

"FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD"

James 2:14-26

We now come to the famous passage that some consider to be an attack on Paul's doctrine of salvation by faith instead of works. But, James definitely did not attack Paul's theory of grace. In his insistence on works as a proof of salvation, rather than as a means to it, James is in complete harmony with all of the rest of God's Word.

James wrote to an entirely different class of people than Paul and emphasized the other end of the matter. Paul wrote to those who were insisting on laws and ceremonies as necessary to salvation, so he emphasized faith. James wrote to those who had a correct form of faith, but were satisfied with that and nothing more. They had a correct creed, but it did not show a change of heart, will or ways. James insisted that a man's works prove that he has faith, not the creed that he can recite like a parrot.

Paul taught that good works must result from faith. He rightly expected good works to follow faith. The only difference between Paul and James in their teaching was that Paul emphasized the faith that works and James emphasized the works of faith. Both were inspired writings, so they could not be contradictory.

What is faith? Faith is not mere assent to a fact. It goes far beyond intellectual assent. Faith goes deeper than the mere assent of the mind; it includes the affiance of the heart. Faith is trust or dependence. Faith can only be detected and made real by works. Faith is a blessed living reality that moves, acts and does things.

This portion of the Epistle proves that a faith which does not produce works is a dead thing. Faith, unaccompanied by works, is like the barren fig tree that the Lord Jesus cursed.

What does it profit when a man says, "I believe," but does nothing for Christ? Is there a single bit of profit in a man saying, "I have faith," when he does not have any works or resultant deeds, which faith invariably produces? Such fruitlessness is useless. It is like an apple tree that never bears apples, or a clock that never tells time, or a car that does not have wheels and cannot run. Only as faith produces works is it of any value. True faith brings Christ into the heart, and this is sure to affect the whole life. James does not belittle faith, but demands that it be a real living thing that produces something for God. Faith is first, but works must follow, or there is no proof that faith exists. True faith is something that is real and vital. It affects one's tongue, hands and feet.

In verses fifteen and sixteen, James, in a striking way, shows the futility of talk without accompanying action. Here is a person without adequate clothing and sufficient food. It is a case of real need. Will good wishes serve the place of clothing? Will expressions of sympathy, coming from the lips of a person with an unsympathetic heart, satisfy the existing hunger? To turn such a needy person away and say to him, "Good luck to you, I hope you'll keep warm and find enough to eat!" would be enough to make the demons laugh. It is not nice words that help such a needy brother or sister, but good deeds.

Even the unsaved are solicitous of their own flesh and blood. Usually a parent will sacrifice anything for his children, even if they are grown and no longer under the parental roof. Usually even worldians will not see their close ones suffer hunger and nakedness if it is in their power to help. Sometimes we are surprised to see to what ends worldians will go even with utter strangers, when a case of real need is presented to them. Christian ties should be much stronger than earthly ones. We are bound together in one bundle of life with Christ. We should not live for self, but for one another.

As in verse fourteen it was only a professed faith, so here it is only professed sympathy. A man may say he has faith, but the only way he can prove it is by his works. A man may say he has sympathy for the poor shivering, hungry saint, but he does not prove it unless

he does what he can to alleviate the condition. If he is in a position to help, and then talks nice, but does nothing about it, his professions of sympathy are sheer mockery.

Ah, the irony of it all. Here is a man dressed in rags and destitute of food. One says, "I am sorry for you brother; let us pray about it." So they ask the Lord to supply the needs of the poor brother. Then as they are about to part, the well-off brother says, "well, don't worry, brother, just leave it all to the Lord; He will see to it that you get the proper clothing and the necessary food. He will not forsake His own." Let us not ask God to do something that we can do ourselves. Let us be like the little girl who said, "I asked the Lord to stop my brother from trapping birds and I believe my prayer has been answered. I kicked his trap all to pieces."

"Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled." Such nice words, what lovely sentiments, but how utterly empty. They did not stop the chill wind from striking his back, and they did not take away the gnawing hunger in his stomach. My, how nice some people can talk, but how little they do. They talk so charitably, but know nothing of being charitable. Even the world says, "Talk is cheap." Let us not be cheap Christians. Nice words without action do not help the cause of Christ. They are a hindrance instead of a help. True faith is not a cold, dead thing. It is a warm, living, operative principle. It will fill one's heart with true sympathy for the needy, and cause one to help when possible.

