

Living Faith

James 2:14-26

Faith in God is not a box you check at one point in your life. It's not bare intellectual assent to the truths of the Christian faith. James writes to exiles who face the temptation to downplay, minimize, and compartmentalize their trust in Christ. But God our Father and savior calls us to live out our faith in every sphere and moment of life, a visible testimony of knowing and loving Him.

Summary of the Text

What good is faith without works? James asks rhetorically if faith alone can save someone (v. 14). If you have a naked and starving brother or sister whom you tell to be warmed and filled without meeting their needs, how did you help (vv. 15-16)? So faith that doesn't produce works is dead (v. 17). To the one who says you have the gift of faith while I have the gift of works, James asks to show him faith without works while he will show it by his works (v. 18). It's good to believe in the one true God, but even the demons believe and shake (v. 19). Don't you know, foolish man, that faith which lacks works is dead (v. 20)? Wasn't Abraham justified by works when he obeyed God and offered Isaac (v. 21)? Faith acted together with his works, and his faith was matured by his works (v. 22). Scripture was fulfilled: "*Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.*" And he was called the friend of God (v. 23; Gen. 15:6). So a man is justified by works and not by faith that lacks obedience (v. 24). Rahab was also justified by works—her true faith revealed—when she harbored the spies and lied to the authorities in Jericho (v. 25). Just as the body without the spirit is dead, without works faith is also dead (v. 26 cf. Gen. 2:7).

Be Warmed & Filled

James writes this letter likely over a decade before Paul's ministry to the Gentiles generates the question of how faith relates to the works of the law. The Judaizers insisted on Gentiles being circumcised and observing the ceremonial laws of the old covenant, to which the apostle says: "*Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing*" (Gal. 5:2). For salvation, Jesus + nothing = everything. You don't need to be a Jew in order to be a Christian. "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:28). The context of the discussion of justification by faith alone is different than the one in which James writes. Yet Paul and James agree entirely, as Paul concludes: "*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love*" (Gal. 5:6). Paul says we've received grace and apostleship for "*obedience to the faith among all nations*" (Rom. 1:5). What good is it to point out your circumcision, or now your baptism, and all of your symbolic Christian attachments and commitments, if you don't live them out? If someone uses these things to counterbalance unrepentant sin, like God is grading on a curve, the Lord will not accept him. This is the "I'm a pretty good person (at least compared to others!)" gospel, and it's no gospel at all. James is not addressing the Jew-Gentile issue but the take-up-your-cross-and-follow-Jesus issue. He already said if you don't watch your mouth, your religion is useless (1:26). These are the weightier matters of the law that Jesus highlighted. The royal law, to love your neighbor as yourself, and show mercy to others as God has shown it to you. James compares the idea of faith that does obey to someone who says "Be warmed and filled" to the cold and starving without clothing or feeding them. The statement makes it worse for the sufferer and reveals, at best, self-deception in the one who acts this way.

Demonic Faith

He anticipates objections. "Someone will say...." Someone points out that Johnny seems to have time on his hands and he will help that person out so I don't have to. The idea that true faith exists deep down and is difficult if not impossible to truly discern rejects the biblical definition and description of faith. The Son of

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Thunder responds: “I will show you my faith by my works.” Faith in Christ is revealed by love shown to Christ and to people who bear His image. James refers to the core confession of his Jewish-Christian audience when he says, “*You believe that there is one God. You do well*” (v. 19). Israel confessed the Shema: “*Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one!*” (Deut. 6:4). That’s a good confession. But guess else can say it? The demons! “*Even the demons believe—and tremble*” (v. 19). Demons have a deep, overpowering reaction to the truth of God’s existence and attributes. Jesus encounters this in Gadarene country when the demon speaking through the man says, “*What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God that You do not torment me*” (Mk. 5:7). Demons are trinitarian believers who know God exists and yet despise Him. People partake in this also. Simon the Sorcerer in Samaria likes the power of the Holy Spirit and tries to buy it from the apostles (Acts 8:18-19). “*Your money perish with you,*” Peter says, “*because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! ... Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you*” (Acts 8:20, 22). Simon believes but doesn’t obey. Consider also today’s atheist who verbally denies that God exists, that there is any justice in the universe, and then is as helpful as boy scout and never cheats on his taxes. He even insists on the moral conduct of others. What do his actions say about his faith? He says he doesn’t believe but then acts as if the judge of the earth imposes His standard on all.

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We don’t want deficient or demonic faith, but living faith—the only kind that God gives. Faith without works is dead (v. 20). James gives two examples that show the authenticity and glory of true trust in God. Abraham is shown to be a true believer in God when he offers up Isaac on Mount Moriah (Gen. 22:9). Isaac was the son of promise that Abraham and Sarah waited decades for. Yahweh asks Abraham for what many pagan gods require—child sacrifice. If there was ever a time to doubt the Lord and His goodness, or just to fail in steadfastness to obey anyway, this is it. “*By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac ... concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense*” (Heb. 11:17, 19). It’s fascinating that James says this fulfills the Scripture from earlier in Genesis, when “*Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness*” (Gen. 15:6). Abram believed God back when his only heir was Eliezer of Damascus, and that deep trust grew and blossomed with the knife in his hand above Isaac on the altar. He was called the friend of God, which is someone who enters into the council of God not just to listen but to speak. Jesus calls the disciples friends, not just servants, because they know what He does and participates in His kingdom (Jn. 15:13-15). Not only Abraham, the original Jew, had his faith matured through obedience, but so did Rahab the Canaanite harlot. And when did this happen? When she harbored spies, lied to the authorities, and sent them out another way in Jericho (v. 25). If Hebrews and James didn’t tell us of her great faith many would doubt it. She had heard of the exodus and how Israel defeated Sihon the Amorite and Og the Bashanite kings, and she believed in Yahweh (Josh. 2:9-11). “*By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace*” (Heb. 11:31). She became an ancestress of the Lord Jesus Christ, Boaz’s grandma (Matt. 1:5). We know that Abraham and Rahab are heroes of faith because of their radical obedience.

Conclusion

Everything you do expresses your faith in and love for Jesus Christ. We believe and love not in word only, but in deed and truth. This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.