



INTRODUCTION

Remember the Junior Church song you learned and loved as a kid, “If You’re Saved and You Know It”? We would sing with enthusiasm while clapping our hands, stomping our feet, and shouting “amen” because we were saved and we knew it. Perhaps your favorite part was when we would “do all three” (clap hands, stomp feet, and say “amen”). It is the final phrase, however, of that song that brings the most conviction to the spiritually sensitive heart. It says, “if you’re saved and you know it then your life will surely show it”. Convicting thought, “Does my life demonstrate my faith”?

This is precisely the point of today’s text. Real faith results in works. There are many who “clap” their hands, “stomp” their feet, and even heartily say “amen”, but do not have a genuine faith. Their “talk” and their “walk” are very different. Their claims and their conduct are in opposition to one another. Remember that penetrating question, “If you say you believe like you should, why do you behave like you shouldn’t?” Three times in this text James warns, “Faith without works is dead” (2:17, 20, 26).

This section is the main thesis of James. Everything before this passage is like an arrow pointing forward to it. Everything after is like an arrow pointing back. The book of James is all about hands-on Christianity. He wants us to stop sitting on our hands and start using them to do God’s work. Real faith results in works!

BACKGROUND

The paragraph before us is one of the most difficult, and certainly the most misunderstood, sections in the epistle. It has been a theological battleground for years. But instead of just academically dissecting the passage, may we spiritually digest its principles.

At first glance it appears that James is teaching something that is in opposition to that of Paul. When James states that Abraham was “justified by works” (James 2:21) is that not contrary to Paul’s teaching that “a man is justified by faith” (Rom. 3:28)? Paul speaks of Abraham in Romans 4:3, “Abraham believed

God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness”. This is only an apparent contradiction, for in reality their teachings do not cross but run parallel. They are not antagonists facing each other with crossed swords; they stand back to back, confronting different foes of the Gospel.

Paul is dealing with the legalistic mindset of the Jews. They thought that their religious practices and good works granted them salvation. He dogmatically announces that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. James is dealing with the other side of the coin. His audience thought that merely giving verbal assent to creedal doctrine granted salvation. James wants these to understand that genuine faith in Christ results in a changed life. Both James and Paul view good works as the proof of faith – not the path to salvation. Works do not precede salvation, but they do proceed from salvation!

Part of the seeming contradiction is clarified with an understanding of the word *justified*. Both authors utilize the word but context brings clarity to demonstrate that these two were not competing but complementing one another’s teaching. The term *justify* can be used in two different ways that should be viewed as two sides of the same coin. Depending on context, the word can mean either “to declare righteous”, as in a legal proceeding, or “to demonstrate as righteous”. Paul uses *justified* to speak of our declared righteousness before God through faith in Christ. James uses *justified* to speak of our demonstrated righteousness before men through good works. Both men agree that a justified person has a changed life and obeys God’s will. True faith will be demonstrated by works.

By way of comparison, Paul references the root of salvation, James points to the fruit of salvation. Paul writes of the provision of salvation by faith in Christ, James writes of the proof of salvation by works before men. Paul looks at salvation from God’s perspective, James looks at it from a human perspective. Paul speaks of the inward work of God, James shows the outward work. Paul identifies a “know-so-faith”, James insists on a “show-so-faith”.

Transition: Our text compares and contrasts genuine and counterfeit faith. James identifies dead faith and then illustrates living faith. When it comes to the test of faith, it is not multiples choice, but true/false. We better be able to get the answer right because our eternal lives depend on it.

1. The Identification of False Faith (2:14-20, 26)

Not all faith is valid faith. Some faith is bogus, phony, a pseudo-faith. James calls false faith “dead faith”. With that in mind, he performs an autopsy of

dead faith pointing out its worthless, useless, and lifeless attributes. At the funeral of dead faith three epitaphs could be written on its tombstone.

A. Words without works is worthless (2:14-17) – Faith in word only

The old cliché quips, “It is easier said than done”. This is true in the spiritual life as well. It is easy to talk about God, but talk alone is cheap. Real faith acts, it sacrificially obeys God. A person with “dead faith” constantly affirms their Christianity in word, but there is never any evidence to validate their claim through works. It is a religion in **word only**. James says that this kind of word-only faith is a false faith. He rhetorically asks, “can faith save him?” (2:14), literally, “can that kind of faith save him?” What kind? The kind of faith that is never proven in practical works. The obvious answer is no! Any declaration of faith that does not result in a changed life and good works is a false declaration. It is “dead faith” and therefore **unable to save**. Just claiming to be a Christian does not make you a Christian.

