

James/Faith/Works, Part 2

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.

We have seen that in verse 14, James compares a truly alive spiritual walk with one that is essentially dead because the faith that saves the believer is not being used as intended to produce that fruitful spiritual life and “save” (deliver) the believer through life’s trials and tribulations. In verse 17, James describes that as a dead faith. Now, he is going to illustrate his point.

James 2:15 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?

“If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food.” This is a third-class conditional clause, also known as the “suppositive case.” Suppose a brother or sister

James 2:16 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?

“Go in peace” is a common Jewish farewell. “Peace” is *eirene* and means quietness, rest, and by implication prosperity. “Be warmed and filled.” “Filled” is literally “feed yourselves.” Instead of providing warm clothing and satisfying food, this destitute person is given only empty words and told to look out for themselves. Warm words may be a kind gesture, but they are meaningless to someone who is cold and hungry. “Those things which are needful to the body” are the essentials they need to survive.

“What good is that?” Here is the point: How useful are your warm words to that destitute person? Do they warm his body? Do they fill his belly? The expected answer is that they do not.

James 2:17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

“So also” means in a similar manner or in the same way. Just as a meaningless statement to the destitute person does not warm them or fill their stomach, “faith, if it does not have works, is dead.” We encounter yet another third-class condition. In this case, faith is both inwardly and outwardly dead. It is a verbal gesture that lacks substance.

James emphasizes that a saving faith must come first. Saving faith was properly directed toward the object of faith (Christ in Heaven) and, therefore, had the power to bring about salvation. It was not a shallow or empty profession of faith. That saving faith will naturally produce spiritual results (works).

If there is no saving faith (if the profession of faith is empty) and the person is not saved, then there can be no spiritual production because there was no regeneration in the first place. Saving faith and the accompanying regeneration must come before any possibility of spiritual production. No saving faith means no regeneration. If there is no regeneration, then there is no spiritual production. The unsaved person may indeed do wonderful and praiseworthy things, but they are not spiritual products and are worthless in God’s economy.

However, saving faith will not be alone; it will be accompanied by works. Simple enough? Yes, but...

We know a believer can allow his sin nature to cause a fall from grace into carnality; otherwise, there would be no need for 1 John 1:9, which promises forgiveness if we confess our sins. We also understand that a believer can fall so deeply and for so long that they become a threat to God’s plan. In such cases, God can and sometimes will remove the believer under the principle of the sin unto death. That kind of believer will produce little or nothing of value in God’s plan. However, James states that faith is never alone and is always accompanied by works. How do we reconcile this with the possibility that a believer can be unproductive?

Faith will indeed be accompanied by works if we understand that the faith spoken of here is in an experiential sanctification context rather than a salvation context. In other words, we see “save” (and the faith that makes it possible) in its present tense rather than its past tense. The same faith that brought about your salvation is still just as powerful after salvation as it was before, as long as it is applied as before. And we know from personal experience and good teaching that sometimes we don’t make that application. Sometimes we let go of that faith, and instead of trusting in God to handle a problem or accomplish some good work, we trust in ourselves. That is sin because we are essentially saying, “God, you can’t handle this to my satisfaction, but I believe I can, so I will deal with it, thank-you-very-much!”

Do you see the arrogance in that? And what kind of results come from such an attitude? Answer: Human good. On the other hand, and I believe this is James’s point, if we rely on the indwelling Spirit of God to guide and enable us *instead* of trusting in our own abilities to solve the problem or accomplish the work, the outcome will be divine good rather than human good. That effective work is not possible without trusting in God—FAITH! And that faith is the same faith that saved you!

James says: That same faith that saved us will produce works after salvation, but we must apply it just as we did when we applied it to our salvation. We have to trust God. It is that outflow/inflow thing that results in “overflow” (works). But break the outflow part, the faith towards God, and direct it to someone or something other than God, and there will be no inflow with no Christ-life produced in you, and thus no outflow, spiritual production – works. If that is the case, the faith is as good as dead because it produces nothing of value.

James 2:15 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.

