

“Dead Faith vs. Living Faith”

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Scriptural Foundation: James 2:14-20, ESV

Faith Without Works Is Dead

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and 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? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

¹⁸But 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. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! ²⁰Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Recently I read a news account of two escaped convicts in Argentina. These two have dodged a huge manhunt by disguising themselves as sheep. The pair dressed in full sheepskin fleeces, complete with heads, in order to lie low among farm flocks. Robbers Maximiliano Pereyra, 25, and Ariel Diaz, 28, stole the sheep hides from a ranch after breaking out of an Argentinean maximum security prison a week before. So far they have managed to evade the three hundred police officers on their trail. Locals have spotted the wooly pair running through fields at night. A farm worker at La Almeda said: "They were wearing grey clothes but had full sheepskins, including the sheep's heads, over their heads and backs." Police say spotting the pair among thousands of sheep in a field is "almost impossible". But one warned: "They can't pull the wool over our eyes forever."

These two robbers look like sheep, they smell like sheep, they hang out with sheep, they walk on all fours like sheep, but they are not sheep. Externally, they are fooling a lot of people into thinking that they are sheep, but they are merely disguised as sheep. These two fugitives illustrate a problem that the Bible warns us against over and over; that is the problem of counterfeit Christianity, the problem of possessing the external appearance of being a Christian without undergoing any internal transformation essential to making one a Christian.

In the cases of Maximiliano and Ariel, they know that they are not sheep. They know that they are hunted men and they are pretending to be sheep in order to avoid the unpleasant experience of being thrown back into prison. I imagine that there are some, like Max and like Ariel, in their attempts to hide their true identity, they know that they are not genuine Christians, but none the less, because they have certain purposes regarding disguising themselves, they put the appearance before others of being Christian.

But, the larger problem, the problem that James addresses all through his letter is not the problem of the people in the church who know that they are Christians but try make others think that they are, the larger problem is the people in the church who really think and believe that they are Christians when in fact they are not. They are self-deceived. This problem concerns those who say that they believe in Jesus as Savior and yet are not forgiven of their sins. They say they have saving faith in God, but theirs is not the kind of faith that saves. The greater problem is with people in the church being deceived regarding their own salvation. In short, the grave danger is in thinking that we possess a saving faith when in fact we possess a dead faith. That would be a horrible condition, yet it is one that many experience.

Someone might protest and say, "What do you mean? Is that really possible to believe, truthfully when you exclaim, 'I believe in Jesus and I believe in God' and yet not be saved and yet not have the salvation of God in the soul, in the heart, and in the life?" The answer from the Bible is emphatically, "Yes!" Over and over the Bible warns us of the danger of possessing a dead faith, a faith that is useless, a faith that does not and cannot save, for there is a kind of

faith in Jesus that does not rescue us from our sin, and there will always be people in the church who claim to have a saving faith, yet do not possess God's salvation.

Consider John the Baptist's warning to the Pharisees who were coming to see him preach and baptize people, in Matthew 3,

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

John did not take a user friendly approach to preaching.

⁸ "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham."

John was warning the Pharisees who were taking an interest in John's message, "Do not count on your religious pedigree or your verbal confession of Abraham as your father to save you from God's judgment. If you have true faith in God, and if your faith is genuine and authentic, show it by the works you do. Bear fruit in keeping with your faith. Live in a way that is consistent with a repentant heart."

Listen, also, to Jesus in Matthew 7, when He says,

²¹ "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. ²² 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?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

These are people who possess a kind of faith; they say, "Lord, Lord," and they do certain religious acts, but their faith does not bring them into a right relationship with God. Why not? What is the difference between living faith and dead faith? That is the question James answers in this section of Scripture. First we are going to concern ourselves with a discussion of the place of faith. Then we will discuss a distortion of the nature of faith. Third, we will look at a description of dead faith. Finally, we will look a denunciation of dead faith.

