

## Marks of a Faith That Works

### *A Faith that Works...* ***Behaves Like it Believes*** James 2:14-26

Many today claim to be Christians. And many claim that faith has brought significant transformation to their lives. A recent Barna study published this past June indicates that nearly half of all Americans believe that faith has “greatly transformed” their lives. About one-fourth (28%) said their faith has been helpful but has not produced significant transformation. And about one out of five (17%) claimed their faith has not made much of a difference at all.<sup>i</sup>

Just what is the relationship between faith and life transformation? James tells us in these verses that a faith that works *behaves like it believes*. He tells us that if we truly believe, that faith will inevitably result in good works. Our belief will determine our behavior. And our behavior will be a demonstration of our belief.

But that raises the question: What does it mean to believe? And how do we reconcile what James says about faith and works with what Paul says about the same topic?

#### **I. Who’s right – James or Paul?**

After all, there does appear at first glance to be a contradiction. For example, Paul says in Romans 3:28 “So we are made right with God *by faith* and not by obeying the law.” On the other hand, James says in this passage, “So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, and *not by faith alone*” (James 2:24 *NLT*).

Who’s right – James or Paul?<sup>ii</sup> Or are they both right, and we simply misunderstand what each is saying? I suspect that we face the same problem in our own communication. Take the word “rock” for example. It can mean a stone, a type of music, or what I do when I sit in a particular kind of chair. Or you can take a European and an American who both want to play football, put them on the same field, and they will soon discover that they are talking about two entirely different games. Language can be misleading and the context in which words are used is vital to understanding.

Take the idea of “works” for example. Paul’s understood “works” or “deeds” to be acts of obedience to Jewish law slavishly done in order to prove that one was elect and in God’s family. But for James, “deeds” are not “deeds of the Law” but the selfless deeds of love that fulfill the royal law of liberty. Paul is talking about works that don’t lead to salvation; James is talking about works that naturally flow out of salvation. Paul is combating the problem of legalism. James is combating the problem of laxity.

But what about Paul and James’ view of *salvation*? Paul emphasizes the *root* of salvation, which is God’s grace received by faith. James emphasized the *fruit* of salvation, which is a changed

life. Jesus said, “By their fruits you will know them.” Paul emphasizes *becoming* a believer, while James emphasizes *behaving* like a believer. Another way of viewing this is that Paul talks most about the *requirement of salvation*, while James emphasizes the *results of salvation*. Paul focuses on the past tense of salvation (Romans 3:28) and James emphasizes the present demonstration of that salvation.<sup>iii</sup>

What is faith for both James and Paul? For Paul faith is trust in Christ’s finished work of redemption which results in leading a life of love. He states it this way in Galatians 5:6 “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is *faith expressing itself through love*.” For James, it is the same. But James refutes a false concept of faith, which is a mere assertion of monotheism.<sup>iv</sup> James is not talking about a faith *with* works, but a faith *that* works.

	<b>Paul</b> Romans 3:28	<b>James</b> James 2:24
<b>Works:</b>	Slavish deeds of law Don’t lead to salvation Legalism	Selfless deeds of love Flow out of salvation Laxity
<b>Salvation:</b>	Root of salvation Becoming a believer Requirement of salvation	Fruit of salvation Behaving like a believer Results of salvation
<b>Faith:</b>	Promotes faith <i>that</i> works	Promotes faith <i>that</i> works

Paul in reading James would say, “I agree with James based on his definitions.” And James in reading Paul would say, “I agree with Paul based on his definitions.”<sup>v</sup>

## II. What is real faith?

In light of what both Paul and James say, just what is real faith? What kind of faith actually results in salvation? Both Paul and James are in absolute agreement. Here’s how we can define *saving faith*:

- We must *recognize* who Jesus Christ is and what he has accomplished for you and me to save us from our sin.

*If you do not believe that I am [the one I claim to be], you will indeed die in your sins. John 8:24*

- We must *repent* of pursuing our own sin and self-righteousness.

*Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out... Acts 3:19*

- We must *receive* Jesus Christ, *relying* on his completed work for salvation.

*Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God- John 1:12-13*

- Such genuine faith *will* result in progressive life change.