With a mini parable, James explains that false faith is also **unwilling to share** (2:15-16). The food and clothing spoken of here are basic needs of every human being (1 Tim. 6:8; Matt. 6:31-32). As believers, we have an obligation to help meet the needs of people, no matter who they may be, but especially the needs of other believers (Gal. 6:10). Wishing others well with statements like “be warmed and filled”, “God bless you”, and “I’ll pray for you” does nothing to actually clothe and feed the poor. Likewise, claiming to have faith in word only is worthless. James is speaking of a person who claims to be part of God’s family, but they do not demonstrate love for their Father or siblings. When it was in their power to help a family member in desperate need, they reply not with helpful works but worthless words.

Illustration: The priest and the Levite in Jesus’ famous story of the Good Samaritan are an example of “dead faith” (Lk. 10). Both had substantial religious training, but neither of them paused to assist the dying man on the roadside. Each of them would confirm and defend his faith with words, yet neither demonstrated that faith in loving works. This is false faith. People with “dead faith” think they can substitute words for works. They may know what to say and how to pray, they have the correct vocabulary and can quote numerous Bible verses, but their walk does not line up with their talk. They think their words are as good as works. But just as works without faith is useless, so faith without works is useless. Works are not the source of faith, rather faith is the source of works. We understand that faith is not born of works, it is born of God (Rom. 10:17). However, we must learn that works are born of faith.

James summarizes, “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone” (2:17). This word *dead* means to be “useless, ineffective, or worthless”. The word *alone* means “by itself”. True, saving faith can never be by itself: It always brings life, and life produces good works. Faith and actions go together. They cannot be separated. You cannot have one without the other. John Calvin is quoted as saying, “It is faith alone that justifies, but faith that justifies can never be alone”.

Application: Genuine faith gives you a genuine love for God and others. Saving faith provides a heart of compassion that result in action. For kindness is “love in shoe leather”. The Apostle John wrote of this, “But whoso hath this world’s goods, and seeth his brother in need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? Little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn. 3:17-18). Our faith is to be evidenced not just in word only, but in works also.

Transition: James writes another epitaph upon the tombstone of dead faith. Not only are words without works worthless, but profession without possession is perilous. Some have a “word only” faith, others have a “name only” faith.

B. Profession without possession is perilous (2:18-20) – Faith in name only

There are those who profess faith, but do not genuinely possess faith. Wherever there is the truth, you will find counterfeit. The person with “dead faith” has only an intellectual experience. In his mind, he knows the plan of salvation, but he has never submitted himself to God and trusted Christ alone for salvation. He says the right words and knows the right doctrine, but he does not back up his words with his works. He is a Christian in word only and **name only**. Profession without possession is perilous! Jesus warned, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

In 2:18, James **challenges** his would-be opponent by saying, “You claim to have faith...prove it!” James must have been from Missouri, he demands “show me” your faith. He understood that faith is made visible only through works. It is impossible to validate your claim of faith apart from works. Faith is internal, works are external. While God looks on the heart and knows whether our claim of faith is legitimate or not, man looks on the outside to discern the fruit of faith as seen through works. James stands willing and able to meet his own challenge. He says, “You show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works”. Instead of just talking a “big game”, James

allows his game to do the talking. His is not a “word only” faith, or a “name only” faith, but a working faith. Works validate your faith. The two cannot be separated. Someone has said, “Faith is like calories: you can’t see them, but you can always see their results”! Real faith results in real works.

James **commends** his audience for their orthodox doctrine, “thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well” (2:19). The Jewish Christians were accustomed to reciting their belief in the oneness of God through their regular use of the Shema. From childhood they would have recited morning and night, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD” (Deut. 6:4). There were some who were trusting in their upbringing, their creeds, their religious belief, but not in Christ. James is burdened that they understand that saving faith is more than mere intellectual assent to truth. He **confronts** them with the reality that “the devils also believe”. In fact, these evil spirits go a step further than most, they even “tremble” (2:19). The word *tremble* means “to bristle or shudder”. It carries the idea of a person being so frightened that it causes their skin to crawl, and the hair on the back of their neck to stand on end. The demons intellectually understand the position and power of God. They emotionally fear the judgment of God and their certain doom, but volitionally they refuse to submit to God. Even the Devil professes “faith” in God, but he is unwilling to bow his knee to Jesus. His theology would be impeccable, but his works are abhorrent. Jesus warned of those who professed faith, but never possessed it in Matthew 7:22-23 when He said, “Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”

Illustration: Suppose we were able to interview the Devil on his doctrine.

Question 1: Do you believe that there is one God? Answer: Certainly.

