

Practical Christianity

FAITH THAT WORKS

James 2:14-26

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Still on our series, practical Christianity, we will be looking at another practical aspect of the book of James, where James emphasized the importance of a faith that works. Our discussion just like that of last Sunday focuses on practicality rather than just theory. Let's see our texts and get to understand the mind of James and what he expects of us.

What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, Go in peace, be warmed and be filled, and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may well say, .You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works... For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (2:14-26).

Do you know anybody who is calorie-conscious? Most of us especially the ladies are truly calorie-conscious! Grocery stores have large sections of "low-calorie" food and drinks. Technically speaking, a calorie is an energy unit in food. Practically speaking, a calorie is that sinister element in food and drink which adds pounds and inches. But have you ever seen a calorie? Of course not, because it cannot be seen with the naked eye.

But all of us have seen the result of a calorie! In this way, faith can be compared with a calorie. Faith is a "key" teaching for the Christian and the Christian life (***Ephesians 2:8, 9; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Hebrews 11:6; Romans 14:23***). According to James, we cannot see faith, but the result of faith can be easily observed. Evidently, James had heard of many people who had professed to have faith, yet it was difficult to see the result of their faith. James wants to see a relationship between faith and works. Faith must be demonstrated.

One comment should be made about our text, ***James 2:14-26***, before we dissect it for the meaning James had for us. This is the text that is often used to prove that James and Paul were opposed to each other. Such passages as ***Romans 3:28*** and ***Galatians 2:16*** are used to show that Paul did not believe "works" were a part of salvation; while, in ***James 2:14-26***, James talks about how essential works are. In commenting on their seeming conflict, Alexander Ross has said, "*They are not antagonists facing each other with crossed swords; they stand back-to-back, confronting different foes of the gospel*". Paul confronted Jewish legalists, who

insisted that works were necessary to be justified before God, while James confronted those who professed a relationship with Jesus but minimized the effect of that relationship in daily living. The difference between James and Paul is a difference in the starting point. Paul starts with the great basic fact of the forgiveness of God, which no man can earn, win, or deserve. James starts with the professing Christian and insists that unless a man proves his Christianity by his deeds, he is not a Christian at all. Therefore, James and Paul do not contradict each other; they merely complement each other. The message of both is essential to the Christian faith in its fullest form.

1. Faith Without Works Is Useless (*James 2:14-17*).

James has just finished teaching about showing partiality (*2:1-13*). As he closed that topic, he brought in the matter of failing to show mercy (v. 13). It is with this background, that he now asks the question: *“What doth it profit, my brethren, if a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can that faith save him?” (James 2:14)*. Profit means “to have value.” The first part of James’ question is this: *Of what value is it to say one has faith if one does not work, does not obey?* The New English Bible has, *“What use is it?”* The understood answer is none. Faith without works is useless. We might notice that James does not deny that this man has faith (in fact, James refers to his faith in the last part of the question). The trouble was that the man’s faith was expressed only in talking. He said he had faith.

James says, *“If a brother or sister be naked and in lack of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Go in peace, be ye warmed and filled; and yet ye give them not those things needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead in itself” (James 2:15-17)*. Let us get the picture. Here is a brother or sister in Christ, one with whom the other man shares the very closest of relationships. This one is *“naked.”* He is not without clothing but is with totally inadequate clothing (*John 21:7; Matthew 25:36; Acts 19:16*; etc.). And he is *“in lack of daily food.”* He is desperately hungry. He was hungry yesterday, he is hungry today, and he will be hungrier tomorrow. He is not a professional bum/beggar. He is one who is genuinely and desperately in need. He lacks those things *“needful to the body,”* the most elementary needs, the very necessities of life, not luxuries. And it is obvious that he is in need. His need shows.

And what is the response? It is *“Go in peace, be ye warmed and filled!”* *“Go in peace”* was the standard Jewish farewell (*1 Samuel 1:17; 20:42; Luke 7:50; 8:48; Acts 16:36*). It was roughly equivalent to our cheery *“Have a good day!”* *“Be ye warmed and filled”* just meant *“I surely hope your needs are taken care of.”* But the man did nothing to take care of those needs. He did not share what he had; he did not pull out his wallet; he did not say, *“You can have this One thousand naira”*; he did not even get him in touch with the deacon in charge of benevolence! He just sent him off with word so cold, empty, useless, meaningless words. What did this profit? Nothing. You cannot wrap words around a shivering body.

