

## **James 2:14-26 Evaluate your Faith**

### **James 2:14-26, Evaluate your Faith**

During the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther was against including the Letter of James in the Protestant Bible. He believed there was a conflict between James and the letters of Paul pertaining to the means of salvation. Luther called James an “epistle of straw”. In 1543 he wrote “I would give my doctor’s beret (they got a cool hat for getting a doctorate) to anyone who could reconcile James and Paul.” I doubt that I could convince Luther, but my task is to prove that Paul and James were not at odds over the means of salvation. Paul was primarily concerned with the acquisition of saving faith while James was primarily concerned with the demonstration of saving faith. In his letter, James presented a series of tests by which professing believers can evaluate the genuineness of their faith, then he let them be their own judge. We all know that it is likely that many people in the church today profess to be Christians without any real belief, knowledge, or commitment. They are Christians in the same sense they are Americans-by culture, tradition, and geography only. If they were arresting people for being Christians, there would be no evidence to convict them. The Bible makes it clear that when you truly believe in Jesus as your Savior, the Spirit of God begins to work a change in your life, and it is certain that in time you will undergo a change with the resultant fruit of that change. We are saved by the grace of God, which is the atoning work of Christ on the cross, and as a result our lives are changed and we do good works. It was the same for James’ audience and he wrote his letter to call them out.

James 2:14-26

In this controversial passage James begins a contrast between what a person says and what he does. I remember an old pastor once told me the joke—“The secret to being a really good minister is to be sincere all the time. Once you are able to fake that, you have it made!” Unfortunately that is all too true, but of course not in our churches (tongue in cheek). James lists three kinds of faith here in chapter 2. In verse 14, there is a dead, lifeless faith that says a lot of good things, but does nothing--that is just intellectual assent. By that I mean you believe in the reality of Jesus dying for your sins, but you really haven’t committed your life to that truth. That really is not a saving faith. That would be like saying you believe George Washington was the first President of the United States, but you are not committed to serving this country. Dead faith is characterized by empty confession, false compassion, and no commitment.

The second kind of faith James mentions in verse 18-19 is demonic faith, “You believe that God is one. Fine, but the demons also believe, and shudder.” Again that is just knowledge of something without a commitment to it, and in this case you can actually believe in the historical accuracy of Jesus, but by your actions oppose Him. Many professing Christians today actually oppose most of the core Christian beliefs like the resurrection, the inspiration of Scripture, and the deity of Christ. At least the demons “shudder” or tremble with the fear of God. These kinds of Christians don’t even fear God.

The third kind of faith that James discusses is a dynamic faith that is living and active and visible. True living faith has been tested and proven. It has resulted in a changed life, increased obedience to God’s Word, and some evidence of good works.

John Calvin explained it well when he said, “Faith alone justifies, but the faith that justifies is never alone.”

All of the characters in the Bible are great examples of this, so James uses two famous ones in the Old Testament to prove his point in verses 21-25. In Genesis 22, Abraham was commanded by God to take his only legitimate son Isaac out to Mt. Moriah and sacrifice him. When Abraham took Isaac out there, tied him up, and drew his knife---we knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Abraham fully believed in God and was committed to Him. We learn that it was a test of his faith when God stopped him, and provided a goat for the sacrifice. James wrote in James 2:22, that faith was working with his works and as a result of the works, faith was revealed or completed. Many believe that James is saying that Abraham was saved by works in v.23-24, but upon further review we see that is not the case. In v.23 he quotes from Genesis 15, which happened years before Gen.22, therefore God reckoned Abraham as righteous and saved by his belief first, then years later this was “fulfilled” or proven by Abraham’s obedience in Gen.22. In James 2:24, the author is following up on the relationship of faith to works by saying, “and not by faith alone”. Just as John Calvin said 1600 years later that “the faith that justifies is never alone”. Both James and Calvin mean that good works are produced by saving faith. They were not saying that works are required for salvation, but that as a result of salvation the person will be transformed and good works will eventually happen. Was Abraham still a sinner

who needed the grace of God to be saved? Absolutely, don't forget he lied to Pharaoh about his wife, and traded her for a herd of sheep (Gen. 12:12-16). Then he brought home a slave wife that he cohabited with, and after he had a son with her, argued with God about God's promise of his heir (Gen.17:17-21). No one who can read would think that Abraham could be saved by works, and neither does James. When James says that a person is justified by works (in v.24), he means justified before men, because as we read in Genesis 15:6 he was justified before God because of belief alone, many years earlier.