For it is by *grace* you have been saved, through *faith*-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *to do good works*, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Eph 2:8-10

There we have it: “by grace,” “through faith,” and “to do good works.” When we get that out of order, we’re in big trouble.

What is faith? Faith is the recognition, reception and reliance upon the truth. We *recognize* the gospel as truth. We *receive* the person of Christ and the salvation he offers. And in so doing, we *rely* upon his finished work of salvation on our behalf.

### **III. Is your faith for real?**

The final question brings it down to the level of your life and mine? *Is your faith for real?*

What an important question to ask! It’s clear that James is speaking here to those who *claim* to be believers. That’s why he calls them “dear brothers and sisters” in verse 14. It seems then that at least some of those to whom James is writing adhere to a type of faith that will not result in eternal salvation. And what about you?

#### **A. Is your faith more than words? (14a)**

*Is your faith more than words?* That’s the first question we’re confronted with in verse 14:

Dear brothers and sisters, what's the use of *saying* you have faith if you don't prove it by your actions? That kind of faith can't save anyone. *NLT*

James is not talking here about one who *has* faith, but one who *claims* to have faith. For this person, it is all lip service, but little or no life service. It’s all talk, but no walk.

Jesus said, “Not everyone who *says* to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Over 50 million American claim to be “born again,” but reflect little change in their lives.

James concludes: “That kind of faith can’t save anyone.” He doesn’t say, “Faith can’t save anyone,” but “that *kind* of faith” doesn’t save.

Some anonymous writer has stated it this way:

I was hungry, and you formed a humanities club and *discussed* my hunger.  
I was imprisoned, and you crept off quietly to your chapel and *prayed* for my release.  
I was naked, and you *debated* the morality of my appearance.  
I was sick, and you knelt and *thanked* God for your health.  
I was homeless, and you *preached* to me the spiritual shelter of the love of God.  
I was lonely, and you left me alone to *pray* for me.

You seem so holy, so close to God, but I'm still very hungry, and lonely and cold. Anonymous

Real faith is more than what you say with your mouth.

### **B. Is your faith more than feelings? (15-17)**

But there's a second question we have to ask ourselves: *Is my faith more than feelings?*

Suppose you see a brother or sister who needs food or clothing, and you say, "Well, good-bye and God bless you; stay warm and eat well"--but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? James 2:15-16 *NLT*

Apparently this person who sees the one in need is at least moved to say something. He may well have feelings of compassion when confronted by the need. He doesn't just walk by, totaling ignoring the one in need. But somehow the feelings are never translated into acts of faith.

It reminds me of the Peanuts cartoon. Snoopy is outside in the freezing cold without a blanket or shelter when Charlie Brown and Linus walk by all snuggly warm. Charlie Brown looks with pity at Snoopy in his current condition and says to Linus, "Snoopy looks kind of cold, doesn't he?" Linus agrees, "Maybe we'd better go over and comfort him." So they walk over and say to their frozen friend, "Be of good cheer, Snoopy" then walk away, leaving Snoopy no better than they found him. Where did Charles Schultz get that idea? He got it from this verse.

### **C. Is your faith more than intellectual belief? (18-20)**

These are important questions we all need to ask: Is my faith more than words? Is my faith more than feelings? And then in verses 18-20: *Is my faith more than intellectual belief?*

Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." I say, "I can't see your faith if you don't have good deeds, but I will show you my faith through my good deeds." Do you still think it's enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror! Fool! When will you ever learn that faith that does not result in good deeds is useless? James 2:18-20 *NLT*

I know what state James came from; do you? My wife comes from Missouri, the "show me" state. I'm convinced that James came from there too! "*Show me* your faith by what you do!" James says.

I remember a little chorus I used to sing in Sunday School: “If you saved and you know it then your life will truly show it.” That’s what James is saying. A faith without works doesn’t work. A faith with no works is a faith with no worth.<sup>vi</sup> Faith is like calories. You can’t see them, but you can see their results.