Words without works are worthless, useless! To quote another, John said: *“Whoso hath the world’s goods, and beholdeth his brother in need, and shutteth up his compassion from him, how doth the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither with the tongue; but in deed and truth” (1 John 3:17, 18)*. So, James concludes this point by saying: Even so faith, *if it hath not works, is dead in itself* (v. 17).

It is the faith of the chief priests who believed, but would not confess Christ (**John 12:42**). It is the faith of the alien sinner who believes but will not be baptized (**Mark 16:16**). It is the faith of the impotent Christian who believes but who does not love God or man (**1 Corinthians 13:1-3**). This kind of faith, says James, is a lifeless corpse dead and useless!

2. Faith Without Works Cannot Be Demonstrated (**James 2:18**).

With James hitting so close to home, one might expect objections. He apparently anticipates one in verse 18: *“But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works”*. James’ point is easy to grasp, but exactly why he phrased the first part of the verse as he did has puzzled many. Maybe James is anticipating someone arguing, So and so is a great man of faith, while put the emphasis on works. Each is important, so stop harassing my friend, whose emphasis is faith. Whatever the objection being made, James’ answer is clear. There is no way for a man to show or prove or demonstrate his faith except by doing something. He says, *“Show me thy faith apart from thy works, and I by my works will show thee my faith.”*

We understand this in other areas of life. What if a desperate criminal pointed a gun at me and said, *“Put up your hands or I’ll shoot”*? How would I show that I believed him? I would do so by putting up my hands! What if the doctor said, *“Take this medicine and you will get well”*? How could I show the I believe him? I would do so by taking the medicine! James is stressing that this is just as true in the spiritual realm as it is in life in general. Jesus said, *“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16)*. How can I show that I believe Him? I can, by believing and being baptized! Jesus further commands us to teach sinners and make disciples, and if we will do this, He will be with us (**Matthew 28:18-20**). How can we show that we believe Him? We can by teaching and making disciples! As far as the world in general is concerned, there is no difference between an atheist and a believer until that believer starts acting as if he believes, that is, until his faith makes a difference in his life. Faith without works cannot be demonstrated.

3. Faith Without Works Cannot Change A Person (**2:19, 20**)

A large percentage of James’ readers must have felt that just holding faith in their hearts was sufficient and were, therefore, haphazard about obedience. Perhaps this was because of their Jewish ancestry. This Jewish background seems to be in

James' mind as he starts his next point: "*You believe that there is one God. You do well. . .*" (**James 2:19**). The Jews prided themselves on their monotheism, their belief in one God. The Shema, the classic statement that "*Jehovah our God is one Jehovah*" (**Deuteronomy 6:4**), was echoed by every faithful Jew morning and evening and continually in the temple. James does not hesitate to commend them on their belief in one God: "*You do well...*"

Some have taught that James downgrades faith in his letter, but this is not true. Throughout the epistle, the importance of faith is stressed: "*The proving of your faith worketh patience*" (1:3); "*Let him ask in faith, nothing doubting*" (1:6); "*Hold not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . with respect of persons*" (2:1); "*The prayer of faith shall save him that is sick*" (5:15). (Italics mine.) What James does downgrade is the faith that was an end within itself.

Apparently, some of his readers thought that just believing in one God made them very special people just as some members think that believing in one church or the necessity of baptism in and of itself makes them special. James quickly lets his readers know that faith did not make them unique: *The demons also believe, and shudder* (**James 2:19**). These demons, "the devil's underlings/messengers and co-workers, James says believe and shudder. Such a statement must be startling to those who believe demons did not exist in the New Testament times, that they were the figments of the imagination of an unenlightened and superstitious people, and that they can be explained as physical and mental disorders. Figments of the imagination do not believe and shudder. But it may also be startling to those who believe in Satan and his co-workers to learn that demons "*believe and trembles*".

James and other inspired writers tell us about the faith of demons. They believe in the one God (**James 2:19**). They believe in the deity of Jesus (**Mark 3:11, 12**). They believe in the existence of a place of punishment (**Luke 8:30, 31**). They believe in Christ as Judge (**Mark 5:1-13**). Believing all this, it is little wonder that they shudder. The root of the Greek word translated "shudder" or "tremble" (KJV) is "to bristle" or to have one's hair stand on end (see **Job 4:14**). These demons know what is ahead and it terrifies them! In this respect, they are far ahead of many of who hears the gospel today. We can preach on eternity, and people check their watches. We can preach on heaven, and people plan what they are going to have for dinner. We can preach on hell and get a yawn. But the demons know what is coming and they tremble. That should tell us something! But that is as far as it goes with demons.