If the believer is not trusting in God, is out of fellowship, and is in sin because he relies on his own abilities, why would anyone expect that person to do anything more than say something nice and do nothing? There is no divine guidance or enablement because the Holy Spirit is in “conviction mode,” trying to bring the person back into fellowship. There is

no spiritual productivity when the believer is in that state. His faith is, for all practical purposes, dead as a doornail. And that, my beloved, is the big failure of many Christians. They don't make effective use of the faith that saved them after salvation.

We (and I include myself) often depend on human ability to solve spiritual problems when we should be trusting in God and waiting for His deliverance. Some of us have a strong trust in God and lead very successful spiritual lives. Others trust God in some areas but not in others, resulting in average spiritual lives. Meanwhile, some of us completely forget the power of the faith that saved us from hell and lead ineffective spiritual lives because we rely on human ability instead of trusting God.

Human ability can't save you from hell, nor can it save you from worldly problems or produce *divine fruit*. Recognizing this allows for an effective, God-glorifying spiritual life. And that is exactly what Satan wants to prevent!

James is not trying to make a case for salvation by works, nor is he arguing that salvation is maintained by works. Instead, he is presenting a case for spiritual output, which he refers to as "works," and he explains that the same faith that saves you is fully capable of producing spiritual fruit. For this to happen, the believer must exercise that faith, which we call "saving faith," a term chosen to highlight its intrinsic value. It's not that the faith itself is powerful; rather, the power is found in the object of the faith – God.

James is not referring to salvation, our deliverance from eternal damnation and the fires of hell; instead, he is talking about temporal deliverance. Our "deliverance" in our daily walk with God includes overcoming the trials and tribulations of life that constantly attack our persons, deliverance in the sense of our spiritual development into mature believers. The same faith that brought you salvation remains just as powerful afterward as it was before, as long as you apply it in the same way. The same God who saved you is also the God who will deliver you through trials and tribulations and enable you to achieve spiritual victory (that's grace), if you use the same faith to face those trials as you did in your salvation.

Show me ...

In the next series of verses, James will continue his argument and introduce an imaginary person to help make his case.

James 2:18 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!

“But someone will say...” conveys a sense of uncertainty, as if someone might present an argument. The KJV’s “...a man may say...” better captures the “what-if” meaning of this phrase. This “man” or “someone” is an imaginary person with whom James will debate. This is adversative rather than confirmatory; that is, the person making the statement is being adversarial, not confirming some profound truth.

This imaginary person says, “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.” “Apart from your works” suggests that works naturally follow faith. True saving faith will, by its nature, produce fruit. The works in question are divine good, and the reference is to fruit produced *after* salvation, not work to earn salvation.

But who is saying what? The NASB places most of the verse in one set of quotation marks along with verse 19. The NIV and NKJV treat this as two separate quotes – the first, “You have faith, and I have works,” as spoken by the imaginary person, and the second, “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works,” as James’ reply. The problem is, breaking it up this way doesn’t make much sense. Unfortunately, the Greek doesn’t help much because it doesn’t use quotation marks, making it very difficult to tell who is speaking. You’re left with only the context to figure out the speakers.

Verse 19 probably should be included as it is in the NASB: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” Then we imagine someone saying, “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!”

The NIV translates it as, “You have faith; I have *deeds*,” which I prefer. Either word, however, is a correct translation, but “deeds” better captures the meaning and avoids some of the baggage of “works.” In my view, an even better translation than “deeds” would be “fruit,” and the context supports this. It would be only a slight stretch for the Greek, which means any product whatsoever, anything accomplished by hand, art, industry, or mind.

This belief in one God is not “trust” in that God. It is simply knowledge of His existence. James’ point is that believing and trusting are two very different things.

The imaginary person seems to be arguing that “works” are everything; therefore, they have gone too far. James did not say that works are necessary, and that is exactly the accusation the legalists make! They claim that if there is no evidence of works, then the person wasn’t truly saved. But we know there are saved believers who produce little or no fruit. They never grow spiritually because they are deceived into carnality. And very often, the spiritual fruit of some believers isn’t even visible to us. Just because we cannot see it is not proof against their being born again.

