



Faith and Works

Real Faith.
Real Life.

LESSON

7

Week of February 19

For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from the works is dead (James 2:26).

Devotional

Whenever we approach the Word of God, remembering the distinction between concept and doctrine can be very helpful. Concept refers simply to the use of a specific term in a specific context. Doctrine refers to the full-orbed biblical understanding of a certain point of theology, which understanding is deduced by examining all the references to a certain concept in the Bible. When we read a term in the Bible, it may refer to the full-orbed doctrine or a limited concept.

Let us illustrate this principle, and since we are considering James' presentation on justification, we will take the term justification as our example. We are no doubt used to seeing the term justification in Scripture and reading into it our full-orbed doctrine, which states that God declares men and women righteous and acceptable to Him on account of the perfect righteousness of Christ, which He imputes to believers when they trust in Jesus alone for salvation. In his use of the terms justification, justified, and so forth, the apostle Paul is usually speaking doctrinally, having the full-orbed biblical doctrine of justification in view (Romans 4; Galatians 2:15–16).

Justification also appears in Scripture as a concept. Jesus says in Luke 7:35 that “wisdom is justified by all her children.” Obviously, our Lord does not have the doctrine of justification in mind, for it makes no sense to say that an abstract concept like wisdom is declared righteous through faith in Christ alone. The primary sense here is demonstration—wisdom reveals its presence through wise actions.

Actually, the conceptual use of the term justification to mean demonstration falls under the full-orbed doctrine of justification. The Protestant Reformers, in summarizing the biblical teaching, were clear that justification is by faith alone but not by a faith that is alone. We are not saved by a mere profession of faith but by the possession of faith, and when faith is truly present in the heart, it necessarily, inevitably, and immediately bears fruit as good works of service to God and neighbor. These works in no sense merit a right standing with God, but if they are not present, neither is justifying faith. James 2:14–26 speaks

of works as a justification of faith—as faith’s demonstration—and is not claiming that our deeds earn a right standing with God. “As the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead” (v.26).

CORAM DEO (In the presence of God)

Again let us be clear, our good works do not get us into heaven. However, they do reveal the faith that lays hold of the benefits of Christ and takes possession of eternal salvation. We must always be careful to make the distinction that while faith alone justifies us, the faith that justifies is never alone but demonstrated to be alive through good deeds. How is your faith manifesting itself this day?¹

Open it

1. As a child what occupation did you desire to have when you became an adult? What was it about that occupation that was so appealing?

Read it

JAMES 2:14–26

Explore it

2. What does James say about a faith that isn’t joined with good works?
3. What is the response of the demons’ beliefs about God?
4. How did Abraham show the validity of his faith?
5. How did Rahab prove the genuineness of her faith?

¹ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/faith-and-works-2/>

Apply it

THE FIRST THING PEOPLE DO when they get *The New Yorker* is read the cartoons, because a good cartoon not only entertains, but often humors the truth home in a powerful way. Recently I came across a cartoon in another publication that did just that for me. It pictured a conventional-looking church with a large billboard in the foreground advertising its ministry. The sign read:

The Lite Church 24% FEWER COMMITMENTS, HOME OF THE 7.5% TITHE, 15-MINUTE SERMONS, 45-MINUTE WORSHIP SERVICES. WE HAVE ONLY 8 COMMANDMENTS—YOUR CHOICE. WE USE JUST 3 SPIRITUAL LAWS. EVERYTHING YOU’VE WANTED IN A CHURCH . . . AND LESS!

That is the stained-glass experience of so many in the modern church today—no quickening of the conscience, no feeding of the mind, no opening of the heart, no commitment—no real faith. This was James’ concern millennia ago, because it was just as likely then as today for church attenders to slide along with a bogus faith that made no real difference in the way they lived. James wants to make crystal-clear what makes faith real faith, and in doing so he sheds eternal wisdom on the relationship of faith and action. James’ teaching, taken to heart, will steel the church against a “lite” faith.²

6. Why are so many people of “faith” quick to pursue a version of Christianity that “tastes great and is less filling”? Why does this version of Christianity fall short?

