

Faith Without Works Is Dead – Part 2

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 **philosophical journey** into this letter (*i.e.* the *fundamental* questions of human existence)
 - a. **first question:** is there a God? answer: yes, there is a Creator who has established all things, including *us*, therefore everyone knows he exists, and answers to him *and to his law*
 - b. **second question:** so, how can any of us, *as fallen, sinful men*, know this God? answer: by faith in his promises as those promises are manifested *in the person and work of Jesus Christ*
 - c. **third question:** so, what is faith; true, genuine, relationship-with-God faith? answer: a trust in him that permeates every aspect of our being, and thus our actions, *as his image bearers*
 - d. **note:** the Scriptures *as a whole* answer the first question, the *New Testament* in general answers the second question, and the *letter of James* is designed to answer the third
 - e. **IOW: what is genuine saving faith (vs. a faith that is just “professed”)?**
 1. a saving faith is *tested* through trials, it is *consistent* in its actions, but it also has a *specific substance* that makes it *real and concrete* ...
2. the **methodology** of this section
 - a. first, James defined (**by inference**) the **substance** of genuine, saving faith
 1. using two (2) rhetorical questions, he infers the reality that faith *is not just words*
 2. stating his point regarding the true substance of faith outright in **v. 17** – a faith that is just professed is not a true faith, just as a benevolence in just words is not a true help to another
 3. **remember:** James uses “*faith*” and “*works*” in different ways throughout this pericope
 - a. **e.g.** James is *not* using “*faith*” throughout this passage as Paul does in **Romans 3:28**
 - b. faith as either 1) a “profession” of belief in “something” or 2) a trust in the promises of God
 - c. works as either 1) minimalistic religious practices or 2) the permeating of the entirety of the *Imago Dei* in the believer by his trust in the promises of God
 4. **faith:** a **radical** trust in Christ = **a trust in Christ as Lord characterized by a set of existential actions flowing out as utter submission to Jesus in every aspect of our lives**
 - b. (**now**) James will argue (**by visual**) the **display** of genuine, saving faith
 1. he will invite his readers to “**show**” 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**)
 - d. **IOW:** he will set out from **v. 18** to make his case for the definition above

II. The Display of Saving Faith (James 2:18-19)

Content

a. the objection of the interlocutor (v. 18a)

1. the **rhetorical device:** the interlocutor = a imaginary reader of the letter raising an objection to which the writer responds in anticipation of the objection
 - a. a common approach by Hellenistic writers, including Paul, as seen **e.g.** in **Romans** – an effective method of teaching designed to *advance an argument* by anticipating objections
 - b. **i.e.** “*but someone will say ...*” = one of you, *in the audience*, may say ...
2. the objection: “*you have faith and I have works*”
 - a. difficult to understand the objection without getting into James’ response below it, however ...
 - b. it is likely that the objection is simply a “*que sera, sera*” reply to James’ inference in **vv. 14-17**
 1. **IOW:** you go your way and I’ll go my way; I have made my “profession” and that is enough for me (IMO); you do what *you* think is needed, I’m fine thank you very much!

b. the reply to the interlocutor (v. 18b)

1. **thesis:** faith can only be “shown” by the works it produces – “I will show you my faith by my works”
 - a. the phrase “show me your faith apart from your works” can have two (2) possible interpretations, based on the definition of the word “works” (see above)
 1. those things *flowing out* of a faith that transforms your life = real faith is only demonstrated by its actions; trying to separate the two is **incoherent** (**IOW:** one can only show faith *by* ones actions in time and space, not just in some artificial “separation” of faith from works)
 2. those “minimalistic” religious practices you rely on = a **challenge** by James to his interlocuter to prove his faith *without pointing to any minimalistic religious practices or professions*
 - a. **IOW:** prove that you have faith in God without “pointing to” any of these common “pieties”
 - b. **IOW:** if you were put on trial for being a Christian by non-churchgoers, would there be enough evidence to convict you, *outside of your “church life?”*
 - b. **the irony:** during this pandemic, we are being “kept away” from those *pietistic practices* that most point to as evidence of their “faith” – the *test of faith* is whether we continue to truly seek God
2. **point:** the connection of faith and works is evident – a faith *without works* is dead, only faith that can *show itself (prove its existence) by its works* is alive
 - a. but, now James will drive this point home, in a most *unusual* way ...

c. the nature of God as one (v. 19)

