

Faith Without Works Is Dead: Reflections on James 2:14-26

Faith without works is dead—James 2:14-26 leaves no room for complacency. A central theme of the New Testament scriptures is that a person cannot “earn” salvation through works. God is perfect and the only way that ANYONE can be joined to God is that he/she must be perfect. But Paul correctly stated that all have sinned and fall short. Yet in verses 14-17, James wrote the faith without works is dead. In other words, a Christian that does not serve the Lord in an active way will not achieve salvation.

So, how does faith and works come together? The answer comes from a consideration of what a person does in becoming a Christian and living a Christian life. A person must hear the message of Jesus Christ and believe that the teachings about Jesus Christ and the cost of sin is true.

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That person must realize that without Jesus Christ, he/she is lost. The spiritual quality of life in this world will not get better, and the future will be faced with either resigned surrender or fear and dread. From that must come the realization that the life today MUST



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CHANGE if there is any hope in this life and in the future. That is repentance.

Once that realization is made, then comes the question, "What must I do to have hope? To have what is being offered in Jesus Christ?" Jesus Christ is the key that opens the door to salvation. To gain that, a person **MUST** acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Son of God, Savior, and King. A person **MUST** submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ through confession.

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And the final step is to do something that will wash away the former sins. In life, a person's debts are erased when that person dies. But dying while in sin does not lead to salvation! The opposite is true. But when a person is fully immersed in water in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, that person parallels the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that person comes out of the water a new being in Christ.

Every Christian should already understand all of this, but how does this apply to faith and works? A Christian now has hope in Jesus Christ, but with the great blessings come responsibilities; and accepting those responsibilities should be easy! After all, a Christian has been saved from spiritual death! The initial sense of love and gratitude should grow stronger and brighter.



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When people have been rescued from almost certain death, many have said that event changed their lives and they were determined to make a difference from that point on. And many did just that! If that is true for a physical rescue from death, how much more should a Christian show his/her love through actively serving the Lord? Love is the motivator for action; and as Christian love grows, the Christian will become more active.

Verse 15-16 states, "If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?" This example shows attitudes of indifference, apathy, and hypocrisy. The words meant nothing because there was no intent to help. But Christians are to help one another. This is especially true within local congregations.

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Within a local congregation, members should know one another. This is especially true for smaller congregations. There should be, no MUST BE, a sense of family and a concern for the well being for each member. In larger congregations, it can be harder to know each



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member, but family takes care of family. Elders and deacons can help organize the members, so no one is left out, but it is each MEMBER that has a responsibility to look out for a brother, a sister, or a little ones that are in need within a congregation. And this is not an option. James ended this section of chapter 2 by stating in verse 17, “Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”

Living Faith Demonstrated by Works

James 2:18-20: “But someone may well say, ‘You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.’ You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?”

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The last section of chapter 2 expanded upon James’ discussion of faith and works, and James pictured two people carrying on a conversation about faith and works. One said that he had faith without works, and the other countered that he could show his faith by his works. The faith of both individuals appeared to be sincere. Nothing says that one’s faith was inferior to the other.



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But how do you show or demonstrate your faith? A strong belief that God is real, Jesus Christ is His Son, and salvation comes through Him really accomplishes nothing. Faith involves a strong love. A strong love will motivate a person to DEMONSTRATE that love. James called a person that was confident in his faith only was foolish.

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A man may tell his wife that he loves her. But then, he does nothing to demonstrate that love. He does not support his wife and himself. He does not talk to her or show affection. He does not help in any way. He does not stay with her but is always with others. "But I love you" will carry very little weight in a situation like that. There is an old phrase, "Words are cheap". This phrase accurately describes the point that James was making.

After all, even the demons acknowledge the fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. In Mark 5, Jesus met a man that was demon possessed by many demons. Mark 5:6-13, "Seeing Jesus from a distance, he ran up and bowed down before Him; and shouting with a loud voice, he *said, 'What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God, do not torment me!' For He had been saying to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!' And He was asking him, 'What is your name?' And he said to Him, 'My name is Legion; for we are many.' And he began to implore Him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now



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there was a large herd of swine feeding nearby on the mountain. The demons implored Him, saying, 'Send us into the swine so that we may enter them.' Jesus gave them permission. And coming out, the unclean spirits entered the swine; and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea, about two thousand of them; and they were drowned in the sea." There was no question that the demons believed! They also had faith that Jesus could send them into the heard of swine.

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In Acts 16:16-18, Luke recorded, "It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, 'These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.' She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!' And it came out at that very moment."

