

## James: Dead Faith

James 2:14-26 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? (15) If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, (16) and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? (17) Thus 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 without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (19) You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe; and tremble! (20) But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? (21) Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? (22) Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? (23) And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. (24) You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. (25) Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? (26) For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Faith or works?

Do we get to heaven through faith in what Christ has done on the cross?

Or do we get there by being good people and doing lots of good things?

Paul seems to have settled the question:

Rom 4:1-5 What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? (2) For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. (3) For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” (4) Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. (5) But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,

Rom 3:28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.

Paul is clear that you can’t earn your way to heaven, but you have to get there by faith alone in the finished work of the cross.

But then James says his bit: “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.”

And to make things worse, he proves his point by using the exact same Old Testament quotation that Paul used to prove his point.

The great reformer, Martin Luther, was so disgusted with this passage in James that he wrote the whole letter off and called it “an epistle of straw.”

This conflict doesn’t only raise the question of who is right: Is it Paul or James?

But it also raises the issue: Does Scripture contradict itself?

If so, how can I trust it? Is it really inspired?

We’re going to take a close look at this passage in James, and when we’ve finished, we’re going to see clearly that Paul and James don’t contradict each other at all.

They complement each other.

They look at the same truth from different angles.

So let’s see what James is really saying.

## 1. Our works actively demonstrate our faith

ILLUS – So imagine your neighbour is desperate. They've got no food. Their clothing is so old, it's turned into rags. And no matter how hard they try, they can't get a job. You're relaxing, watching TV, when there's a knock on your door. You open the door, and there's your neighbour. You haven't seen him for a while. You take a look at him, and say, "Wow, Bob. Have you lost a lot of weight, or what?" "We need help," he says. "We're starving. And if my clothes get any thinner, I might as well not wear them at all." "Gee," you say. "That's too bad. I wish I could help, I really do. We're down to only three meals a day. I haven't bought a new shirt for two weeks. But hey, let me pray for you."

James asks, "What sort of faith is that?"

Because real faith is demonstrated by real action.

In verse 18 of our passage, he says, "Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."

The implication is that without works it is not possible to demonstrate the reality of your faith.

In fact, he was just picking upon Jesus' theme in Matthew 25:

Mat 25:37-40 Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? (38) When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? (39) Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" (40) And the King will answer and say to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."

Jesus Himself had an expectation that faith would be demonstrated in practical good works.

We're not even talking about miracles or healings here.

We're just talking about doing good things for people in need.

Works actively demonstrate the reality of our faith.

## 2. Faith alone is not enough

Isn't it inspiring to read about Peter's confession of faith in Jesus as the Son of God in Matthew 16:16?

It got Jesus' attention, and Jesus pronounced a blessing on Peter because he had received a revelation from the Father.

But here's something interesting: Demons made amazing confessions of faith.

In Mark 1:24, a demon said to Jesus, "I know who You are; the Holy One of God!"

In Mark 5:7, another demon said to Him, "What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"

They knew who Jesus was; they made the right confession; but no demon is ever going to heaven.

This is why James is saying that faith alone isn't enough.

He says, "Even the demons believe; and tremble!"

That word "tremble" means to shudder, or to bristle.

In other words, they not only believe in the reality of God, but they're smart enough to be scared.

The kind of faith that demons have, the kind of faith where there's nothing more than a confession, James calls that "dead faith."

There are, essentially, two kinds of faith.

The first one is intellectual faith.

ILLUS – For instance, when I was in high school, I learned a mathematical formula that went like this:  $v = u + at$ . Everybody understand that? Okay, so just in case you're wondering what in the world that means. The

letter  $v$  stands for the final velocity of an object;  $u$  stands for the initial velocity;  $a$  is the acceleration at 9.8 metres per second squared; and  $t$  is the amount of time that has passed. I know that's made it a whole lot clearer to all of you.

Now here's a question: Is that formula ( $v = u + at$ ) true?

You might say, "Well, I guess if that's what your maths teacher taught you, it's probably true."

Actually, it is true.

But for you, it's merely an intellectual faith; it has no practical bearing on your life whatever – unless you jump off a bridge.

ILLUS – But here's another mathematical fact:  $10 - 5 = 5$ . That's a whole different ballgame. If you go into a shop with \$10, and buy something worth \$5, how much change are you expecting to receive? \$5, and if that shop assistant tries to give you \$2, what are going to say? "Hey, pal. Where's the rest of my money?"

This mathematical fact that  $10 - 5 = 5$ , is not just intellectual faith for you; it has practical meaning for your daily life.

The first kind of faith – intellectual faith – is what James calls "dead faith."

The second kind of faith is what we might call "practical faith."

It's real; it means something.

There's more to having faith than just saying you've got faith.

ILLUS – For instance, what if I go round telling everyone that I'm a giraffe? If I did something crazy like that, you'd be looking for something we call evidence. You'd say, "But a giraffe has four legs, antlers, a long neck, is incredibly tall. That doesn't sound like you at all."

It's exactly the same with a person who claims to be a Christian.

