

A Study in James
Part 7 – “The Faith That Saves”
James 2:14-20

The verses we will study today are often misunderstood. Some see it as a direct contradiction to the teachings of the Apostle Paul concerning the means of salvation. They would accuse James of advocating a salvation by works while declaring Paul as the champion of salvation by grace. However, when the teachings of these two great men of faith are viewed in proper perspective, there is no conflict at all. They do not differ in basic belief, merely in emphasis. There are three keys to understand at the outset:

- ✦ First, the situation faced by James was entirely different than that of the Apostle Paul. Paul had in mind those who denied the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. James, on the other hand, had in mind those who, by the barrenness of their spiritual lives, distorted the doctrine of salvation by faith. He was insisting that a faith worthy of the name must express itself in deeds. Paul was expounding the way of justification; while James was describing the life of the justified.
- ✦ Second, James and Paul used many of the same words, but they put different meaning into them. By “works” Paul means works of the Jewish Law. James uses the word to mean works of love; they are a proof that faith is alive and real.
- ✦ Third, the intention of James was not to contrast two opposing methods of salvation, one by works and one by faith. He contrasts two *kinds* of faith, one genuine the other spurious; one alive, the other dead; and one that saves, and the other that simply does not save.

We would do well to listen to these teachings today. Too many church members are performing acts of obsolete obedience hoping that will be enough to grant them God's blessing and redemption.

We are much like the soldier in the story told about the Czar of Russia who while walking one day discovered a sentry standing by a small patch of weeds. Curious the Czar asked the soldier why he was standing guard over the weeds. The sentry replied he did not know. He was merely obeying orders. His curiosity aroused, the Czar ordered an investigation. No one at the court knew why the sentry had been posted there, yet everyone could not recall a time when there wasn't one there. The question remained: “What was he guarding?” Servants and scholars alike searched the archives page by page until the mystery was solved. Decades earlier, Catherine the Great had planted a rosebush on the little plot and stationed a guard to keep it from being trampled underfoot of the many passer-by's. Years passed; the rosebush died, but no one thought to cancel the command to post a sentry. For over one hundred years a soldier had stood guard over a patch of weeds!

There are many such “sentinels of the weeds” in our day. They watch one weed patch of the past. They have no knowledge or commitment of the purpose for which they stand guard, only the thought that they have always done it that way before! Periodically we must sift our “additions” to God's commands. Then and only then can we truly understand the faith that saves.

TAKE YOUR BIBLES PLEASE...

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? (James 2:14-20 ESV).

It is evident that faith is the vital link between God and man in salvation. *The just shall live by faith* is the theme on which much of the New Testament is built. Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews are all expositions of this great theme. Yet on the first reading, James would seem to deny this truth. Yet, James merely agrees with these writers, and describes the faith Paul and the writer of Hebrews declare we must have to be saved. **THERE ARE THREE ESSENTIAL POINTS ABOUT THIS FAITH THAT SAVES:**

First, the Faith That Saves Is More Than a Profession of Faith (vv. 14-17).

Jerome, an early church father, having lived in the third Christian century, took up this principle aptly when he wrote:

Do not let your deeds belie your words, lest when you speak in church someone may say to himself: "Why do you not practice what you preach?"

The emphasis upon publicly declaring "I believe" can be misleading. To think that faith is nothing more than this public declaration is fatal. The key word in this paragraph is the verb says. This man does not necessarily have faith, in fact, the evidence points to the truth that he does not. He is merely saying he has faith. James asks the question: *Can this kind of faith save him?* The Greek text makes it clear by using the definite article before the word faith. James does not ask "Can faith save him?" He is asking "Can the faith claimed by this man without works save him?" Or, better still, he is saying, *Can THAT faith save him?* The answer is very evident. That kind of faith cannot save him, or any other. Faith that is only profession is like compassion that is only words. They are empty, without real impact or power.