The particular problem that James is attacking here is the false idea that faith is nothing more than *intellectual belief*. Many Americans (or for that matter many around the world) *believe* in Jesus Christ like they believe that George Washington existed. But as we have seen, this is not saving faith according to the Bible. Those who merely believe intellectually often dichotomize or compartmentalize their lives like we saw in the film clip. That seems to be what James is saying here. The *Message* translation of verse 18 bring this out quite well:

“I can already hear one of you saying, ‘Sounds good. You take care of the faith department, I’ll handle the works department.’ (*Msg*)

Our American culture is very influenced by Greek culture. For example, in Greek thought there is a division between the body and the spirit. But the Bible has a different perspective. A Greek would say, “I *have* a soul.” But the biblical view is, “I *am* a soul.”

We often do this in many areas of life. We have our spiritual life, our family life, our work life, our leisure life. We have what we believe in the head and then there is the behavior in our daily life. And so some say, “You take care of the faith department; I’ll handle the works department.” What is James response? Here it is: “Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove” (*Msg*)

Bottom line – *simple intellectual belief saves no one*. James says that even the demons have that, but they certainly aren’t saved! Satan *believes* in God. Satan and his hordes of demons *believe* in Jesus Christ...if by “belief” you mean intellectual assent that Jesus is God’s Son. Mark 3:11 says: “whenever evil spirits say him, they fell down before him and cried out ‘You are the Son of God.’” James even says that the devil “trembles” at the thought of God. The word means to “bristle.” It was used by the ancient Greeks to describe hair that stands on end. Hell will be full of people who gave some type of intellectual assent to the existence of God, but never came to the point of trust. A lot of people are going to miss heaven by 18 inches, the distance between their heads and their hearts. Will you?

#### **D. Do you behave like you say you believe? (21-26)**

The final question is this: *Do you behave like you believe?* In the final verses of this section James places us in front of two totally different people in the Old Testament as he asks us that question: Do you behave like you believe?

On the one hand is Abraham, on the other, Rahab. Abraham is a man. Rahab is a woman. Abraham is Jewish. Rahab is a Gentile pagan. Abraham is a patriarch. Rahab is a prostitute. One is respected. The other is rejected. But they both have one thing in common – their faith that demonstrated itself in action.

First, there is Abraham the patriarch:

Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was declared right with God because of what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see, he was trusting God so much that he was willing to do whatever God told him to do. His faith was made complete by what he did--by his actions. And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, so God declared him to be righteous." He was even called "the friend of God." So you see, we are made right with God by what we do, not by faith alone. James 2:21-24 *NLT*

James compresses into four verses events that took place over a twenty-five year time period in Abraham's life. Abraham was granted salvation when he first believed God's promise to give him a son: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." But how do we know that Abraham's faith was for real? Twenty-five years later, God told Abraham to get up and take his only son Isaac and sacrifice him back to the Lord. And Abraham obeyed, immediately...until God intervened.

James says something very important about Abraham's faith. He says that "his faith and his actions were working together." It's the picture of faith and works that travel side by side, step answering to step, like the legs of men walking. First faith, and then works; and then faith again, and then works again--until you can scarcely distinguish which is one and which is the other.<sup>vii</sup>

Next, there is Rahab the prostitute:

Rahab the prostitute is another example of this. She was made right with God by her actions--when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road. Just as the body is dead without a spirit, so also faith is dead without good deeds. James 2:25-26 *NLT*

This story is found in Joshua 2. What saved Rahab? Her works or her faith? We must not separate the two. She (as well as you and I) are saved by faith that demonstrates itself in works. Hebrews 11:31 says, "It was *by faith* that Rahab the prostitute was not destroyed..." But the faith that delivers us from destruction is a faith that works.

Amazingly, this prostitute later married a man named Salmon. Their son Boaz had a son named Obed who had a son named Jesse who had a son named David from whose line came Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:5).<sup>viii</sup>

Abraham the patriarch and Rahab the prostitute behaved like they believed. Certainly not all the time, we know that. And certainly not perfectly. But sufficiently to demonstrate that their faith was for real.

What about you? That's the question James wants us to ask. And he challenges us to ask this in several areas of our lives.

First, does our faith demonstrate itself in our care for the poor and needy? This is a reoccurring theme in this book and throughout the Bible. And it is a neglected theme in our churches. Every Christian must ask: What am I doing to care for the poor and the needy around me and in the church. Today we have our benevolence offering. This is a gift over and beyond your tithe to help care for those in our fellowship who are struggling materially. This is our responsibility and this is our privilege.

