

# A FAITH THAT WILL WORK

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Text: James 2:14-26

This passage has been misunderstood by some to be in conflict with the Apostle Paul's teaching on "justification by faith," found in Ephesians 2:8-10. Nothing could be farther from the truth. James is simply expanding on the principle he has already laid down in chapter 1:19-27. As he has said, "hearing must be followed by doing;" therefore, it is only natural to follow with our text in which James teaches that "faith must be followed by actions." Simply put ... faith is more than an intellectual exercise. **It is not salvation BY works. It is works BECAUSE of salvation.**

■ One writer observes, "An illustration of the balance between faith and works lies hidden within any tree. Leaves use up nutrients in the process of photosynthesis. As the leaves consume nutrients in the sap, a suction is formed, which draws more sap from the roots. Without the sap, the leaves and branches would die. But the continual flow of sap comes only as it is used up by the work of the leaf.

Likewise, through faith we draw life from Christ. But a continual supply of fresh spiritual nutrients depends on our willingness to "consume" the old supply through our acts of obedience, through our works." (Hewett)

Once again let me be clear. James is not talking about saving one's self; he is speaking only of *proving what you have by what you do*. He is seeking to make several *principles* clear.

James begins by pointing out that...

## I. REAL FAITH IS A FAITH THAT LIVES (vv.14-17).

James gives us another hypothetical situation to consider—one of a person who claims to have faith but has no good works to accompany his faith. Of this situation James has two questions.

A. Can a faith void of works save a man (v. 14)?

We need to ask ourselves, "What kind of faith is that really?" "What difference does that kind of faith make?" "Would I want that kind of faith?"

B. Can a man or woman of faith turn his or her back on those in need (vv. 15-16)?

James is asking, "Does a real Christian see another child of God who is without proper clothes or daily food and say to them, 'Now get you some warm clothes and a good meal,' without lifting a hand to help them?" James knows that if we won't help our own brothers and sisters we will not help anyone else. Charity or love begins at home.

■ Someone said, "Our faith becomes practical when it is expressed in two books: the date book and the checkbook."

-- Elton Trueblood. Leadership, Vol. 11, no. 1.

C. Obviously, this kind of faith is dead (v.17).

The "laws of nature," both natural and spiritual tell us that if something is alive it produces. By the same token, the very fact that it produces nothing tells us that it is dead. Dead faith cannot and will not save you.

James also points out that...

## **II. REAL FAITH CANNOT BE SEPARATED FROM GOOD WORKS (vv.18-21).**

In these verses, James continues to make his point that works are necessary to prove one's faith.

A. Some would like to say our actions have nothing to do with our faith (v.18).

Notice the challenge. "But someone will say, 'One person has faith and another has works.'" James responds. "Show me your faith WITHOUT works. Profession proves nothing—possession proves everything.

■ A.W. Tozer said, “The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to obedience, nor does it recognize any obedience that does not spring from faith. The two are at opposite sides of the same coin.

-- A.W. Tozer. Leadership, Vol. 12, no. 4.

B. If only believing in God was enough—the demons would have religion (v.19).

■ All devout Jews know Deuteronomy 6:4. They know it as the Shema.

It reads: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord."

James commends them for believing "that there is one God." But he points out that if that is all they have they are no better off than the demons. The question is, "Have you got peace with God?" or "Has your faith changed your life?"

At this point, James is ready to bring his point home by giving evidence to the fact that faith without works is useless.

James reasons that...

### **III. REAL FAITH GOES HAND IN HAND WITH GOOD WORKS (vv.21-26).**

A. Abraham was declared "righteous" because of what he did (v.21).

This is not a contradiction of Paul's teaching.

■ Donald Burdick explains, "James asserts that Abraham did works and that these works were used as criteria in God's ultimate judgment over Abraham's life. He assumes that Abraham had faith and that this faith was basic to Abraham's acceptance by God (vv.22-23). But he stresses that the life of the one who has been so accepted by God must show the fruit of that relationship in good works. It was what precedes and enables these works that Paul concentrates on. Paul wants to make clear that one 'gets into' God's kingdom only by faith; James insists that God requires works from those who are 'in'."  
(110)

B. Abraham's faith and actions worked together (v.22).

If there had been no evidence of his faith it would have meant his faith was not genuine and therefore could not have been counted unto him as righteousness.

C. Abraham proved his friendship to God by responding with trust (v.23).

When he was asked to sacrifice his own son, he responded in trust to the one who had never failed him.

D. Being considered right with God does not come by faith ALONE (v.24).

Again, works are evidence that saving faith is in a person's heart. James is fighting against superficial faith. Paul was speaking against legalism or the belief that one can save one's self. Paul appreciated works as much as James.

■ Paul said in Ephesians 2:10, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

E. James commends the "living faith" of Rahab (v. 25).

She risked her life because she believed in the purposes of God. She was a pagan, a prostitute, a woman of no value to the world; but by her willingness to turn to God she was justified. James compares what she was to what she had become—a woman of faith and actions.

## CONCLUSION

James concludes his discussion in verse 26 with the reminder that natural laws tell us that a body that doesn't breath is dead. Likewise, spiritual laws tell us that faith with no action is dead. If we say we have faith—an experience with God—then we should prove it by the way we live.

■ A man by the name of Doug Nichols tells the following story, “While serving with Operation Mobilization in India in 1967, tuberculosis forced me into a sanitarium for several months. I did not yet speak the language, but I tried to give Christian literature written in their language to the patients, doctors, and nurses. Everyone politely refused. I sensed many weren't happy about a rich American (to them all Americans are rich) being in a free, government-run sanitarium. (They didn't know I was just as broke as they were!)

The first few nights I woke around 2:00 A.M. coughing. One morning during my coughing spell, I noticed one of the older and sicker patients across the aisle trying to get out of bed. He would sit up on the edge of the bed and try to stand, but in weakness would fall back into bed. I didn't understand what he was trying to do. He finally fell back into bed exhausted. I heard him crying softly.

The next morning I realized what the man had been trying to do. He had been trying to get up and walk to the bathroom! The stench in our ward was awful. Other patients yelled insults at the man. Angry nurses moved him roughly from side to side as they cleaned up the mess. One nurse even slapped him. The old man curled into a ball and wept. The next night I again woke up coughing. I noticed the man across the aisle sit up and again try to stand. Like the night before, he fell back whimpering.

I don't like bad smells, and I didn't want to become involved, but I got out of bed and went over to him. When I touched his shoulder, his eyes opened wide with fear. I smiled, put my arms under him, and picked him up. He was very light due to old age and advanced TB. I carried him to the washroom, which was just a filthy, small room with a hole in the floor. I stood behind him with my arms under his armpits as he took care of himself. After he finished, I picked him up, and carried him back to his bed. As I laid him down, he kissed me on the cheek, smiled, and said something I couldn't understand.

The next morning another patient woke me and handed me a steaming cup of tea. He motioned with his hands that he wanted a tract. As the sun rose, other patients approached and indicated they also wanted the booklets I had tried to distribute before. Throughout the day nurses, interns, and doctors asked for literature.

Weeks later an evangelist who spoke the language visited me, and as he talked to others he discovered that several had put their trust in Christ as Savior as a result of reading the literature. What did it take to reach these people with the gospel? It wasn't health, the ability to speak their language, or a persuasive talk. I simply took a trip to the bathroom.

-- Doug Nichols, Bothell, Washington. *Leadership*, Vol. 15, no. 2.

The light in our lives is the result of the Holy Spirit who lives within us. Our good works that men see are the result of our obedience to the Holy Spirit. Obedience is the basis of all the *principles* laid down by James.

#### References

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