NOTE: This kind of faith, which is only words, is no more than that which the demons themselves have. Remember the words of Jesus:

Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." (Matthew 7:21-23 ESV).

What kind of faith do you have? While our words are important, if they are no more than words, they will not save!

Second, the Faith That Saves Is More Than Creed (vv. 18-19).

Another misunderstanding of faith is associating it with confidence in some creedal statement. Many Jewish people in the day of James felt assured of salvation because they believed the right things about God. They were ready to recite their confession of faith: “The Lord our God is the one God.” They were staunch believers in monotheism. James attacks this view of faith with firmness:

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!
(James 2:19 ESV).

There is cutting sarcasm in these words. Faith that is involved in creedal orthodoxy is well known in the devil’s kingdom. Specifically James is speaking of the demons rather than the devil himself. The demons are firm believers of the unity of God. They *know* there is only one God. And, they even get a little emotional about it! Their “faith” causes them to tremble. The word “tremble” means to “shudder with fear.” Do you see it? Their hair stands up on the back of their neck and they get goose-bumps when they think of God, but they are not saved. When all we have is our creed and perhaps even a little excitement in worship, we are no more saved than the devils.

Those who have grown up in a religious atmosphere are more vulnerable to this misconception of faith. When you hear the truth about God proclaimed, and hear others declaring their orthodox understanding of faith, it is easy to begin to think of faith as just believing the things about God. However, you can believe all the right things about God, believe the very things your parents believed, and still be no more saved than a demon. While saving faith does believe the right things about God, it is more than this.

Third, Saving Faith Is a Total Commitment to God That Expresses Itself in Good Works (v. 20).

Many of us are self-sufficient. Though our talk indicates otherwise, our actions speak loudly to the fact that we believe we can handle anything that life has to confront us with. We are like the little boy trying to move the heavy stone, but unable to budge it. His father passing by, stops to watch his efforts. Finally he says, “Are you using all your strength?” “Yes. I am.” He answers. “No,” the father says calmly, “You’re not. You haven’t asked me to help you.” We heave and strain and in exasperation give up when all that is necessary is faith in He who is able. Reliance upon your strength alone will not save you nor will it produce God-honoring good works in your life.

James uses two illustrations of this truth. He chooses two Old Testament people famous for their faith in God. About all they had in common was their saving faith in God. He picks Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, and Rahab, the gentile prostitute who hid the spies in Jericho. Both of them had the kind of faith that required a complete commitment of life to God and that expressed this commitment in obedient works. Abraham believed a promise God gave him concerning an heir. He believed this so much that when God instructed him to present Isaac, the child of the promise, in a sacrifice, he was willing to do so. This act of obedience was the proof of his faith. It was a little different for Rahab. She was a citizen in the condemned city of Jericho when the Israeli spies stepped into her life. She believed the God of Israel to be the only true God. She so believed it that she took the hated spies into her home,

hid them to protect them, and then helped them to escape. This action involved a risk to her life, but her belief compelled her to act accordingly. **James is emphatic about this point. No other kind of faith will save.**

A SPECIAL CONCLUSION:

The inclination is to subject ourselves to certain “tests” of faith. All of these can be dangerous and destructive. Here are some things to avoid.

- ✚ Do not use emotions or feelings to determine the validity of your faith. Remember, “tingly feelings” are no more than that which the demons have as well. That alone is not a good indicator of true faith.
- ✚ Do not use formulas of words or creeds to determine the validity of your faith. Some would have us believe there are certain words that you must say in order to be saved; others call on creeds or beliefs. All these are not valid in themselves.
- ✚ Do not use your level of “orthodoxy” as a test of faith. It is not a checklist that must be completed to be saved. Do you believe in this or that is not the question.

ONLY A FULL COMMITMENT IN THE WORK OF CHRIST ON YOUR BEHALF IS ENOUGH FOR SALVATION. It is not what we do, but what He has done. We trust that and that alone. Then we have saving faith. That kind of faith is enough.