

WITH WORKS

James 2:14-26

Years ago, someone told me about a friend of his. This friend had a reputation of being a “mean fellow.” I have no idea why people thought he was mean; however, his friend said, “He’s really not. Let me tell you what he does. He knows a lot of elderly people that need help, and he will buy them a load of coal and have it delivered. If he sees something else that they need he will just go out and get it for them.” It would be my guess that this person did not go to church, he probably cursed like a sailor, probably drank, smoked and chewed. Yet he was coming closer to doing what Jesus told us to do than many people who are at church every time the doors are open, who never say a bad word, would sooner die than drink and thinks that smoking and chewing are about the nastiest habits around.

We recall the parable about two brothers whose father told them to go work in the vineyard. Both of them understood what he said and what he wanted. One brother readily agreed to get right to work and the other brother refused to go. Eventually, the one who agreed to work found something else to do and the son that refused went out and worked all day in the vineyard.

While these are two different stories, there is a common thread in both stories. How you would describe the “moral” of the story in each case? Could it be that “what you do matters more than what you just say?” Jesus implied that it was obvious which son was pleasing to his father. The Word of God places much emphasis on turning what we know to be “the right thing to do” into “doing the right thing.”

The second half of chapter two of James addresses such questions in terms of “what we believe” and the “way we behave.” We could divide these thirteen verses into three groups of simple concepts

- Dead Faith – James 2:14-17
- Useful Faith – James 2:18-19
- Complete or Saving Faith – James 2:20-26

Dead Faith – 2:14-17

¹⁴ What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? ¹⁷ Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. James 2:14–17 (NASB95)

It would be a mistake to assume that verse 14 and following are not intimately connected to the previous verses starting in verse eight. It is there that James mentioned the “royal law” of “love your neighbor as yourself” which we understand to be the spirit of the laws that are outlined in the second half of the Ten Commandments. Remember that James was writing to people who had come out of a Jewish religious system in which there was a lot of emphasis on keeping the letter of the law and they did not let the spirit of the law “get in the way” of thinking that they were pleasing to God simply by observing (in minute detail) the letter of the law. The problem with that religious system was that if you broke one of the rules, then the whole of the “law” was broken.

It is only in keeping the spirit of the law that we are pleasing to God and we can do that only if we have the love of God poured into our hearts that is accomplished when we put our faith and trust in Jesus. After they have heard the gospel message that “justification is by grace through faith,” some had applied the same kind of logic they used with regard to the letter of the law to the concept of faith as a means of salvation. The equivalent of thinking that the letter of

the law is all that is needed would be that “if you will just believe the right doctrines and make the right professions or confessions,” then that is all you need. In the case of the letter of the law, the missing element was the “spirit of the law” and in the case of salvation by faith alone, the missing element is validation of the genuineness of that faith by works of faith.

Not everything we call “faith” is the real thing. If we have the kind of faith that does not result in godly action, then it is not the kind of faith that leads to salvation. James called it dead faith. The example James used about helping or not helping another person with food and clothing illustrates how ridiculous it is to think that a faith devoid of action can do anyone any good.

Some will try to confuse the teaching of this passage with “earning God’s mercy.” This is not the issue. The question here is the genuineness of the faith and the reality of the salvation experience. (A person may have the perfect intellectual grasp of the doctrines and so one could argue that this is “true faith.” I would claim that you may have a true doctrine but a faulty faith in that knowing the truth does not accomplish anything unless we are motivated to action that is a result of the truth we know.) Many skeptics (atheists, for example) claim that the salvation experience the Church proclaims is nothing more than some emotional high that is self-induced. For some people, this may be the case. However, if their faith is genuine, then there will be results. It will be more than lip-service.

Useful or Working Faith – 2:18-19

¹⁸ But someone may well say, “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” ¹⁹ You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. James 2:18–19 (NASB95)

There are some things that are practically impossible to do. For example, if you tried to describe the color blue to a person who was blind from birth and, you would fail. The only way you can know what blue looks like is to see it. If your child asks you “Do you love me?” Your answer is an automatic “Yes.” You don’t even have to think about your answer. But, in childlike innocence, the child may then ask “Can I see your love for me? Show it to me.” You cannot see love apart from actions. We could take all the “fruit of the Spirit” (love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, meekness, temperance, and faith) and the thing they have in common is that you cannot see them with your physical eye. So, when James says show me your faith without deeds, this is somewhat “tongue in cheek.” There is no way to do that. A simpler example could be “can you see the wind?” How do you know that there is a wind? By the results!

Genuine “saving faith” will produce “works of faith.” Even Jesus said, “By their fruit, ye shall know them.” This is exactly what James meant by “I will show you my faith by my works.” If just believing the facts is all it takes, then the devil would have it made. He knows! Even Abraham’s faith was validated in that he took action that proved he believed that God’s word is true.

Saving Faith – 2:20-26

²⁰ But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? ²² You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,” and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶ For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. James 2:20–26 (NASB95)

This consideration of faith and deeds (in verse twenty) should cause us to raise the

question of “does doing good deeds prove that we have genuine faith?” I don’t think that we would want to jump to that conclusion. In fact, the writer to the Hebrews mentioned in two places that we had been delivered from “dead works.” So, consider this: Dead Faith is belief that doesn’t produce good deeds and Dead Works are deeds that came about but not as a result of good faith.

