

James 2:14-26

FALSE FAITH

Faith is a key doctrine in the Christian life. The sinner is saved by faith (Eph. 2:8–9), and the believer must walk by faith (2 Cor. 5:7). Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6), and whatever we do apart from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23).

Someone has said that faith is not “believing in spite of evidence, but obeying in spite of consequence.” When you read Hebrews 11, you meet men and women who acted on God’s Word, no matter what price they had to pay. Faith is not some kind of nebulous feeling that we work up; faith is confidence that God’s Word is true and conviction that acting on that Word will bring His blessing.

In this paragraph, James discussed the relationship between faith and works. This is an important discussion, for if we are wrong in this matter, we jeopardize our eternal salvation. What kind of faith really saves a person? Is it necessary to perform good works in order to be saved? How can a person tell whether or not he is exercising true saving faith? James answered these questions by explaining to us that there are three kinds of faith, only one of which is true saving faith.

Dead Faith (2:14–17)

Even in the early church there were those who claimed they had saving faith, yet did not possess salvation. Wherever there is the true, you will find the counterfeit. 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).

People with dead faith substitute words for deeds. They know the correct vocabulary for prayer and testimony, and can even quote the right verses from the Bible, but their walk does not measure up to their talk. They think that their words are as good as works, and they are wrong.

James gave a simple illustration. A poor believer came into a fellowship, without proper clothing and in need of food. The person with dead faith noticed the visitor and saw his needs, but he did not do anything to meet the needs. All he did was say a few pious words! “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed” (James 2:16 NIV). But the visitor went away just as hungry and naked as he came in!

Food and clothing are basic needs of every human being, whether he is saved or unsaved. “And having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Tim. 6:8). “Therefore take no thought, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or, ‘What shall we drink?’ or, ‘Wherewithal shall we be clothed?’ ... for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things” (Matt. 6:31–32). Jacob included these basic needs in his prayer to God: “If God will be with me ... and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on” (Gen. 28:20).

As believers, we have an obligation to help meet the needs of people, no matter who they may be. "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40).

To help a person in need is an expression of love, and faith works by love (Gal. 5:6). The apostle John emphasized this aspect of good works. "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and truth" (1 John 3:17–18 NIV). The priest and Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan each had religious training, but neither of them paused to assist the dying man at the side of the road (Luke 10:25–37). Each of them would *defend* his faith, yet neither *demonstrated* that faith in loving works.

The question in James 2:14 should read, "Can *that kind of faith* save him?" What kind? The kind of faith that is never seen in practical works. The answer is no! Any declaration of faith that does not result in a changed life and good works is a false declaration. That kind of faith is dead faith. "Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone" (James 2:17). The great theologian John Calvin wrote, "It is faith alone that justifies, but faith that justifies can never be alone." The word *alone* in James 2:17 simply means "by itself." True saving faith can never be by itself: it always brings life, and life produces good works.

The person with dead faith has only an intellectual experience. In his mind, he knows the doctrines of salvation, but he has never submitted himself to God and trusted Christ for salvation. He knows the right words, but he does not back up his words with his works. Faith in Christ brings life (John 3:16), and where there is life there must be growth and fruit. Three times in this paragraph, James warned us that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17, 20, 26).

Beware of a mere intellectual faith. No man can come to Christ by faith and remain the same any more than he can come into contact with a 220-volt wire and remain the same. "He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life" (1 John 5:12). Dead faith is not saving faith. Dead faith is counterfeit faith and lulls the person into a false confidence of eternal life.

Demonic Faith (2:18–19)

James wanted to shock his complacent readers, so he used demons as his illustration. In recent years the church has rediscovered the reality and activity of demons. When our Lord was ministering on earth, He often cast out demons, and He gave that power to His disciples. Paul often confronted demonic forces in his ministry, and in Ephesians 6:10–20, he admonished the early Christians to claim God's protection and defeat the spiritual forces of wickedness.

It comes as a shock to people that demons have faith! What do they believe? For one thing, they believe in the existence of God; they are neither atheists nor agnostics. They also believe in the deity of Christ. Whenever they met Christ when He was on earth, they bore witness to His sonship (Mark 3:11–12). They believe in the existence of a place of punishment (Luke 8:31), and they also recognize Jesus Christ as the Judge (Mark 5:1–13). They submit to the power of His Word.

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord!” (Deut. 6:4) This was the daily affirmation of faith of the godly Jew. “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19 NIV). The man with dead faith was touched only in his intellect, but the demons are touched *also in their emotions*. They believe and tremble.

