

Faith or Works?  
James 2:14-19  
ABC 6/2/19

James 2:14-26 is famous for theological controversy. At 1<sup>st</sup>, it seems James is contradicting what Paul would later write. Paul taught we're saved by grace through faith, apart from works. James seems to say we must have faith plus works to be saved. Which is it? Are we justified by faith alone or by faith plus works? At the heart of this dispute is the question, *What is genuine saving faith?* This isn't just an academic debate. The correct answer to that question concerns your eternal destiny. If my faith is not genuine, saving faith, I could be deceiving myself in the worst possible way. I might think Jesus is my Savior & even be active in serving Him but be sadly mistaken. Jesus spoke some of the most frightening words in the Bible when He said,

**Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, & in Your name cast out demons, & in Your name perform many miracles?' & then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness' (Mt 7:21-23).**

It's vital to be clear on this crucial matter of what saving faith truly is & what false faith is that doesn't save

Before we look at the passage, how should we approach a controversial or difficult text, such as Js 2:14-26? 1<sup>st</sup>, know that the Holy Spirit doesn't contradict Himself in Scripture. If we believe that **all Scripture is inspired by God** (2 Tim 3:16), then James & Paul cannot be at odds. We mustn't pit one author or doctrine against another. For example, if Scripture plainly teaches that God is sovereign & that people are responsible, we must teach both.

2<sup>nd</sup>, try to understand the issue each author was addressing. Paul wrote Galatians to deal with the error of adding some outward work, such as circumcision, to faith alone for salvation. James wrote this text to confront the problem of those who profess to believe in Christ, but don't have any fruit to show for it. Don't lose sight of the author's intent.

3<sup>rd</sup>, be careful not to read Paul's use of words into James or vice versa. Each author may use the same word or term, but with different nuances or understanding of meaning. We must understand James' point in its context & Paul's point in its context before we try to harmonize them.

Finally, we must try to combine all that the Bible teaches on a particular topic into one harmonized, unified whole. Try to understand what the whole Bible teaches on a subject. & we must put the same emphasis on a subject that the Bible puts on it. To take a minor doctrine & blow it up into the central teaching of the Christian life is to fall into error, even if the doctrine is true. To dodge or neglect a major doctrine because you don't like it is to stray from the truth.

As we come to a difficult text, we must have teachable hearts that seek the Lord for understanding & we must apply the truth personally. Our prayer should always be, *Lord, teach me Your truth & enable me to obey it.* **8-26** PRAY

James & Paul are not at odds. Both clearly taught...

**1. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.** The word **faith/believe** appears 14x in 12 vss & is the obvious theme. The question James addresses isn't whether or not faith in Christ saves sinners, but what kind of faith in Jesus can save a sinner. A faith that's no more than words, even the right words, isn't a saving faith. James is not disputing that we're saved by faith alone. He's dealing with the question of what is true saving faith? KJV & NKJV translate vs 14, **Can faith save him?** & the grammar expects a negative response. Literally, it reads, **Can the faith save him?** & should be translated, **Can that or such faith save him?** Wuest's Greek NT says this **faith is not able to save him, is it?** & the NLT states, **that kind of faith doesn't save anyone.** It refers to the faith that James has just mentioned, a faith that someone professes to have but has no works. When vs 14 says this man **says he has faith**, it's in the tense for a continual claim, a perpetual profession of faith. But he isn't in possession of works that accompany saving faith. He's always saying but never obeying. You've probably heard the question, *If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?* The answer for the man here is, **NO.** James says, there must be visible conduct to support verbal claims of what you believe. Just because someone claims to be an astronaut doesn't mean he is one. Saving faith won't just be on the lips, it will also show up in life.

James has already stated, **Every good thing given & every perfect gift** comes from God (1:17). This surely includes His gift of salvation! James continues in 1:18, **In the exercise of His will He brought**

**us forth by the word of truth.** Those words show that the new birth, salvation, wasn't due to anything in us & is only by God's grace. It comes to us by the exercise of God's will. James also referred to **your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ** (2:1). He would line up with other NT texts that show that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. For example, Eph 2:8-9 states plainly: **For by grace you have been saved through faith; & that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.** Then comes vs 10, **For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.** So James & Paul both teach that salvation is by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. & both James & Paul teach that genuine faith results in good works. But...

**2. There is a false faith, which does not save.** The issue isn't faith versus works for salvation. As one commentator correctly observes, *The burden of this section is not (as is often supposed) that we are saved through faith plus works, but that we are saved through genuine, as opposed to counterfeit, faith.*<sup>1</sup> Satan is the master deceiver. Since salvation is through faith, it isn't surprising he works to mislead people about saving faith. If Satan can get someone to think he'll get into heaven because of his works, apart from faith in Christ, he's perfectly happy to watch that person die in their sin. Or if a person who was born & raised in the church thinks, *I'm going to heaven because I believe in Jesus as my Savior*, but his faith is merely intellectual & doesn't affect his daily life, Satan is happy with such false faith.

