

## Living Faith

*14 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?*

*17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

*18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe-- and tremble!*

*20 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?*

*21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? 23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. 24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?*

*26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.*

In the year 2000, a human rights organisation reported that the radical Muslim regime in Sudan had targeted Christians for forced conversion to Islam. When bombings did not work, they undertook a more direct method. Christians were taken in groups of fifty many miles into the desert. They were then left without any food or water. Every few days, government trucks would return to them with offers of food and water to those who would renounce their faith. The trucks would then return until there were no more Christians living. Then they would bring the next group of fifty.

When faced with the physical torture of dehydration and starvation, and the offer to get food and water and survive if you just renounce Jesus, why did those Sudanese Christians refuse the offer, and slowly succumb to a painful death? What was inside them, that made them refuse to renounce Christ?

The Bible would say, real faith. A living faith. The Bible would say, the kind of faith that actually saves you, that makes a real difference in the world. A living faith. James would contrast that faith with dead faith, faith that does not save.

This passage is one of the most controversial in the Bible, for, at first reading, it appears to contradict much of what Paul wrote. Paul speaks about faith, works and being justified in very different ways. Paul says, faith alone justifies, and works are not only insufficient to save, but they corrupt the saving process, making something that is of God belong partly to man. But here, James is saying things like, faith alone cannot save. Faith needs works. Abraham was justified by works, Rahab was justified by works. On a surface reading, James and Paul seem to be directly contradicting each other. So much so, that Martin Luther, the champion of justification by faith, at first so disliked James that he called it a 'right strawy epistle'. However, he later retracted that comment, and praised the book of James. But almost everyone, including the early Luther sensed tension.

To understand this passage, we have to know what James is after. James wants us to know the difference between living faith and dead faith. Three times in this passage, James refers to dead faith.

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*20 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?*

*26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.*

That's the big image here – life and death. James wants us to know that there is a kind of faith that is like a corpse with no life, like a sea shell with the creature in it long dead, a pressed flower petal with its pretty appearance, but no life. There is a kind of faith which might make you feel good, or comfort you, or secure you, but it is actually dead. You have planted not a seed, but a husk, nothing will grow.

Some people complacently believe that the faith they have will save them, but it is a dead faith. And sadly, some people never check the pulse on their faith. Some people ignore the correlation between their lives and their profession. And that's all the more true in a world which now teaches that there are two realities, there is this internal reality of your own feelings, emotions, thoughts (which no one can judge but you) and this external reality, which is amoral and meaningless. So the world tells you that it doesn't matter what you do out there, because it's just a bunch of meaningless molecules anyway, but it does matter how you feel inside here. And no one but you can judge if you are good and true and have real faith. So as long as you feel good, feel optimistic, feel full of faith, that's all that matters – it doesn't have to correlate with the outside world in any way. That's why many Western Christians have no concept of what our Sudanese brothers and sisters were doing in refusing to renounce Christ. Many Westerners would say something like “Yes, I'll just tell them I've renounced Christ, but inside I actually haven't, so then I get to live and continue having my personal walk with Jesus”

James throws those ideas out like three-day old rubbish. He has no time for a personalised, interior, theoretical faith. He insists that we submit our faith to some real life, real world, external tests.

What he's going to do here is give us two of the vital signs of living faith. Living faith does certain things, and living faith is certain things. We're going to see that living faith always does work, and then we're going to see living faith always has works.

## **I. Living Faith Always Does Work!**

*14 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? 17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

The first thing James tells us is that living faith brings some profit, some change, some benefit into the world. Living faith does work – it acts upon the world in practical ways. James gets as practical as he did when dealing with partiality. A brother or sister is lacking in the two necessities of life – clothing and daily food. The verbs suggest an ongoing condition – this is someone in the congregation with a persistent need, and he or she is doing everything in his or her power to meet the need, but the need is still dire. Once that is known, and one of us claiming to be in the faith, says to such a struggling believer, “Go well! Have a great meal, and stay warm!” James asks, what kind of faith is that?

