

Faith

Part 5 – Faith And Works

ILLUS – There is a story about the great circus performer Blondin. Stretching a steel cable across Niagara Falls, he walked, ran, and danced across it in front of a large crowd. All of this was done during high winds and without a safety net. He even wheeled a barrow full of bricks across the cable. Blondin then asked the crowd, “How many of you believe that I could push a man across the wire in the wheelbarrow?” Everyone did. But when he asked, “Would one of you please volunteer to be that man?”, there was not a soul.

Today I want to talk about faith and works.

James 2:14-26

If you didn't quite understand the terminology, your works are the things that we do.

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.

Compare this with our verse in James:

James 2:24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

What do we do when two passages in Scripture seemingly contradict each other?

Back in the 1500s when Martin Luther had his great revelation from God that “the just shall live by faith”, and the Reformation and the Protestant movement was born, it was this seeming disagreement between the texts that prompted him to describe the Epistle of James as an “epistle of straw”.

And at first reading these Scriptures not only seem to be saying the opposite, but the problem is aggravated because they both use Abraham as proof of what they're saying

Then to make matters worse, they both quote the same Scripture from Gen 15:6 to prove their point: “And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.”

Are we justified by faith apart from works as Paul says?

Or are we justified by works, as James says? (James 2:24)

We're going to find the answers to these questions in these same passages as we study them.

At the same time we'll learn something about the relationship between faith and works.

But first let's just note some of the points that James makes in his letter.

1. James 2:18 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.

Our works are the active demonstration of our faith.

We can't prove that we have real faith if our actions aren't affected by it

When I gave my heart to the Lord I did it as a result of a revelation from God. And one of the first things the Holy Spirit did in me was to clean out my filthy mouth. I was a week old in the Lord when I realised that I wasn't using all those four-letter words anymore.

Sometimes I can't even believe that was me.

But if we have real faith, something in our life will change.

Our works are the proof that we have a real, living faith.

2. James 2:19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe; and tremble!

Ask a person if he believes in God, and he might reply, "Yeah, sure".

It's an intellectual acknowledgement of the existence of God, like if you asked if they believed in penguins.

But ask a demon if they believe in God.

They've seen Him, they know what He can do, they know what He's going to do.

When you start telling someone about Jesus and they respond, "I believe in God.", it's not enough.

If believing in God's existence made you a Christian, then the devil would be one of the best.

He believes: boy does he believe!

He's seen Him, His glory and power.

He really believes, but he's not a Christian.

And for a human being to believe in the existence of God, just means that they are probably not a complete and utter fool, since the evidence is all around us.

That's why the Bible says that it's the fool that says in his heart, "There is no God."

Saving faith is different from just acknowledging the existence of the Creator.

Saving faith changes our heart, and the evidence of that change is our works – what we do, what we say.

3. Now let's take a look at the key to understanding this whole passage of Scripture.

The verse that helps us understand how James fits in with Romans is verse 26.

James 2:26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

James has given us a little analogy here.

He's saying that the relationship between faith and works is like the relationship between the body and the spirit.

That helps me to understand this little riddle, since there are a couple of truths we can glean from this statement.

First, this verse summarises what the passage is all about; if the spirit of a man leaves his body, the body is dead.

No spirit, no life.

You'll remember that in Luke 8, when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, Jesus said, "Little girl arise." But the next verse (vs 55) says, "Then her spirit returned."

The spirit has to be in the body for there to be life.

To raise her from the dead, Jesus had to bring her spirit back, because when the spirit is not in the body, the body is dead.

The same relationship exists between faith and works; if there are no works, that's proof that faith is dead.

Tit 1:16 They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him...

Matt 5:16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

It's our works which either show the unmistakable mark of Christ or, because of their nature, deny Him.

James Berry (1852-1913), was hangman for England for eight years in which time he killed 134 men and women. His profession took its toll on him and he became a heavy drinker and constantly irritable. At age 52, sitting at a station, a young man walked up to him, started to talk to him, and took him to a mission hall where he gave his life to the Lord. He became an evangelist till he died aged 61.¹

The works show the work of the Cross.

Where does that leave Christians whose works deny Christ? Fiddling tax, stealing, backbiting and gossip, taking their own revenge, lying, coarse language and dirty jokes.

Christianity is not just playing mind games.

A Christian is an active disciple of Christ, an active follower of Christ.

Let me challenge your thinking on this with regards to your loved ones or friends.

I've talked to so many Christians over the years, and I ask questions like, "Is your father saved?" "He came to church once and said the sinners' prayer, but he doesn't go to church, or talk about it. But I think he believes."

Faith without works is dead.

That might sound tough, but I'd rather they found out now, in this life, than find out when they stand before the Lord.

We all want to feel good about our loved ones, and to think they're going to heaven.

But don't let them go that easily: pray them right through.

And if they're not an active follower of Christ, they're not through yet.

4. What else do we learn from this verse?

It's simple: the body contains the spirit.

Your body is the vessel that carries within it your spirit.

And the same relationship exists between faith and works.

When the Word of God enters your heart, and finds good ground, it brings with it a parcel of faith.

In turn, that faith has within it the works that God wants you to do.

The potential for those works is already within the faith package.

That's *why* faith without works is dead: real faith brings with it all the potential for the works God has planned for us to do.

Eph 2:8-10 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, (9) not of works, lest anyone should boast. (10) For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Listen to what Paul is saying here: we are not saved through our own works.

Nothing we can do could earn God's loving grace.

But when we are recreated, we become His workmanship for the purpose of good works.

What does the Bible say about those good works?

That God has prepared them beforehand.

John 5:19-20 Then Jesus answered and said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. (20) For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does; and He will show Him greater works than these, that you may marvel."

Jesus did what He saw the Father do, so it's up to us to see with the eyes of faith so that we can do the works of God too.

We need to allow God to challenge us to examine our hearts to make sure everything we do is really a work of God and not just one of our own bright ideas.

Real faith brings with it the potential to do the works which God has already prepared for us.

Phil 2:13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

Col 1:29 To this end I also labour, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.

It's God who works within us to produce good works.

1 Thess 2:13 For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.

God works in us by His implanted word.

If we understand this, we'll understand what James is talking about as opposed to what Paul is talking about.

Paul is saying, "Hey guys, your salvation, your redemption, your being justified, made righteous before God, does not depend on your works. Simply have faith, and it's yours as a free gift."

James is saying, "Now listen guys, faith may be all you need to be saved, but real saving faith contains within it the works that God wants you to do. Don't try and tell me that you have faith if those works aren't evident in your life."

Now interestingly, the Word of God tells us that Abraham "believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness."

He believed God's promise that his descendants would be like the stars in number.

It was about twenty or so years later when Abraham's faith was really tested, and God told him to offer up Isaac his son.

Paul was right; Abraham believed, and that alone was reckoned to him as righteousness.

If he'd died the very next day, he would still have been saved.

Two thieves were crucified with Jesus and both of them hurled abuse at Him. (Matt 27:44) One of the thieves crucified with Jesus had a change of heart, believed, and Jesus promised he would be with him in Paradise; his faith saved him.

But James was also right; Abraham's faith produced a tremendous work of obedience.

And without that obedience Abraham's faith would have meant nothing.

Having faith is like throwing a pebble into a pond. You can't throw it in without creating little ripples. If there are no ripples that's proof that there was no pebble in the first place.

Faith isn't just so we can get something from God; it's to enable us to do something for God.

¹ Bailey, Brian *Hangman* p132