James didn’t say that faith is unimportant. His argument was that deeds (works or fruit) are *evidence of faith*, not evidence of salvation. True divine good— the kind of deeds (works or fruit) James talks about— is impossible without faith, the same faith that saves.

It Requires Faith.

James’ point is that deeds (works, fruit, spiritual produce) serve as *evidence of faith*, not as proof of salvation. True divine goodness—like the deeds James describes (or “works,” as he calls them)—is impossible without faith, and that faith is the same faith that saves. The spiritual life is completely supernatural, a product produced by God in man. It is a product of faith! And that’s exactly what James is talking about.

James 2:20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

Most expositors argue that James restates his original point from verse 14. His use of “you foolish person” seems to refer to someone who has works

apart from faith and emphasizes works produced by dead faith. “Dead faith” does not produce divine good; it is unproductive. The word translated “foolish” means empty, useless, vain, and lacking in truth. His works, no matter how admirable they are or who benefits from them, are in vain. They are in vain because they are a product of human effort and mentality, not faith. While works may naturally follow faith, there is a quality aspect to consider. Additionally, the lack of visible works (deeds, fruit, etc.) proves nothing to an outside observer. Only the opposite proves something, though only in a secular sense.

James 2:17 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?

There are two kinds of people in this world: the saved and the unregenerate. Aside from evil, there are also two types of works: human good and divine good. The unsaved only produce human good, and while they may believe in God and even fear Him like the demons do, they haven't trusted in Him. Instead, they are “working” to earn His approval—doing so in vain—because human good never meets God’s divine standard. Fallen man produces fruit, much like the scribes and Pharisees, but it is dead works because their faith is dead, like empty whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but full of dead men’s bones. The scribes and Pharisees were merely going through the motions of religion, relying entirely on their own abilities for self-glorification, and their efforts resulted in dead works.

The regenerate, born-again believer is capable of producing both human good and divine good. Clearly, he can be filled with the Spirit, surrendering to God’s will, and be guided by God to do His work, yielding divine good or fruit for God. This believer does not do this to earn God’s (or man’s) favor; instead, he does it out of love for God and gratitude for all Christ has done for him. A big difference in motivation!

However, the regenerate, born-again believer can also produce human good. He might be out of fellowship, or he could be motivated not by love and divine guidance, but rather by selfish motives. The fruit this believer

produces is no better than that produced by the unregenerate. The product of both the unregenerate person and the born-again believer out of fellowship is nothing more than human good.

Dead faith is directed inward toward a person's own abilities. In contrast, "saving faith" steps beyond human capability, outside the comfort zone, and trusts in Someone much greater and more capable than oneself. James says that such faith is demonstrated by the quality of its fruit. The emphasis is on how the fruit reflects the faith's quality, not the other way around. The presence of fruit, which results from faith, *provides human justification for a person's claim to be a follower of Christ.*

Did you catch that?

I said "human justification" and not "divine justification." This is a very important piece of learning here. Understanding this will help clear up the confusion that many have about what James is teaching and prevent the misconception that James is presenting works as proof of salvation, because he isn't. The difference may seem small, but it is actually huge.

The standards of the world are far below the standards God has set for His children. Nevertheless, the world will observe the life of the child of God and judge what it sees, and this is extremely important! The believer's security does not rest in the hands of the world – and thank God for that! – but the believer is called to "walk in wisdom toward them who are without" (outside the family of God – Colossians 4:5). The believer is called to present himself as a witness to the rest of the world, *and that is the point James is making.* Faith and the works it produces are *human justification*, a witness, if you will, for the person's claim to be a child of God.

Works Prove Faith to Man

James 2:21 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 provides two illustrations to support his point that deeds naturally follow salvation as a direct result of the same faith that brings salvation. In verse 21 and then in verse 25, he shares the testimony of two individuals with very strong faith, so strong that they were willing to risk everything on that faith. Interestingly, he uses the same illustrations that the author of Hebrews used in Hebrews 11. Let's examine those.