It's not enough just to claim it.

There has to be evidence, proof of the faith that a person claims to have.

Otherwise it's just dead faith.

And here's the thing: If faith doesn't lead to a transformation in behaviour, it's dead faith.

ILLUS – John the Baptist pretty much said the same thing. In Luke 3:7-14, when people responded to his preaching by asking, "What shall we do?", he told them, "Give some food to people who don't have any. Give your spare shirt to someone who doesn't have one." When the tax collectors asked him the same question, he said, "Don't collect more money than you're supposed to." When the soldiers asked, he said, "Don't intimidate people; don't falsely accuse people; be content with your wages."

It's the same as what James is saying: Faith without works is dead. Real faith leads to a transformation in behaviour.

### **3. Two important faith qualities**

James uses two illustrations from the Old Testament to support his argument.

We're going to look at these and discover two important faith qualities.

The first story is the story of Abraham.

James says, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God.

It was a time in Abraham's life when God wanted to see the quality of his faith and called him to sacrifice his son, Isaac on an altar.

How did Abraham respond?

Did he argue with God?

Did he run away like Jonah did?

Did he pretend not to hear?

None of these; it says in Genesis 22:3, “Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey.”

He rose early in the morning.

Was he in a hurry to get rid of his son?

Of course not! But he was eager to please God.

The first quality of faith is absolute submission.

Let God be God; let Him call the shots.

God is the only one with absolute wisdom and absolute power, and that qualifies Him to be in absolute control.

The second story is about a woman named Rahab.

James says, “Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?”

ILLUS – What sort of woman was Rahab? Well, for a start, she was a prostitute. But when she found faith in God, she took a chance. When the spies came to spy out the city of Jericho, they lodged with her. And somebody told the king. Now imagine the difficulty she was facing. The enemies of her people are staying under her roof, the king finds out and sends men who demand that she give them up. What should she do?

The easy way out would be to hand them over.

But she didn't take the easy way out.

She had faith in God, and that faith led her to hide the spies.

She took a risk.

That's another faith quality: risk-taking.

I'm not talking about doing stupid things; I'm talking about stepping out in faith.

Taking a risk and trusting God.

It was that faith-inspired risk-taking quality that took Rahab from being a prostitute in a pagan country to a new land where she became the great-grandmother of David the greatest of all the kings of Israel.

She took some faith steps, just like Peter did when he stepped out of the boat and walked on water.

Sure, he sank; but nobody else in the boat stepped out.

Faith has that risk-taking quality.

Here's what Mark Twain once said: Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

That's quite a challenge.

#### **4. Faith substitutes**

For our final point, I want to give you two common substitutes for real faith, the kind of faith that results in works.

The first one is talk.

There's an old saying: When all is said and done, there's a lot more said than done.

Jesus told a story in Matthew 21:28-31 that illustrates this.

ILLUS – A father had two sons, and he said to the first one, “Son, go and work in my vineyard.” But his son had better things to do than work for his father. He said, “Not a chance. I've got things to do, people to see, places to go.” But later on, he had a change of heart, and went to work. In the meantime, the father went to the second son and told him to go and work in the vineyard too. “Sure,” said his second son. “Not a problem.” But he didn't go. “Which one,” asked the Lord, “did the will of his father?”

Which one?

Not the one who said he was going but didn't go.

The one that did the will of his father was the one that did more than just talk, went out into the vineyard, and actually did some work.

Talk is not enough.

Intentions are not enough.

Real faith translates into real action.

The second substitute for the kind of faith that results in works is prayer.

“What!” you say. “Are you against prayer?”

Not a chance.

But do you know that for some people it's actually easier to pray than it is to do something?

Prayer is good; prayer is an activity that every Christian should be engaged in.

But prayer was never meant to be a substitute for action.

Jesus was a man of prayer, but He was also a man of action.

ILLUS – The story is told of Martin Luther who had a friend who was a monk. Both men were convinced that there was a great need for the Reformation. So they agreed that Luther would go out into the world to do the work, while his friend would stay in his cell and pray for his success. But then, one night, the monk had a dream. And in his dream he saw a single reaper out in a vast field trying to reap by himself. And as the monk watched, the lone reaper turned around, and he saw that it was Martin Luther. He knew then that he had to go and help Luther in the work that he was doing.

If prayer becomes a substitute for godly action, that prayer is then nothing but an escape.

God has called us to have a living, vibrant faith; a faith that results in works; a faith that brings about personal transformation.

Any other kind of faith is a poor substitute; it's dead faith.

Let's finish by going back to our original question: Does Scripture contradict itself?

Are Paul and James at odds with each other?

Not at all: The key to the whole mystery is found in verse 26 in our passage: For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

James uses an analogy to show the relationship of faith to works.

It is like the body that contains the human spirit.

A live body has the human spirit within it; if not, then the body is dead.

In the same way, a living faith has the works already within it waiting to be done; if not, then that faith is dead.

It is faith alone that saves us; but if that faith does not produce good works, then it's not real faith.