

James/Faith/Works

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Introduction – James 2:14-26 Faith/Works

In James 2:14-26, James explains the relationship between salvational faith and works. It has often been misunderstood as an argument for salvation *by* works or as suggesting that a Christian without works must not be truly saved. Neither of these interpretations is correct, as we will see.

Many claim that James and the Apostle Paul disagree on faith versus works, but in reality, the spiritual fruit James discusses simply shows the true faith Paul describes. Their writings are complementary rather than contradictory.

Possibly one of the earliest writings of the New Testament (A.D. 40–50), the Epistle of James is believed to have been authored by James, Jesus' brother (Galatians 1:19).

Let's start with a quick review of some passages to establish a base.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever **believes** in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Acts 16:31 And they said, “**Believe** in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

Romans 10:9 because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and **believe** in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved

John 1:12 But to all who did receive him, who **believed** in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,

John 5:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and **believes** him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

And also John 8:24, 20:31; 1 John 5:1; 1 John 5:13; and many other passages in the Bible show that salvation comes through faith, not works. To believe is simply to express faith in someone or something. With that in mind, we read this passage in James.

James 2:14 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.

Many examine these passages and quickly conclude that works are essential for salvation. In doing so, they simply disregard all passages that oppose this false doctrine of works. Such a view directly conflicts with the very definition of grace, which is “undeserved blessing.” Under grace, how can salvation be the result of works? That would render salvation as something “deserved.” Furthermore, interpreting these passages from James 2 to support a doctrine of salvation by works conflicts with Paul’s teachings on salvation apart from works. Some of those are:

Romans 3:28 For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Romans 4:5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness

Romans 11:6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

Titus 3:5 He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,

Galatians 2:21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

The first rule of Bible interpretation is to never reason from the unknown to the known. Instead, you should reason from what is known to what is unknown. Start with what is already established and work toward understanding what isn't yet clear. Never automatically dismiss established truths when encountering a passage that *appears* to conflict with them. Instead, the expositor should examine the contradiction and consider the possibility that there may be another interpretation that does not conflict with the previously established truths.

In light of overwhelming scriptural evidence supporting the doctrine of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone, one is forced to examine this passage in James 2 and conclude that it does not teach that works are a means of or proof of salvation! It must be teaching something else! So, if the passage doesn't endorse that, what does it teach?

James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

James asks a very simple question. It is rhetorical and has an impatient tone. "What good is it?" is *ophelos*, which means to be beneficial or advantageous. The NASB translates it as "what use is it?" while the NIV and ESV say "what good is it?" The KJV translates it as "what profit." All of these work, but I think "what good is it?" is slightly better because "good"

suggests benefit. “What good is it if you have faith and not works?” And the expected answer is “No good!”

The next word is *ean* and can be translated as “if” or “though,” though I think it is better translated as “if.” Both the NASB and NIV translate it that way. In Greek, it is a third-class conditional clause, meaning “if” and maybe it is true, and maybe it isn’t true. “Says” is *lego* and is in the present active subjunctive that implies continued action – “if someone *keeps on saying* he has faith...”

“Works” is *ergon* and means work or deed, and it can refer to a person’s occupation. It is also the present active subjunctive. Once again, we see continuing action, and since there is a negative, it should be translated as “keeps on not having works.”

We have so far, “If a man *keeps on saying* he has faith and *keeps on not having* works...”

James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

What good is it if a man keeps saying he has faith but doesn't have works? Can faith save him? “Can” is a negative particle, suggesting a negative answer is expected. In other words, the answer is “No,” such a faith is not a saving faith.

“Faith” is *pistis* and means moral conviction, assurance, or belief. Note that the merit, whether real or perceived, lies in the object of faith. Moral conviction is a belief in something outside oneself. It may be based on solid biblical principles or rooted in culture or social norms. Either way, for the person holding these moral convictions, something outside that person is the object of their belief. If cultural or societal norms influence the belief, the assurance comes from society or culture, which is believed to have value and substance. If it is based on Scripture, then the assurance comes from God. We all want something to believe in. Be careful what that is.

“Save” is *sozo* and means to deliver, protect, heal, preserve, or save.