Hebrews 11:17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," ¹⁹ concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

The writer of Hebrews states that Abraham believed that even if he was called to go all the way and actually sacrifice Isaac, God would be able to raise him up again. Then the writer reminds us that this was a "type" for Christ, a picture of Jesus's sacrifice for our sins. And even though Abraham would not have to sacrifice his son, God would sacrifice His Son.

Hebrews 11:31 By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace.

Rahab's faith saved her from death. The unbelievers of Jericho all died, but Rahab, because of her faith, was spared. Another beautiful example of temporal salvation through faith. What the writer of Hebrews is talking about is found back in 10:38.

Hebrews 10:38 Now the just shall **live** by faith ...

"The just" is *dikaïos* and means those who are righteous. It can refer to those who consider themselves righteous, such as the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' time, but it can also refer to those who possess the righteousness of Christ through faith and regeneration (1 Corinthians 1:30, Romans 4:5, Philippians 3:9). The latter is in view here. The just (or justified) *live* by faith. This does not refer to acquiring eternal life, but to the way we live out the eternal life we already have. It's a *process* the writer is pointing to, not a condition that comes from a specific action. The writer is

encouraging these Hebrew believers to remember the faith that saved them and to *use it to live by* daily.

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. ² For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.

Faith is “substance of things hoped for....” “Substance” is *hupostasis*, a Greek compound word meaning a foundation or steadfastness of mind. It is a common term from Aristotle and is often used in business documents as the basis or guarantee of transactions, like a title or deed. I believe this is the essential meaning in Hebrews 11:1, “Faith is the title-deed of things hoped for.” This suggests actual possession! This faith is so strong that what is believed in must be seen as already possessed, a foregone conclusion, a done deal. This “hope,” seen as “things hoped for,” is a confident expectation. It is evidence of things not seen. “Evidence” is *elegchos*, meaning proof or conviction. “Seen” is *blepo* and means to behold or see.

This verse might be better translated as: “Faith is the foundation of things confidently expected, the proof of things not seen.”

Testimony to Mankind

James used Abraham and Rahab as examples to illustrate his point about faith and works.

James 2:21 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.

A superficial reading of the passage might suggest that James is arguing that Abraham and Rahab were saved by their works—“justified by works” (vs 21 and 25). But what exactly does “justified” mean as used here?

There are two meanings of the word “justified.” Paul uses the term to refer to the imputation of Christ's righteousness at salvation. That is, the believer is considered *justified* in God's eyes because he possesses the very righteousness of Christ (Romans 4:3, 11-24; Galatians 3:6). Man cannot rely on his own righteous deeds because they do not meet God's standards. However, man can stand on the imputed righteousness of Christ, which is received through faith in Him. This meaning of “justified” signifies that God finds the individual acceptable because he has the righteousness of Christ. The main emphasis of this usage is on the believer's eternal security and status as a child of God.

James, on the other hand, uses the word to refer to actions that demonstrate the presence of the divine righteousness Paul discussed. These deeds are our *justification* as believers and serve as our *testimony* to others. While these actions don't prove anything to God, they do demonstrate something to people. This is not justification before God, but it is justification before men!

Paul is discussing the righteousness of Christ imputed to believers. James is referring to the righteousness of Christ demonstrated in the believer's life. Abraham's faith, his saving faith, was so strong that he trusted God's command to offer up Isaac, the child of the Abrahamic Covenant, the child through whom God said He would make Abraham a great nation that would be as numerous as the sands of the sea. Abraham trusted that, and his willingness to follow God's command proved his faith. Look at verse 22. His “faith was perfected.” “Perfected” is **teleioo** and means to complete, make perfect, or bring to an end or fulfillment. The same word is used twice in James 1:4, where this exact idea of the believer being perfected or completed appears. It is the same word spoken by Christ on the Cross after the sins of the world were imputed to Him and judged. He proclaimed, “It is finished.”

