

Faith that Works

Saving faith is living faith

JAMES 2:14–26

Salvation is a gift you could never earn — and the faith that receives it is never the kind of faith that sits still.

i. A Faith That Only Talks

JAMES 2:14–17

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

JAMES 2:14–17, ESV

There are two temptations we will have when reading this text, and I want to state them plainly and ask you not to hold either one. The first is to take James to mean that good works, added to your faith, are what save you. The second is to reduce good works to nothing more than external evidence that saving faith once occurred. That doesn't seem to be what he is saying either — works appear to be more than the outward proof of an inward reality. We are going to have to be comfortable living in some tension.

Now focus on one word in verse 14: someone says. James is dealing with a claim to faith that has no works backing it up, and he asks whether that kind of faith can save. The implied answer is no. It cannot.

Then he hands us an analogy. A brother or sister is poorly clothed and hungry, and you tell them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” and then you do nothing about it. We would condemn that person instantly. We would tell them they are fooling themselves and that their words have no substance. That is exactly the person who says they have faith and has nothing to show for it.

This analogy hits so hard because it feels scandalous. It is scandalous. We should read it and think, that person is awful. Listen — as Christians we are called to be a light to the world, which means we meet needs and make a difference in our domain. Wherever we go, collectively or individually, ought to be better because we were there. We cannot be the kind of people who claim faith and use wonderful spiritual language but never lift a finger to help anyone in need.

A claim with nothing behind it is not faith. It is vocabulary.

Before We Begin

James writes to Jewish Christians persecuted badly enough that they fled their homes, families, and community to keep their lives. In that hard season, when following Jesus has cost them everything, he confronts them rather than comforts them. He knows it is in trial that our walk is most likely to falter.

The theme runs the length of the book: half-hearted devotion and double-mindedness. All of us have areas where we believe one thing and live another. That is the gap James is after, and he means to eliminate it.

But first, the gospel. We were by nature children of wrath, condemned not because Adam sinned but because we sin, and the debt was too high to ever escape. Then God dies for his enemies. It is a gift, not a reward — and the moment you try to earn it, you invalidate it.

Words to Know

*faith**pistis · πίστις*

A conviction that something is true, and trust in what it implies.

*works**erga · ἔργα*

Deeds, doings. The visible activity that a living faith produces.

*dead**nekra · νεκρά*

A corpse. Not weak or immature — without life in it at all.

*justified**dikaioō · δικαιόω*

Declared righteous. Paul uses it of how we are saved; James of how it is shown.

ii. Even the Demons Believe

JAMES 2:18–20

But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

JAMES 2:18–20, ESV

This answers the person who says, well, I’m a faith kind of guy — or the modern version, my part in the body is to have faith and your part is to work. James’s reply: show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You cannot show me anything.

Then he turns up the heat. You believe that God is one — you do well. Even the demons believe, and shudder. You can believe all the right things, but if you never live them out, you resemble demons. They hold right beliefs about God. Their works simply never align with them.

There are two kinds of “Christian” we must never become: the one who checks every doctrinal box and lives contrary to it, and the one with good works and bad doctrine. We are after a third — right beliefs, right walk, right heart. Faith without works isn’t merely dead. It isn’t faith. It’s belief, and belief saves no one.

| *Conviction that changes nothing is only an opinion.*

iii. Completed by Works

JAMES 2:21–26

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works ... For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

JAMES 2:21–26, ESV

Here is where we pause and ask, wait — what about everything Paul just said? Hebrews helps us. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called out. By faith he lived in the land of promise. By faith, when he was tested, he offered up Isaac. Notice the pattern: by faith Abraham did something. His faith compelled the action, and the action found its home back in his faith.

Then one more analogy. You can have a body, but without the spirit there is no life in it. Faith that never moves, never obeys, never produces anything is dead. Paul says the same thing — read the verse right after Ephesians 2:9. We are his workmanship, created for good works, which God prepared beforehand.

| *You prayed the prayer. James asks what happened next.*

Grace, Faith, and Works

- > Justified by grace as a gift *Rom. 3:23–24*
- > Justified apart from works *Rom. 3:28*
- > God died for his enemies *Rom. 5:8*
- > By nature children of wrath *Eph. 2:3*
- > Saved by grace, not works *Eph. 2:8–9*
- > Created for good works *Eph. 2:10*
- > Not by works of the law *Gal. 2:16*
- > By faith Abraham obeyed *Heb. 11:8, 17*

Paul and James are not arguing with each other. Paul is telling you how a sinner is declared righteous before God. James is telling you how you would ever know it happened.

Take It Further

1. Where do you believe one thing and live another?
2. Whose real need have you talked about but never met?
3. What faith would this week’s works prove you had?
4. Which of your convictions is actually just an opinion?
5. Name one work your faith owes. Do it this week.

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Notes

James 2:14–26 · Faith that Works

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Soli Deo Gloria

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