One thing is so sure in this scripture about demons, even after they believe and tremble, they remain demons, still Satan's henchmen, not angels serving God! Faith without works will not, cannot, change a person! So again, James hammers home his point: "*But wilt thou know, O vain man [literally, empty-headed man], that faith apart from works is barren?*" (**James 2:20**).

One writer suggests that there are three types of faith in **James 2:14-26**, each one of which can be described with a word starting with “d.” There is **dead** faith of verses **17, 20, and 26**. This faith apparently involves only the intellect. Then there is **demonic** faith of verse 19. This faith goes further. It involves the intellect and the emotions. The demons are moved emotionally, or they tremble. But involving the intellect and the emotions is still not enough. There must be the involvement of the whole man. And this includes not only the intellect and the emotions, but also the will, that which causes one to act. The writer calls this **dynamic** faith.

4. Faith Without Works Is Not Perfected (2:21-26).

James now turns to proofs that should carry great weight with his readers, God’s expectations of His people in the Old Testament. **James 2:20** introduces this material almost as if he is still arguing with his imaginary opponent. In both evidence of proof, the individuals were moved to action by their strong faith in God and not by the mere sentiments of natural human kindness.

In verses 21 through 24 James offers evidence from the life of Abraham. Abraham was known as “*the father of the Jewish nation*,” and also as “*the father of the faithful*”. Abraham struggled with the development of this trusting, obedient, faith in God. Think of all the evidence of struggle early in his life: the halfway obedience to his call, running off to Egypt during the drought in Palestine, lying about his relationship with Sarah while in Egypt, and laughing at what God said about his wife having a child. Abraham grew into this example of faith. Someone has well explained James’ point by saying: “*Abraham was not saved by faith plus works, but by a faith that works*”. No doubt exists about Abraham’s faith because he demonstrated it in his life.

Every little Jewish boy and girl knew by heart the story of Abraham offering Isaac (**Genesis 22:11-19**). To test Abraham, God came to him and told him to take his son, his only son of promise, Isaac, into the land of Moriah and there offer him as a burnt offering. Early the next day Abraham, Isaac, and two young male servants started on the journey. On the third day they reached the designated spot, a mountain. The two servants were left behind while Abraham and Isaac climbed the mountain. They took with them the wood, the fire, and the knife for the burnt offering. As they toiled upward, Isaac asked, “*My father: . . . Behold, the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*” (**Genesis 22:7**). Abraham’s heart must have been breaking, but he replied, “*God will provide . . . my son*” (**Genesis 22:8**). At last, they reached the summit. Abraham built the altar, put on the wood, and then bound Isaac and laid him on the altar. I cannot imagine the feelings of father and son as this was done nor what words might have passed between them. Abraham then took the knife to slay his son. There was no hesitation. In his heart he had already done the deed (**Hebrews 11:17**). But a Voice from heaven stopped him, saying, “*...for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your*

son, your only son, from Me.” (**Genesis 22:12**). Abraham was allowed to substitute a ram, caught in a nearby thicket, for his son. Then the voice came again, repeating the great covenant promise first made in **Genesis 17:1-3**. It concluded: “*In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.*” (**Genesis 22:18**).

The second evidence that James offers is the faith that was demonstrated in the deeds of Rahab. Did Rahab have a ‘dead’ faith, a mere intellectual experience, and do nothing for the spies? Did she have a faith which enlightened the mind and stirred the emotions but still did not accomplish anything for the spies? The beauty of the story is that Rahab had a ‘living’ or dynamic faith. She proved what she believed by the way she acted. She believed in the Jehovah of the Israelites; she hid the spies and sent them out of the city another way.

Conclusion

James concludes his discussion by saying, “*For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead*” (2:26). Like a lawyer before a jury or a debater before an audience, James gives a summation of the argument he has been presenting. When body and spirit are separated, death and decay will result; similarly, when faith and demonstration by works are separated, faith dies and decays.

For Christianity to be real, James says that it has to be *practical* and *practiced*!

References

A Living Faith – Bill Hooten, a study on the book of James, Truth for Today, www.biblecourses.com

Is Your Faith Alive and Well? – David Roper, a study on the book of James, Truth for Today, www.biblecourses.com