

Faith and Works

Daily, people around the world are talking about faith and religion. In these conversations there's much being said about the value of both faith and works. Every faith or belief system in the world requires an element of works, or deeds, in order to achieve whatever their version of "heaven" is. All, except Christianity. Christianity is the only faith in the world that dismisses all works, with regards to getting to heaven. Consider the magnificence of this reality, and how unique Christianity is. Not only is the Holy Bible the only book which gives the complete account of the universe from the very beginning to the very end, it's also the only doctrine teaching us that a person cannot work, earn, or "do" anything in order to be right with God. Christianity teaches that the way to heaven is by faith alone; simple, yet so profound. Unpacking John 3:16 reveals the simplicity of the good news that I'm speaking about.

John 3:16,

FOR GOD – *the greatest Being*

SO LOVED – *the greatest love*

THE WORLD – *the greatest creation*

THAT HE GAVE – *the greatest gift*

HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON – *the greatest sacrifice*

THAT WHOEVER – *the greatest invitation*

BELIEVES IN HIM – *the greatest simplicity*

SHALL NOT PERISH – *the greatest promise*

BUT HAVE – *the greatest guarantee*

ETERNAL LIFE – *the greatest reward*

Jesus makes salvation that simple.

So, why then does the Bible stress that faith without works is dead? This essay attempts to clarify what the Scriptures mean when it teaches the necessity of faith with works. The passages in view will be James 2:14-26.

James 2:14-26, ***"What use is it, my brethren, if someone 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.' You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,' and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."***

At a glance, it may appear this portion of Scripture teaches that a person is saved by the combining of both faith and works. But we know this can't be the case as the rest of the Bible emphasizes salvation by faith alone. For example, Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9 that works have no part in salvation, ***"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."*** Besides, in James 2 we see James repeat phrases, testimonies, and examples used in Romans and Hebrews (Romans 4:3, Hebrews 11:17, 31). This shows the Holy Spirit inspired writers like James and Paul; harmonizing their examples, and showing that they hold the same doctrine. So, James is not contradicting other Biblical teachings, he's simply making a different point. In James 2:14-26, the kind of person in view is different. In short, Paul emphasized what is required to be justified before God, James speaks of what is required to be justified before men. Let's look at these two passages from James.

Passage One - James 2:14-17

14 What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?

- Here James is referring to the type of person who claims to be a Christian, but is not. A key word here is the word, “says.” James isn’t saying that the man here “*has faith*”, but only that the man here “*says he has faith.*” This indicates a type of person with a mere profession of faith, yet without genuine faith in his heart. The error here is resting on bare profession of faith without actually entrusting himself to Jesus.
- If the type of person in view here actually had genuine faith, then it would be proved, or demonstrated, by a life of holy living. The result of real faith is “works”, which are results or behaviors that come from a heart of love and mercy. Real faith animates a person and directs how a person lives; it is functional, operative, and impacts duties and responsibilities.
- There are people like this today; people who say they have faith, but really have none. This is the type of person that when asked, might say, “*Yea, I’m a Christian. I believe in God.*” However, his friends notice that throughout the day he’s cussing, smoking, lying, cheating, etc. In other words, the phony believer is trying to convince others, maybe even himself, that what he has is genuine, when in reality there is no saving faith in his life.
- James says, “*Can that faith save him?*” This statement means, “*Where there is no internal faith, and only a verbal profession, can that type of faith save a person? No, it cannot!*” Everyone needs faith to be saved, and one cannot be saved by a bare knowledge of God, or merely by holding a correct sentiment, like, “*I believe in God.*” Even demons do this much, which James addresses in verse 19.
- The Bottom Line - Empty professions can’t result in salvation. Likewise, empty verbal charity can’t help one’s neighbor. James gives the following example in verses 15-17 of how mere professions are worthless.

15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food,

16 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?