Again, there was no question that the spirit of divination, or demon, recognized Paul and Silas as representatives of Jesus Christ. It recognized the power and authority of Christ that was given to Paul and it obeyed Paul's command. Would the belief of the demons save them? Of course not.

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Earlier in James chapter 2, believers were commanded to [stop showing partiality and live out genuine faith](#). That warning against favoritism now intensifies — because a faith that does nothing is dead.

Examples of Faith in Action

James 2:21-26, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”

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In the above verses, James gave two examples that tied faith and works. The first had to do with God’s instruction to Abraham to



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sacrifice his son Isaac. There was no question that Abraham knew and believed in God Most High. By “faith only”, that should have been enough. But Abraham met the divine test when he determined to carry out the sacrifice of his son. Hebrews 11:17-19 states, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, ‘In Isaac your descendants shall be called.’ He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.” He made the decision to ACT. Because of that, he demonstrated his love for the Living God.

James then stated his conclusion in verse 24, “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” No, a man or woman cannot earn salvation through works. That was the fatal flaw in Jewish thinking. But works are an indication of the level of love that a person has for the Lord.

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Finally, James used the example of Rahab in verse 25, “In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?” Unlike the future nation from Abraham, Rahab was a non-Jew, or a Gentile. She was one of the race that God condemned to extermination due to their sin. The account was recorded in Joshua chapter 2.



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Like Abraham, Rahab's actions were not based on any understanding of God's reasons. Abraham knew that God had promised a nation would come from his off-spring, and then God wanted him to sacrifice that son. He did not know how his promise and the sacrifice would be resolved, but he trusted in God.

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Rahab had heard of what the Lord God had done for Israel, and when the two spies came to her house, she did not betray them, but protected them. When they left, an agreement was made by which she and her family could be protected from the destruction of Jericho. The only thing she knew was that God was the all-powerful God. That simple knowledge was the basis for her decision to place her life and the lives of her family with the Israelites. Belief was coupled with action. Hebrews 11:30-31 states, "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace."

In verse 26 James clearly stated the principle that Christians must remember. "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." When a person physically dies, the spirit of that person had given him/her life is gone! All, but the very young, have experienced a time when a loved one or friend dies. And everyone knows that the person is no longer there. The body can no



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longer make plans, interact with people, or have any part with rest of world.

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From that, James clearly stated that salvation based on belief and faith only will NOT lead to salvation. Christianity is NOT a spectator sport. If a person's faith is not combined with obedience and ACTION, then that faith has no more use a dead body. When Peter concluded his initial declaration of the Jewish audience in Jerusalem, he said in Acts 2:36, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified."

Then Luke recorded in Acts 2:37, "Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart..." The audience certainly believed. They believed Peter's pronouncement that Jesus was/is Lord and Christ. Yet, that belief, that faith, was nothing more than what the demons believed. And the crowd asked Peter and the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter's reply was clear, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

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But then, that faith had to be demonstrated in a changed life. A life that was evidence of that change and a committed love for the Lord. Jesus told the parable of the talents as recorded in Matthew 25:14-30. In that parable, a master had three servants and he entrusted them with certain sums of money while he was gone. The first two used the money to earn greater sums of money for their master. But the third one hid the money and did nothing with it. When the master returned, he received reports from all three. The first two were praised. The third gave excuses as to why he had done nothing. But in verses 26-30, the master's response was very telling, "But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. Therefore take away the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents.' 'For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

Passage after passage in the New Testament describes the great blessings that God has given His children through Jesus Christ. But with great blessings come great responsibilities. A person MUST become a Christian according to God's Will as recorded in His Word. Then, each person, as a Christian, MUST change and begin to become more Christ-like. There is no other option. Remember, being a Christian is NOT a spectator sport!



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Frequently Asked Questions

What does James 2:14-26 mean by “faith without works is dead”?

James teaches that genuine faith is proved by obedient action. A belief that does nothing is as lifeless as a body without a spirit. True saving faith actively expresses love, as seen when Abraham offered Isaac and Rahab protected the spies.

Can faith alone save a person according to James 2?

No. James 2:24 says a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. We cannot earn salvation, but obedient works demonstrate a living faith. Without works, faith remains dead and useless.

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How do Abraham and Rahab illustrate the connection between faith and works?

Abraham acted on God’s command to sacrifice Isaac, trusting God’s promise. Rahab, a Gentile, hid the Israelite spies because she



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believed in God's power. Both were justified by works that flowed from authentic faith.

Why does James say even demons believe?

James uses demons to show that intellectual acknowledgment of God is not saving faith. Demons believe and shudder, but they do not submit in obedience. Real faith must produce a changed life of loyal action.

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