

No Other Sort of Faith can Save (James 2:14-26)

Matthew Williams

One of the common objections to Christianity is hypocrisy. It often goes like this: “I used to go to church, but as I got older, I realized most of the people who went to church on Sunday lived no differently than the world every other day of the week. The whole thing started to feel like sham. I guess the lack of authenticity just kind of wore me out. So I decided that what really matters isn’t what you say you believe, or whether you go to church, but whether you’re a good person. That’s what the world really needs – less hate, more love.”

Have you heard that before? Maybe you’ve thought or said those very words yourself. If someone said as much to you, how would you respond? I think several things need to be said. First, on a very real level, we’re all hypocrites. Every one of us has said or known in our head one thing was right, but still done the exact opposite. We say things to family members and friends we know we shouldn’t say. We fail to love or care for someone else because it would be inconvenient. If we’re going to be “authentic,” we need to start by admitting we’re all hypocrites in one way or another.

Second, keep in mind that Jesus is just as if not more concerned about hypocrisy than you are. He didn’t cover up hypocrisy. He called hypocrites “whitewashed tombs” and other things that didn’t make people very happy. So don’t write off Jesus or avoid dealing with Jesus simply because of the hypocrisy of those who claim to be his people. Christianity has an institutional shape, but it isn’t a religious product of an institution. It’s the good news of Jesus, the Son of God incarnate, who came to save hypocrites like you and me from the judgment we deserve.

Finally, I would simply say this. You’re right. If the Christians around you claim their faith is genuine, but lack any works of obedience in their life, you are absolutely right to question the authenticity of their profession. In fact, that’s exactly what James does in James 2:14-26. Why? Because salvation requires a faith that works. Hear the Word of the Lord:

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”



But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

The entire book of James is designed to shake us out of our spiritual apathy and awaken us to a life of real faith, a faith that thinks, feels, and acts the way God thinks, feels, and acts. Christianity isn't passive. It's not a religious affiliation. It's a faith that works. Hence the title of our sermon series, "A Faith That Works."

It's a point James has emphasized in various ways since the beginning of chapter 1. But in the second half of chapter 2, as he approaches the middle of the letter, he doubles on this issue in a passage that is both the theological center of the book and probably the most controversial section in the whole.

It's a passage where James shines a bright light on the spiritual danger of hypocrisy, reminding us not once, not twice, but three times in verses 17, 20, and 26 that salvation requires a faith that works. James teaches us. He warns us. Right standing with God, vindication in the courtroom of heaven, is impossible apart from a faith that works. Why is that the case?

REASON #1: WORKS ARE THE EVIDENCE OF GENUINE FAITH (verses 14-17)

In typical style, James establishes the crux of the issue from the very beginning of the passage, in this case, through a rhetorical question. Verse 14, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?" When you read the word "works" in James, don't think "works of merit" or an attempt to earn favor with God through obedience to God. By "works" James simply means "actions" or "deeds."

In other words, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith (I'm a Christian, I believe in Jesus) but does not have works (the way they live is no



different as a result). Can that faith save him?" The very grammar of the question indicates the answer is no. But in order to really understand what's at stake here, we need to slow down and consider what James means by "save" or salvation.

The Bible tells us that our greatest problem as human beings isn't our failure to be a better version of ourselves. It's our failure to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. Our greatest problem is our collective disobedience of the law of God, the law of our Creator to whom we are all accountable. As James reminded us in the first half of chapter 2, every one of us is a "transgressor of the law" and deserves to be judged accordingly.

Because that's our greatest problem, mercy is our greatest need. We need a way for our sins to be forgiven, to become righteous as God himself is righteous, for that is the only way we can ever know the joy of a restored relationship with him. That's exactly what Jesus came to do. He lived your life, he died your death, and then he rose from the grave, making a way for you to be saved, rescued from sin and death and brought back into right standing with God.

It's what we call the gospel or "good news" of salvation. Relationship with God isn't a spiritual blessing we earn by doing more good than bad. None of us are good enough, so Jesus earns it for us, which is why the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 2 that our salvation is "by grace," it comes to us as an undeserved gift. So how do we receive it? We receive it "through faith," through obedient trust in Jesus. But sometimes we con ourselves into thinking something less than wholehearted, obedient trust in Jesus is sufficient.

"Of course, I'm a person of faith. I believe in God, you know, that he's real and all. Jesus seems like a good guy who did some pretty cool things. I definitely consider myself a Christian. But I try to not stress out about the whole obeying the Bible thing. There are so many different interpretations out there. It's being a loving person that really counts, right? So yeah, if you believe in Jesus and don't do anything really terrible, I think you're good to go, or at least have as good a chance of salvation as anyone else."