A key word in vs 14 is **says**. This person **says** he has faith, but talk is cheap. James contends that such a claim must be tested. He uses the illustration of a brother or sister in Christ coming to church (15-16). It's cold outside & this person doesn't have adequate clothing to stay warm. They're hungry & have no food. Someone in the church shakes their hand & says, *Have a nice day! Stay warm & eat a good dinner!* & sends the person out the door with no help for their needs. The Greek phrase means, *May God go with you*. The statement itself isn't wrong. The problem is it functions as a religious excuse for a failure to act. *May God go with you* stands in the place of *I will*

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<sup>1</sup> CEB Cranfield, quoted by John MacArthur, *Faith Works*, p 148

*go with you. Be warmed & be filled* could be translated two ways. The 1<sup>st</sup> is, *Warm & feed yourself*. This is saying something like, *You look cold; you should try to get warm. You look hungry; go eat something*. The 2<sup>nd</sup> way to translate it would mean, *May God feed & clothe you, because I certainly won't*. This amounts to counseling someone to pray that God will help him. But perhaps the poor brother has been praying & God expects us to be the answer to the prayer!<sup>2</sup> Maybe he's praying for daily bread & God wants you to supply it. Sometimes praying for someone is all we can do. But on other occasions we can help, & if we don't, the end of vs 16 says, **what use is that?** Mere words without any mercy or love doesn't help your needy brother or sister. Words alone don't prove we're loving our neighbor. & when it comes to faith, mere words without works of mercy don't prove true faith. James calls such *faith* **dead** faith (2:17). He drills this home by calling it **useless & dead** (2:20, 26). Someone may argue this really isn't faith at all & James would agree. But this is counterfeit or false faith. A person may say they have faith in Christ but if there's no mercy or love expressed to others in the body of Christ, they aren't showing evidence that God's mercy or love is within them. Paul says, **if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing** (1 Cor 13:2). Even if I do the greatest works of charity without God-given, God-produced love, it says in the next vs, **it profits me nothing**, certainly not salvation. That makes clear that acts of mercy, in & of themselves, don't mean you're saved. But no acts of mercy may mean you're not.

Paul spoke of false faith when he wrote, **Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain** (1 Cor 15:1-2). It is possible to believe in vain. He refers to the same thing referring to false teachers when he writes to Titus, **They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable & disobedient & worthless for any good deed** (1:16). Their profession of faith is false. Such false faith does not save.

**3. Faith without works isn't true faith. 17** This shouldn't be difficult to understand. If something's not moving or doing anything to indicate life, you can't be sure it's alive. Spiritually, people may

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Doriani, *James*, pp 84-85

look like Christians, but if their faith has no works, no mercy or love for others, it's not the real thing & it's not alive. James doesn't refer to someone who has genuine faith, but no works, because genuine faith results in good works. Just as a seed planted will, because of the life that is in it, grow into a plant that bears fruit according to its kind, so genuine saving faith will produce good works. Don't misunderstand this. You don't have to do a whole bunch of Christian works before your faith becomes a living & saving faith. It's not if you do certain Christian works you definitely are saved. He's saying that without such works, you can't be sure you are in Christ. Your faith may be empty & dead. Look at it this way, life isn't caused by activity, it's shown by activity. Newborn babies don't become alive when they cry, kick, or do what babies do. We know the baby is alive because it's doing those things do. James' point is that just as there are signs of life physically, there are signs of life spiritually. A faith that doesn't have the vital signs may be an empty faith which is dead.

But keep in mind, just as a seed must be watered & cultivated to bear fruit, so saving faith must be nurtured to bear the fruit of good deeds. Those good deeds aren't tacked onto saving faith. Rather, they're inherent in having faith. They stem from its very nature. When God imparts salvation to a sinner, He changes the heart. In Ezekiel, God promised, **Moreover, I will give you a new heart & put a new spirit within you; & I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh & give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you & cause you to walk in My statutes, & you will be careful to observe My ordinances** (36:26-27). That promise came to fruition in the new covenant that Jesus brought. Thus Paul wrote, **Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come** (2 Cor 5:17). Genuine faith results in a changed heart because of the new birth (Jn 3:1-8). When God imparts new life to us, we are changed from within. In Jn 5:24, Jesus said, **Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears My word, & believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, & does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.** There's a fundamental change from death to life that is associated with genuine faith. Because of its nature, this new life will result in good works. Therefore, Jesus didn't contradict Himself just a few vss later, when He said, **Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the**

tombs will hear His voice, & will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment (Jn 5:28-29). He meant that those who've passed out of death into life will live in accordance with that new life (Jn 5:24). Their lives are marked by good deeds.

