

What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.
James 2:14-26

Deadly Faith

Early in the fall you purchase several maple saplings and plant them around your property. As spring approaches you anxiously watch the trees to see which ones survived the transplant and the winter. As summer comes on, and leaves begin sprouting all through the woods, you carefully water and tend the maples. Despite your hard work and care, one tree never buds and grows. The one next to it flourishes, it's leaves spread out and you can see the fresh tips where it has grown. Which tree is alive? Of course, the green, growing tree is a living tree. Is it alive because it has leaves, or does it have leaves because it is alive? The life of the tree is not in its leaves and its fruit, but in its root. I can attach leaves all around a dead branch, but that will not give the branch life. The leaves and fruit are the evidence of a life possessed, not the source of life. In James 2, James shows the relation of works to faith. Just as a tree without growth, leaves and fruit is dead, so a faith without works is dead. The works have no part in producing faith. The works reveal the living faith that is underneath.

This section before us today is one that has left many believers in wonder at what exactly James is saying and how it relates to Paul's very plain statement's that salvation is only by faith completely apart from works. Despite the apparent contradiction between what James is saying and what the rest of the Bible teaches, this passage can be understood quite easily when we realize two essential things. First, when James says faith without works is dead, he is not talking about genuine saving faith. He is talking about a profession of faith. Notice, James says in verse 14, "if a man say". The claim of faith does not save. The claim of faith is not evidence of salvation. The claim of faith is as profitable as my claim to have a billion dollars buried in my backyard. It's completely worthless. Second, James is giving evidence to test the reality of such a claim. He is not teaching what produces salvation, but what salvation produces. He is telling you what fruit to look for so you'll know if the root is alive. As we go through this passage, remember, James is confronting the claim of faith and giving a way for the believer to determine the genuineness of his profession.

First, I want us to see the danger of an empty profession. If I were today to ask each of you if you

have been saved, what would you answer? If I were then to ask those who claim to be saved how you know you are saved, what would you answer? I would guess that most of you would then describe to me the time when you made a profession of Christ. You would base your claim to salvation upon a past event in which you asked Jesus to forgive your sin. James points out that a claim to salvation that is not accompanied by works is an empty claim. Not that the works have any part in your salvation, but that salvation will produce works which reveal salvation's real presence. The profession apart from works is a profitless profession. It is destitute of anything worthwhile. A profession alone is as worthwhile as cheerful words to a starving family.

The bare profession is destitute of value and it is a rather dubious claim. I can't see your heart. I have no idea what motivated you to make a profession. No man has any idea if the Holy Spirit has actually made you a new creature or if you have been reconciled to the Father. You say I am to take your word for it, but the Bible does not say that at all. James says to you who say you have faith, show me. You say your profession alone is enough; show me the genuineness of your faith apart from works. You cannot peel back your flesh and let me see your spirit. You cannot open up your heart and let me peer into the working of God within you. The claim to have faith apart from the evidence of works is as trustworthy as the claim that I can run a five minute mile apart from my willingness to get on a track and run.

A profession alone is not believable; it is dubious at best. In fact, your claim to saving faith is no better than the proclamations of the demons. The demons believe in God. They believe He is the only God who is the Creator and Ruler of all. They believe all the truths of the Bible. In fact, they know the Bible far better than I do and understand its truths far more accurately than I do. So what that they have and agree with the right doctrines? Saving faith is not merely agreeing with the facts of the Bible and the facts of the gospel. Signing off on the correct doctrinal statements is not saving faith. Nor is being stirred by the truths of the gospel saving faith. The devils believe, and they tremble at those truths. They are terrified before God. An emotional response to the truths of the gospel is not saving faith. The bare profession, even if it is accompanied by emotion, is not enough; it is no more than the devils themselves do.