Friends, that kind of attitude might sound humble, but James says it's the height of folly. Why? Because God hasn't left it up to us to define what "faith" is. Faith isn't a giant blank that we get to fill in without whatever sort of religious belief or mental assent suits our fancy. Biblical faith, genuine faith, the only kind of faith God accepts and through which we receive the gracious gift of salvation, is faith of a



particular sort. It's a complete and total reliance on the work Jesus has done to rescue our souls that displays itself in a lifestyle of obedience to his Word, practicing the good works or actions he commands us to do.

After summarizing the truth and cleansing power of the gospel, the substance of our faith, the Apostle Paul writes in Titus 3:8, "I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works." Why? Because it's the presence of good works that demonstrate or evidence the authenticity of our faith.

If you ran into a brother or sister in Christ who was (verse 15) "poorly clothed and lacking in daily food," what would you think if one of your friends said to them (verse 16), "Go in peace, be warmed and filled!" but didn't give them any food or clothing? You would rightly conclude they don't really mean what they're saying.

If they genuinely want him or her to be clothed and fed they wouldn't just send a text with "thoughts and prayers." They would cook them a meal. They would buy them some clothes. Right? A lack of action corresponding to their profession of love seriously undermines the credibility of their profession of love. You would probably conclude they don't really love that person.

Our relationship with God is no different, James says. If our "faith" isn't confirmed and backed up by corresponding deeds, it's not genuine faith. It's a false faith. It's a religious trapping. It's not the real deal. Real faith, the only kind of faith God accepts and through which we are saved, is a wholehearted dependence on Jesus that makes itself known through works of obedience. Submission to Jesus is the test of faith in Jesus.

As James says in verse 17, faith by itself, mental assent or belief absent a lifestyle of obedience, isn't just weak or insufficient. It's dead. It's non-existent. That's the first reason salvation requires a faith that works and the second is like it.

REASON #2: WORKS ARE INSEPARABLE FROM GENUINE FAITH (verses 18-19)

James has clearly been around the block a few times. He knows how we try to wiggle ourselves out of acknowledging that our profession of faith without works is dead. They tried to do it in the 1st century the same way we try to do it today. "Faith without works is dead? Well, that might be true for you. But don't you go forcing your religious beliefs on me. If 'works' work for you, great. If 'faith' works for you,



great. To each his own. Whatever road you pick, we're all going to wind up in the same place."

Verse 18, "You have faith and I have works." So stop freaking out, James, and questioning the salvation of everyone who doesn't keep all the "rules" you think they're supposed to keep. They believe in Jesus, and that's enough, ok? Just chill out.

How does he reply? Verse 18, "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works!" In other words, don't allow yourself to think we have this thing over here called saving faith that we then get to choose to express in whatever way suits our fancy. If you want to express it through works, through obedience to God's Word, have at it. If you want to express it through meditate rock climbing where you get in touch with the spiritual essence of reality, more power to you.

Verse 18 says that's utter nonsense. Why? Because works are endemic to faith. They're part and parcel of faith. They are what faith looks like and how faith expresses itself. We call them different things because one is more internal and other more external, but they're actually a package deal. They're two sides of the same coin. You couldn't separate the two of them even if you tried. Therefore, we must never think or speak as if we could add works to genuine faith. Genuine faith is active by definition. It's a faith that works.

But you don't know my heart, James! I know what I believe. I know the Bible. I know the historic creeds of our faith. I grew up in church, for crying out loud. I believe God is one and all that other stuff the Bible teaches. Verse 19, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder."

Does that mean the demons have genuine faith? Of course not. The kind of "belief" James refers to here is the same sort of dead faith he's decried from the beginning. It's a mere mental assent, a cognitive acknowledgement of the truth that never translates into obedient submission to the authority of Christ. Even the demons "know" in their minds what is true about God. The problem is the utter absence of faith, for knowledge of Christ and faith in Christ are not the same thing.

And therein lies a great warning to all of you who have grown up in the church, those of you to whom the Lord has granted the tremendous privilege of being raised in the household of faith. The danger that lies before you is the danger of assuming that simply because you know the truth about Jesus that you have a

genuine, saving faith in Jesus. Don't assume that, friend. Examine yourself. Test yourself. Is your professed faith showing itself, evidencing itself, proving its authenticity, through the presence of works, a pattern of diligent obedience to King Jesus?