DEAD FAITH

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (v. 14).

Let’s start with the little phrase “if someone says.” By putting the matter this way, James imagines a hypothetical person claiming he has faith in Jesus, but whose life offers no “works” of any kind. In the Greek, “does not have works” is in the present tense, indicating an ongoing condition of the heart. James uses the word “works” to cover the vast range of things a godly person might do, from praying and preaching and singing and giving and testifying to serving and helping others.

Here is a person who boasts of something that, apparently, he does not possess. He says, “I believe in Jesus” but there is nothing there, nothing at all, nothing remotely Christian. He thinks he’s okay because he says he believes. But he does not show the love of Christ, and he lives like the pagans around him. In

² Hughes, R. Kent. James (ESV Edition): Faith That Works (Preaching the Word) (p. 97). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

many ways, the problem is in his lips as much as in his life. **His mouth writes a check his life can't cash.** He apparently is completely unchanged by the gospel he says he believes. He might as well be an unbeliever because, for all intents and purposes, that's what he is. You can find people like this in almost every church. They are apparently unchanged by years of church attendance, hundreds of gospel sermons, and stirring worship services. **What good is that sort of religion? It's useless! It's empty, vain, pointless, and self-deceived.** There isn't one good thing to say about this man and his faith. He does no good for himself or for anyone else.³

7. Why do some people profess a faith that has no real substance to it? What is gained by such an assertion?

8. In what ways can a church contribute to this type of misunderstanding of faith? In what practical ways can a church rectify this misunderstanding?

To further emphasize the importance of a faith that works, James now gives a shocking illustration: “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (vv. 15–17). In this illustration a “brother or sister,” a fellow believer who sits at the Lord’s Table with the rest of the church in worship, is inadequately clad, perhaps in rags or lacking an outer garment, and is so destitute that he or she does not even have food to eat that day. You, feeling full and satisfied in your fashionable wardrobe, see the tattered believer and with a radiant smile say, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled” and without the slightest twinge of conscience go merrily on your way. **If and when this happens, something is radically wrong with one’s faith.** So James properly asks, “What good is that?,” the only answer being, “None at all.” Thus he concludes, “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (v. 17). It is not only outwardly dead but inwardly dead—totally lifeless and useless... If we tend to talk about our faith in Christ and the truth of his Word but do nothing, or very little, we may be in spiritual trouble. **If we refuse to get our hands dirty, or if we are cheap and grudging with other people, we must take inventory of our souls.**⁴

³ Sermon by Ray Pritchard entitled **Don't brag about your faith live it** found at <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/dont-brag-about-your-faith-live-it/>

⁴ Hughes, R. Kent. James (ESV Edition): Faith That Works (Preaching the Word) (p. 99). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

9. Using James' illustration in verses 15–17 as a foundation, how would you describe in your own words a dead faith?

10. Why is this type of “dead faith” more dangerous than no faith at all?

DEMONIC FAITH

James makes three things about faith abundantly clear.

First, faith is not mere intellectual assent. In verse 19 he says, “You believe that God is one; you do well. The demons also believe—and they shudder.” Every Jewish man or woman believed the Shema in Deuteronomy 6: 4: “Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.” The demons believe the Shema. Demons believe a lot of things that we believe—they believe in the existence of God, the deity of Christ, and the presence of heaven and hell. They know Christ is the eternal Judge, and they know that Christ alone is able to save. I fear that countless men and women have bought into the soul-damning idea that mere intellectual assent to the truth of God in Christ is enough to save, and the reality is that these people are no better off than the demons themselves.

Second, faith is not simply an emotional response. According to James 2: 19, the faith of demons is not just intellectual but also emotional. The demons believe and they “shudder.” They are affected by the truth of God; they tremble at it. I wonder how many people define their faith today merely by the emotions they feel at any given time.