Tragically, this kind of profession is a deadly profession. Let me paraphrase verse 20, "You fool! Don't you realize a profession alone is dead?" I am terrified that there are many Christians, some in this room today, who have a profession but have no life. Your faith is dead and when you die you will find yourself cast out of the presence of God. This bare profession is a deadly, deceptive faith that comforts many with the promise of eternal life while hiding from them the reality of their own lost condition. Jesus warned of the danger of just such a false faith, "Not every one that saith unto me Lord, Lord, will enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21) A profession alone is of no profit and it will end in the eternal death of the one who makes such an empty claim.

James contrasts the empty profession with a genuine justification. Real justification will produce unmistakable evidence in a life. How then is a genuine justification made known? Proper evidence proves it, and it is seen when a life is being transformed. Just as the leaves do not cause life in the tree, so the evidences of justification do not make one righteous before God. This is where we must be very, very clear that what James is saying is in full accord with the rest of the Bible. Justification, salvation and righteousness before God only occur by faith. Justification is

only accomplished by the work of Christ and no work of man aids or adds to justification. The attempt to add personal effort or religious work to become justified is a denial of the justification of Christ. One that trusts Christ and some personal work, obedience, law, ritual or religion is not saved. This is most clearly stated in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast." You are saved only by the grace of God, received through faith, completely apart from any effort on your part.

James is not at all contradicting this great truth of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Justification is also not at all perfected or aided after salvation, if you keep the Mosaic law or hold to a certain set of rules for your life. Galatians and Colossians address these points. In Galatians 3 Paul asks the believers, "O foolish Galatians who has bewitched you?" "Are you now made perfect by the flesh?" "As many as are under the works of the law are under the curse." "The just shall live by faith." The keeping of the law has absolutely no part in our justification. It does not justify us; it does not keep us justified; it does not make us more justified; it does not give us special favor in God's eyes; it does not move us into a higher class of Christian, and it does not make us more spiritual. The insistence of keeping Moses' law to really be right with God is to add works to justification and is a denial of the gospel.

The insistence of adding traditions and rituals to really be a Christian is to add works to justification. Paul warns in Colossians 2:8, "Beware lest any man spoil you (that is steal your treasure), through philosophy and vain deceit, after the traditions of men, after the rudiments of the world and not after Christ." He later says, "Let no man judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of sabbath days." "Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why as though living in the world are ye subject to ordinances (man made commands)." The keeping of your own standards, rules and rituals does not add one bit to your justification. It does not secure, complete or aid your justification in any way. In fact, the addition of these things takes away from Christ and what He has done.

Justification is always only by grace completely apart from works, and it is always and only received by faith, the obedient response to the gospel. Genuine justification produces certain evidences, but those evidences do not at all acquire or secure your justification. James is saying that justification always produces certain evidences. These evidences are not the keeping of the Mosaic law or the keeping of man made laws. We have already seen some of the proper evidences in James, endurance in trials and temptations, readiness to hear and obey the Word and committed, practical love for your fellow believers. The works to which James is referring are not just any good works but are these particular works he has mentioned and especially the one of love for one another that he is addressing in this second chapter. I think we can rightly say James' argument is that faith without Christlike love is a dead, empty faith. Or, if you claim to have saving faith, show it by your love for one another. A genuine justification proves its reality by its actions. If your faith is real, your life will show it.

So when someone asks you how you know you are saved, don't stop with the profession you made, but tell as well the Christlike behavior that has been produced in you by your salvation. Give verifiable and observable evidence that you are justified. Genuine justification transforms the believer. If your heart is the source of your behavior, then your behavior reveals the true

condition of your heart. Your behavior does not change your heart; it reveals your heart. If your heart has been made new and filled with the Holy Spirit, your behavior is going to reveal that change. If your profession of faith is all you have, then your faith is not a saving faith. If your profession of faith is genuine, then your life will show it. If you have been justified, declared righteous by God, then the deeds in your life will declare your righteousness to men.

To show the unbreakable connection of works to faith, James uses two illustrations. Both these illustrations are used elsewhere in the New Testament as illustrations of great faith. This is not a coincidence. James uses these two great examples of faith to show that faith always produces visible evidence. Faith always produces obedience to the Word of God. If there is no obedience to the Word, the faith one asserts is not genuine faith.