But it is not a saving experience to believe and tremble. A person can be enlightened in his mind and even stirred in his heart and be lost forever. True saving faith involves something more, something that can be seen and recognized: a changed life. “Show me thy faith without thy works,” challenged James, “and I will show thee my faith by my works” (James 2:18).

How could a person show his faith without works? Can a dead sinner perform good works? Impossible! When you trust Christ, you are “created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Being a Christian involves trusting Christ and living for Christ; you *receive* the life, then you *reveal* the life. Faith that is barren is not saving faith. The Greek word translated “dead” in James 2:20 carries the meaning of “barren or idle,” like money drawing no interest.

James has introduced us to two kinds of faith that can never save the sinner: dead faith (the intellect alone), and demonic faith (the intellect and the emotions). He closes this section by describing the only kind of faith that can save the sinner—dynamic faith.

Dynamic Faith (2:20–26)

Dynamic faith is faith that is real, faith that has power, faith that results in a changed life.

James *described* this true saving faith. To begin with, dynamic saving faith is *based on the Word of God*. We receive our spiritual rebirth through God’s Word (James 1:18). We receive the Word and this saves us (James 1:21). “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom. 10:17). James used Abraham and Rahab as illustrations of dynamic saving faith, since both of them heard and received the message of God through His Word.

Faith is only as good as its object. The man in the jungle bows before an idol of stone and trusts it to help him, but he receives no help. No matter how much faith a person may generate, if it is not directed at the right object, it will accomplish nothing. “I

believe” may be the testimony of many sincere people, but the big question is, “In whom do you believe? What do you believe?” We are not saved by *faith in faith*; we are saved by faith in Christ as revealed in His Word.

Dynamic faith is based on God’s Word, and *it involves the whole man*. Dead faith touches only the intellect; demonic faith involves both the mind and the emotions; but dynamic faith involves the will. The whole person plays a part in true saving faith. The mind understands the truth; the heart desires the truth; and the will acts upon the truth. The men and women of faith named in Hebrews 11 were people of action: God spoke and they obeyed. Again, “Faith is not believing in spite of evidence; faith is obeying in spite of consequence. “

True saving faith *leads to action*. Dynamic faith is not intellectual contemplation or emotional consternation; it leads to obedience on the part of the will. And this obedience is not an isolated event: it continues throughout the whole life. It leads to works.

Many different kinds of works are named in the New Testament. “The works of the law” (Gal. 2:16) relate to the sinner’s attempt to please God by obeying the Law of Moses. Of course, it is impossible for a sinner to be saved through the works of the law. “The works of the flesh” (Gal. 5:19) are done by unsaved people who live for the things of the old nature. There are also “wicked works” (Col. 1:21) and “dead works” (Heb. 9:14). Where there is dynamic faith—saving faith—you will always find good works.

James then *illustrated* his doctrine in the lives of two well-known Bible persons: Abraham and Rahab. You could not find two more different persons! Abraham was a Jew; Rahab was a Gentile. Abraham was a godly man, but Rahab was a sinful woman, a harlot. Abraham was the friend of God, while Rahab belonged to the enemies of God. What did they have in common? Both exercised saving faith in God.

You will want to read Genesis 15 and 22 to get the background facts for this illustration. God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees to lead him into Canaan and to make out of him the great nation of Israel. It was through Israel that God would bring the Savior into the world. Abraham’s salvation experience is recorded in Genesis 15. At night, God showed His servant the stars and gave him a promise, “So shall thy seed [descendants] be!” How did Abraham respond? “And he believed in the Lord, and he [the Lord] counted it to him for righteousness” (Gen. 15:5–6).

The word *counted* is a legal or financial term; it means “to put to one’s account.” As a sinner, Abraham’s spiritual bankbook was empty. He was bankrupt! But he trusted God, and God put *righteous* on Abraham’s account. Abraham did not work for this righteousness; he received it as a gift from God. He was declared righteous by faith. He was justified by faith (read Rom. 4).

Justification is an important doctrine in the Bible. Justification is the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous on the basis of Christ’s finished work on the cross. It is not a process; it is an act. It is not something the sinner does; it is

something God does for the sinner when he trusts Christ. It is a once-for-all event. It never changes.

How can you tell if a person is justified by faith if this transaction takes place between the sinner and God privately? Abraham's example answers that important question: the justified person has a changed life and obeys God's will. His faith is demonstrated by his works.

James used another event in Abraham's life, an event that took place many years after Abraham's conversion. This event is the offering up of Isaac on the altar (Gen. 22). Abraham was not saved by obeying God's difficult command. His obedience proved that he already was saved. "You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did" (James 2:22 NIV). There is a perfect relationship between faith and works. As someone has expressed it, "Abraham was not saved by faith plus works, but by a faith that works."