1. James is clearly making a reference to the **Shema (Deut. 6:4)**
“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (say it like Charlton Heston)
 - a. Shema = hear – a prayer (or mantra) that serves as the centerpiece of Jewish prayer rituals
 1. it is repeated twice-daily, and is often the last words said before going to sleep at night
 2. it is spoken as a *core religious creed* by the faithful Jew, as something *heard from God*
 3. **remember:** the audience of this letter is completely *converted Jews* (in ~45AD)
 - b. the Shema represents the “oneness” of God in two (2) distinct ways:
 1. it confesses the **uniqueness** of God – that there is only one (1) God
 - a. **notice:** by the time of Jesus, Jews in Palestine were *fiercely monotheistic*, and hated any form of culture or religion that served multiple gods (**e.g.** Samaritans, Greeks, Romans)
 - b. **consider the timeline:** God calls a pagan polytheist (Abram) to Canaan, a land of many polytheistic people, but establishes Abram in himself by promise to bring forth a nation – a nation that would *know the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob* – they would:
 1. be established as a nation in Egypt, and then brought out by the *direct* hand of God
 2. stand in his presence at his holy mountain and receive his law (**see Exodus 20**)
 3. be helped by him to overthrow all of the polytheistic peoples in Canaan
 4. but, wander into various forms of polytheism through their history *and be exiled for it*
 5. but, return (as a remnant) to Jerusalem from Babylon *having learned the lesson*
 - a. **consider:** is it possible that this “exile” of pandemic is designed to cause many “false believers” to fall away from the gathering of saints, to *finally* push them to leave?
 - b. **principle: true followers of Jesus have always had to take a risk in joining together to worship Christ – how many are compelled now to take that risk?**
 - c. **IOW:** a First C. Jew would confess the Shema as a core belief – there is only one God!
 2. it confesses the **unity** of God – that God is only of a single nature and purpose
 - a. that God is *indivisible* = he is unchanging, immutable, holy, **simple** = he is so perfect that he is utterly *singular in nature*, and his *purpose is utterly consistent with his nature*
 - b. **IOW:** all that God does is consistent with all that God is – **e.g.** the Ten Words (the Decalogue) of **Exodus 20** are a reflection of his nature; he demands for *us* to be utterly consistent in word and deed *as he is utterly consistent in nature and action*

d. the nature of faith and works as one

1. the Shema presents an “issue” for the believing Jews in James’ audience
 - a. Jewish Christians were persecuted and driven from the synagogues because they were *assumed* by other Jews to be worshipping “another god” (**i.e.** in Jesus)
 - b. in fact, the first major issue that the church dealt with was the nature of Jesus and his relationship to the Godhead (**i.e.** at Nicea c. 325AD) – that Jesus *is fully God and fully man (homoousios)*
 1. specifically, that the unity of the Godhead is such that God is *one God who has eternally existed in three Persons*, yet those three Persons are co-equally God *by nature and purpose*
 2. there is no “division” in God by virtue of his *personhood* – his nature is perfect unity
 - c. so, James argues that Jewish Christians, *confessing the Shema*, also (by definition) confess that Jesus is God – that Jesus *is* Yahweh, and there is **unity** *between he and the Father*

1. “*even the demons believe ...*” = the nature of Jesus is known even to those who hate him
 2. during Jesus’ ministry, they had “some” idea of his nature (**Matt. 8:29; Mark 1:24**), which became fully evident to them after his resurrection and ascension
 3. “*they shudder*” (or are greatly afraid) = now they know that the nature of Jesus as *God* means they are doomed – their fate is sealed by the power of the One who has come to judge them
2. **principle: faith and works are the same thing!!**
- a. in the Shema: to look at Yahweh *you see one God*, even if you see him as *three distinct Persons*
 1. **IOW:** God can be viewed *as a single Being*, or he can be viewed *as distinct Persons*
 - b. in faith: to understand faith is to see *one thing*, even if you see it *from different perspectives*
 1. **IOW:** faith can be viewed as a trust in God that radically transforms how you live, or it can be seen as the “separate” elements of *trust* on the one hand and *actions* on the other
 - c. **e.g.** in the cursed fig tree (**Mark 11:20ff**): a fig tree is known by its fruit; a tree that does not produce fruit is worthless and is cut down and thrown into the fire (**Matt. 3:10**)
 1. **IOW:** there is no “distinction” between the tree and its fruit – both are necessary together
 - d. **so, it’s either a trust in God that radically transforms your life (“I’ll show you my faith by my works”) or it’s not faith at all (“show me your faith apart from your works”)**
 1. a “profession of faith” or a set of religious pieties are not salvific – they are “dead”