The third point James makes about faith is that faith involves willful obedience. You show your faith not just by what you think or by what you feel but by what you do. Faith acts. If your faith consists merely of listening to the Word, talking about the Word, or feeling a certain way about the Word, your faith is dead. **Faith acts on the Word. Faith in our hearts is evident in the fruit of our lives.**⁵

⁵ Platt, David. Exalting Jesus In James (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 863–876). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

11. How does knowing the facts about Jesus and His words help to establish one's faith? How does knowing the facts alone fall short of real faith?

12. What advice would you give to someone who believes the Bible but fails to live in light of it?

13. What is it about faith that makes it emotional? In what ways are emotions a healthy barometer for our faith, and in what ways can emotions hinder us from experiencing real faith?

14. When it comes to James' example of the demons' faith, what added feature is present that wasn't present in the example of dead faith earlier in the passage?

15. While the end results of a dead or demonic faith are the same, why is a demonic faith more dangerous than simply a dead faith or no faith at all?

DYNAMIC FAITH

Dynamic faith is faith that is real, faith that has power, faith that results in a changed life. James described this true saving faith.

To begin with, dynamic saving faith is based on the Word of God. We receive our spiritual rebirth through God's Word (James 1:18). We receive the Word and this saves us (James 1:21). "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Romans 10:17). James used Abraham and Rahab as illustrations of dynamic saving faith, since both of them heard and received the message of God through His Word. Faith is only as good as its object. The man in the jungle bows before an idol of stone and trusts it to help him, but he receives no help. No matter how much faith a person may generate, if it is not directed at the right object, it will accomplish nothing. "I believe" may be the testimony of many sincere people, but the big question is, "In whom do you believe? What do you believe?" We are not saved by faith in faith; we are saved by faith in Christ as revealed in His Word.

Dynamic faith is based on God's Word, and it involves the whole person. Dead faith touches only the intellect; demonic faith involves both the mind and the emotions; but dynamic faith involves the will. The whole person plays a part in true saving faith. The mind understands the truth; the heart desires the truth; and the will acts upon the truth. The men and women of faith named in Hebrews 11 were people of action: God spoke and they obeyed. Again, faith is not believing in spite of evidence; faith is obeying in spite of consequence.

True saving faith leads to action. Dynamic faith is not intellectual contemplation or emotional consternation; it leads to obedience on the part of the will. And this obedience is not an isolated event: It continues throughout the whole life. **It leads to works.**⁶

16. How does the Word of God give us guidance and direction that causes our faith to grow?

17. In what ways do the examples of Abraham and Rahab share similarities? What is different about their examples?

⁶ Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Mature (James): Growing Up in Christ (The BE Series Commentary) (pp. 87-88). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

James 2:14–26 is famous for theological controversy. At first glance, it seems that James is contradicting Paul, or vice versa, if James wrote first. Paul taught that we are saved by grace through faith, apart from works. James seems to say that we must have faith plus works to be saved...At the heart of this dispute is the question, “What is genuine saving faith?” **This is not just an academic debate! The correct answer to that question concerns your eternal destiny!** It relates to the eternal destiny of your family and friends. If my faith or the faith of my loved ones is not genuine, saving faith, I could be deceiving myself in the worst possible way. I might think that Jesus is my Lord and Savior, and even be active in serving Him, but be sadly mistaken.⁷

18. Why is it so difficult to distinguish between earning your salvation through good works and living out a real faith filled with good works?

19. How might you encourage a struggling believer who has evidence of a real and genuine faith but feels like his faith is falling short?

Billy Graham echoed James' concern when he said...

Faith that saves has one distinguishing quality; saving faith is a faith that produces obedience, it is a faith that brings about a way of life.

J I Packer wrote that...

What saves is faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.⁸

20. If it is God who enables and empowers our faith, what role do we have in living out our faith? What things can you be doing to make your faith more dynamic in the days to come?

⁷ Sermon by Steve Cole entitled **Saving Faith Genuine or False** found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-10-saving-faith-genuine-or-false-james-214-19>
⁸ http://www.preceptaustin.org/james_214-17