

Session 3

September 18, 2022

FAITH ON DISPLAY IN YOUR ACTIONS

James 2:14-26

The relationship between faith and works is not difficult to understand, but it is often misrepresented. The most prominent religious belief in the world has always been that one must “do something” (whatever that might be) in order to be “saved” (whatever that might be). Christianity—and only Christianity—teaches that salvation is not earned, but rather is given freely as an act of God’s grace. Between the faulty view and the correct view lies other difficulties. Some, whether intentionally or not, have attempted to blend the two views to make salvation a combination of faith *plus* works as though God does His part and we do ours. But to do such a thing nullifies grace altogether (see Rom. 11:6). In this text, James uses three illustrations to clarify the relationship between faith and works.

Well-intentioned faith (vv. 14-17). James sets up his argument (v. 14) with two rhetorical questions. The first connects faith to *works*: “What good is faith that produces no good works?” The second connects faith to *salvation*: “Can that faith save him?” Just a note: the older translations often put it, “Can faith save him?” which almost sounds like faith does *not* save. But the context makes James’ rebuke quite clear: “Can the kind of faith that does not produce works actually save anyone?” Verses 15 and 16 give one example of *dead* faith. Good intentions that are voiced but not acted upon are more than cruel and disingenuous; they are hypocritical. The common component here is *faith*. James indicates that there is only one kind of true faith. And the one true faith will do two things: it will lead to good works, and it will lead to heaven. Conversely, the faith that does not lead to good works will never lead to heaven. For reflection: *While we are not in a position to judge one’s salvation, Jesus made much of believers “bearing fruit.” How do we balance those two principles? Why should we?*

Intellectual faith (vv. 18-20). The construction of verse 18 is difficult. The original had no punctuation, so who is saying what can be confusing. Whether the first statement, “You have faith, and I have works” is made from ridicule or from serious intellect, the truth remains: some make a clear separation of faith and works and tout their value as being equal. James’ reply is just as valid in either case. To paraphrase, “Go ahead; try to demonstrate your faith without any tangible evidence (because it can’t be done!). “I, however, can demonstrate my faith, because my good works are the evidence of it.” The fallacy of *intellectual assent* versus *true faith* is illustrated further in verse 19. Even the demons have a valid intellectual (or theological) understanding of God. But that knowledge makes them shudder in fear. They know about Him...but they do not *know* Him. That kind of intimate relationship is only accomplished through true faith. For reflection: *We often say it is possible to miss heaven by 18 inches, the approximate distance from the head to the heart. Have you encountered those who seem to fit that description?*

Active faith (vv. 21-26). James’ final illustrations of faith demonstrated by works are found in Abraham and Rahab. Of Abraham’s faith, there was no doubt, as it was both stated and lived out. Again, it wasn’t Abraham’s act of offering Isaac that made Him right with God (see Gen. 22). Rather, because Abraham was already right with God, he was willing to accept God’s promises

by faith (Heb. 11:17-19). The result was that Abraham's faith was affirmed as legitimate; thus, he was *justified* (vv. 21, 23). "In the same way" Rahab the harlot (v. 25; see Josh. chapters 2-6)) demonstrated the faith she already had by hiding the spies and seeing to their safety. Simply put, her actions didn't make her a person of faith; rather, her faith made her a person of good works. Hence, the two aspects (faith and works), while not identical, are inseparable. The faith that does not produce works is a faulty faith. For reflection: *Abraham is the model of biblical faith. But Rahab is seldom seen that way. Why do you think James chose her as an illustration of faith?*