Question 2: Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Answer: Yes. My followers and I have attested to that fact on many occasions (Mt. 8:29; Mk. 5:7; Lk. 8:28). Question 3: Do you believe Jesus was born of a virgin? Answer: Of course, I witnessed His virgin birth. Question 4: Do you believe that Jesus died on the cross? Answer: Yes. I watched Him die. Question 5: Do you believe that Jesus rose from the dead? Answer: Yes, I did everything in my power to stop Him, but to no avail. Question 6: Are you willing to bow the knee and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord? Answer: No, I’ll never bow the knee to Jesus!

James reiterates again, “But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?” (2:20). He is asking this foolish (vain) man, who believes that faith can be separated from works, “do you really want to understand the relationship of faith and works?”. Bottom line – faith without works is dead! This word *dead* is sometimes translated “barren”. False faith and barren belief cannot save a man. What is needed is a different kind of faith – a living and

active faith. True faith goes beyond words and acknowledgment to the point of trust, acceptance, and obedience.

Application: The individual that acknowledges Christ but never accepts Christ has “dead faith”. It is faith in “name only”. They believe in their head biblical and historical facts *about* Jesus, but have never trusted *in* Jesus with their heart. They may nod in agreement, but they have never knelt in acceptance. Many will miss heaven by 18 inches. They know facts in their head, but they have never bowed in faith in their heart. Dead faith knows right words and facts, but demonstrates no real works of faith. “The Gospel,” Zodhiates remarks, “is not something that is understood and appropriated collectively, but something that is seen personally and individually”. Have you personally received Christ as your Savior?

Transition: James continues chiseling a third epitaph into the headstone of dead faith. He wants us to recognize that words without works is worthless, profession without possession is perilous, and finally, faith without fruit is fatal. Dead faith is in “word only”, “name only”, and “form only”.

C. Faith without fruit is fatal (2:26) – Faith in form only

A third time James warns, “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead” (2:26). Whenever you find separation, you find death. That is true both physically and spiritually. The body has no independent life apart from the indwelling spirit. Without the spirit it is a useless corpse. So an inactive faith, entombed in an intellectually approved creed, is of no more value than a corpse. A saving faith is an active faith. Works do not save, but real faith works! The work of the human body does not give life, the work of the body reveals life. Just as fruit does not give life to a tree, the tree’s life is evidenced through the fruit. So faith without fruit is fatal. No fruit in the life, no root in the heart!

Jesus spoke of those who professed to be in the vine, but produce no fruit. John 15:1-2 records these words, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away.” In verse 6 He continues, “If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned”.

Good works are not an infallible proof of faith, but the absence of good works proves the absence of faith. Some have a “form of godliness but deny the power thereof” (II Tim. 3:5). This is a **form only** faith. Men can have good works without faith, but a man cannot have true faith without works. There are some honest men who are unsaved, but a saved man will be honest. James

insists that any profession of being justified by faith must be proven by the works of the one making the profession.

Application: A faith that is outwardly unproductive is also inwardly dead. A faith that has no accompanying works is dead as measured by its own barrenness. Like a corpse, which may have all the outward dimensions and configuration of a man, but if there is no evidence of life, the body is pronounced dead. True faith will be energetic in displaying itself by its fruits, but a faith that is merely professed without any observable effects is a false faith.

Transition: James has clearly identified false faith for us. After a thorough autopsy he has pronounced it D-E-A-D no less than three times. Now he wants his audience to understand what true faith looks like. He reaches into the pages of the Old Testament to illustrate that true faith is living faith.

2. The Illustration of True Faith (2:21-25)

True, Christian faith will manifest its existence in active obedience to God's Word. True faith is living faith. It is not in "word only", but evident to others through obvious works. It is not in "name only" or "form only", but practices obedience before God. Living faith is right belief backed by right behavior. It is orthodox learning observed in obedient living. It is proper doctrine that demands practical deeds. True faith is a belief that results in dynamic, active response to God's grace.

Genuine faith is evidenced by our actions. True faith is not passive, it is active. It rolls up its sleeves and gets its hands dirty. Faith gets involved with people who need a helping hand. Faith is not just a state of being, it is a state of doing. Faithless works and workless faith are both wrong. Authentic faith trusts and obeys!

Living faith is experienced by grace through faith and evidenced through good works. Ephesians 2:8-10 is familiar, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them". Paul uses three prepositions that are key to our understanding. Salvation is by grace, it is through faith, and it is unto good works.

Salvation is not by works it is by grace. Grace is God's unmerited, undeserved favor to man. Grace is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8). We cannot earn grace, we have not merited grace, and we certainly do not deserve grace. In fact, because of our sin we deserve eternal separation from God (Rom. 6:23). But thank God He

is rich in mercy and great in love (Eph. 2:4)! So that even while we "were dead in trespasses and sins, [He] hath quickened us together with Christ (for by grace are ye saved)" (Eph. 2:5). Salvation is all of God, it is by grace.

