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

Faith Works

Lesson Aim: To show that faith without works is dead.

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Topic: Faith: Of Believers; Works: Of Righteousness.

INTRODUCTION

There are two basic errors commonly made concerning the way one is saved. One is that a man is saved by character—that only as he does good works can he be justified. God used the Apostle Paul to show the fallacy of this view. Paul insists that justification before God is never by works of law but by faith in Christ, Romans 4. The second error is that a man is saved by faith in the historical fact of Jesus and His sacrifice, ignoring the inner change called the “new birth.” James deals with this error. He points out that the faith that saves is the faith that works. Faith that is divorced from works is dead and useless. (To say, “Faith saves,” means faith lays hold on the saving grace of God. Some have tried to set Paul and James against one another saying Paul taught salvation by faith and James taught salvation by works. This is untrue. Both agree that faith saves. James goes on to insist that the only kind of faith that saves is the kind that motivates a person to deeds.

Perhaps the reader has seen the “summer lightning” at the close of a sultry day. It is without thunder and is harmless. If a person should say, “I’m afraid that lightning will strike here,” he could be comforted with, “There is no danger. .The only lighting that strikes is that which is accompanied by thunder.” Just so, Paul says, “Faith saves.” James replies, “Yes, faith saves, but only that faith which is accompanied by works.” The faith which is so poor and weak that it makes no difference in a person’s words, deeds, and attitudes, is so weak it cannot receive God’s grace in salvation. This is the

argument of today's study.

EXPOSITION

I. FAITH WITHOUT WORKS, 2:14-20.

1. One may confess his faith and have no works accompanying it, verse 14. James questions the usefulness of a faith that is content to go without expressing itself. The words of this verse may be translated, "If one keeps on saying he has faith," as if the statement is made over and over again. Thus far the statement is good. Men should confess their faith in Jesus. There are far too many already who try to serve the Lord in secret. However, James sees a true confession of faith as more than words alone. If this man who keeps on saying that he has faith keeps on not having works, he is revealing that his claim to faith is spurious. James questions, "That kind of a faith cannot save him, can it?" The answer which he expects to receive is, "No."

That faith can save a man, and that nothing else can, is written with a pencil of light throughout the Scriptures. However, "faith" which is content with a mere intellectual, barren assent to Christian doctrines never saves. Indeed, it will serve an opiate to lull the soul to a treacherous and fatal repose. The Christian graces—the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22-23—are the things that accompany salvation. If one can live with the kind of faith that does not produce these graces in deeds, he has dead faith which is unable to save! Yet he may be all the while confident that he is secure in his "faith." Oh, the binding POWER of sin!

2. Faith that does not produce work thereby denies its validity, verses 15-16. The story is told of a certain wealthy farmer who daily prayed that the hungry might be fed. One day his young son said, "Daddy, I wish I had the key to the storeroom." His father inquired why and the lad replied, "I would answer your prayers!"

The apostle shows the barrenness and uselessness of an empty faith in one great illustration. He appeals to the Christian motive of selfless love. This is the very first fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22. Yet, if one can see a brother or sister stand in need of food, clothing and other things necessary to earthly existence, and his heart does not go out so that his hand ministers to them, he has proven his faith is unreal. However charming the words, "Be ye warmed and filled," they hardly satisfy the needs of a man destitute of daily provisions.

The reader has probably met the person who talks much about the Lord

when he is around a minister but who consistently lives for self and neglects the Lord's church and the Lord's people. Such demonstrates the profession of devotion as gross hypocrisy. The faith that refuses to work is dead!

3. Faith that does not produce works cannot be truly demonstrated, verse 18. James now introduces an objector who says, "But you have faith and I have works." The response of the apostle is "How can one demonstrate faith separate and apart from works?" There are certain works that properly belong to faith and should characterize it. It is not a question of faith or works, but of a live faith or a dead faith. The problem is whether one's profession of faith can be with no works or whether it must be shown to be alive by its works.

Suppose that one sought to demonstrate his faith in Jesus but he would do it without works. Neither his deeds, attitude nor disposition would reveal it. He would depend upon words alone. How hollow his profession would sound! Men would listen to his words and then look at his life. If the two did not coincide they would brand him a hypocrite. There is no way to prove to the world that one has faith in Jesus Christ but by a life whose deeds are consistent with the will of Jesus.

4. Faith that does not transform the soul is useless, verse 19. The apostle now goes on with his reply to the man who professes faith but has no works. He takes up the central doctrine necessary to faith. There is one God. This is a fundamental doctrine. Yet, it may be a mere creed.

The belief that there is one God is good so far as it goes. However, even the demons believe this and their response is that they shudder (literally, their hair stands on end in terror) at the fact. None would dare to say the demons were redeemed by this faith. Their belief works no beautifying effect on their character. Their character remains unimproved by their "faith." Their belief only deepens their anguish. Would any man be willing to stake the destiny of his soul on such faith as this? Surely not. Yet, it is to be feared that many are going toward eternity with no more preparation than this to meet God.

5. Judgment will show the faith without works to be dead, verses 17, 20. That sort of faith which is content to ignore expression through deeds is counterfeit. Judgment will show it to be dead, empty, inactive, unable to bring the experience of redemption to a man.

This sort of "faith" is not a confidence which leads to commitment to Jesus. The man who so trusts and commits will be made a new creation in Christ and works will manifest his new nature. The "faith" which does not bring this experience is merely a general acceptance of Christian truth. It brings no union with God through Jesus Christ. It produces no fruit to God's

glory. It makes no change within a man. It will be rejected in judgment and those who trust in it will hear, **“I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity,”** Matthew 7:23.

