

A Study in James

The Tests of a Living Faith

James 2:14–20

February 1, 2013

Introduction

One of the major theological debates of the Reformation period focused on the basis for salvation. Are we saved by faith, or by works? In the final analysis, the Scriptures clearly declare that a person is saved by faith alone (Rom 3:28; 5:1; Eph 2:8–9; Gal 3:11). But then comes our friend James, who declares that “a man is justified by works, and not by faith only” (Jas 2:24). How are we to reconcile this statement with the clear teaching of the Scriptures that salvation is by faith alone?

To answer this question, we first need to make sure we are asking the right question to begin with. James is providing the answer to a question. The answer is: a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone. But what is the question? Is he answering the question of *how* a person gets saved initially? No! James is answering this question: what is the evidence that a man is *already* saved? We’ll look at this more below.

Test #4: A Living Faith and Good Works (2:14–26)

In this fourth test of a living faith, James tells us that faith without works is unprofitable, dead, and useless. He will then illustrate this for us through two Old Testament examples. His point is that real Christian faith *must* produce good works. Otherwise, it will prove to be a false faith.

The Necessity of a Living Faith Producing Good Works (vv. 14–20)

For the first part of this test, James demonstrates that faith, without any works to accompany it, is useless. He argues against the potential objection that faith can exist in isolation from works.

Faith without Works is Unprofitable (vv. 14–17)

James begins by asking two questions (v. 14). Notice two things about these questions:

(1) The questions are rhetorical and assume a negative answer. Any time a rhetorical question is asked, the point the person is trying to make is found in the assumed answer to the question. James asks his readers rhetorically, “What does it profit [a person]...if someone says he has faith but does not have works.” Therefore, James’s point is that there is *no* profit in professing faith without having works.

The second question is also rhetorical: Can faith save him? (NKJV) We know that the answer to this question must also be, “No.” But this puts us in a quandary because we know a person can *only* be saved by faith (Eph 2:8–9). The problem really stems from an assumption that all “faith” is of the same kind. Not so! James is talking about a different *kind* of faith here (non-saving/profitless/dead faith) as opposed to the kind that Paul talks about in Ephesians 2:8–9 (saving/profitable/living faith). This question would better be translated in this way: “Can *this kind* of faith save him?” (NET) or “Can *such* faith save him?” (NIV) Therefore, James’s point is: NO! — This *kind* of faith cannot save him!

(2) Notice also that James includes the phrase “my brothers” in this question. There were some of James’s readers whom others assumed to be believers that were making this very assertion! If you think yourself to be a believer and are making the same assertion as this person (“I have faith but not works”) — Watch out! You would do well to heed James’s warning here.

An Example of an Unprofitable False Faith (vv. 15–16)

James has just made the point that a profession-only faith that lacks works is unprofitable and cannot save a person. Next he gives us an illustration of what a fake faith looks like. The illustration presents the picture of a person who lacks the daily necessities of life — specifically food and clothing.

We already looked at the idea of believers being under the royal law or “Law of Christ” in James 2:8 (cf. Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 9:21). At the foundation of that law is the gospel; but another key principle that ties into that is loving one’s neighbor. Jesus taught this as a key principle of Christian behavior (Matt 22:39; John 13:34–35) and also said that those who seek first the kingdom of God will have all these things (food, clothing, etc.) added unto them (Matt 6:33).

One of the ways that God provides these basic necessities for believers is through other Christians who are obedient to the command to love their neighbors, especially their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ (Gal 6:10). One assumption here is that the believer is engaged in some kind of work, otherwise he should not eat (2 Thess 3:10). But that all aside, the assumption in verse 15 is of a godly believer who is truly destitute.

The illustration goes on to show a professing believer who sends this person on his way with lots of spiritual well-wishing, but does nothing for his physical needs. Apparently, the professing believer wanted the brother to be warmed and fed...but by someone else! Words are meaningless if they are not accompanied by action. So also this *kind* of faith which does not produce works is profitless.

The Conclusion: A Faith without Works is Unprofitable and Dead (v. 17)

There is only one possible conclusion that can be drawn about the kind of faith mentioned in verse 14. It is dead! This is where we draw our theme for the entire book of James. We don't want to have a dead faith, because that would be unprofitable and useless. Believers must have a *living* faith! If we fail all the tests in James, we may find out that our faith is actually dead!