Salvation is not through works it is through faith. The Prophet announced, "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rages" in God's sight (Is. 64:6). Paul declared, "there is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). Salvation is not through "works lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:9). No one can brag of their personal effort and part in gaining eternal life, for "salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). Our redemption was paid in full through Christ's finished work on the cross. It is a gift that must be simply received. We humbly receive the gift of salvation through faith. It is not the amount of faith that saves, but the object of our faith. The object of our faith is not our prayer, our creed, our baptism, or our good works, it must be in Christ alone. It is not faith in our faith that saves, it is faith in Christ. Salvation is by grace through faith.

But salvation is unto good works. God did not save us to allow us to sit, soak, sour, and stink. He saved us to serve! "For we are his workmanship", we are the masterpiece of God. As His masterpiece, God has ordained that we would work for Him and walk with Him. Christian, you were "created unto good works" and it is the design and desire of your Creator that you would "walk in them". Our faith in Christ produces good works for Christ. James gives two illustrations of the truth that living faith is experienced by grace through faith and evidenced through good works.

Abraham and Rahab were very different people, from opposite backgrounds and extremes. Abraham was the father of the Hebrews, Rahab a Gentile prostitute. Abraham a man of power and respect, Rahab was a woman of ill repute. Abraham is called the "Friend of God" (2:23), while Rahab once belonged to the enemies of God. So why are they mentioned together, and what did they possibly have in common? Both exercised saving faith in God and it was evidenced through works. By using Abraham and Rahab as examples of true faith, James casts a broad net in which every Christian should find themselves somewhere in between the examples.

A. Example of Abraham (2:21-24)

James begins with the person the Jews would have most highly revered. Abraham was visited by God and instructed to leave his homeland. God had made a covenant with Abraham to make of him a great nation, to provide a land of dwelling, and to bless all nations through him (Gen. 12). Both James and Paul references Genesis 15:6 by saying, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted (imputed) unto him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:3; James 2:23). Abraham's salvation was by grace through faith! Yet we know he was a

genuine believer because of the works seen in his life. He obeyed the Word of God. This is James's point when he says that Abraham was "justified by works" (2:21).

The specific event that James identifies is Abraham's willingness to "offer Isaac his son upon the altar" (2:21). With this act of obedience, Abraham demonstrates that his faith was not sterile, a mere profession, or intellectual assent. Rather, it was the kind that showed its vitality when confronted with the test. Abraham's works displayed the dynamic faith he possessed. Abraham was not saved because he obeyed God's command. Instead, his obedience demonstrated his faith in God. In other words, the faith that secured Abraham's righteousness before God in Genesis 15 produced the supreme evidence of its work some 30 years later in Genesis 22.

Furthermore, James advocates that faith is not fully matured until it flowers into appropriate works. This is what is meant when he says, "by works was faith made perfect" (2:22). Then he wants to know if we are getting the point through his illustration. "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (2:24). Remember that term *justified* is speaking of the demonstration of our faith before man. God alone can declare us righteous before Him, but true faith is evidenced through works.

Transition: Living faith is experienced by grace through faith and evidenced through good works. Abraham is a prime example of this truth, but James is going to give us another illustration of true faith.

B. Example of Rahab (2:25)

The conversion of Rahab is detailed in Joshua 2. Two men were sent to spy out the city of Jericho. They took lodging in Rahab's home for the night. When it was discovered by the authorities where the men were residing, Rahab hid them "with the stalks of flax which she had laid in order upon the roof" (Joshua 2:6). She also sent the king's men chasing "ghosts" outside the city gates (Joshua 2:7). But her confession of faith in God is recorded in verses 8-11, specifically when she states, "the LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath". Rahab believed the Word of God and demonstrated her faith in God through obedience.

By harboring the spies and helping them escape the city, Rahab put her very life on the line in demonstration of her professed faith. Her actions would have been viewed as an act of treason against her people. This is the point that James intends to drive home once again. Rahab was "justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way" (2:25).

This verse is again speaking of the validation of faith before men through works. Rahab's faith resulted in action and that action was rewarded by God.

Conclusion: James would have heartily sung "If you're saved and you know it then your life will surely show it". The question we must ask ourselves is, "Does my life demonstrate my faith"? If I were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict me of being guilty? Is my faith in "word only", "name only", or "form only"? Do I have "dead faith" or living faith? Someone has said, "If your religion hasn't changed you, you ought to change your religion". Living faith is experienced by grace through faith and evidenced through good works. Real faith results in works.