How was Abraham "justified by works" (James 2:21) when he had already been "justified by faith" (see Rom. 4)? By faith, he was justified *before God* and his righteousness declared; by works he was justified *before men* and his righteousness demonstrated. It is true that no humans actually saw Abraham put his son on the altar, but the inspired record in Genesis 22 enables us to see the event and witness Abraham's faith demonstrated by his works.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, D. L. Moody often said, "Every Bible should be bound in shoe leather." He did not say that because he had been a successful shoe salesman; he said it because he was a dedicated Christian. Dynamic faith obeys God and proves itself in daily life and works. Alas, we still have church members today who fit the description given in Titus, "They profess that they know God, but in works they deny him" (Titus 1:16). Paul also wrote, "This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works" (Titus 3:8).

His second illustration is Rahab, and the background for her is found in Joshua 2 and 6. Israel was about to invade their Promised Land and take the city of Jericho. Joshua sent spies into the city to get the lay of the land. There they met Rahab, a harlot, who protected them and affirmed that she believed in what God had said and what God was going to do. When the men departed, they promised to save her and her family when the city was taken, and this they did.

It is an exciting story. But in it is one of the Bible's great examples of saving faith (see Heb. 11:31). Rahab heard the Word and knew that her city was condemned. This truth affected her and her fellow citizens so that their hearts melted within them (Josh. 2:11). Rahab responded with her mind and her emotions, but she also responded with her will: *she did something about it*. She risked her own life to protect the Jewish spies, and she further risked her life by sharing the good news of deliverance with the members of

her family. The Hebrew word translated “harlot” in Joshua 2 can also have the wider meaning of “an innkeeper.”

Rahab ran a guest house, so it was normal for the spies to go there. The Greek word “harlot” in James 2:25 definitely means an immoral person. This is also the meaning in Hebrews 11:31. Matthew 1:5 indicates she married into Israel and became an ancestress of our Lord. What grace! Rahab is one of the first soul-winners in the Bible, and you cannot help but compare her with the “bad Samaritan” in John 4. Rahab could have had *dead* faith, a mere intellectual experience. Or she could have had *demonic* faith, her mind enlightened and her emotions stirred. But she exercised *dynamic* faith: her mind knew the truth, her heart was stirred by the truth, and her will acted on the truth. She proved her faith by her works.

When you realize the small amount of information Rahab had, you can see how truly marvelous her faith really was. Today we have the full revelation of God through His Word and His Son. We live on the other side of Calvary, and we have the Holy Spirit to convict and to teach us the Word. “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required” (Luke 12:48). Her faith is an indictment against the unbelief of sinners today.

James 2 emphasized that the mature Christian practices the truth. He does not merely hold to ancient doctrines; he practices those doctrines in his everyday life. His faith is not the dead faith of the intellectuals or the demonic faith of the fallen spirits. It is the dynamic faith of men like Abraham and women like Rahab, faith that changes a life and goes to work for God.

It is important that each professing Christian examine his own heart and life and make sure that he possesses true saving faith, dynamic faith. “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves” (2 Cor. 13:5a). Satan is the great deceiver; one of his devices is imitation. If he can convince a person that counterfeit faith is true faith, he has that person in his power.

Here are some questions we can ask ourselves as we examine our hearts:

1. Was there a time when I honestly realized I was a sinner and admitted this to myself and to God?
2. Was there a time when my heart stirred me to flee from the wrath to come? Have I ever seriously been alarmed over my sins?
3. Do I truly understand the gospel, that Christ died for my sins and arose again? Do I understand and confess that I cannot save myself?
4. Did I sincerely repent of my sins and turn from them? Or do I secretly love sin and want to enjoy it?
5. Have I trusted Christ and Christ alone for my salvation? Do I enjoy a living relationship with Him through the Word and in the Spirit?

6. Has there been a change in my life? Do I maintain good works, or are my works occasional and weak? Do I seek to grow in the things of the Lord? Can others tell that I have been with Jesus?
7. Do I have a desire to share Christ with others? Or am I ashamed of Him?
8. Do I enjoy the fellowship of God's people? Is worship a delight to me?
9. Am I ready for the Lord's return? Or will I be ashamed when He comes for me?

To be sure, not every Christian has the same personal experience, and there are degrees of sanctification. But for the most part, the preceding spiritual inventory can assist a person in determining his true standing before God.

"Search me, O Lord, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23–24).¹

¹ Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Mature Growing up in Christ*; 2nd ed. United States: David C. Cook; 2010.