And if you think you've heard that question before in James it's because you have. It's a theme he circles back to again and again. I for one am grateful, because our country is filled with a growing number of young adults who grew up in church but eventually walked away from the faith. That should sober you, friend. Faith and works are inseparable. They're a package deal and cannot be separated. That's the second reason salvation requires a faith that works.

REASON #3: WORKS ARE NECESSARY FOR JUSTIFICATION

Now here is where we need to be really careful with our terms. And I'm going to linger here because there's an important lesson for us in verse 20-26, not only about why salvation requires a faith that works, but about how to read our Bibles.

If I was shopping with you at DSW and said, "Man, that's a bad pair of shoes," what would you conclude? You would assume something is wrong with them, right? They're ugly, broken, out of style, or something like that. What if I said, "Check it out. That's a *bad* pair of shoes." What might you conclude? Well, if you used your urban dictionary, you might realize I actually mean that's a really good looking or incredibly fine pair of shoes! Same word, but very different meaning.

So how do we know what James means when he uses a word like "works" or "justify" like he's about to in verse 21? Do we remember how another Biblical author, like the Apostle Paul, uses that word and assume James means the same thing? No.

First, we recognize words in the Bible have a range of meaning. Second, we give priority to the immediate context in determining what the original author meant. Third, we let Scripture interpret Scripture, remembering there is one divine Author who ultimately stands behind the unified canon of God's Word.

Our starting point, grounded in the truthfulness and unchangeableness of God, is the humility that says, "What the Lord says in one part of the Bible cannot be contradicted by what he says in another part of the Bible." Thus, whenever we encounter an apparent contradiction, we do not assume a lack of clarity or



consistency on God's part. We assume a lack of full understanding on our part, even as we work hard to harmonize in our minds what is gloriously unified in his own. It's called faith seeking understanding.

All of that is really important in working to understand what James says next in verses 20-21, "Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?"

In the Bible, the word we translate as "justified" has a range of meaning. In the overwhelming majority of cases, it means to declare, vindicate, or pronounce someone as righteous. That's what Paul means, for example, when he speaks of God "justifying" the ungodly. He's referring to what happens the moment someone becomes a Christian. God the Father, having united us to his Son through the gift of repentance and faith, credits the perfect righteousness of Christ to our account, declaring us to be righteous in the courtroom of heaven. It's not a legal fiction. It's a spiritual reality made possible by our covenant representative, Jesus, who lived a perfect life on our behalf.

Jesus uses the word justify in the same sense of divine declaration in Matthew 12:36-37. Only this time, it's not the initial justification we receive at the beginning of our Christian life. It's the final justification, the divine act of acquittal and vindication we're still waiting for, on the coming day of judgment. "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

There is a critical sense, Christian, that your justification, in a declarative sense, is both already and not yet. You have been justified and one day, Lord willing, you will be justified. Our initial justification anticipates our final justification, but they are not the same thing for they occur at different times.

In a few other places, justification doesn't mean a declaration or vindication of someone as righteous. It refers more to a demonstration or proof that someone is righteous. For example, Psalm 51:4 says God is "justified in his words." Or in Matthew 11:19, Jesus says, "Wisdom is justified by her deeds." In both cases, first God and then wisdom are justified in the sense that they are shown or prove themselves to be righteous. Bottom line, when the Bible says someone is justified, it can refer to either a declaration of righteousness or a demonstration of righteousness.

So when James says in verse 21 Abraham was “justified by works,” what does he mean? We know he doesn’t mean Abraham received an initial declaration of righteousness and corresponding welcome into relationship with God on the basis of his works. Why not? Because of what the Lord himself says in Genesis 15:6. Immediately after the Lord promised to give childless Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars, we read, “And he believed the LORD and he counted it to him as righteousness.”

In Romans 4:4-5, the Apostle Paul recognizes the tremendous significance of the fact that God’s initial declaration of righteousness in Abraham’s life was a gift he received by faith, not a reward he earned by works. “Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...”

So if James doesn’t mean Abraham earned an initial declaration of righteousness from God through what was arguably the greatest “work” in his life (his obedient willingness to give his only son back to the Lord) what does James mean when he says Abraham was “justified by works”? I think he means three things.