It is faith in intention only. I feel good about you, I feel the warmth of my own intentions, and that is enough to comfort me. But because we do not give the person the necessities for the body, no good has been done. Nothing has changed. This faith, because it moves or changes nothing, is dead.

The writer of the comic strip Peanuts, with Charlie Brown was a man by the name of Charles Schultz. He was a believer. He illustrated this principle in one strip where Charlie Brown and Linus see Snoopy shivering in the snow. Charlie says, “Snoopy looks kind of cold, doesn't he?” Linus replies, “I'll say. Maybe we'd better go over and comfort him.” They walk over to him, pat his head, and Charlie Brown says, “Be of good cheer, Snoopy.” Linus says, “Yes, be of good cheer.” The

boys walk away in their warm winter coats, while Snoopy continues shivering, and over his head is a big question mark.

James is confronting a common kind of self-deception: that intending to do what faith does counts as faith. But intention does not count as action. Intention is not yet trusting obedience. It has not yet become part of the will. It is still in the realm of wishes, options, thoughts, ideas. But thinking that these good intentions, nice aspirations, righteous purposes, noble goals are as good as the actual deed is exactly what James is attacking. It is just like the hearer only of chapter 1, who feels that hearing the Word with pleasant approval is just as good as doing it. Remember what James called that? Deceiving yourself. Telling yourself a lie until you believe it.

In the same way, intending to obey, intending to serve in the local church, intending to evangelise, intending to give to the Lord, intending to give a year or two of your life to overseas missions or study in a seminary or Bible college, intending to visit the elderly, intending to begin a weekly Bible study with someone, intending to do great things for the Lord but never doing it, does not count as faith. Being nicely disposed towards Christianity just makes you a spectator who knows what he would like to one day see himself doing.

When faith is present it acts. It works. Living faith cuts off certain sinful influences or habits, living faith begins practising habits of obedience, living faith gets hold of a good evangelistic resource or makes that call or organises that study; living faith puts a date in the diary to visit the elderly, living faith sees the needs in the church and begins meeting or speaks to the leadership about how to get involved, living faith looks for a short-term missions trip or a ministry to serve in, or a seminary to study in, living faith phones that brother who has been looking downcast or has been scarce, living faith put the money in an envelope, living faith walks across the room to encourage that person.

*28 "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' 29 "He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went.*

*30 "Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go.*

*31 "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to Him, "The first." (Mat 21:28-31)*

This kind of living faith does not only work in the world and change things for others. It is in the end that which saves your soul.

I have often quoted to you that saying by A.W. Tozer, "You may not be as spiritual as you wish you were, but you are in fact as spiritual as you want to be." The wish is just scanning options. The want is desire that shapes your decisions.

*14 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?*

I think there are people in the world who wish they were saved. I have met many of them. They like the idea of being on God's side. They like certain things about organised religion. They may even enjoy being in church on a Sunday. But that wish or intention has not become the faith that rises up, and comes to Christ. Either there are sins they do not want to give up, or friends they do not want to lose, or family they are afraid of, or independence they wish to retain, or some kind of confirmation from God that He will not give, but they always stay in the world of intention. James says, "My friend, that will not save your soul. On the Day of Judgement, if God asks, did you repent and receive the Lord Jesus as your Saviour and Lord?, you cannot reply, I always meant to. I always felt He was the Messiah and only way. Of all religions, I thought Christianity was best, and of all saviours, I thought Jesus the most qualified. This is dead faith, and it will not save.

If that is you, stop counting your intention to believe on Christ as believing on Christ. Stop counting your approval of Christianity as an actual embrace of Christianity. Today, turn from your sin, turn to Christ.

James is now going to move from the actions of living faith to its definition. Not only is it true that living faith always does works, James also teaches us that

## II. Living Faith Always Has Works

*18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe-- and tremble! 20 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?*

James imagines an objector. The objector says something like, "Faith and works are two completely separate things. They don't require one another. They can exist in their own right separately."

