

110 March 18, 2023 – Faith and Works

What is “**works**”? Well the Book of James in Chapter 2:14 provides a question “*What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has **faith**, but he has no **works**? Can that **faith** save him?*”. **Save** means having “salvation”.

The Book of James was written to encourage readers to live consistently in light of what they say they believe. The text focuses on maturity, character, and the hallmarks of true **faith**; but this short book has invited considerable controversy through the years. The dispute centers around James 2:14-26, and especially verse 26 that reads, “**faith** without **works** is dead.”

In James 2, James refers three times to **faith** without **works** being dead faith (James 2:17, 20, 26). **Faith** without **works** is described as “**faith** that has no product, that gives no evidence”.

Many, many people within the framework of Christianity and involved, to one degree or another, in the church possess nothing more than that kind of faith: dead faith.” Modern evangelism largely fails to recognize that problem. The words of Jesus about professing believers who rely on their works to enter the kingdom of heaven—“And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me...’” (Matthew 7:21-23). They do not have genuine faith.

Unlike other New Testament writers, James didn’t focus on legalism, but rather on antinomianism. Those who embrace antinomianism think it is sufficient for people to “believe” and then live as they desire. For the antinomian, it’s enough to believe the facts about God, Jesus, and even the gospel. But if there is no hunger for godliness—no desire to live righteously—and no resultant fruit, James labels that “dead faith.” Even adhering to orthodox theology is not enough. Even the demons “believe,” James said (2:19). MacArthur writes, “All demons are orthodox. They are orthodox and they tremble.” But they don’t produce good works from transformed hearts.

James introduced the truth about faith and works in [James 1:22](#): “*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*” In other words, if there are no deeds of faith to prove genuine spiritual life, a person is deceived and playing the fool. James was deeply concerned about this. “(James) realizes that in the church there are people who can be self-deceived, self-deluded, and ultimately damned, MacArthur said.” Multitudes have professed faith in Christ, but they have never surrendered their life to Him in obedience. They’ve never seen the validation of their [salvation](#) in [righteous](#) works.

Jews new to the Christian faith had grown up in Judaism’s traditional, often guilt-inducing legalism. Many thought that—since works weren’t efficacious for salvation—they could throw off all restraints under the gospel of grace. They reasoned, “Now I am free in Christ!” Obviously, they went too far as they misunderstood this freedom, and James wisely addressed their faulty theology. As MacArthur explained, James suggested non-saving, dead faith had three marks: empty confession ([v. 14](#)), false compassion ([vv. 15-16](#)), and shallow conviction ([v. 18](#)). In contrast, James then offered illustrations of *living* faith in [verses 21-26](#).

Show Your Faith by Your Works Meaning

In “The Autopsy of a Dead Faith,” Adrian Rogers wrote, “Man is saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.” It’s been said that we are saved *by* grace, *through* faith, *unto* good works—which was beautifully explained by Paul in [Ephesians 2:8-10](#). True, biblical faith will always be evidenced by good fruit, good works of some kind.

[Hebrews 11](#), sometimes called “The Faith Chapter,” presents a powerful example of works emanating from a transformed life. Reading through the chapter, two words are repeated—“by faith.” We read, “by faith Abel,” “by faith Enoch,” “by faith Noah,” “by faith Abraham,” “by faith... Sarah,” “by faith Moses,” “by faith the people,” “by faith Rahab,” etc. But notice what *follows* those words. Noah built an ark.

Abraham obeyed God. Moses left Egypt. Rahab saved the Israeli spies. There are so many examples of faith plus works in this chapter.

That is what God always expects of His transformed children. Believe in Him, trust Him, and then do what He says. Trust and obey. What does that look like in today's culture? We trust God for salvation in Christ, and then we respond to what He says in His Word. We first humble ourselves ([Philippians 2:5-7](#)), and then we ask the indwelling Holy Spirit to empower us to share the gospel and love and serve others with biblical commands and principles in mind.

Among many things Christ-followers might do are: feed the hungry ([Matthew 25:35](#)), be generous to the needy ([Proverbs 14:31](#)), meet practical needs ([1 John 3:17-18](#)), visit orphans and widows to help them ([James 1:27a](#)), guard against greed ([Hebrews 13:5a](#)), and keep their lives from the sinful "stains" of the world ([James 1:27b](#)). Another sign of vital faith is the presence of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives ([Galatians 5:22-23](#)).

