



**“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (James 2:26).**

## **Faith Does Good Works**

**Central Truth:** Faith without works is worthless.

**L371. Date:** July 1994. **Text:** James 2:14-26.

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

*“Faith without works is dead”* (James 2:20, 26). Do you really believe that with all your heart? There is no option to believing it, for the Bible states it clearly twice in the lesson text. Since faith without works is dead how can we call a person a “Christian” if he professes faith and commitment to Christ, but his lifestyle has borne no Christian evidence for years? Is being a true Christian confessing Christ as Savior, or does it include submitting to Him as Lord?

Here is a subject which challenges you to take personal inventory. *“Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves”* (II Corinthians 13:5). This study is not a call to stand in judgment over another person. It asks for self-examination. “Am I, by my lifestyle in private and public, showing that my profession of faith in Jesus is true?” Unless your honest answer to that question is a positive yes, James says your faith is dead, ineffective, and not real faith at all. Faith that is as lifeless as a corpse is not Christian faith, is it?

### **QUESTION: Can faith save?” (James 1:14)**

What is faith? Faith must be defined in order to answer the question, “Can faith save?” The Bible makes it quite clear that faith is more than mental assent. You may believe that Jesus is God in human flesh, that He was sinless, that He died on the cross to pay the debt for sinners, that if you

repent from sin and trust Him you will be saved. You could believe all of that and not be saved. Why? Because Christian faith is more than agreement with truth. John 2:23-25 tells of some who heard Jesus and “believed in his name”; but “Jesus did not commit himself unto them, for he knew what was in man.” Their belief lacked one essential element. Do you know what that one necessary thing is?

Faith is belief plus trust. It is belief which is followed by commitment based on what we believe. A tourist watched a man push a wheelbarrow before him on a cable strung across part of the Niagara Falls. The high-wire artist asked the tourist, “Do you believe I can do that again without falling?” The tourist answered, “Yes.” “Would you be willing to get in the wheelbarrow and let me take you across?” he asked.

Faith is not merely believing that Jesus can save; it is “getting in the wheelbarrow” and committing all to Him. F-A-I-T-H means “Forsaking All I Trust Him.” The demons believe (James 2:19), but they are not saved.

Faith cannot be kept secret. It will be manifested by change in act and attitude. Zacchaeus showed his faith by giving half of his estate to the poor and restoring fourfold anything taken by false means (Luke 19:1-10). How are you showing your faith? James says that if it is not shown by your lifestyle it is not genuine Christian faith.

The Bible is quite clear that no one is saved by works. Paul is positive about that in his writings (Ephesians 2:8, 9). James is very positive that a faith that does not work cannot save. Are they in conflict? Not at all. James simply explains the quality of the faith which saves, a faith that produces works. To confess a faith that does not work is to flatter God with the tongue and lie to Him with the lips (Psalm 78:36), What a sin!

ILLUSTRATION, “How do nice words help?” (James 2,15-17)

James illustrates how words without work are useless. He intends show that, in the same manner, faith without works is equally useless. First, faith has the occasion to act (verse 15). Here is a person who is destitute of food and clothing, and here is a fellow Christian who has resources to supply both. He knows that Jesus has said, “*Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me*” (Matthew 25:40). Here is an opportunity to serve Jesus by serving someone in Jesus' name. What an occasion to show the love of Jesus.

Second, faith may express itself in kind words only. So the man who could help said, “*Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled,*” but he did not

give him his resources to meet the need (verse 16). What profit was there in that? Where is the indication of the love and grace of God? What evidence of faith is to be found in that exchange? The words become hypocritical in being alone without works to perform what is needed.

Third, faith is equally unprofitable if it is expressed in words only (verse 17). Jesus showed His love for us by works — laying down His life for us. We show our love and faith by works — laying down our lives for our fellow human beings (I John 3:16-19).

James' illustration was related to benevolence — meeting needs for food and clothing. But the principle can be applied to all areas of life. The truth is that the faith which is expressed in words only, without an appropriate lifestyle accompanying it, is not true Christian faith at all.

What a warning James gave against “easy believism,” a shallow confession unaccompanied by sincere commitment. It is as well not to believe as to believe and not act upon that mental assent. It is not that you might lose your salvation if works do not accompany faith. It is rather that you are not saved at all unless your faith is the kind that produces works that demonstrate a godly lifestyle.

### **ARGUMENT: “Isn't personal testimony enough?” (James 2:18-20)**

Christian faith should be voiced openly. Jesus warned that He would not confess before the Father those who did not confess Him before others (Matthew 10:32, 33). All through the New Testament a vocal confession of Christ is required of new converts (Acts 8:36-38). James' teachings on conduct do not remove the requirement for faith to be spoken.