- Charity is operative, and so is faith. Verbal charity, “*May your stomach be fed*”, is not charity at all. Real charity is practical, “*Here is some food to fill your stomach.*”
- James basically argues, “*You wouldn’t dare come before God with such empty demonstrations of charity as this, would you? Likewise, don’t think you can come before God and expect to enter into heaven with empty professions of faith.*”

17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

- Here in verse 17, James moves his argument to real faith, in comparison to mere professions. He says “***Even so faith*** (real faith), ***if it has no works, is dead***”, meaning that real faith if it were to be stagnant and produce no outward change, is like a dead lifeless person, as genuine faith animates a person’s life.
- Consider this illustration. Imagine a person who tried to sell his dead dog to a neighbor. The neighbor looks at the dog and says, “*Why isn’t it moving? Is it alive? Make it walk around and bark or something.*” But, the owner says, “*It’s alive, trust me. You don’t need to see it do anything, just take my word for it.*” Likewise, a person who displays no evidence of the faith has a hard-time convincing people he’s a believer.
- One is justified before God by his faith, as God can rightly know a man’s heart. But humans can’t rightly know a man’s heart. Therefore, we are justified before men, by our works, which demonstrates our heart condition.

Passage Two – James 2:18-26

18 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.”

- Here, two types of people are in view; a true believer calling out someone who’s faith is in doubt. One of these is a person having some measure of belief in God, but whose faith cannot be assured as his life has no outward demonstration of it. The other, a no-doubt Christian cites that his faith is sure, and needn’t be questioned, as his life reflects his faith. In other words, the true believer says, “*I’ll let my works speak for me.*”

19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

- Building off of verse 18, the person without any works might try to argue that he has faith by stating that he believes God is one. Now, someone who believes in God is closer to salvation than the atheist who denies the existence of God. Even more, someone who believes in one God might be closer to salvation than the pagans who worship many gods. These things are good, but not good enough. Many people believe in monotheism; the existence of one God. Even demons have such a belief, but it will not help them escape God's judgment.
- True faith is more than an intellectual agreement; as even the demons know about God. Additionally, true faith is more than an emotional response; as demons' shudder at the reality of God, whom they know will judge them. True faith will involve both the mind and the heart, but it is more, it is entrusting oneself to the Lord!

20 But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?

21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?

- In Genesis 15:6, Abraham had believed and entrusted Himself to God, allowing God to direct His life. For this reason, it says, **"Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness."** Here, James speaks of a later incident when Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac, some thirty years after Abraham was saved. So, Abraham offering up Isaac was a testing of Abraham's faith, a work that demonstrated his faith, but not something that produced salvation in Abraham. Romans 4:2-3 says, **"For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.'"**
- In offering Isaac, Abraham's allegiance is justified, and this outward "work" justifies (proves) to us that Abraham was a no doubt man of faith. James argues that Abraham's actions prove he was a man of faith. Abraham didn't just profess faith, he lived it out. James uses this example to show believers that they can't just profess faith and expect to be taken seriously. *"Show me,"* James insists!

22 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;

- God told Abraham that he would have a huge number of descendants through his son, Isaac. But, before Isaac was married or had any kids, God asked Abraham to kill Isaac. Abraham, in faith, knew this request could only mean one thing; that God could raise Isaac from the dead. How else could the promise be fulfilled if Isaac were to die now? Abraham believed that God could fulfil His promise by bring Isaac back to life, as Hebrews 11:17-19 says, **"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, 'IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED.' He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type."**
- Faith working with his works! Genuine faith is demonstrated not simply by speaking a set of beliefs, but by the actions that those beliefs produce.

23 and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God.

24 You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

- Again, no contradiction here between the words of Paul and the words of James. Paul speaks of justification before God, whereas James speaks of justification before men by showing fruit in order to be believed. If you have a mere casual profession of faith, someone else is right to question your profession by requiring works in order to prove yourself. True faith, which is alive in Christ, will naturally pour out works.
- In James day, many Jews put their faith in Jesus. These former Jews, before faith, had nothing but works to live under, which didn't save anyone at all. Now, alive in Christ, and no longer bound to the works of the Law, many Jewish converts to Christianity said, *"I no longer need works, I only need faith."* James aims to correct them and show that faith saves, but works justifies your faith before men. Next, in verse 25, James turns to another example that Paul used; Rahab.

25 In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

- Rahab, as a true believer, did what she did in faith. Hebrews 11:31, ***“By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.”*** She proved her faith by her works, thus manifesting that she was a justified person before the Lord. So, whether a Christian has converted from Judaism or from being a Gentile, male or female, and no matter what the sin background, a genuine Christian will display the good works that accompany saving faith!

26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

- Doubling down on what he said in verse 17, here, with this simile, James says just as a human body can't live without a soul, neither can genuine faith exist without good works to show for it.