We now need to pause and examine two issues before continuing with James. The first issue is how James and Paul view the word “works.” The second issue is the meaning of “save” and how it is used in the Bible. Understanding these two terms will greatly aid our understanding of this challenging passage in James Chapter 2.

Paul’s and James’ Perspectives on “Works”

We begin with some passages from Paul’s writings.

Galatians 2:16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Galatians 3:24 So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

Romans 3:20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Romans 3:28 For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is abundantly clear that faith alone can save you! So how can James say, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (James 2:14). The answer is that there is a significant difference between the “works” Paul discusses in Galatians and Romans and the “works” James mentions in James 2.

What does Paul say in Galatians 2:16 – “by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified”? Paul is specifically referring to the Mosaic Covenant, the Law. He states the same idea in Romans 3:28. During the time James and Galatians were written, there were individuals called “Judaizers” who argued, “Yes, it is true that faith saves, but unless you keep the Law, you are not saved.” They even went as far as saying that a believer must be

circumcised according to the Law. In other words, they were claiming that *works are also required* for salvation. The book of Galatians is Paul's effort to refute that false claim.

Paul says, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1). "The yoke of slavery" is the Law. He says if you get entangled with the Law, "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace" (Galatians 5:4). "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (Galatians 2:21). If "works" are required, then what was accomplished by Christ at the Cross?

1 Corinthians 15:1 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that he preached the gospel of salvation through faith to them, and they received it and were saved—delivered from the fires of Hell. Because of that faith, they "stand" in their salvation. "Stand" is the Greek word *histemi*, which means to be established or firm, to have a steadfast mind. Then there is a change.

We have the statement "in which you are *being* saved." This refers to the Corinthians' *ongoing experience of salvation*. The present tense of the verb "saved" indicates continuous action and emphasizes experiential sanctification, or being *freed from the power* of sin in life. Some translations omit "being," which hinders understanding of the passage. Including it is necessary because the present tense makes clear that "saved," as seen here, is an ongoing process. Thus, it must be referring to experiential sanctification.

"If you hold fast to the word" is a Greek first-class conditional clause; thus, the condition is assumed to be true. They have indeed held firmly onto the word Paul preached. They are called "brothers" and are indeed saved; therefore, that is not the issue.

That is "unless you believed in vain" (v. 2).

“Believed” is *pisteuo*, which is a form of *pistis* for “faith.” “In vain” is *eike* and means without cause, purpose, or success. If they believed in vain, then their faith has no value or power. And I believe that is referring to the power to *deliver them through* life’s trials. Because Paul calls them “brothers” in verse 1, indicating they are indeed saved, he argues that there is such a thing as a shallow faith that might have been enough to save them, but it is “in vain” – meaning “without purpose or success” in daily application to life’s trials.

James is discussing works that are produced by faith. It is the same faith that saved us, but now – *after salvation* – that faith must be used for another purpose, producing “works.” This is what Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 15 when he mentions there is a faith that saved the Corinthians, but is now “without purpose and without success” because it produces nothing of value. Paul and James are saying the same thing using different words.

We might refer to these works as “works of faith.” What are “works of faith”? They are “divine good.” Divine good is God working in the believer and through the believer, using the willing believer’s faith for His purpose and plan. This divine production is only possible when the believer is in right relationship with God and demonstrates faith toward Christ in Heaven – outflow – which results in the Christ-life being produced in the believer – inflow. The works James mentions are not possible without the saving faith that enabled salvation. You must be saved first! James is saying that the same faith that saved you — faith in Christ — is used in your daily walk with God, or what we call our “spiritual life.” That same faith that saved you will produce “works” if you allow it to. In fact, the expected biblical “norm” is that once saved, the believer will produce fruit.

James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

James says faith can be non-productive, and Paul says you can “believe in vain,” meaning without purpose and without success. In other words, non-productive. Such weak faith that does not produce fruit (works) can’t “save” (deliver) you through life’s trials.

“Saved” in Three Tenses

Now, we need to focus on this troublesome word “save.” The first thing you should understand is that when you see the word “save” or “salvation” in the Bible, it doesn’t always mean your deliverance from the fires of hell as a born-again believer. More often, it refers to some other form of deliverance (being saved) from another kind of threat.

Dr. C. I. Scofield describes salvation as having three tenses: past tense, present tense, and future tense.