We begin by considering a discussion of the place of faith in the Christian life. In Verse 14, James writes,

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

Implicit in James question is the acknowledgement that there is a kind of faith that saves a person and delivers a person from the Judgment of God, but implicit also in the question is the acknowledgement that there is another kind of faith that does not save a person from the Judgment of God. James is not asking the question, "Can faith save a person?" He is asking, "Can that kind of faith save him, the faith that has no works attached?" James wants us to evaluate the one who says he has faith but who has no life change. James is asking, "What do we think about that kind of faith?"

James is not denying that faith is the sole condition that God requires for a person to receive the free gift of eternal life through Jesus. James is not teaching salvation by works. James is teaching that saving faith produces good works in the life of a believer and in the life of the one who has been born again and who is regenerate. James is not contradicting Paul's teaching on the Doctrine of Justification. Some believe that, but that is not true. Scripture always corresponds with itself. In Paul's letters, he is deeply concerned with those who think that they will be accepted by God on the basis of faith plus works; that they could add something to the work of Christ in order to be accepted by God. Paul is very clear on this matter. In Romans 3, listen to what Paul says,

²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Understand that the word "justified" appears all through Scripture and it is important for believers to understand what that means. Justified means "being accepted by God as righteous" and "being declared righteous by God". Our

justification is God's declaration concerning our legal standing before Him; that when we stand before Him at the Judgment Day God will declare those who have been justified as being innocent and being righteous.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul says in Galatians 2,

¹⁶ ...yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Paul wants to clarify the Gospel message to all those who argue that we, in ourselves, can supply some of our good works to gain God's favor and to merit God's acceptance. Paul is arguing that our acceptance by God is all of Jesus' working and all of His doing on our behalf. We do not and we cannot add to Jesus' work. We come to God as beggars with nothing in our hands to bring to Him to barter and to trade for His forgiveness and to trade for eternal life. We come as beggars before Him needing God to feed us and needing God to provide for us. God's salvation is His free gift. It is apart from works so that no one may boast.¹ It is nothing but the blood of Christ that can give us freedom from sin and that can give us peace with God. The work of our salvation was completed when Jesus died on the cross for us and rose from the dead. The whole of the work is done right there. We do not add anything to that work in order to be accepted. We just receive what Jesus has done for us through faith.

James understands this truth and he affirms this truth. He is not in contradiction to this. In Chapter 1 James has already touched on this,

¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

How are we given spiritual life? It is by His word and the working of God. God brings us forth and God brings life to us. James affirms that God brings us new life by the Gospel and not by our good deeds. James continues in Chapter 2,

⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom...

James understands that there is a kind of faith that makes us heirs of the Kingdom; those who are rich in faith are heirs of the Kingdom. That is what James is teaching. James is not teaching that we are saved by faith plus works; he is teaching us that we are saved by the kind of faith that works; that produces a changed life.

Regeneration, or New Life in Jesus, always accompanies justification and it always accompanies our forgiveness and our acceptance by God. When God accepts us on the basis of our faith in Jesus' finished work, He makes us new people. Faith alone in Jesus is the root of the tree of our spiritual life. That is where our life is grounded, but good works become the fruit of that tree and they become the evidence of the roots that are sinking down into the soil of God's grace.

The Reformers in the 16th Century attacked the false gospel of good works; the gospel that says we are saved on the basis of faith plus works, but they also knew that living faith, true faith in Jesus, is never alone. John Calvin, the great reformer, would write, "It is faith alone that justifies, but faith that justifies can never be alone." Martin Luther said, "Faith does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question could be asked it does them . . . It is impossible to separate works from faith, as impossible to separate burning and shining from fire."

What is faith? I like Warren Wiersbe's definition of biblical faith: "Faith is not some kind of nebulous feeling that we work up; faith is confidence that God's Word is true, and conviction that acting upon that Word will bring His blessing."

