



FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD

What Does It Mean?

*A detailed study on one of the most
controversial passages in the Bible*

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Faith Without Works is Dead

It has been the experience of many Christians that, as we share the gospel of grace with those around us, the issue of James 2 comes up along with the familiar cry, “But faith without works is dead!” This is a true statement, but what does it mean? Is James saying that we must do good works in order to go to heaven? Or, is he saying that if we do not do a certain amount of works we were never saved to begin with? Or, is he saying something else? God has not spoken in a vacuum nor does He contradict Himself. This passage in James must fit with the rest of Scripture.

The first issue we must understand is that James 2 is dealing with a *practical* salvation--not *positional* or *eternal* salvation. From the beginning of the book through chapter 2 and thereafter, the epistle speaks only about *practical* salvation--not *positional* salvation. Remember too, *this is a letter* and in the original document there are no chapter divisions.

This portion of Scripture has been made controversial because it is so often interpreted out of context in violation of one of the fundamental rules of sensible Bible interpretation. Context is crucial to proper understanding. *Faith that works* is the issue--not eternal salvation. James makes a forceful plea to believers to *put their faith into action.* James 2 is a call to *active* faith

and the *exercise* of that faith. It is not a passage written to test whether a person is going to heaven or not.

Let me make two observations as we begin:

1. The book of James is written to Christians--not unbelievers. In chapter 2, the word "brethren" is used in verses 1, 5, and 14. (It appears another twelve times in the rest of this letter.) In addition, the word "brother" is used four times. Altogether, the epistle reminds us nineteen times that we are dealing with brothers in Christ--not lost people!

2. God's Word cannot contradict itself. I say this because the Bible states clearly that there is only one way to heaven. It is by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, believing that when He died on the cross and rose again, He completely paid for all of our sin. He simply asks us to trust in Him as our Savior. Jesus spoke in no uncertain terms when He said,

"I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

Paul and Silas were also very clear when asked how a person could be saved.

"And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:31).

It was not, and is not, faith *and* works. Faith *alone* brings eternal salvation. Paul and Silas either told the jailer the truth or they deliberately misled him. Certainly they told him the truth.

Furthermore, the Bible declares,

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2: 8-9).

It also says,

"But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness" (Romans 4:5).

With this in mind, we see in an earlier portion of James that,

"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (James 1:17-18).

Salvation is certainly one of those "good" and "perfect" gifts described in verse 18. This should settle once and for all the fact that James 2:14-26 is not referring to

obtaining or proving eternal salvation since we clearly see that salvation is a *free gift*.

James 2 refers to salvation, *but what kind of salvation?* It is a *practical* salvation. Remember that there are times when the words "save" or "salvation" are used in the Bible but not in reference to heaven or hell.

"What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?" (James 2:14).

We must ask, "Save him from what?" The answer is simple, two-fold, and is found in chapters 1 and 2:

1. From a ruined life of sin.

"Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls [i.e. deliver your lives]" (James 1:21).

2. From unfavorable judgment at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

"So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty. For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment" (James 2:12-13).

In verse 14 the question is asked, *"Can faith save him?"* The answer simply is, "No!" Faith alone cannot save

him *from a ruined life and future judgment*. James then uses verses 15-16 to illustrate verse 14.

"If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?" (James 2:15-16).

What does it profit, in a *practical* sense, if we are saved but don't exercise our faith by helping those in need? Our faith is useless. Our salvation is doing no one any good if we don't exercise it by helping others.

This brings up three very important issues:

1. The very fact that James recognized their faith shows they had it, but it wasn't producing! That is the issue in chapter 2. James continues,

"Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone." (James 2:17)

2. The word "dead" in verse 17 does not mean "nonexistent" or "false." It is the word "*nekros*" and means barren, useless, or idle. According to *Strong's Greek and Hebrew Dictionary*, the root word means "like a corpse." Corpses are not active *but they are real!* They are idle and useless, not producing their original, intended purpose. This is the exact word used in verses 20 and 26.

Let me illustrate this point. My family lives in St. Cloud, Minnesota. We love the weather here, and yet it *does* get cold in the winter. When we have an extended period of very cold weather, it puts a strain on a car's battery. If the battery does not have enough "juice" to start the car, we say that the battery is "dead." What we mean is that it is *not being productive*. It is idle. We certainly do not mean that if you look under the hood, you will not find a battery there, or that you will find a "counterfeit" battery!