II. A FAITH THAT WORKS, 2:21-26.

A faith that works is illustrated in Abraham's experience, verses 21-24. Genesis 13:25 tell of the life of Abraham. James calls that life to witness to the fact that works are united to true faith.

(1) Works demonstrate faith, verse 21. James points out that Abraham was justified by works (verse 21) while Paul insists that he was justified by faith, Romans 4:2. Observe this, however: Paul looks to Abraham's faith in God's promise to provide him a son and many descendants, **“And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness,”** Genesis 15:6. Paul says that Abraham was justified “before God” by his faith, Romans 4:2.

James takes the other side of the same life. He examines an event which happened some forty years after Abraham was pronounced justified before God by faith. James looks at Abraham's offering of Isaac as a sacrifice to God (Genesis 22), and points out that Abraham, by that act, was justified before men. Thus faith justified Abraham before God while works proved to men the fact of this justification.

If Abraham had not had the kind of faith which caused him to offer his son (produce works) he would not have had the kind of faith which saves. Faith justifies a man before God but works reveal that justification to men. Works demonstrate faith. (2) Works strengthen faith, verse 22. Works go along with faith. They reveal the existence of this faith to men and to the believer. In this revelation they strengthen the resolve and faith of the convert. The new convert should immediately confess his new-found life of faith. He should, as soon as is expedient, follow the Lord in baptism. He should take advantage of every opportunity to declare his faith by words, works, and attitude. These manifestations of faith will strengthen faith and one will grow in his ability to serve the Lord. Verse 22 says, “Faith and works cooperate so that by working faith grows toward maturity.”

(3) Works bring rewards to faith, verse 23. Observe carefully that James says Abraham was justified by faith. It was the works which this faith prompted that caused him to be called “The Friend of God,” II Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8. Both God and men recognize that a man is a friend of God when he performs the deeds which manifest it. Friendship with God is not merely believing the things of God. Jesus said, **“Ye are my friends, if ye do**

whatsoever I command you,” John 15:14. The highest praise faith could ever receive is for men to recognize it as genuine because of the witness of the works it inspires. True faith neither seeks nor desires other rewards.

(4) Works join with faith in justification, verse 24. **“Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.”** James is saying that in considering our relations to God we should not be satisfied with finding in our minds some assent to divine truth. We must carefully examine our faith to see whether it be operative, fruit-bearing belief. Only this is saving faith.

There can be no question that salvation comes by faith in Jesus Christ and by Him alone, John 1:12; 3:14-18; 5:25; etc. However, James insists, “Faith alone, without works, does not justify,—for an inoperative faith is dead, powerless, unprofitable.” The faith which is too weak to produce works is too weak to save. Faith alone saves, but not the faith which is alone!

Only a living faith can receive salvation and a faith which is without works is dead. Therefore, works do not actually help accomplish the work of redemption but their presence, as a result of faith, is proof that one has the kind of faith which brings God's grace in redemption. The reader should study this passage carefully to make sure he understands its significance and meaning.

2. A faith that works is illustrated in Rahab's experience, verse 25. Our apostle now brings forward another instance when justifying faith produced works. The story of Rahab is told in Joshua 2:1-21; 6:17, 22-25; Matthew 1:5; Hebrews 11:31.

It is possible that Rahab may have pretended an acceptance of the God of the Hebrews, but when she took a stand against her own city and fellow-citizens she demonstrated her acceptance of the Hebrew God as her own God. She received the spies of Israel because they were the people of God. She caused their lives to be spared and kept them from harm for the same reason. Her faith in the God of Israel caused her to protect His servants. These deeds of faith secured for her the place of a wife and mother in Israel, bringing her into the ancestry of David and our Lord Jesus Christ, Matthew 1:5. Her actions would have been treason and inexcusable if it had not been that they were based on a living faith in God.

There is a basic lesson to be learned from the example of Abraham, the faithful, and Rahab, the harlot. Robert Johnstone has expressed it in these words, “All justifying faith, then, we see, in whatever class of persons it is found, produces works, varying in kind according to circumstances, but all expressive of love to God, and trust in Him.”

3. A faith that works is illustrated in man's physical body, verse 26. **“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”** Thus does James conclude his argument. He who has honestly followed the solemn and impressive statement of the discussion cannot deny this truth: The only faith which can be pleasing to God is such a profound and influential belief of His truth as reveals its presence in the soul by moral beauty and earnest devotedness in the outward life. A supposed and professed faith which has no such results is a dead thing. An inoperative faith is a corpse passing to corruption—utterly loathsome in God's sight!

CONCLUSION

How do you measure up in view of the truth of this lesson? Forget about everyone else and examine yourself alone. If you can live an unproductive life before God, it would be well to check again your experience of grace. It is possible for one to have an emotional experience that is not regeneration. One sure sign of the presence of salvation is that the Holy Spirit abides within one working that which produces the fruits of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, Galatians 5:22-23. **“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also,”** James 2:26.

QUESTIONS

- 1, What is faith?
2. What are works?
3. How does saving faith differ from intellectual faith?
4. In what sense was Abraham justified by faith?
5. In what sense was Abraham justified by works?
6. How is faith in God demonstrated before men?
7. How do works aid faith?
8. What is the aim of this study?
9. Why should believers be justified before men? How?