

James 2:14-19

How do we know that the faith in Christ we claim to have is real? **2 Corinthians 13:5**, “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?--unless indeed you are disqualified.”

One of the tragedies of the “cultural Christianity” of the Bible-belt is that the majority of people say the right words but their lifestyles and their works are not really different from those who are non-believers or profess to be atheists or agnostics.

If we condensed the message of James, it would be this: *What we do as a pattern of life evidences who we are.*

Faith and works are mentioned together 10 times in the passage **James 2:14-26**. One of the main messages of James is that works of obedience are not an optional extra added to faith, they are an essential expression of genuine saving faith!

Faith is not something that we can afford to be uncertain about. The Bible tells us that the sinner is saved by grace through faith (**Ephesians 2:8-9**), the Christian must walk by faith (**2 Corinthians 5:7**), without faith it is impossible to please God (**Hebrews 11:6**), and whatever we do apart from faith is sin (**Romans 14:23**).

Matthew 7:16-20, “¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”

Vs. 14 – This abstract person “*someone*” (objector) claims to have saving faith, but there are no works flowing from this professed faith. James provides abundant evidence in this letter that refutes that false belief. James is saying that if a person has faith there will be works as confirmation, a sign, an indication, proof, verification, and as a mark of their faith.

I. Saving Faith Is More Than Just a Verbal Affirmation (Vs. 14-17)

James is making the strong point that words of profession of faith are without value when they are not backed by, or evidenced by, a pattern of obedient works.

A. A Profession of Saving Faith Is Not Alone (Vs.14)

In verse 14 the same Greek word translated as “*faith*” is used both times in this verse. However, the first word “*faith*” means “*trust*” with a nuance of “obedience.” What James is saying is this: if a brother says he has obedient faith but has no works where is the evidence of his salvation? Is that really saving faith? The second word “*faith*” used in verse 14 can be translated “*evidence*” or “*proof*.” The grammatical structure of verse 14 demands a negative (“*no*”) response to both questions. In other words, can that kind of faith prove a person has real faith?

Throughout Christian history, this passage (vs. 14-18) has been the center of a lot of confusion. The problem is that many think that what the Apostle Paul wrote (especially in Romans) and what James wrote contradict one another.

- Paul is writing to unbelievers on how to define their salvation, which is by faith
- James is writing to believers on how to demonstrate their salvation which is by works
- Paul is writing in theological terms
- James is writing in practical terms
- Paul focuses on faith which leads to salvation (Rm. 10:9-10; Eph. 2:8)
- James is focusing on faith that validates salvation (2:14, 17, 20)
- Paul is teaching how to be justified before God who can see faith (Rm. 5:1-2; chp.7)
- James is teaching how to be justified before men who can't see faith but can clearly see works (1:22, 25; 2:14, 17, 20)
- Paul wants the unbeliever to get into the faith (Rm. 5:9-11, 21)
- James wants the believer to grow up in the faith (1:4-5 12, 22-25; 3:13-18; 4:13-17)
- Paul writes, “It is faith alone that justifies” (Rm. 5:1-2, 9; Eph. 2:8-9)

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- James writes, “Faith which justifies is never alone” (chp. 2)

The point of James’ letter is not so much to convince an unbeliever that he’s an unbeliever, but to challenge the believer to act like a believer. In other words, if you don’t demonstrate your faith, as far as the world is concerned, your faith is useless—it’s dead; it’s fruitless.

B. A Profession of Faith Alone Does Not Serve (Vs. 15-16)

In verses 15-16 James gives an illustration of dead faith. Dead faith responds to real needs with nothing more than pious sounding talk with no action or deeds. Verse 15-16 is in the middle-passive voice, translated – the person should take care of himself or just trust God to it and don’t bother other people. In the Greek there is a subtle implication of blame, that is, if they would only exert themselves, they would have plenty to eat and sufficient clothing to wear.

The question in verse 15-16 is what good is voicing platitudes? God expects His people to meet those needs. **1 John 3:17-18**, “¹⁷But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deeds and in truth.”

Acts 4:32-35 describes how the early church members sold property and possessions and brought generous sums of money and laid it at the apostles’ feet to be used to help others.

C. A Profession of Faith Alone Does Not Survive (Vs. 17)

Verse 17 is a summary of verses 14-16. A faith not followed with works is a faith with no worth. “*The saints fed the hungry and clothed the naked because it gave them much pleasure to do so. They did it because they could not help doing it, their new nature impelled them to do it... They did good for Christ’s sake, because it was the sweetest thing in the world to do anything for Jesus.*” [Charles Spurgeon]

II. Saving Faith Is More Than Mental Assent (Vs.18-19)

Mental assent is affirming that something is truth instead of error. For many, unfortunately, salvation is simply a matter of acknowledging that the facts of Scripture are indeed facts and not error. It is the acknowledgment that indeed Jesus is God’s only begotten Son, He did live a sinless life, died on the cross, and rose again on the third day.

James is warning that mental assent is not saving faith as he, in verse 19, points to the fact that demons have mental assent but not salvation. **Romans 10:9-10** clearly indicates that salvation is by expressed through confessing and believing!

A. Mental Assent Alone Has No Demonstration of Faith (Vs. 18)

The anonymous objector James is referencing is treating faith and works similar to spiritual gifts, implying some have the gift of works and some have the gift of faith.

Verse 18 teaches true saving faith always gives evidence of works ... always. It is not “pick and choose.” Works flowing from faith is not optional; it is inevitable. Works are the external physical evidence of an internal spiritually alive faith. The Greek word James uses in verse 18 translated “*show*” is a word which means, to “bring to light,” “to exhibit,” or “to display.” Faith in Jesus Christ produces life – life in Jesus Christ produces works.

Application:

James has continuously repeated that true saving faith is demonstrated by “works” (i.e. actions, work in ministry, good deeds toward others, etc.) From the time I professed Jesus Christ as my Savior how have I continuously demonstrated faith through my actions towards others in service to Christ’s cause?