3. This Greek word *nekros* is used in many other places in the New Testament. How it is used is very significant to our understanding. Let us look at two examples:

a. The prodigal son in Luke 15:24.

*"For this my son was **dead**, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry"* (Luke 15:24). (*bold-face added*)

In this parable, the prodigal son took his portion and went away in rebellion and wasted it. After a while, he came to his senses and went back home. While he was away, did he ever cease being a son? Of course not! That would be ridiculous. It is impossible to cease being a child. The father, though, says that his son was "dead" and is now alive again. Simply put, the son had been barren and fruitless — *as good as dead*, but not

literally dead. He had been idle, but now by the fact that he was coming back, he was showing signs of life again. He had been useless while he was in a backslidden condition. This is the point.

b. The body of Abraham and the womb of Sarah in Romans 4:19.

*"And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now **dead**, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the **deadness** of Sarah's womb:" (Romans 4:19). (bold-face added)*

Abraham and Sarah were past the age of physical childbearing. But the Lord worked a miracle and they were able to have the child, Isaac. It is clear that Abraham was alive when he considered his body *dead*. Simply put, his body was considered past the age of being *fruitful*. It was barren and idle in regard to children. Sarah's womb was considered exactly the same, as the same word is used describing her condition. Psalm 127:3 fits perfectly with this truth when it says,

*"Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the **fruit of the womb** is his reward" (Psalm 127:3). (bold-face added)*

Now, let's go back to the text.

"Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone" (James 2:17).

Simply put, faith alone, if it is not manifesting itself by works, is idle and useless. It is dead in that it is showing no signs of life. It is not bearing fruit as it should. Our faith will not do anyone any good if we do not exercise it. The fact of our eternal salvation is meaningless *to others* if we do not exhibit the love and grace of God through our lives.

Also, our natural lives will not be delivered from destruction just because we are saved from hell. We must work out our faith to be fruitful and useful. This is God's plan. Paul spoke unashamedly about this issue when he said,

"Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13).

We are to work *out* the salvation we have *within*. We do not work to get it, but rather work out what we have received from the Lord by grace. The key is that we are obedient to God and cooperate with Him in allowing Him to use our lives for His glory.

"Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works" (James 2:18).

Verses 18-20 give another example that shows the folly of not working out our faith. Specifically, we can't show our faith without works. It is impossible. Faith is inside. Living out our faith shows the world that we have something inside. Our Lord Jesus said,

"By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

It is an issue of living out our faith. It is only right, if we are going to be of any benefit to anyone else. Jesus said,

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

It is God's will that Christ should be glorified through all of us who are believers. James continues,

"Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble" (James 2:19).

Verse 19 has been so badly misinterpreted that it is disturbing. Many use this verse to say that believing in Christ is not enough to be saved. Notice, though, that

believing in Christ for eternal salvation is not even mentioned in this entire passage! What James is saying is that it is good that we believe there is one God, but even the demons believe that! The issue is that of unproductive faith! This is what he says *again* in verse 20,

"But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?" (James 2:20).

The Lord is pleading with believers in this passage to engage their faith and get with it! Do not rest on the knowledge that you are saved forever and become a lazy Christian. Exercise your faith! James presents two individuals to illustrate this point--Abraham and Rahab.

"Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?" (James 2:21-22).

The question must be asked again, "What kind of justification is James 2 referring to?" Simply put, it is a *practical* justification.

There are two kinds of justification. The first is *eternal* and is based on faith alone. The second is *practical* based on faith that is exercised by works. Abraham

was justified by faith alone on an *eternal* level. This is clear from Romans 4.

"What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness" (Romans 4:1-5).

God is not the author of confusion and the Bible cannot and does not contradict itself. The justification spoken of in Romans 4 and the justification in James 2 cannot be referring to the same thing.

Now, let's get back to Abraham. James is speaking of a practical salvation. James 2:22 says that by works, faith was made perfect. The word "perfect" here does not mean to make authentic. It means to complete in the sense of bringing to maturity. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* defines it as "complete, mature. To complete, make perfect by reaching the intended goal."