First, he means that the faith by which Abraham was initially justified wasn’t some sort of mental assent or casual belief. It was active reliance. Obedient trust. A faith that works. Notice how he uses Genesis 15:6 in verses 22-23 to make a different, though not at all contradictory, point than the one Paul makes in Romans 4. “You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works, and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’”

Paul takes a chronological perspective on Abraham – at what point in his life did God declare him to be righteous? Answer – at the point he first believed the Word of the Lord. James takes a more holistic view – what sort of man does the Lord justify? The answer, of course, is a man who exercises the kind of obedient faith Abraham did. For the faith the Lord rewarded in Genesis 15, the sole basis of his initial justification, was the very sort of faith that culminated in obedience, namely, the work of sacrificing Isaac in Genesis 22. It wasn’t a “workless” faith or “faith alone,” as James says in verse 24. It was a belief “fulfilled” or brought to its ultimate end, through obedience.



James isn't saying Abraham earned his justification from God by works. He's using Abraham as an illustration of the main point of the entire passage. The only kind of faith God accepts, the only kind of faith by which anyone, Abraham included, is ever justified or "saved" (in the language of James 1:14), is a faith that works.

Second, when James says Abraham was justified "by works," there's a sense in which he means that Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac conclusively demonstrated or "showed" the righteousness that was already his by faith. What does the Lord say to Abraham in Genesis 22:12? "Now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." In this sense, Abraham was justified or "shown to be righteous" by virtue of the presence of works, no less than we are today.

Finally, when James says Abraham was justified "by works," he means that God responded to Abraham's paradigmatic work of obedience, the sacrifice of Isaac, by vindicating him with a decisive declaration of righteousness, affirming the continued presence of the spiritual reality that first came into existence back in Genesis 15. We know that because the Lord repeats in Genesis 22 the same sort of promises he made in Genesis 15.

Genesis 22:16-18, "...because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

The Lord isn't contradicting himself. He isn't saying, "Abraham, at first you were justified by faith, but now you're going to be justified by obedience. Surprise!" Not at all. He's simply telling Abraham what remains true for every Christian today. Divine vindication is based on the obedience of faith.

But what if that doesn't happen? What if our supposed "faith" never issues in any works? What if obedience is MIA? What then? Will that person be justified or "saved" (in the language of verse 14) on the final day of judgment? Absolutely not. Remember the future orientation of Jesus' words in Matthew 12:36. "By your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned." And what does he say just a few chapters later in Matthew 25:31-36?

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’”

Is Jesus teaching salvation by works? No. He’s saying the same thing James does when he draws on the example of the Lord’s relationship with Abraham. Our initial justification is on the basis of faith and faith alone (the working sort, that is). But our final justification (and in Abraham’s case an interim vindication) requires the presence of the sort of works genuine faith necessarily displays. And it’s for that reason James warns us in verse 24, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

Douglas Moo puts it well: “If a sinner can get into relationship with God only by faith, the ultimate validation of that relationship takes into account the works that true faith must inevitably produce.”

We don’t have time to look at it in detail, but the example of Rahab in Joshua 6 is similar. Why did the Lord “save” her or allow her to live when all the other residents of Jericho were destroyed? Hebrews 11:31 gives us the answer, “By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.” The Lord vindicated her on a very real day of judgment, declaring her to be righteous, on account of her obedient faith.

What do the example of Abraham, Rahab, and the very words of Jesus himself teach us? Works are necessary for justification. Whether initial, final, or somewhere between, non-working faith, mere mental assent, is never the basis for divine vindication of any sort. Friend, if you are clinging to that sort of false faith, if you know all kinds of “truth” about God or about the Bible, but your affections and actions are no different than the world, you will not be saved. Verse 26 could not be clearer. “Faith apart from works is dead.” It will do you no good, whether now or in the future.

CONCLUSION



Salvation requires a faith that works. Works are the evidence of genuine faith. Works are inseparable from genuine faith. And works are necessary for justification. It is entirely unfortunate that so many in the history of the church have concluded James and Paul were at odds on this point. They're not. They're simply addressing different issues, in different contexts, in different ways.

The divinely intended response to James' warning isn't to get busy trying to add works to our faith so we can be assured of salvation. The right response is to test yourself. Take an honest look at your life and ask, "Do I see a pattern of works that testify to the authenticity of my faith and give me confidence of vindication on the final day of judgment?"

If you don't, run to Jesus. Ask him to give you the gift of genuine faith, a faith that issues in a life of good works. Keep in mind you can't earn God's favor through your faith or your works. Good works don't confer righteousness, but they are required for righteousness, for absent the obedience of faith you will not be saved.

And if you do see a pattern of good works in your life, praise God and don't stop running to Jesus. Why not? Because it is Christ and Christ alone who nurtures and sustains a living, breathing, working faith in our hearts by his power, until the day he returns. I leave you with the words of the inimitable Martin Luther.

"O it is a living, busy active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this, and is constantly doing them."