

Genuine Faith

James 2:14-26



Faith: Dead or Alive?

❑ In his letter, James talks about “faith” and “works.”¹ Read James 2:14-26.

1. Repeated phrases can indicate the author’s theme or emphasis. What phrases or ideas are repeated in this passage? (vv. 17, 20, 26)

❑ James talks about “faith without works” (vv. 14, 17, 18, 20, 26) and he illustrates it in verses 15-16. In verses 14 and 16, James asks questions about this kind of “faith.”

2. What questions does James ask? (vv. 14, 16) How should these questions be answered and why?²



📖 “If anyone has this world’s goods and sees his brother in need but closes his eyes to his need – how can God’s love reside in him? Little children, we must not love with word or speech, but with truth and action.” (1 John 3:17-18, HCSB)

❑ In verse 18, James considers the claim that some Christians have faith while other Christians have works. In other words, some people seem to think it’s not necessary to have both faith and works. However, the Bible teaches these two things: 1) faith without works is dead; and 2) works without faith is dead.³

James vs. Paul?

❑ James says “a [person] is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24). However, Paul says “a [person] is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Romans 3:28). Thus it may seem that James and Paul disagree. However, James and Paul are addressing different concerns and using their terms in a different way.⁴ (See footnote 4 for more explanation.)

¹ ‘works’ (*erga*) – actions, accomplishments; in this context, actions done in obedience to God.

² According to the Bible, *genuine* faith is evidenced by a desire to do God’s will. If we say we have faith, but avoid doing what God wants us to do, our faith is ‘useless’ (v. 20). It is evidence that we lack *true* faith. So ‘what good is faith without works?’ (vv. 14, 16) It’s no good. ‘Can such faith save a person?’ (v. 14) No, it can’t. Why? Because such ‘faith’ is not *genuine* faith, and *genuine* faith is needed for salvation.

³ Many people call themselves ‘Christian,’ and do many good things, but they are not truly Christian if they don’t have faith. Christian faith involves belief and trust in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and was raised from the dead. Being a Christian is not merely trying to follow the moral teachings of the Bible. Being a Christian is a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. However, true faith is evidenced by works.

⁴ James’ ‘faith alone’ is different from Paul’s ‘faith.’ James’ ‘faith alone’ is not *true* faith. Also, James and Paul use the word ‘justify’ differently. Paul uses ‘justify’ to refer to God’s judicial act of declaring sinners righteous in His sight (involving forgiveness of sins). It is how a person *gets into* a relationship with God. James uses ‘justify’ to refer to either 1) the ‘demonstration to be right’ (that is, showing that a person’s faith is genuine); or 2) God’s vindication (final approval) of the believer at the judgment, which takes into account the things that person has done. Paul is concerned about people who believe they can be saved by their good works (at least partly). James is concerned about people who identify themselves as believers but lack the good works that show that their faith is genuine. Paul also teaches that *genuine* faith is evidenced by works (e.g., Galatians 5:6; Ephesians 2:10).

3. What do demons believe about God? (v. 19) What is wrong with the demons' "faith?" How might human "faith" be like demon "faith?"⁵

Dynamic Faith

- ❑ In contrast to dead and useless faith, James presents two examples of alive and dynamic faith (vv. 21-25). His first example is Abraham (vv. 21-23).

4. On what basis was Abraham declared to be "righteous" (right with God) and saved? (2:23) In what way was Abraham "justified"? In other words, what did Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac demonstrate?⁶



- ❑ Abraham was saved through faith, by God's grace (*Ephesians* 2:8-9). However, Abraham's faith was 'perfected' or 'made complete' by his works (v. 22b). By his actions Abraham's faith was fully expressed.
- ❑ Rahab is another example of faith evidenced by actions (v. 25).⁷
5. How would you define "genuine faith?" Summarize the relationship between faith and works.⁸
6. How can we apply this passage to our lives? How can we have and show "genuine faith" – faith that is alive and dynamic?

Reflection/Application

- Are you trusting in your good works to make you righteous, apart from faith in the crucified and risen Christ? The Bible says we cannot earn salvation! Do you need to trust in Jesus?
- If you claim to be a "Christian," are you confident that your faith is genuine? Is it truly based in Christ? Is your faith merely intellectual belief or words, or is it evidenced by love and obedience? Ask God to change your heart, and surrender your life to His will.
- As a Christian, think of some good works you know *should* be flowing from your faith. By God's grace, commit to put these good works into action.

⁵ Demons accept that there is a God, and that God is one. They know enough about God to make them shudder (shake, tremble), probably in fear of God's judgment. However, demons do not submit to the will of God. We can know a lot about the Bible and God on an intellectual level, but if we don't accept God's word as truth, and respond appropriately to that truth, it does us no good.

⁶ Verse 21 says Abraham was justified by his 'works.' But he did what he did because of faith. His actions were based on his trust in God. Verse 23 says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness.' This is a quotation of Genesis 15:6, and refers to Abraham's belief that God would give him a son and many descendants. This was *before* Isaac was born. Because of Abraham's faith, God declared Abraham righteous (Romans 4:1-5). But his faith was demonstrated by his actions; thus he was shown to be righteous by his actions.

⁷ See Hebrews 11:31. Rahab's story is recorded in Joshua 2.

⁸ Genuine faith is based on a belief and trust in God, including His provision of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins, and was raised from the dead. Faith brings us into a relationship with God, and that relationship changes us. By the indwelling Holy Spirit, our values change, our love grows, and we want to do what pleases God. What we do (our works) is evidence that our faith is genuine. If we have genuine faith, Christ is in us, and we should bear 'fruit' consistent with his character (Matthew 7:15-23; John 15:1-8).