Past tense – the Christian **has been saved** from the **guilt and penalty of sin**. This is traditionally what we call “salvation,” or being born again. In Scofield’s past tense, “salvation” refers to being delivered from the fires of hell. This is what we’ve called “positional sanctification,” which means being identified with Christ as a child of God at the moment of regeneration. We see examples of its use in Luke 7:50; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15; Ephesians 2:5, 8; and 2 Timothy 1:9. This definition is most commonly associated with the word “saved” and is what many Christians first think of when they hear this term, but it isn’t the only meaning.

Present tense – The Christian **is being saved** (delivered from the **habit and dominion of sin**). This is what we typically refer to as “experimental sanctification,” or our daily walk with God, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. More accurately, the Greek word *sozo*, usually translated as “save,” should be understood here as “delivered” rather than “saved.” It is our moment-by-moment deliverance from sin through the filling of the Spirit. It is what we identified during our study on Spiritual Warfare as outflow/inflow. The believer demonstrates faith in Christ in Heaven – outflow – and in return, he receives Christ’s lifestyle produced in him – inflow. We also called that “walking by means of the Spirit” from Galatians 5:16. The second part of that verse is “shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh.” That is what Scofield calls the “deliverance from the habit and dominion of sin.”

But there is another aspect of experiential sanctification, which is our spiritual growth through consuming spiritual nourishment and facing tests. Through this process, our faith becomes stronger, and we are better prepared to withstand the fiery darts of the devil and be a positive witness

for God against Satan. This is what James has been discussing since chapter 1 and verse 2!

This present tense “saved” is unrelated to the past tense version, except that the past tense must have existed for a present tense form to be possible. There are two separate types of deliverance: one from condemnation and separation from God, and the other from temptation and sin after salvation. That latter present tense “saved” (faith) needs to grow and strengthen through the intake of Bible doctrine and trials to withstand life's challenges. Your faith may be strong enough to save you from hell, but it also needs to develop strength to be used as a tool to carry you through life. This is what James is referring to.

We see it in Romans 6:24; 8:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 2:18-20; Philemon 1:19; 2:12-13; 2 Thessalonians 2:13. It is the process of being brought into conformity with Christ (Romans 13:11; Hebrews 10:36; 1 Peter 1:5; 1 John 3:2).

Future tense – At the Lord’s return, the Christian **will be saved** from all bodily infirmities that result from sin and God’s curse on a sinful world (Romans 8:18-23; 1 Corinthians 15:42-50). We also call this “ultimate sanctification” or “glorification.” Even as born-again believers, we live in bodies of corruption. This is a consequence of the fall of man. We are born into corruption, and our bodies begin to decay the moment we are born. At the Rapture, Church Age believers will exchange their corruptible bodies for spiritual resurrection bodies that will never decay or grow old. That is the believer’s final “deliverance” from the condemnation that resulted from the fall of man.

Sozo

This Greek word, sozo (save), also has meanings beyond the three tenses of salvation. It can mean to get well, to be made well, to preserve, to recover, to restore, or to be made complete, all in addition to the usual translations related to “save.” Furthermore, it can and often does refer to temporal deliverance beyond the common understanding of “save.” For example—

Acts 27:20 When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being **saved** was at last abandoned.

Paul, as a prisoner on a ship en route to Rome, is caught in a fierce storm. Luke writes that the storm was so severe that they believed no one on board could be sozo.

Acts 2:40 And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “**Save** yourselves from this crooked generation.”

Peter, after his speech to the Jews, urges them to sozo themselves “from this crooked generation” that has rejected the Gospel and killed the Christ. “Save yourselves” – this is an act of the will, not a redemptive act of God, although that act of the will would lead to the redemptive act of God on behalf of those who “saved themselves.” As used here, the term suggests the idea of separation, but that separation results in deliverance.

John 12:27 “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, **save** me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.”

Jesus prays to be delivered (sozo) from what He knows He must face. Although prepared to do the Father's will, He would prefer not to go through what's coming if there were another way, which, of course, there isn't. This request, therefore, is rhetorical.

Matthew 8:25 And they went and woke him, saying, “**Save** us, Lord; we are perishing.”

Here, the storm arises as Jesus and His disciples are crossing Galilee. Fearful of losing their lives, they wake the sleeping Jesus and ask Him to deliver (sozo) them from this temporal threat.