The second historical example that James used was Rahab in James 2:25. If you read the story of Rahab in Joshua 2, you will see that when the children of Israel were camped on the Jordan River preparing to enter the Promised Land, they sent in two spies to check out the closest Canaanite city. By the providence of God they came secretly into the city, and sought shelter at a cat-house owned and operated by the harlot Rahab. She had heard all about the God of Israel, and had come to believe in Him. We know she believed in God in a committed way because she risked everything to protect and hide God's people. Is there any way she could have been saved by works? Is there any way James believed she was saved by works? Hello, James calls her Rahab the harlot because she was a known sinner, but her works in helping God's people proved that she had changed and believed in GOD. Again, she said she believed in God, and of course God knew the validity of that, but she was proven to be a believer when she risked it all for the two men, thus she was justified before men.

### JAMES VS. PAUL—DID THEY REALLY DISAGREE?

In Romans 4:2-5, Paul used the identical example of Abraham to prove that Abraham (and us) could only be saved by belief, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness". Therefore Luther, and many others have been disturbed by the apparent contradiction, but upon further review, there is no contradiction. Paul and James were addressing different audiences about different issues. Paul was concerned with initial salvation, but James was concerned with the result of salvation. James was writing to professing Christians about how a life of faith should be manifested (worked out and proven). Paul used Abraham's initial belief that saved him in Genesis 15, but James used his actions many years later in Gen.22 that proved to Abraham and all other people that he believed in God.

Did James believe that we are saved by the grace of God, and we appropriate that grace by faith alone? Yes, just read his own words in James 1:17-18. "Every perfect gift (grace) is from above, coming down (Jesus) from God the Father...in the exercise of God's will He brought us forth (we were born spiritually) by the word of truth (the Gospel of Jesus which we believed)". Also, we have the historical meeting of the minds of Paul and James in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem church council.

### The Jerusalem Church Council—Acts 15

When the Apostle Paul was ministering to the Church in Antioch, Syria about 48-49 AD, some legalistic Jewish members of the Church in Jerusalem came to Antioch to see what was going on. They insisted that to be saved, the Gentiles needed to be circumcised and follow the Mosaic Law as well as believe in Jesus. Paul and Barnabas knew the danger of this so they all determined to go to Jerusalem and settle the issue of the means of salvation once and for all. A church council was called in Jerusalem with all of the Apostles and elders of the church as the decision making body. James was the head elder in the church, and he would make the final recommendation. We learn that the professing Christians who required circumcision and obedience to the law were past Pharisees (Acts 15:5), and they laid out their case. Paul stated that salvation was by grace alone, and received by faith. Peter gave an excellent speech backing up Paul in Acts 15:7-11 saying that their Jewish ancestors had tried to be saved by works and failed so, "why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear, but we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus". James agreed with Peter and concluded the debate by saying it was his final decision that they not trouble the Gentiles with circumcision or law, but only ask them for the purpose of unity to abstain from idolatrous practices common in pagan cities. Therefore we have clear proof that Paul, Peter, and James all fully agreed on the means of salvation, and there could be no contradiction in their respective letters. When I get to heaven I'll ask Martin Luther for his doctor's beret (just kidding).

### Conclusion

It is a sobering reality that everybody who claims to be a Christian will not be saved. Just as Jesus predicted in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven...then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you'.

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Abraham's and Rahab's justification was not demonstrated by an empty profession, but by putting everything that was dear to them in this world in subjection to God. They were totally committed to the Lord as was proven when their faith was tested. They were willing to give up their life in this world, because they believed in eternal life with God. This was in accordance with the teaching of Christ many years later, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me". Long before Jesus was born, Abraham and Rahab were willing to take up their cross and follow Him.

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