

Faith Without Works Is Dead – Part 1

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – James contends that saving faith demonstrates itself through the works of the believer
2. aim – to cause us to understand genuine saving faith and to live that faith out in all of life
3. passage – James 2:14-26

b. outline

1. The Substance of Saving Faith (James 2:14-17)
2. The Display of Saving Faith (James 2:18-19)
3. The Justification of Saving Faith (James 2:20-26)

c. opening

1. the **new section** of the letter
 - a. (**probably**) the most *infamous, controversial, misunderstood, and troubling* section: “*faith without works is dead*”, “*justification is not by faith alone*”
 - b. (**most likely**) this is James *defending his primary point in the letter (i.e. defending his thesis)* ...
2. the **outline** of the letter
 - a. James’ statement in **1:22** is the **thesis** of the entire work: “*be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves*” – living in the deception of thinking one way and acting another
 - b. the **tendency** within us: to “disconnect” what we *believe* from what we *do*; the “natural” condition of the flesh whereby we tend to think one way but act another (**a self-deception**)
 1. **IOW**: to *assume* (in our minds) that we are followers of Jesus, but to act **inconsistently** in those beliefs – to *say* that we are believers, but to *deceive ourselves* by our *actions*
 2. **IOW**: **what is genuine saving faith (vs. a faith that is just “professed”)?**
 - a. what does it mean to have “faith?” – **answer**: to be a doer of the word, not just a hearer ...
 - c. **outline**: the elements of *saving* faith are ...
 1. **Its Testing (1:1-18)** – the recognition that the Christian life is *hard*, trials are an *essential* part of faith; faith, *by definition*, must endure through trials *or it is not actually faith*
 2. **Its Consistency (1:19-2:13)** – the statement of the thesis, the importance of consistent belief with action as the measure of true religion (connecting belief to practice)
 3. **Its Substance (2:14-26)** – the substance of true faith as demonstrated in every aspect of life, a real trust in Christ that manifests itself as submission to him in every part of our existence
3. the **methodology** of this section
 - a. first, James will define (**by inference**) the **substance** of genuine, saving faith
 1. he will use two (2) rhetorical questions that clearly define this substance (**vv. 14-16**)
 2. he will state his point regarding the true substance of faith outright (**v. 17**)
 - b. next, James will argue (**by visual**) the **display** of genuine, saving faith
 1. he will invite his readers to display their faith as a reflection of the nature of God (**vv. 18-19**)
 - c. finally, James will prove (**by Scripture**) the **justification** of genuine, saving faith
 1. he will use Abraham and Rahab from the O.T. to prove his point (**vv. 20-26**)
4. the **starting point** of this section
 - a. **note**: we must **define** the two keywords used in this passage: faith (**x11**) and works (**x12**)
 - b. **why**: this passage is difficult (for many) because it is approached *assuming* an understanding of the two words, and (because of misunderstanding) *misinterpret* what James is *actually saying*
 1. **e.g.** James is *not* using the term “*faith*” in the same way that Paul uses it in **Romans 3:28** “*one is justified by faith apart from works of the law*” (Paul) vs. “*a person is justified by works and not by faith alone*” (James; v. 24)
 - a. to assume that the term is being used *identically* is where the “contradiction” appears
 - b. however, if the men are using the word *differently* (in their specific contexts), then there isn’t a contradiction between the two statements (**see below**)

I. The Substance of Saving Faith (James 2:14-17)

Content

a. question #1 – an assertion of the point (v. 14)

1. or, what *good* (benefit; see also **v. 16b**) is it to *claim* to have faith (“*says he has faith*”), but not to have works associated with that faith – can that “faith” save the one who professes to have it?