In church history, even into recent times, we've seen versions of this idea. One popular version goes like this, "You can believe on Jesus as your Saviour and then you're going to Heaven, no matter what. How you live and how committed you are is something entirely separate. That's your discipleship, and it begins later, and maybe some are more committed than others." So you have your faith for salvation, completely separated from the works of sanctification and spiritual growth. In its extreme forms it says things such as "If someone believed on Jesus, we can never question if he is saved. He prayed a prayer, and so he is saved forever." And so you meet people who think that a friend or a relative, who once prayed a prayer, or attended church for all of two years, but has since lived for the world, renouncing Christ in every way except formally, and the relatives say such a person is just 'backslidden'. His works bear no resemblance to the faith of a Christian, but that doesn't matter to them, because they hold the view of the man James imagines speaking – faith and works are completely separated.

But this is James' answer in verse 18: *Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*

James challenges the man to show that his invisible, interior faith is actually real and present without works. The man can't. Faith is interior and an act of the soul. If you deny the place of works to show faith, then all you can do is what a lot of people today do: "I know I believe." How do you know? "Because I know what I feel inside. I feel sincere about my faith."

James says, instead of this, I will show you my faith *by* my works. Living faith always has works. They are the completion and the fulfillment of the faith.

Faith, the way James uses it here is incomplete until it has works. He illustrates in verse 19. *9 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe-- and tremble!*

Faith without works is simply agreement. Demons have this kind of faith. They know the fundamental creed of the Bible: "Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is One." They believe it is true that God is the only God. They tremble at the thought of His awesome majesty. **Luk 4:34** saying, "Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are the Holy One of God!"

What do they lack? They lack love for Him, submissive obedience, sweet and joyful adoration of the one true God. When you really believe, you also behave. When you have orthodoxy, you also have orthopraxy.

Just as we can be self-deceived and think that good intentions are as good as faith, in the same way, we can think that knowing the correct facts counts as faith, like knowing the answers on a trivia show. We think that agreement counts as faith.

Just as living faith goes beyond intentions and does works, so living faith goes beyond agreement and always has works. Some fruit manifests to complete and fulfill what began as agreement, but progressed in love and obedience. So in verse 20, James offers to teach his objector that faith without works is dead, and he does so with two illustrations. First, Abraham.

*21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? 23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. 24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.*

You remember that God had unconditionally promised to make Abraham's descendants like the stars of the sky. That night, when Abraham looked up into the sky, and considered his own body, he transferred his trust from himself to the mighty power, and the trustworthy promise of Yahweh. He believed God, he trusted in Him. And at that moment, according to Genesis 15:6, God counted his faith as righteousness. God declared Abraham righteous because He believed.

But how did Abraham know that he really had faith? He had some wobbles along the way. He improvised and had a child with Sarah's servant, Hagar, named Ishmael. His wife laughed at the revelation that she would give birth, giving rise to Isaac's name. But God fulfilled His Word, and Isaac was born when Abraham was 100. Isaac grew older, and probably when he was somewhere between twelve and a young man in his twenties, came the fateful day when God said to Abraham

*2 Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." (Gen 22:2)*

We try to imagine that night of prayer, as Abraham must have convulsed in agonising prayer, something like Gethsemane. But the book of Hebrews tells us what conclusion he came to that night. *17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son,... concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense. (Heb 11:17-19)*

They take their journey early in the morning, and eventually reach the place. And then we have this touching scene. Isaac asks, "Father, I see the wood and the fire, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Those words must have felt like sword thrusts into Abraham's heart. He replies gently, "My son, God will provide Himself a lamb. Even though he is about to kill his son, he feels it necessary to continue disciplining his son in the ways of God."