In verse seventeen the illustration is applied. It is assumed that in the judgment of all readers of this passage the charity in the case supposed, which went no further than words, was "dead." "Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone." Just as a professed sympathy did not help the poor sufferer, even so, a professed faith that does not produce good works is a profitless dead thing. In true Christianity, of which faith is the root, there will be something visible. That which is called faith but is unable to prove its existence is not a reality.

We know that there is life in a human or an animal because of action. We cannot know that one has spiritual life, unless he proves it by deeds of piety and pity. Faith and works are joined together just as life and action are. It is impossible to separate faith and works; as much so as to separate life and action or fire and heat. God puts faith and works together and they are linked indissolubly. They cannot be divorced. The only way a man can show his faith is by his works. Works are proof of one's salvation. Faith is something on the inside that no one can see except God. However, anyone can see works that are produced by faith. It is impossible to exhibit faith in Christ apart from good works. Scriptural salvation has substance to it. How do we know that a tree is alive? We can see its buds, leaves and fruit. How do we know that a baby is living? we know it by its crying and moving. So, faith is a living thing that moves and acts. Faith is the heart that receives, the hand that takes, the foot that steps, the eye that looks. Genuine faith always works. There is no faith without works.

Paul and James look at justification and works from altogether different angles. Paul looks at the source of justification and looks at it from the viewpoint of God. James looks at the effects of justification and from the viewpoint of man. Abraham believed God and was justified. In Genesis twenty-two we read that sad story of God's call to His servant to take his only son, whom he loved dearly, and offer him as a sacrifice. Without any hesitation, Abraham saddled the beasts of burden, took his son and several servants, and away they went in obedience to God's command. Once they had reached top of Mount Moriah, the old man prepared the altar, secured his son thereon, and made ready for the most difficult operation in all his life. With raised knife he prepared to take the life of his boy, but at that instant he heard a voice from heaven, "Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me." Abraham thus proved to his generation that he had faith by his willingness to offer his son in sacrifice in obedience to the word of the Lord. Abraham proved his faith by his works, and "the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God." Abraham certainly lived up to his faith when put

to the test. His faith made him willing to offer his son on the altar.

A man is righteous in God's sight the moment he puts his faith in the Lord Jesus. God does not need to see the fruit of faith to know there is faith, but we do. We cannot declare one righteous until we see the fruit of faith. We can only tell one is a Christian by what he does. So James is not contradicting Paul, but complementing him. Paul is fearful of dead works without a living faith. James is fearful of a dead faith that produces no good works. If no works are produced, faith is a mere dead thing, good for nothing. One who does not produce good works proves he is not justified by God, nor can he be declared righteous by man. Works are the fruit of faith. Faith alone justifies, but not the faith which is alone.

James proceeds to bring forward another example of justifying faith. He shows that in her case too faith produces works. He thus maintains that all justifying faith is operative. No persons could be much farther apart in everything except their faith than Abraham, the illustrious father of God's chosen race, and poor, ignorant Rahab, brought up in the midst of heathenism and living a life of immorality for a time. Abraham was a fine man, but Rahab was a bad woman. He was called a "Friend of God," and she was called "the harlot." He was an aged saint of God and she was just manifesting the first evidences of faith. His offering Isaac was the highest point in a life of faith. Her receiving the spies was the start in her life of faith in God. How this demonstrates the grace of God! He can save and use the old, the young, the good, the bad, the Jew and the Gentile.

For Rahab to receive these spies into her house was an act of faith. Humanly speaking, it was a very risky business. She did it because she believed that her city was doomed, and that her hope of living lay in casting her lot with the people who would soon conquer the city. Even so, every poor sinner is living in a doomed world. His only hope of salvation lies in receiving God's message through His messengers concerning the Lord Jesus Christ and His atoning work on Calvary's cross, and accepting Him as personal Saviour.

God used Paul to show that there is no salvation in dead legal works apart from a living faith in Christ. He also used James to teach that there is no salvation in a mere dead formal faith that has no life in it. Both of these writers of the inspired Word of the living God teach a living, vital and productive faith. Paul emphasizes the faith, while James emphasizes the effects of that faith.