But Christian faith is more than mental assent and public confession. James challenges, “*Shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works*” (verse 18). That creates a problem. How can you show your faith without doing good works? If you do not speak or act in response to your faith, how can it be shown? The demons believed that Jesus is the Son of God and made a public confession of His deity (Mark 1:24; 3:11). But they were not saved. Why would belief and confession assure you of salvation, if that was all the evidence you gave? There can be no positive assurance in that situation. Christian faith is more than mental assent and public confession. It is accompanied by a changed life.

Faith is valid only when it is expressed in action; therefore, James warns “*Wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?*” (verse 20). Evaluate your life in the light of that solemn truth.

The only thing that is valid in the Lord is “*faith which worketh by*

love” (Galatians 5:6). Even Jesus did not depend on His words alone to prove His relationship with the Father. He said, “*The works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me*”(John 5:36). Listen to His words and look at His works. The two bear ample witness that He is the Son of God.

How can you demonstrate to an unregenerate and spiritually hostile world that your faith in Christ is real? You can do it by living such a lifestyle that, though unbelievers speak evil of you, they will see your good works and glorify God in the day when He visits them (I Peter 2:12).

### **PROOF: “What does the Bible reveal about true faith?” (James 2:21-25)**

The Bible teaches that you are justified before God on the basis of faith alone. It further teaches that you are justified before people on the basis of works which flow from faith. It is at this point that Paul and James seem to disagree. Paul uses Abraham as an illustration of salvation by faith alone (Romans 4). James uses Abraham as an illustration of salvation by works which demonstrate faith (James 2:21-23). Which is correct? Both are, as the following comments will show.

Abraham demonstrates true faith (verses 21-24). Abraham was one of God's chosen servants (Genesis 12:1, 2; 15:7). God did not choose Abraham because of some deserving virtue in him, but He did so according to His own sovereign will. Abraham trusted the God who called him, leaving his homeland and relatives to follow God's leading into a land which was not then identified.

Abraham was justified by his faith, apart from works. One night God took Abraham out and challenged him to count the stars. He could not, of course. “That is how many descendants you will have,” God promised. And the Bible reports, “*He believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness*” (Genesis 15:6). Paul used that as an illustration of justification by faith. He said you and I could be justified the same way if we believed in Jesus who was delivered for our offenses and was raised for our justification (Romans 4:1-25). There is no question but that Abraham was justified by faith, apart from any works.

But Abraham demonstrated his faith by his works. God commanded him to offer his only son, Isaac, upon the altar as a burnt offering (Genesis 22:1-18). And he did it to the point that God stopped him before the child was killed. How could he possibly have done such a thing? Hebrews 11:19 said he trusted God to fulfill His promise in Isaac so that, if necessary, God

would raise him from the dead to do it. That act proved more than words could ever do that Abraham trusted God fully.

It is that act which James calls to record as proof that Abraham was justified. God knew Abraham was justified the moment He made the promise and Abraham responded to Him in faith. But we could not know the validity of Abraham's faith until it was demonstrated in the act of offering Isaac. Abraham was justified before God on the basis of his faith and before man on the basis of his works. But James' statement still stands: Faith, which produces no works, is dead, and dead faith is useless to save or sanctify.

Rahab was a sinner saved by faith (verses 25, 26). Joshua 2 recounts the story of Rahab. She was a pagan prostitute who lived in Jericho at the time Joshua led Israel into Palestine. She had heard of God's works on behalf of Israel when He opened the Red Sea and gave victory over the Amorite kings. She confessed, "*The LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath*" (Joshua 2:11). She believed that before the Hebrew spies came to her to be hidden from those who sought them. Hebrews 11:31 reports that it was "by faith" (because of her faith) that she was saved when the city of Jericho fell.

What do works have to do with Rahab? She demonstrated her faith by risking her life to save the lives of the Hebrew spies because she believed in their God. If she had not believed in God, she would never have endangered herself and her family by protecting the spies. Her works demonstrated her faith. She was justified before God by her faith and before man by her works.

### **CONCLUSION: "How are faith and works related?"**

Faith comes first. You are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Works follow faith as the demonstration that you truly believe to the point of commitment (Ephesians 2:10). Faith and works are related as body and spirit, as breath and life. The relationship of faith and works should be considered in the light of these questions: What is the profit to you of your faith without works? What is the profit to others of your faith without works? What is the profit to God of your faith without works? James says it is useless in all areas. Where there are no works prompted by faith, there is no saving faith. Beware of the devil's deception of mental assent without total commitment.