Scripture spares us the emotional agony of what happened next. What was Isaac's reaction when he realized *he* was the burnt offering? Did he struggle? Did he understand, and sweetly submit? Was Abraham weeping? Was He trying to mask his fear and pain for Isaac's sake? We don't know. But we know that Abraham lifted the knife, with full intention to take his son's life in obedience to God's Word. And only at that moment, when the work of faith is complete – does God stop him. God never intended for Abraham to hurt the boy, but through that test, His belief in God went beyond intention, beyond agreement into submissive action, action to the point of death.

The faith internally had been verified, justified, shown to be real, and fulfilled and completed by his work of obedience. His justification so many years before, when He looked up at the stars, was now justified, vindicated, shown to be true by his actions.

Rahab too. *25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?*

She had heard that Yahweh parted the Red Sea. She had heard the God of Israel was the true and living God. She believed that. She was converted to the worship of Yahweh. But what verified that hers was not merely an intention, or merely some head-agreement, was her willingness to receive the Hebrew spies, risking her life, putting everything on the line to be on the same side as Israel.

Now we are in position to understand Paul and James. Paul and James are not enemies crossing swords. Paul and James are allies, standing back to back facing enemies who are attacking the faith from different sides. Paul and James are separated by at least 15 years of writing; they are facing different audiences, with different controversies. Paul is writing primarily to a Gentile audience, where works-righteousness is strong, and they need to be taught to give all the glory to God by trusting in His righteousness. James is writing primarily to a Jewish audience, steeped in the theology of Israel, more likely to be leaning on their believing tradition than checking if they have personal real faith.

Therefore, the two of them are using the words *faith*, *works*, and *justified* in overlapping but different ways. For Paul, faith is a submissive and enduring trust in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. To have faith is to call on the Lord, bow the knee, and follow. But for James, faith is simply the first stage of an incomplete action, it is the head knowledge, the agreement, the mental assent, the intention to submit. Works then, are the necessary and inevitable result of a real faith, the logical result of mental agreement, turning into volitional commitment.

You could picture Paul drawing a big circle, and labelling it 'faith', and then James fits his definition into that big circle by dividing it in half, and writing on the one half, 'head-knowledge agreement', and on the second half, necessary works. And Paul would agree with that.

Works, for Paul, are the independent efforts that human make to please God and gain merit with him. Works, when Paul uses the term do not refer to necessary fruits, but to acts of self-righteousness. James would agree with that – people insult God when they try to earn His grace. He would call that law-keeping outside of grace.

So Paul and James are also using different meanings of *justified*. Paul, writing much later than James takes justification as a legal action by God, where God acquits the guilty, declaring them innocent. It is a forensic act of God, by which He imputes our guilt to Christ, and imputes Christ's innocence and righteousness to us. But James does not use it in the same sense. James here means justified in the secondary sense – when your faith is vindicated, proved to be real, shown to be authentic. Sometimes the New Testament uses it in this way. For example, when Paul gives us a mini-summary of the Incarnation in 1 Timothy 3:16, he says, “16 And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory. (1Ti 3:16)

The word *justified* there has the idea of vindicated, proved guiltless by the Spirit's raising Him from the dead. So now you can imagine James drawing a big circle, and writing “Justification”, and then Paul comes and fits inside that circle, and divides it in half, and the left side he writes, “legally declared righteous before God”, and on the right side he writes “fruits of righteousness”. And James would agree with that. A man is justified before God by faith alone (the true, submissive faith we saw in the other circle), but a man's justification is justified, shown to be real by fruits, works.

“Faith alone justifies, but the faith that justifies is never alone.” — John Calvin

So James does not want us to live with dead faith. Intentions are not enough. Agreement is not enough. Doing church every week is not enough. We must examine ourselves to see if we are in the

faith. How do we do that? We see if our faith has manifested in an active submissive trust in Jesus Christ? Is it continuing to manifest in acts of obedience, compassion, service, and sacrifice?

We live in a world where real faith is something alive – a living invasion of God's grace into your mind and affections, changing you from within all the way out. That's how people stay in a desert and keep owning Christ until He comes to claim them from their perishing bodies. Living faith works.