What are some examples of doing things that could come under the general classification of “dead works?” Possible Examples: A person is running for public office and works on a Habitat for Humanity house for a poor person. A person is being considered for a job promotion at the local factory and he volunteers to help with several United Way agencies to help the needy of the community. A guy is courting a young lady whose dad is the pastor of the local church. The guy volunteers to help with teaching in the children’s department. With no more than what has been said, we still don’t know if these are “dead works” or not! The missing bit of information in each case is the motivation for what was done. The purpose in the heart is known only by God. The message in these examples is that we need to be careful in such judgments.

As we move on into the remaining verses we will discover some subtle differences in meanings of the way certain verbs were used by James and compare these with what Paul had written regarding this same general subject.

In verse twenty-one James asked the question “Was not Abraham justified by works?” An apparent answer to this question can be found in Romans 4:2 where Paul wrote “If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God.” This comparison looks very much like a contradiction. Both passages used the same Greek word (*dikaioo*) for “justified.” As we well know, there can be different “shades of meaning” for various words in any language. In this particular case (according to Strong’s Numbers) there are at least three different usages for this Greek word. The first is “to render righteous.” The second is “to show, exhibit, one to be righteous.” The third is “to declare, pronounce, one to be just, righteous.”

Apparently, Paul referenced the first “shade of meaning” in the Romans passage with the implied assertion that Abraham was not “rendered” (made) righteous by offering up Isaac. On the other hand, James was using the second “shade of meaning” in his letter to claim that what Abraham did “showed” or “demonstrated” his righteousness.

Some of the newer translations such as the NIV try to show this difference in translating verse twenty-one as “Abraham was considered righteous for what he did.” The key word in understanding this and seeing that James and Paul are not contradicting each other is the word “considered.” Paul said (in Romans 4:3) “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” The consideration or visible evidence of that righteousness was **seen** in the offering of Isaac. James did NOT write that “what Abraham did” **caused** him to **be** righteous. What he did simply gave understanding or evidence of the righteousness (or right standing before God) that he already had.

The next sentence is (from NIV) “*You see that his faith and his actions were working together.*” The key word here is “see.” What Abraham did enabled us to “see” evidence of his faith. It is also important to note that the observation that “faith and action worked together” is another way of stating that people will behave in a way that is in accordance with what they truly believe.

And the scripture was fulfilled . . . When promises or prophecies are found in the Bible we expect these to be fulfilled or to happen, occur, come to pass, or whatever term we might use. The promise to Abraham that “his descendants would possess the land of Canaan” was fulfilled when they actually occupied the land. The prophecy that “the Messiah would be born in

Bethlehem” was fulfilled when Jesus was born there some two thousand years ago. When God gave the promise, it was (in His viewpoint) a done deal. We say that the promise or prophecy was fulfilled (or completed) when we could **see** the evidence of it. So, when Abraham offered up Isaac he was giving evidence of his righteousness (resulting from his faith) and thus we can say that “what was written” was **fulfilled**. The fulfillment did not cause the righteousness, but it just allowed it to be seen.

We notice the same words of “see” and “considered” are used in the description of what Rahab did to help the spies when the Israelites were checking out the promised land before the invasion and fall of Jericho.

The bottom line is that the fulfillment or completion of any promise or declaration of a spiritual reality is the happening or outworking of whatever action is associated with the spiritual reality. In the case of faith or belief the outworking of the resulting righteousness is found in righteous deeds or actions.

Summary

These verses state loudly and clearly that true Christianity is not an “easy believism.” It is not founded on “cheap grace.” It is not just going to church to learn something that is never applied to daily living. It is, on the other hand, a way of life that brings the love of God to bear on and influence all of life. It is a belief that leads to action. It is really a question of whether the love of God is real in our lives. When we are saved, we are given the love of God in our hearts and it is His love that produces the life-changing results. Putting our faith into action is just an expression of our love – that is, God’s love – the self-sacrificing kind of love.

Addendum:

The following is included in the lesson material to show that when Paul stated that Abraham believed God and it was accounted or reckoned to him as righteousness (Romans chapter 4 and Galatians chapter 3) he was using different words than those used by James when he stated “Was not Abraham our father justified or considered righteous by works?”

“accounted” or “reckoned” used in Gal 3:6 is Strong’s number 3049 *logizomai log-id'-zom-ahee* AV-think 9, impute 8, reckon 6, count 5, account 4, suppose 2, reason 1, number 1, misc 5; 41
1) to reckon, count, compute, calculate, count over

This word deals with reality. If I “logizomai” or reckon that my bank book has \$25 in it, it has \$25 in it. Otherwise I am deceiving myself. This word refers to facts not suppositions.

Compare the above with

“justified” or “considered righteous” used in James 2:21 is Strong’s number 1344 *dikaioō dik-ah-yo'-o*

AV-justify 37, be freed 1, be righteous 1, justifier 1; 40

1) to render righteous or such he ought to be

2) to show, exhibit, evince, one to be righteous, such as he is and wishes himself to be considered

3) to declare, pronounce, one to be just, righteous, or such as he ought to be

Paul was right when he stated that God accounted Abraham’s faith (believing God) as righteousness and James was right when he stated that Abraham showed (gave evidence) that he was righteous by his obedience or action. These statements are NOT in conflict but are complementary.