Second, does your faith demonstrate itself in wise stewardship? James has a lot to say about money and possessions in this book. Our faith becomes practical when it is expressed in two books: your calendar book and your check book.<sup>ix</sup> When you get your paycheck to you immediately take out the proportion that God has led you to give to your local church and then to his work around the world before you spend anything else? This is a sign of authentic faith.

Third, James says much about authentic community. He addresses believers as brothers and sisters. He talks in chapter 5 about believers being in a local community with elder leadership. One of the biblical signs of authentic faith is active participation in a local church. The writer to the Hebrews says very plainly: “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing” (Hebrews 10:25 NIV). I believe that some of us take this command too lightly. We are far too willing for an outing, a sports event, or a family event to take precedence over our gathering together as a church family.

The Bible says, “Examine yourselves to see if you are in the faith” (2 Corinthians 13:5). In biblical times, if you ran across someone who appeared to be dead, you would take a mirror and hold it under their nose. If even the slightest breath mark appeared on the mirror, you knew the person was still alive. James here takes the mirror of God’s Word and holds it up under our nose so we can examine our faith to see if it’s for real. Is *your* faith for real?

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<sup>i</sup> “Half of Americans say faith has ‘greatly transformed’ their lives.”

<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=240>

<sup>ii</sup> Is James making a deliberate attempt to refute Paul? No, James wrote in about AD 48 while Paul wrote his earliest epistle, Galatians in about AD 49 and Romans nearly 10 years later. James may be arguing not against Paul’s teaching, but against a perversion of Paul’s teaching.

<sup>iii</sup> We often think of salvation only in the past tense, referring to our point of conversion. But the New Testament presents salvation in three different tenses: salvation is past (Eph 2:8), present (1 Cor. 1:18; Phil 2:12) and future (Rom 13:11; Phil 3:20). Paul speaks in terms of *past* justification in Romans 3:28. James speaks in terms of *present* demonstration of that justification. However, in 1:18 James speaks of the past salvation event has a new birth.

<sup>iv</sup> James refutes a dead faith (17) that doesn’t result in a changed life. But he also refutes a demonic faith (19) that is nothing more than outward orthodoxy.

<sup>v</sup> All of this raises the question of what is commonly called “lordship salvation.” Does saving faith necessitate receiving Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord of one’s life? Certain New Testament verses would tend to support this. For example, Paul says in Romans 10:9 “if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” However, to “confess Jesus as Lord” means in this context simply to acknowledge him as deity. For the Jews, this was blasphemous. For the gentiles who worshipped the emperor as lord, this was scandalous. The emperor Domitian loved to be called “our Lord.” One of his decrees began “our Lord and God commands that this be done” (Seutonius Domitian 13). To confess means to “say the say thing as” or “to agree.” According to this verse, salvation comes from agreeing that Jesus Christ is deity in flesh and

that God the father raised him from the dead. More than this, salvation is *receiving* something, not *giving* something. We are not saved by “giving” our heart, our life, our will to God. We are saved by receiving his grace, his gift to us (John 1:12). The call to lordship is for the believer: “But in your hearts set apart Jesus as Lord” (1 Peter 3:15). Paul gave the same appeal to believers in Romans 12:1-2. See Livingston Blauvelt, Jr. “Does the Bible Teach Lordship Salvation?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (Jan-March 1986), 41.

<sup>vi</sup> O.S. Hawkins, *Getting Down to Brass Tacks* (New Jersey: Loizeaux, 1993), 81.

<sup>vii</sup> William Booth in *The Founders' Messages to Soldiers*. Christianity Today, Vol. 36, no. 10 James also says that Abraham's faith was *made complete* by what he did. This is the same word that is used in James 1 describing our faith being tested and “made complete” through difficulty. In passing the test, Abraham demonstrated that his faith placed in God twenty-five years before was an authentic faith.

<sup>viii</sup> In Jewish tradition, Rahab married Joshua and became the ancestor of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (*b. Meg.* 14b, 15a).

<sup>ix</sup> Elton Trueblood, *Leadership*, Vol. 11, no. 1