Abraham faced the toughest test of his life when he offered his son upon the altar. It was a test that stretched his faith. As a result, he was declared

righteous *in a practical sense* in that he proved himself to be a godly man by his works. His life was delivered through his obedience to the Lord's command to offer his son up. The Lord considered him "just" *in a practical sense*. That's exactly what verse 23 says.

"And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God" (James 2:23).

Notice that his actions proved he had a living faith. The Scriptures were fulfilled in that Abraham showed his faith by his works. This fits perfectly with James 2:18. Once he was a believer, his faith was stretched and matured through obedience.

There is something more in verse 23. As a result of his obedience, Abraham was called the "Friend of God". Jesus had something to say about this concept.

"Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you" (John 15:14).

Jesus was speaking to the apostles when He spoke these words. They were already believers so eternal salvation was not the issue.

"Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (James 2:24).

We must have a working faith to be justified *practically* in this life and to have our lives delivered from destruction, ruin and judgment (James 1:21; 2:12-13).

Our next example is Rahab the harlot. The Israelites were going to take the city of Jericho. When the Jewish spies came in to spy out the land, Rahab hid them and then secretly sent them out so they could escape. James refers to this story in chapter 2.

"Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:25-26).

When the Jewish spies came into Jericho, Rahab had them agree that she and her family would have their *physical lives* spared if she helped the spies escape. The spies agreed and Rahab and her family's *physical lives* were subsequently saved. Hebrews 11 makes this fact clear.

"By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace" (Hebrews 11:31).

Rahab herself said it in unmistakable words.

"And that ye will save alive my father, and my mother, and my brethren, and my sisters, and all that

they have, and deliver our lives from death" (Joshua 2:13).

Notice that she said, "...deliver our lives from death." Simply put, her life was delivered from judgment and destruction because she believed and acted upon the faith she had. This fits perfectly in the context of James 2. We as believers are already saved from hell. We can mechanically go to church three times a week. We can know Bible stories by heart, but until we act upon the Word of God and start living out our faith *what does it profit anyone else?* Sin will ultimately destroy our lives if we don't work out our faith.

In verse 26, we see that a dead body is still a body, even though it is of no use. It is dead, barren and idle. It shows no signs of life and is useless. This takes us back to verse 14. *What does it profit?* We must decide today how we will live our lives. Are we going to heed the warning of Scripture and live for the Lord, or are we going to do what our selfish desires dictate and not be concerned about anyone else? If we as believers live for Christ, our lives will be useful to the Lord and to others. We will be delivered from a ruined natural life and also harsh judgment at the Judgment Seat of Christ. God's desire is for us to live lives that have purpose. He wants us to have lives that accomplish something for His kingdom.

ARE YOU SURE OF HEAVEN?

In reading this booklet, you may have come to realize that you have been trusting in your good works to get you to heaven. You cannot be saved that way. Please take some time to read and understand the following truths:

The Bible tells us that we are all sinners, less perfect than God.

“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;” (Romans 3:23).

To "sin" is to *miss the mark* of God's perfection. We all have violated His word and broken His commandments. The penalty for sin is death. If we pay for our own sin, we will have to die and spend forever separated from God in Hell.

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

God's Word also says that no sin can enter heaven because heaven is a perfect place and sin would bring death. Man must be sinless in God's eyes to enter heaven.

“And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life” (Revelation 21:27).

There is absolutely nothing you can do to obtain the sinless perfection God requires for eternal life. No amount of good works or sincerity can give you the righteousness needed.

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Because God loves you, He sent His Son Jesus Christ – God in the flesh – to earth to make the complete payment for all your sin. He took your place and paid for your sin *for you*. He then literally came back from the dead.

“But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

All you can do to have everlasting life is to believe, or trust, in Jesus Christ and Him alone as your personal Savior.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

God promises that if you put your trust in Christ alone you will receive, at that moment, everlasting life. He cannot lie. Because He has promised it, on the authority of God’s Word you can be sure of going to heaven today.

*“These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; **that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God**” (1 John 5:13) (bold-face added)*

Why not, right now, trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior? He will give you eternal life and you will be secure *forever*.

If you have any further questions about James 2 or about salvation, feel free to contact me.

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