We will look now at the distortion of the nature of faith. James stands with Paul against the false notion that our works have anything to do with God's acceptance of us. The Gospel makes that abundantly clear. In Verse 14, James

¹ Ephesians 2:9

begins to address a different enemy in the Gospel. James is addressing the person who says, “Since we are justified by faith alone, let me place my faith in Jesus and then live my life the way I want to live it! I do not need to submit to Jesus as my God and my Lord. I can get eternal life from Him, by believing in Him, and then I can follow my own course.” James asks the question, “What kind of faith is that? Is it the kind of faith that saves you or is it the kind of faith that is dead and useless?” James asserts that the faith that does not have works is distorted and dead.

There is a story about some ducks who went to church every Sunday at the Quacky Baptist Church. The duck choir would sing songs about the joy of flying high above the treetops. The duck Sunday school teacher’s would give detailed instructions on the science and art of flying. The duck preacher would exhort the ducks to fly farther and faster. The duck congregation would quack “Amen!” loudly in approval. The ducks would end their there time together with a prayer of commitment to flight, and then each Sunday they would leave church and waddle home. What kind of faith is that?

It is a distortion of faith to learn and acknowledge spiritual truth about God, about Jesus, and about the Gospel without submitting our lives to it and without committing ourselves to it.

How can I know whether I have dead faith or living faith? That is a huge question that each one of us should ask. The Bible encourages every one of us to ask that question throughout our lives, for if we are wrong on this question then our soul is in jeopardy.

James describes three characteristics of dead faith to help us evaluate our own faith. First, a dead faith makes an empty profession. In Verse 14, notice that the person “says” that they have faith. A person with dead faith may stand up and confess that the Bible is the Word of God, that Jesus Christ is God come in the flesh and He is God’s Son, that He died upon the cross for the forgiveness of sin, that He was buried and on the third day He arose again, that He ascended into Heaven and there He sits today, and that one day He will return in power and glory. A person with dead faith may “say” all of those things, and intellectually believe them, yet all of this person’s confession is empty and it is useless and it is dead because it is merely an external acceptance of the facts about God and about Jesus Christ without any heart commitment to Him.

Dead faith substitutes words for actions. It is not wrong to say you have faith if you really have it, in fact, there is everything right about that. We should do that, but if we are not living the life of a Christian, then there is no value to our confession. People with dead faith know the language for prayer and when they pray others are impressed with their prayers. They know the language of testimony so that when they give their testimony others are impressed about it. They can recite verse upon verse of Scripture. They think that their words can replace their actions as evidence of their relationship with God, but they cannot.

When God gives salvation, He always gives a changed heart. Salvation causes a total transformation in the life of a person. That is why Paul would say, in 2 Corinthians 5,

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

God produces within the believer a love for righteousness and a hatred for sin. That is what happens. This does not mean that a true believer never sins or that a true believer is never attracted by sin and by worldly desires, but it means that our attitude toward sin has changed. Believers sin. We stumble and fall in many ways, but we do not live in peace with sin. There is a war raging within us now that gets up every morning and fights against it. That fight against sin, that fight to move toward godliness, that fight to do the will of God in this world is the evidence of living faith and is the evidence of the life of God. We no longer give ourselves to pursue our own desires. We now commit ourselves to following Jesus and we fight to obey Him. Beloved, if that is not true, if you are giving yourself over freely to some sin, regardless of what that sin might be, you may be saying, “Okay, this is the way that it is. I am going to pursue this life. I know that it is not consistent with the Christian faith, but I am going to pursue it anyway.” Beloved, the Scripture is so very clear: you have no basis upon which you can be assured of your salvation – none whatsoever. You have to tremble before God in fear because something is gravely wrong because the basic evidence of authentic, living faith is not existent in your soul.

Secondly, dead faith makes no loving provision. I love the illustration that James uses in Verses 15-16.

¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ 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?