2. “faith” (*pistis*) – a word with a *wide semantic domain* in the N.T. (i.e. with many different uses)
 - a. e.g. “world” (cosmos) = the planet; every human; a subset of human beings, a worldview, etc.
 - b. biblically, “faith” can mean anything from “what can be believed” to “trust” to “trustworthiness” to “doctrine” to “promise” to “intellection conviction” to “faithfulness” to “believe” to “assurance”
 1. **question:** how can we know which of these “forms” James is using? **answer:** by assessing the *usage* of the word *in this context*
 2. **obviously:** James cannot be using the term “faith” in the biblically robust sense of: *a radical trust in the promises of God manifested in the person and work of Christ – a radical trust in the completed work of Christ as the only basis for righteousness in the presence of a holy God*
 - a. is James suggesting that *genuine, true, saving faith cannot save*?
 - b. no, James is suggesting that **genuine, true, saving faith has certain characteristics that differ from the “popular” or “common” view of faith (often) present in the church**
 - c. generally, the concept of “faith” is approached in one of these ways:
 1. a religious or spiritual **system** – e.g. the Catholic faith, the *Baptist Faith and Message*, etc.
 2. a sense of **wishful thinking** – e.g. I have faith that this pandemic will end soon (why?)
 3. a common **identity** based on the acceptance of a set of religious or spiritual propositions
 - a. i.e. to *profess* being a Christian by accepting certain “truth claims,” being *identified* by those propositions through a “loose” affiliation, then acting in the *minimalistic* ways defined within the “framework” of that affiliation
 - b. e.g. the “altar call” version of Christianity = the call to “accept Jesus” (by profession), identify as a “Christian” with a loose affiliation with the church (often through baptism), then carry out the “minimums” required by that affiliation (church attendance, etc.)
 - c. **irony:** although today is “officially” Easter Sunday, many such people are (literally) unable to fulfill this yearly “obligation” today – i.e. to carry out a “minimum” of what it means to be a “professing Christian”
 3. **here:** a person who “says” he trusts God (professes a set of propositions), but lacks certain *characteristics* that should be **inherently visible** in the life of the one making such a profession
 - a. e.g. the use of the word “Lord” = as a *master* (by action) vs. as a *title* (by profession)
 1. **Romans 10:13** cf. **10:9** = to call on the “name of the Lord” by confessing that “Jesus is Lord” understanding the ramifications of “God raised him from the dead” (i.e. his resurrection implies that he is Lord over all and therefore he is Lord over me) – Lord = submission to a master
 2. **Luke 6:46** cf. **Matthew 7:21f** = to profess Jesus as “Lord, Lord” but “not do what I tell you” or “not do the will of the Father” – Lord = a title, but not one of submission and obedience
 3. **IOW:** the difference between “accepting that Jesus is Lord” vs “acting as though Jesus is Lord”
 - b. **James infers that faith must not be just a profession, but something far greater, by asking this first question: can a professorial “faith” really save a person, or is more required?**
- b. question #2 – an illustration of the point (vv. 15-16)**
1. **note:** the question does not imply that the primary mission of the church is to meet temporal needs
 - a. e.g. liberal “Christianity” rewrites the gospel to be *primarily* about “social justice” matters, and rejects the *true* content of the gospel to be about *eternal* matters (i.e. faith and repentance)
 - b. but, assuming that application of this question/illustration *is to miss the point*
 1. true, people who understand *grace* re: sin and justice will *certainly* understand the need to give *grace* to others (i.e. mercy triumphs over judgment; **v. 13**)
 2. but, such people will also recognize that *temporal* needs are *far less important* than the eternal need that *faith in Christ truly resolves* – which is the *point of the letter*
 2. **note:** the question is designed to be another **preposterous** illustration that makes a strong point
 - a. e.g. looking in a mirror and forgetting what one looks like, justifying murder but not adultery
 - b. replaying the question/illustration: imagine a poorly clothed and hungry individual comes to the church, and you see/hear of their need, and then pat them on the head, escort them to the door, and say “I’m so glad that we were able to feed you and clothe you; go in peace”
 1. **note:** James refers to a “brother or sister”, implying that the needy person is a *fellow believer*
 2. **IOW:** it’s as though the person **professes something to be true that isn’t true because no actions align with the statement**
 3. **IOW:** to “feel good” about having “done something” *by only saying the words* is **preposterous**
 3. **thus:** the illustration = “claiming to have faith is not the same as actually having faith”
 - a. **James infers that faith must be far more than just words by asking this second question: can it truly be considered faith if its only words, or is more required?**

c. the substance of saving faith (v. 17)

1. “works” (*ergon*) – a word with a *simpler semantic domain* in the N.T. (**i.e.** a simple idea)
 - a. biblically, “works” is primarily associated with “deeds” or “labor” – the exertion of *energy* in order to accomplish a goal; human actions towards a specific purpose; labor with meaning
 - b. **question:** what is the understanding of this “overused” word *by modern Christians*? **answer:** simple religious activities; the keeping of *minimal standards* of behavior ordained by the church
 1. the term is often associated with the religious activities of the Jews as they attempted to keep the law (**i.e.** the works of the law; **e.g. Romans 3:20**)
 2. thus, Christians “apply” this word to mean simple religious activities that we should do
2. **here:** James is *obviously* using the word with a much *stronger intention* – **i.e.** he knows that his audience *is already* doing the “minimums” (**e.g.** gathering in their “assemblies”; **v. 2**)
 - a. **thesis: works, in this context, is the effect of faith on every aspect of the Imago Dei**
 - b. **i.e.** the effect of faith on our rational thought, our emotional responses, our volitional choices (both moral and amoral), our speech (both form and content), and every action “spilling out” of us
 - c. **IOW:** a **radical** trust in Christ = **a trust in Christ as Lord characterized by a set of existential actions (at the core) flowing out as utter submission to him in every area of our lives**
3. **remember:** faith always has an object – faith is always placed “in something”
 - a. **question:** what is the *object* of the “faith” of the “professing Christian?” **answer:** his *profession!*
 1. **i.e.** to point to the profession and claim that God is “obligated” to save you for doing so *regardless of what the rest of your life consisted of ...*
 2. “*faith without works is dead*” = such a faith has no “life” in it; it is “dead” in much the same way that the reprobate man is dead in his trespasses and sins – his spiritual nature is unable to “do” what God requires
 - b. **question:** what is the *true object* of faith? **answer:** the completed work of Christ, *the Lord!*
 1. **i.e.** to point *away from oneself* to Christ – to be “represented” by Christ before the Father’s judgment because we have *fully submitted* ourselves to his Lordship
 2. “faith with actions flowing out of a regenerated and submissive nature is eternally alive”