Again, those who say they have saving faith, but who live for themselves, are deceived. Such false faith doesn't save anyone. John deals with this kind of false profession throughout his 1<sup>st</sup> letter. For example, 1 Jn 1:6 states, **If we say that we have fellowship with Him & yet walk in the darkness, we lie & do not practice the truth. & The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' & does not keep His commandments, is a liar, & the truth is not in him'** (2:4). He continues, **By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked** (2:5b-6). The point is the same throughout Scripture: Saving faith results in a changed life of good deeds. False faith is an empty profession & lacks good deeds.

In vs 18 James brings up a hypothetical comment that someone may make: **You have faith & I have works; show me your faith without the works, & I will show you my faith by my works.** This is a difficult vs to interpret. Part of the problem comes from the fact that Greek didn't have punctuation & so we don't know for sure where the quotation ends. The NASB puts all of vs 18 in quotes. But it may end after, **You have faith & I have works** (NKJV, NIV, ESV). The remainder of the vs would then be James' reply. James says it's impossible to verify faith apart from works since faith is a hidden attitude of the heart. The only way that we can see true faith is by the person's works. I don't want to drag you through all the technical & scholarly arguments as to where the objector's quote begins & ends. The basic gist I think is this: Some will want to separate faith & works saying, *This person has faith & this person has works, to each his own, I'm OK, you're OK.* But you aren't OK spiritually if you only have one without the other. How can you show you have faith without any outward manifestation? How can you exhibit your faith without some demonstration of it? You can't! Works don't make faith, they make faith visible. The end of the vs says, with possibly James speaking to an objector, **I will show you my faith by my works.** True faith is demonstrated by conduct that backs up the claim. It shows up in works, not just words. James' point is simply that you cannot separate

true faith from good deeds. If someone claims to have faith but has no good deeds, his claim proves nothing. Just as seeing fruit on a tree tells you the tree is alive, so seeing good deeds is one sign that the person has new life in Christ.

**4. The faith that does not save may be doctrinally correct, but there is no change of heart or behavior.**

James' words in vs 19 would have shocked his readers. He states the core of the Jewish Shema, **Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!** Every Jew & Christian believes that truth. The doctrine of the Trinity doesn't contradict it. God is one & yet He is 3 persons. James praises the professing believer for holding to this truth by saying, **You do well.** Then he sticks in the knife: **The demons also believe, & what? Shudder.** The demons are doctrinally orthodox! Not only that, they even experience an emotional response to the truth: they **shudder** in fear! Demons believe a lot of accurate facts about Jesus & their belief goes deeper than many churchgoers because their faith in God makes them **shudder** or **tremble**. That's more than can be said for many professing Christians. James says they're more responsive than the one who has a mere intellectual faith. But the problem is, the demons can't repent. They have no change of mind where they turn from their rebellion to submission to God. They have no change of heart where they turn from hating God to loving Him. They have no change of will or behavior where they turn from disobedience to obedience. Faith that doesn't result in a change from self-centered rebellion to God-centered obedience is no better than the faith of demons! James isn't implying that sound doctrine is unimportant or irrelevant. Not at all. Possessing sound theology is good, **you do well**, but it's not enough until that sound theology also possesses us. Saving faith must rest on Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture. To believe in a Christ of your own imagination is to believe in an idol. To trust in someone or something for eternal life other than Jesus Christ & His death & resurrection is to be deceived on the most important issue in all of life.

There were many who believed the miracles of Jesus. Even his critics couldn't disbelieve or deny them. James is saying if our faith isn't better than them or than the demons, we can't expect to be in a better place in eternity. Orthodox beliefs in a creed or facts don't guarantee a place in heaven. Not all faith saves. We read in Jn 2:23-3:3,

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself (same word as believed) to them, for He knew all men, & because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man. Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night & said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." Jesus answered & said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

There were many who believed in Jesus but Jesus did not believe in them! Many knew & believed the right things about Jesus, even Nicodemus, but that's not the same as being born again. Today there are many who trust in their good works to get them into heaven. From a human standpoint, they're good people who spend their lives serving others. But if they never turned from their sin & trusted in Jesus & His shed blood, their good works will not & cannot save them. Believing in sound doctrine is important. But James is saying that believing sound doctrine alone is insufficient for salvation. Genuine saving faith is always connected with the new birth. New life in Christ will result in a life of good deeds. To sum up, James is telling us genuine saving faith will result in a life of good works, whereas false faith does not.