In view of God's great mercy, as we offer our life of faith as a living sacrifice to Him, we continue to act on our faith in view of eternity and are transformed by the renewing of our mind ([Colossians 3:1](#); [Romans 12:1-2](#)). God who began a good work in us through faith, will complete it—and we are blessed to cooperate with Him and demonstrate *His* good work through *our* good works—deeds the Lord "prepared in advance" for us to do ([Philippians 1:6](#); [Ephesians 2:10](#)).

Who Is the Writer of James and What Is the Background of His Epistle?

Three men named James are mentioned in the New Testament. First, James, the brother of John (the "sons of Zebedee" and former fishing partners with Simon Peter) dropped everything to become an early follower of Jesus ([Acts 12:2](#); [Luke 5:8-11](#)). Second, James, the son of Alphaeus, was another of the twelve apostles—sometimes called "James the Less" (meaning "James the Younger") ([Matthew 10:2-3](#); [Mark 15:40](#)). The third is James, the half-brother of Jesus ([Matthew 13:55](#); [Galatians 1:19](#)). Early church tradition ascribes the authorship of the epistle of James to this third James. According to Ligonier Ministries, "Scholars have compared James' speech and letter of [Acts 15:13-29](#) with the book of James and have come up with many similarities of language and phrasing."

James did not become a Christ-follower until after the resurrection of Jesus ([John 7:3-5](#); [Acts 1:14](#); [1 Corinthians 15:7](#)). In church history, this disciple is sometimes called "James the Just" for his righteous living. He was named as a pillar in the Jerusalem community ([Galatians 2:9](#)), and some consider him the head of the Jerusalem church—sending emissaries and chairing the Jerusalem Council ([Galatians 2:12](#); [Acts 15:13-21](#)). According to the historian Josephus, James was martyred in 62 A.D.

His letter was written as early as 45 A.D.—some time before the Jerusalem Council in 50 A.D.—to Jewish Christians scattered abroad ([James 1:1](#)). Describing himself simply as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," James wrote to encourage the Jews—the 12 tribes scattered among the nations. He wanted those who came to salvation and identified with Christ to continue growing in their newfound Christian faith.

For context, the Jewish church at that time was divided between the faithful and the Judaizers. A "Gentile controversy" arose later ([Acts 11:1-18](#); [Acts 15](#)) which was resolved at the Jerusalem Council to promote peace within the early church.

But the controversy concerning [James 2:26](#) raged on through the centuries.

What Is the Supposed Controversy between James and Paul?

Throughout Christian history, Christians have argued a *seeming* contradiction in Scripture regarding justification—being declared righteous by God. In [Romans 3:28](#), Paul says a person "*is justified by faith*

apart from the works of the law;" but in [James 2:24](#), James says people are considered righteous "*by what they do (works) and not by faith alone.*"

Unfortunately, some emphasize faith while others focus on works. Martin Luther's text regarding justification was "The righteous will live by faith" ([Romans 1:17](#)). He originally wrote that the book of James is "an epistle of straw" and unworthy to be included in the Word of God because it has "no evangelical character." That comment was removed from all editions of his German Bible after 1537 A.D., but Luther didn't change his views dramatically.

Most scholars resolve the faith/works dispute by understanding the perspective and purposes of Paul's and James' writings. "Two senses of the idea "justified by works" are in play," says Christian blogger Tim Challies. He references John Piper, who explains, "For Paul, 'justification by works' (which he rejects) means 'gaining right standing with God by the merit of works.' For James, 'justification by works (which he accepts) means 'maintaining a right standing with God by faith along with the necessary evidence of faith, namely, the works of love.'... These two positions are not contradictory."

W.A. Criswell pointed to the life of Abraham who "believed God," and his faith was "credited" to him as righteousness ([Genesis 15:6](#)). But James wrote about an incident in Abraham's life that adds perspective—when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac ([Genesis 22:1-18](#)). In this story, Abraham *demonstrated* his faith by obedience. In explaining this further, Criswell wrote, "Paul is talking about a man's faith in God's sight, and James is talking about a man's faith in man's sight." God knows the heart, Criswell said, and "He doesn't need a demonstration of our works to know how we are in our hearts." On the other hand, all we can see is the man's outward life. If a person's life doesn't demonstrate or exhibit his faith so that we can see it, "the life of faith is dead."