Here is a fellow Christian, a brother or sister in Christ, who is lacking the clothing necessary to keep him or her warm and he or she lacks the food necessary to sustain physical life; they are chronically hungry. The "dead faith Christian" comes along side and meets that person and comes to understand their needs, and they offer a few religious sounding words, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled. The Lord bless you," but they do not do anything to help the poor brother or sister. What good came to that needy person as the result of meeting this person of faith? None! The poor man or woman was no less cold, no less hungry. They might as well have met a pagan with no faith at all! What good then is that kind of faith if it offers no practical benefit in the lives of people we meet?

We learned from James 2:8, that the Royal Law of God that commands us to "love our neighbor as ourselves"! James is now saying that living faith obeys the Royal Law and it fulfills it. True faith expresses itself in practical love for others. Galatians 5 says this,

⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

True faith does not merely offer a few trite words to a person in need. True faith acts in love. True faith does not look for some religious cover to hide ourselves from our responsibility to love our neighbor.

The priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan had a faith but it was a dead faith, a faith that made no provision the poor person, beaten and in great need. If you talked to the Levite and the Pharisee who passed by that day and said, "I don't believe you have real faith," they would be offended and they would get mad at you. They would go on to explain with great venomous and energy why their faith is real and why they possess true faith in the Living God, but neither of them demonstrated living faith by their actions of compassion. Why, because their faith is dead. Regardless of their arguments and their denial their faith was dead and their life revealed it.

When true believers meet others who are in need, whether the need is physical like the one in the story or whether the need is emotional or spiritual, we know that God has placed us there, in that person's path, to be His feet and His hands. True believers see their lives through the lens of God's design. We know that God has sent us to others that we meet so that we might be a blessing to them and so that we might impart God's blessing to them. Real faith rearranges our perception of social relationships. We do not ask, "How can that person provide for me," or, "How can they benefit me." Real faith changes us so that when we look at people we say, "How can I be God's feet and hands for them? How can I help them? How can I bless them in the name of Jesus?"

John will write in his first letter, 1 John 3,

¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. ¹⁹By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him...

Beloved, God is going to place someone in your path this week who has a need. I know that because that is what God does in the life of believers. He is going to place someone in your path this week with a need. It might be a physical need, it might be an emotional need, or it might be a spiritual need, but there is going to be someone for whom you can give some of your resources to help them, someone with whom you can take the time and stop and say, "Let me pray with you. Let me talk with you. Let me be a friend with you." It may be someone with whom you can come along side and say, "Let me share the Gospel of Jesus with you. The greatest need you have is to know God and God has graced me with the understanding of who He is through the Bible. Let me talk with you about that."

That is what love does! We are not going to say, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," are we? Will we love that person enough to spend our resources, our time, and our energy to do what we can to meet the immediate need of the moment?

Third, dead faith sometimes makes an emotional response to God. James knows that some of his readers are getting uncomfortably defensive. As they are reading there is this angst that is raising up inside of them and they say, "Wait a minute, James. You are talking about me now and I don't like that." They begin circling the wagons.

It is interesting that dead faith does not like to be examined. Dead faith gets really offended by certain questions and by certain principles from God's Word, "James, you are talking about me now. How dare you judge me and how dare you evaluate my faith and question it!" Living faith loves to be examined because that is what we are called as believers to do everyday; to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith. We are used to doing that for ourselves, so when a Christian brother or sister comes to us and says, "Hey, let me talk to you about your faith," we say, "Great! You are going to help me examine myself to see if I am in the faith, because I need to do that everyday."

Here are the readers who are saying, "James, how dare you question my faith in God. I was raised in a biblically orthodox home. I have signed the statement of faith. I believe in God just as much as you do!"

Verse 19 begins,

¹⁹ You believe that God is one...

That was the core of the orthodox statement of the 1st Century Jew. In fact, all orthodox Jews will still say that is their core statement from Deuteronomy 6. But, James continues,

¹⁹ You believe that God is one you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder!

They have an emotional response as well as an intellectual one. All the demons are orthodox in their understanding about God. They know He is One. They know Jesus is God's Son. They know that He is holy and He is righteous and that one day they will face Him on the Day of Judgment to give an account. There are no liberal demons. Not only do they hold to true doctrine about God, but they also shudder when they consider it.

