Look at verse 31: By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

James is saying basically the same thing that the author of Hebrews is saying in the hall of faith.

True and living faith does things in the one who possesses it. Faith was the instrument that produced the works of God's people throughout history.

Now, James ends with a final negative illustration. He says, "*For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.*" (26)

James wants you to ponder this idea. When you see a dead body, no matter how much the mortician tries to make it presentable, the absence of life is evident.

James says, it is the same with faith that produces no works. The absence of life is evident.

So, I believe James would have you ask yourself; does my life, my speech, my love for others, make it harder or easier for others to see a difference in me?

Would your life cause an unbeliever to think; why should I follow Christ; it hasn't really changed them?

As we conclude this sermon, I understand that the challenges that James presents are not necessarily easy.

But don't ignore the challenge. I understand that these types of passages tend to meddle with the comfort of our assurance.

It is OK to work out your salvation with fear and trembling as Paul says in Philippians 2:13.

Thomas Watson said, *“If there is anything excellent, it is salvation; if there be anything necessary, it is working out salvation; if there be any tool to work with, tis holy fear.”*

And my hope is that if anyone here has the dead type of faith that James describes in this passage that they will be plagued with “holy fear”. That fear could be the path to true faith; to true salvation.

Now, having said that. I also want you to take comfort. James is not saying that the works that are produced by faith are perfect works.

After all, he uses Abraham as an example of someone who was justified by works. We all know that Abraham was not perfect in all of his works.

Just because your righteous works are inconsistent, does not mean they are not being produced by saving faith.

And if you have the kind of heart that earnestly desires do seek God and to serve the Lord Jesus Christ, but your heart is constantly condemning you (and I know this kind of heart well), remember the words of John in 1 John 3:19-20:

“By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.”

So, beware of the deception of claiming faith that possesses no works.

If you have fallen for this deception, turn to Christ, he will remove your dead faith and give you a faith that is living and active. Amen.