Look at verse 22: “You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works.” “Active with...” is *sunergeo*. We get our English word “synergy” from this Greek word, which means to work in cooperation. Abraham's actions were working in harmony (or cooperation,

in synergy) with his faith. In other words, there was no disconnect between his faith and his actions! Abraham trusted God, and his actions proved that – *to you and me!*

James 2:23 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.

Now James appears to quote Paul from Romans 4:3, but of course, both are only referencing the same Old Testament passage.

Genesis 15:6 And he (Abraham) believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Abraham’s faith was counted for righteousness. Abraham’s faith led to his account in Heaven being credited with the righteousness of Christ. Abraham was saved in the same way we are—by trusting in the promises of God, not by works.

Ah, but what about James 2:24, you ask?

James 2:24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Actions speak louder than words, and Abraham’s actions spoke volumes about his faith. His deeds proved his faith was genuine *before mankind*. God already knew what was in Abraham’s heart and that he would obey and slash his son’s throat unless he was stopped, which he was. We stand here some 4000 years later in awe of Abraham’s faith!

Abraham had enough faith to be willing to sacrifice his own son because God commanded him to. This was not blind faith. Abraham believed that God must have a plan and trusted in that. He knew that both he and Isaac would come down from that mountain because Isaac was the child of the Abrahamic Covenant. To believe Isaac would die would be to doubt God’s promise concerning him, and he told his servant so.

Genesis 22:5 Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I **and the boy** will go over there and worship **and come again to you.**”

Abraham's actions, or his works if you will, proved or justified his faith before mankind.

James 2:25 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?

James provides a second example. This time, it's a Gentile who was outside the covenant but also believed. Abraham represents the Hebrews, and Rahab represents the Gentiles, demonstrating that both groups, not just Jews, have the potential for salvation through faith. The story of Rahab is in Joshua 2. Moses sent Joshua and two men into Jericho on a reconnaissance mission. The king of Jericho discovered they were there and ordered their capture. Rahab hid them and lowered them down the outer wall with a rope. She risked everything she had, including her life, to help the Israelites! Had the king found out about her duplicity, she and her family would have been killed. Before helping Joshua escape, she confessed her faith in the God of Israel (Joshua 2:9-11). Because of her help and her faith, Rahab and her family were spared when the Israelites captured Jericho. Rahab's faith was shown through her actions. It wasn't a shallow, empty, dead faith; it was alive and produced fruit.

That is what James calls for in the believer. We are called to action – faith in action – where we use the same faith that saved us and apply it daily to do what God has called us to. This includes living a righteous life, embodying the lifestyle of Christ (the Fruit of the Spirit), and producing works that God has prepared for us to advance His Kingdom. None of this is possible without trusting in God to sustain us through trials and temptations and to guide and empower us to accomplish what He has called us to do.

Our “deeds” don't prove anything to God. There is no need for that, because He knows what is in our hearts. Our deeds do demonstrate to mankind that we are truly children of God, but that only happens when we use the same faith that saved us to live the supernatural lifestyle of Christ, which is possible only through faith.

It all boils down to this...

James 2:26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

James concludes by saying that just as a man without the human spirit is spiritually dead, so is faith that produces no fruit spiritually dead. The conclusion is clear: faith and deeds are as essential to each other as the body and the spirit. Without the “Spirit” (*pneumatōs* breath) of life, the body is dead. Without the evidence of works, faith may be considered dead. True faith continually contributes to spiritual growth and development.

A believer should stand confidently on God’s Word even during trials and temptations (chapter 1) and also serve his brothers and sisters in Christ (chapter 2). He must accept all members of God’s family without favoritism (vv. 1–13) and support the family with a working faith (vv. 14–26). To achieve spiritual maturity, a believer must be what God wants him to be and do what God wants him to do.

James is imagining an ideal scenario where, by nature, a believer saved through faith is expected to produce a spiritual product, which James refers to as “works.” These works serve as a testimony to the believer’s status as a child of God before mankind. They demonstrate that his faith was genuine.