Faith without Works is Useless (vv. 18–20)

Verse 18 has caused a lot of confusion because James uses a literary device called diatribe. A diatribe is where an objection is put in the mouth of an imaginary opponent, so that it can be later refuted by the speaker. However, James also uses indirect discourse (relating a conversation to others, but speaking in the third person). The way most translations handle the text makes it sound like James is arguing *for* a faith that lacks works. Let's start by breaking down who is saying what:

Purple = Opponent speaking; Green = James speaking

Opponent: I have faith, you have works, but faith is the bottom line (v. 14).

James: (Addressing the crowd) Someone (like James himself) will say, (now turning toward the opponent) "You (my opponent) have faith, I (James) have works."

James: [You, my opponent] show me your faith without works, and I [James] will show you my faith by my works.

Also consider the same diatribe from the perspective of who is saying what about whom:

Red = words about opponent's view; Blue = words about James's view

Opponent: I have faith, you have works, but faith is the bottom line (v. 14).

James: (Addressing the crowd) Someone (like James himself) will say, (now turning toward the opponent) "You (my opponent) have faith, I (James) have works."

James: [You, my opponent] show me your faith without works, and I [James] will show you my faith by my works.

The whole point of this dialog is that the opponent is trying to object to what James has just said in verse 17. But James is calling out this person and basically telling him: prove it! Now which is easier to demonstrate: faith without works, or faith with works? The answer is obvious. Someone can argue they have faith until they're blue in the face, but without works, it is a useless dead faith.

A Refutation of False Faith (v. 19)

Many people profess to "believe in God." Even some that call themselves Christians may believe that God is one (Deut 6:4) or that there is a God (Rom 1:19). But that kind of pure intellectual belief is not enough. This is proven by the demons. Demons have an intellectual belief in God. They know the truth precisely. In fact, one could argue, in a sense, that the demons are among the most orthodox of theologians! Every time there is a confrontation between Jesus and a demon in the gospels, they know precisely who He is and the power He holds. Consider some of their acknowledgments: Jesus is the Holy One (Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34); *the* Son of God (Mark 3:11; 5:7); He existed prior to His incarnation (Luke 4:34); He is omnipotent (Luke 8:28); and He is Judge of all (Matt 8:29).

Just as the demons held some orthodox beliefs, so also did James's opponents. But don't forget about the end of this verse — those beliefs won't do the demons any good in the final judgment. The demons are absolutely terrified at the prospect of what awaits them in the end. In the same way, the prospect of judgment should terrify a person who professes faith but lacks works.

Genuine Faith Must Produce Works (v. 20)

James reiterates the conclusion he drew in verse 17: faith without works is dead! But he also adds a note about his opponent: this person is a fool! The person who thinks he can have faith apart from works needs to reconsider his position. Perhaps there is someone here that is thinking this way. James is calling this person to reject that false view and turn to the living kind of faith. A real faith must produce works!

Conclusion

Coming back to the issue of this as the test of a living faith — how do we understand the role of works in regard to salvation? Does this passage teach that we are saved by faith plus works? NO! James is not addressing the issue of how a person gets saved. Paul answers that question in Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and elsewhere. James is performing a “diagnostic test” to see if people genuinely have a living faith. Consider the following analogy:

Imagine that getting saved is like starting the engine of a car. Paul tells us *how* to start the car:

- 1) Insert key (Christ)
- 2) Turn on Ignition (Believe)

James is running several diagnostic tests to see if the engine is actually running. How would you test this?

- 1) Engine is making a humming noise
- 2) Heat or A/C is coming out of the vents
- 3) Lights turn on when it's dark
- 4) The car moves when in gear

Now if you want to start the car, it would not make sense to put your hand in front of the vent to check for heat. In the same way, asking what relevance this passage has for *initially* getting saved would make no sense. The test is a diagnostic for vehicles already running.

But what if I fail the test? This means one of two things:

- 1) The vehicle may need to undergo repairs in order to start working at peak performance. Believers who fail a test need to repent of their sin and start acting like the Scriptures teach!

- 2) The vehicle was never started in the first place. For example, a vehicle may have its headlights on, but without the engine running, the lights will eventually go out. If you don't have a genuine, living faith then you need to trust in Christ to save you! He will never turn you away if you come to Him in repentant faith (John 6:37)! ~AWB