The first illustration is that of Abraham. Abraham was the father of the nation of Israel, the one God called out of Ur and promised to be the father of a great nation. God promised Abraham many descendants, a great land, rich blessings and to be the ancestor of the Messiah. There is no question that Abraham was justified by his faith. However, as James says, Abraham's faith worked in his works so that his faith was brought to its full end. Abraham was made righteous by his faith. Abraham's faith worked in his deeds and Abraham's faithful deeds brought him to the desired end of faith, close personal intimacy with God.

Abraham's works showed the reality of his faith, and because his faith was real and active, Abraham was known as the friend of God. Real faith changes the way we behave. That transformed behavior then brings faith to its intended end, namely a close walk with God. In verse 24, James is stating that the claim of faith alone, "faith only", does not justify. Rather, genuine faith that brings justification is faith that also changes the life. This kind of faith is what produces works and is the full end of justification. Paul says this in Ephesians 2:10, after he has declared that salvation is only by grace through faith completely without works. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." You are made a new creature for the purpose of good works. God determined before you were ever saved that you would serve Him by good works. The direct result of your salvation and one of the clearly defined intentions of your salvation is that you will serve God through good works. Your faith is brought to its desired end by your obedient deeds.

The other illustration is of Rahab, a prostitute in the city of Jericho. When Joshua was leading the Israelites into the land of Canaan, he sent a couple spies to the city of Jericho. These men were found out, and when the king of Jericho sent to take the spies prisoner, Rahab hid them and then helped them escape out of the city. She did this because she believed God. She believed God would be merciful to her and her family. What good would it have done for Rahab to tell the spies she believed but would not do anything to help them? Of what value or believability would her faith have been if she had not done anything for the spies or done any of the things they instructed her to do to preserve her family? It was only by her actions that her faith became apparent. James concludes this section by comparing a dead body to a workless faith. When the spirit is separated from the body, this is physical death. Without the spirit, there is no life. A bare profession without works has no life. If you say you have faith and your life shows no Biblical evidence, your faith is not a life giving faith, it is dead. Your works bring your faith to life. Your works show to all that your faith is real. If you have no works, you have no faith.

What then is saving faith? Saving faith is not just agreeing with the truths of the gospel. Saving faith is not just agreeing and being stirred by the truths of the gospel. Saving faith is agreeing with the truths of the gospel, accepting them as personally applicable and acquiescing (submitting) yourself to them. Saving faith is that response to the truths of the gospel that obeys God's command to rely on Christ alone for forgiveness and that results in a life of obedience to the Word of God..

Saving faith is acceptance of the truths of God about your sin: you are a sinner, convicted by God as guilty, separated from Him, condemned to eternal death and unable to remove your guilt or pay off your penalty.

Saving faith is acceptance of the truths of God about Jesus; Jesus is God, the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, who remained fully Divine while adding into Himself full humanity. He remained perfect and holy, living a human life but without sin. His death on the cross was for our sin, paying in His own flesh the penalty that we cannot pay. He died but three days later was restored to life by the power of God. He lives forever as the God-man to save all those who call upon Him.

Saving faith is acceptance of the truths of God about salvation; salvation is only through the work of Jesus. He did all that is needed to fully forgive sin, and His salvation is given freely to those who will cry out to Him. Saving faith is not only acceptance of those truths, but it is also acknowledgment that they apply to you personally. You accept them not just as true in general, but as true specifically of you. Saving faith is then the bowing of myself before God and His Son, as I acquiesce to God's truth, allowing it to change my thinking, passions and behavior. Now, I submit myself to the gospel and reject my sin nature, reject all other efforts at salvation and depend only on Jesus for the full pardon of my guilt. The initial expression of such faith is the confession of sin and call to Him to forgive. Is your faith genuine? Do you show evidence in your life, verifiable deeds, that you are saved? Are you relying on a bare profession? If your faith has not changed you, I implore you to examine yourself to see if you are in the faith. If you know you are not saved, I plead with you to today turn from sin to Christ for full forgiveness.