We observe a similar use of “save” in the Old Testament as well.

Judges 7:7 And the LORD said to Gideon, “With the 300 men who lapped I will **save** you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home.”

“Save” here is the Hebrew *yasha* and means to save, deliver, or help. The Lord would *yasha* (deliver, save) Israel through the small number of only 300 troops the Lord had chosen to fight against the huge Midianite army.

This is a temporal deliverance, of which we have another example in First Samuel.

1 Samuel 7:8 And the people of Israel said to Samuel, “Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that he may **save** us from the hand of the Philistines.”

As you can see, the word “save” has many meanings. Usually, the context helps us identify which meaning is intended. Understanding key Christian truths requires us to distinguish which “saved” is in view—past, present, or future tense—or being delivered from some temporal threat.

Galatians 2:15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

“Justified” is simply another way of saying “saved,” but it emphasizes how sin acts as a barrier to salvation, and that man is declared “not guilty” because of what Christ accomplished on the Cross and the sinner’s faith in that. When Paul says a man is saved (justified) apart from the Law, he is referring to Scofield’s past tense—deliverance from eternal punishment. We call that “saving faith.”

But James is not talking about Scofield’s past-tense salvation. He is referring to Scofield’s present tense—“*being* saved from the habit and power of sin.”

James’ point is that the same faith that delivers us from hell (past tense) also produces works or fruit (present tense). James argues that this faith, which frees us from the habit and power of sin and bears fruit, could not exist without Scofield’s past tense version, saving faith.

John 15:4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

“Abide” means to have a faith relationship that reflects a lifestyle – the lifestyle of Christ? Outflow – inflow!

Unfortunately, not all believers bear fruit after salvation. It is possible to be saved and not produce fruit. That same John 15 passage in verse 6 tells us that if the branch does not abide in Christ, it will be gathered and burned. Note that it is a branch attached to (identified with) the vine (saved). The passage then states that these dead, unproductive branches that are attached to the vine are gathered and burned. The KJV says “men” gather the branches. I believe the message is that these non-producing branches will be consumed by the world and destroyed by their earthly desires. It probably also refers to the possibility that a non-productive Christian living in disobedience may be taken out of this world by God under the principle of the “sin unto death.”

James’ premise is that God tests faith. He tests faith through circumstances and by allowing temptations to come our way. Most of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2, with the rich man / poor man scenario, focus on testing the believer’s faith and what kind of foundation that faith is built on—divine standards or human viewpoint. James explains that our works are part of this faith-testing and building process. The faith that saved you, if it doesn’t grow or isn’t used after salvation through the outflow/inflow process, will not produce divine good (works). And “faith without works” is useless because it is a shallow, empty faith.

James is speaking about “works” after salvation as a product of the faith relationship believers are called to have with God. The works James speaks of are not a result of human effort. You, my beloved, do not produce this “work.” Instead, that “work” is divine production in the believer – inflow. That faith, that divine input, and its product then “overflows” out through the believer as works. It is a result of the same faith that saved you, and if that faith is powerful enough to save, it is also powerful enough to enable you to be productive through God’s grace—if you choose to use it. Otherwise, it remains unused and unproductive faith.

God has work for you to do for Him. You possess free will and can choose whether to follow God's call or not. If you decide against it, your faith is as good as dead, just as James says, because it results in little or nothing toward God’s plan.

In the case of “I will,” you will be productive in God’s plan for mankind. That productivity will not be your own; it will be God working through you. It is made possible because you were willing to do what you were called to do and demonstrated faith in God’s guidance and, most importantly, His enablement to accomplish the task, whatever it is, no matter how impossible it seems. That is outflow/inflow/overflow in action!

Saving faith is alive, while “professing faith” is dead. Many Christians today only claim to have faith. They give up and fall apart like old paper at the first temptation or trial. They produce nothing of value for God. Deceived by Satan, they live in a passive state, often also in disobedience and sin. They are spiritual zombies.

James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

The answer is “no, it cannot.” Even though you were saved through faith, if that faith is now dormant, untested, and undeveloped, it produces nothing to further God’s Kingdom, nor is it useful for facing the trials and tribulations of this life. James is highlighting the distinction between a profound spiritual journey in faith and a superficial one.