This always raises the question, *If genuine saving faith is proved by good works, then how many good works does it take to prove it? Is 1 good deed enough? Does it take 10, 100, or 1,000?* & then many falsely conclude, *If it takes even one, then salvation is not by faith alone, but rather by faith plus works.* But that's to miss James' point. He isn't saying we must add works to our faith to make it genuine. He's saying that genuine faith, by its very nature, produces godly fruit. When God changes a person's heart, when He raises a dead sinner to new life, He imparts saving faith. That new life & genuine faith will result in a new direction in life. Just as a seed when planted grows into productive plant, so the seed of new life in Christ produces the fruit of godly character & good deeds. If you see some of this fruit in your life, even if it's very little now, but you've seen growth in your life in areas like this, & want to increase more, be encouraged. Assurance comes from what God is doing in your life now, not what you think you did for God in the past. This is God-produced fruit in a heart cooperating with the indwelling Holy Spirit. These aren't works of the flesh, they're fruit of the Spirit. If you want assurance that you have the Holy Spirit within you, isn't it reasonable to look for the fruit of the Spirit in your life? James says a fruitless faith is a useless faith. Bad fruit



reveals a bad tree. The test is what it produces. As sinful humans, we need to be careful not to presume to be infallible fruit-inspectors of others, to claim to know their heart or the state of their soul. But Scripture does command us to examine ourselves to see if we're in the faith. It also says we'll know others by their fruits. If the pattern of life isn't biblical fruit, there may be a problem. & as unpopular as it may be, it's not unbiblical or unloving to be concerned with habitual sinful patterns in us & in others. James brings out some of his strongest words for this last point: *You believe the right things about God & Christ & you think that qualifies you for heaven – that by itself only qualifies you to be a demon! You're being foolish if you think an empty faith keeps you from the destiny of demons!* This text may not sound loving to some, but it is the most loving thing he can do if God's Word is true. Scripture says, **The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God"** (Ps 14:1). It's also foolish to live as if there's no God but expect you'll be with Him when you die. A dead orthodoxy is useless to save.

I want to end on a positive note. Not dead faith but a living Lord whose sovereign majesty makes demons tremble & fall on their faces before Him, & whose sovereign mercy brings sinners to their knees before Him in true faith. His glory shines brightly in this chapter as well (2:1) & can shine light to the darkest deadest soul. A true Christian still sins. But if he has genuine saving faith, the overall direction of his life will be toward holiness & good deeds. As 1 Jn 3:9 puts it, **No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; & he cannot sin, because he is born of God.** He's moving on to grow in godliness & good deeds. Genuine saving faith results in a life of good works. False faith does not. As Paul told the Corinthian Christians, **Test yourself to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!** (2 Cor 13:5a).

In closing, those who have faith in Jesus see Him as precious. They place supreme value on & in Christ. John Piper said it this way: *When you have faith in Jesus Christ:*

- *You rejoice in His glorious deity as Christ*
- *You rejoice in the humble, sinless, virgin-born humanity of Jesus.*
- *You're satisfied by the universe-creating, miracle-working, power of Jesus.*
- *You're satisfied by the covenant keeping, law-fulfilling, righteousness-performing, perfection-providing obedience of Jesus.*
- *You're satisfied by the wrath-bearing, justice-satisfying, sin-atoning death of Jesus.*

- *You're satisfied by the death-defeating, devil-destroying, heaven-opening, resurrection of Jesus.*
- *& you're satisfied by the sovereign, interceding, ever-present, never-leaving-us-alone triumphant reign of Jesus at the Father's right hand.*

He went on to say, *joy in your heart in Jesus above all things. So will you embrace that? ... so that Jesus Christ would be seen & experienced as the supreme treasure of your life in all that He is for you.*<sup>3</sup> If you do not yet love the Lord, come to Him in humble & true faith. He is full of grace & truth to those who come on His terms, who don't trust in their own works, but who plead for God to work on their behalf & by His Spirit to change their life & grant them a new heart, new life, & new desires to love the Lord & live for His glory. If Christ is not supreme in your hearts, if He is not Lord of your life, if you love your sin & not the Savior, & have never turned from your sins which you treasure & which you seek to find your joy in, here is real & lasting joy offered to you in Jesus Christ if you repent & confess Him as Lord. **God's grace has appeared, bringing salvation**, as Titus 2:11 says. But as vs 12 says you must **deny ungodliness & worldly desires**. Make Jesus your treasure & His glory your greatest pleasure in this world & turn from the unsatisfying, fleeting, empty pleasures of this world & do the works God has prepared for you.

#### COMMUNION

As we come to the communion table we again remember what Jesus has done for us through His life, death, & resurrection. We believe the historical fact of His life, death, & resurrection but do we bank our lives on it? If so, God will produce His good works through us. We thank Him & acknowledge His gift to us as we eat of the bread & drink of the cup together today.

#### PRAY PASS

Paul tells us, **I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; & when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me (1 Cor 11:23-24).**

Paul continues, **In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread & drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes (25-26).**

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<sup>3</sup> Sermon given at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007