

Faith and Works

10.18.09

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 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? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 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. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! 20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. James 2:14–26 ESV

Interpretive Key: **Words can be used different ways.**

Dead Faith (v.14–17) :

"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?" James' Greek presupposes the answer will be "no." Probably better translated as "can that kind of faith save him?"

"If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food..." A familiar, concrete illustration of his point. Almost a reduction to absurdity. He is comparing the ineffectiveness of words of compassion without acts of compassion with the ineffectiveness of faith that does not give way to works.

"So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." James moves from a question to a proposition to speak his mind clearly.

Demonic Faith (v.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." Anticipating the pushback to his idea, he speaks either directly or hypothetically to further his argument.

"You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!" Ref. to the Shema from Deut. 6. Even demons believe it. Cultural faith is not enough.

"Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Lit. empty, defective. James uses an ancient rhetorical technique to further press his point. James is not contrasting two different two different kinds of faith.

Dynamic Faith (v.21–26) : 3 Examples of Dynamic Faith

"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?"

James is using the word 'justified' in a different way than Paul uses it. Justified can Mean "to be judicially declared righteous" or "to prove oneself true/right." Ex. "Justify your claim" does not mean "make it true" but "show its truthfulness."

This event that James is claiming 'justified' Abraham (Gen. 22:9, 12) occurred many years after his conversion (Gen. 12:1-7, 15:6) which demonstrates his actual faith.

"You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works..." This word means 'brought to its end, fullness or maturity.'

"and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." Again, the correct interpretation lies within a correct understanding of how James uses the word 'justify'.

"And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? A second OT example (Josh. 2, 6) that bears out James' point. Her actions bore out her true faith in the God of the Bible.

"For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead." James restates what he has been saying all along with one final, concrete analogy.

What Do We Do with what James is Saying?

1. Examine yourself to see if you are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5).
 - "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?— unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" (2 Cor. 13:5)
 - Ask yourself some important questions.
2. If you are in the faith, ask yourself:
 - Where is my faith failing to "work itself out?"
 - Why is this the case?
 - What are the 'sins behind the sin' driving this disconnect?
3. Believe and apply the Gospel!
 - Jesus died to purchase you a faith that works itself out. Jesus empowers you to live a faith that works itself out.

Works Consulted: Expositor's Commentary, MacArthur Study Bible, ESV Study Bible, MacArthur Commentary on James, The Bible Exposition Commentary, The Bible Knowledge Commentary, A Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Old and New Testaments, New Bible Commentary, The Outline Bible, Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary, Wilmington's Bible Handbook, Word Pictures of the New Testament