The word "shudder" means to have one's hair stand on end. They have a surge of terror flowing through them when they think about the Truth of God. This is an emotional response to the truth of God. They are afraid of what they know to be coming. James point is that demons have a kind of faith. They have a faith that is correct in its orthodoxy and that is emotional in its expression, but let us agree that they do not have a faith that saves. They are demons. They are condemned.

A person can have his mind enlightened and a person can have his heart stirred by God's truth and still not be saved from his or her sins. True living faith includes something more. Living faith includes a real-life transformation that is wrought by God Himself.

Jesus told the religious Nicodemus. "You, Nicodemus, who is one who seeks to live a very moral, upright, respectful life, you who is one who is very religious and who knows the Bible backwards and forwards, Nicodemus you must be born again or you cannot see the Kingdom of Heaven."²

The way one tests whether or not they have living faith versus dead faith is not by taking a Systematic Theology examination. The way one tests whether or not they have a living faith versus a dead faith is not by looking into one's emotional feelings: do I have some feelings toward God? The way one tests whether or not they have living faith is by looking for evidence of God's transforming work in their life, in the way they behave, and in the way they live.

James has already given us four practical tests. In James 1:1-12, he asked, "How do you respond to trials? That is evidence of faith if you count it all joy." In James 1:13-18, he asked, "How do you respond to temptations? If you obey God rather than disobey Him that is evidence." In James 1:19-25, he asked, "How do you respond to God's Word? Do you love it and do it?" Finally, at the beginning of Chapter 2, he asks, "How do you respond to other people? Do you love them as you love yourself?" James gives these practical tests.

² John 3

The last thing that James does is the denunciation of dead faith, as we see in Verse 17,

¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Underline the words “by itself”. Those are key. James is talking about a kind of faith that does not produce good works. It is not connected to good works in any way. James then elaborates in Verse 18,

¹⁸ 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.

The arguer reasons that faith and works are like spiritual gifts: some have one; some have the other. I like the way the New Living Translation translates this verse. It is a difficult verse to interpret, but I believe this translation communicates the flow of James' argument.

¹⁸ Now someone may argue, “Some people have faith; others have good deeds.”

Again, they are looking at this like spiritual gifts; some people have faith and understanding about God and knowledge of Him, and others have mercy and they have works of service, so these are two different kinds of Christians. James comes back to the person who argues this way and says,

But I say, “How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds.”

Do you catch the question? Faith is invisible until it acts. You cannot X-ray a person's soul and see faith. There is no way that you can quantify faith physically. The only way you can see faith is when it shows itself through actions. Faith is made visible through obedience to God's will. James says, “Show me your faith if you have it! You say you have faith, prove it to me. How do I know? How do you know? You cannot see it, can you? How does it become evident?” James says, “I am willing to show you my faith if you ask me to, and how am I going to show it to you? I will show it to you by my good works. That is the only way I can show you. I cannot just simply say I have faith. I cannot make affirmations about biblical truth and say that is faith, because that is not what faith is. If you ask me to show you my faith, I will show it to you by the transformations and the life changes that have happened to me wrought by God's grace. That is how I will be able to demonstrate it to you.”

The only way that a person can make his or her faith visible is through the actions and behavior of a changed life wrought by God. If there is no changed life, and the Scriptures are abundantly clear, then there is no way to show, or to demonstrate, or to give evidence of a living faith.

Let's look at Verse 20,

²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

You can see the energy of his argument. He says, “you foolish person,” not because he is mad at them, or because he hates them, but because he loves them. He has a pastor's heart. This problem keeps James awake at night, because he knows that there are people to whom he is ministering, who think that they are saved, and they are not. He is so deeply concerned and he wants to rattle them so he says, “You are a foolish person! Don't you know that the faith you are holding is useless?”

Millions come to church each week thinking that they are right with God. They know the Gospel intellectually. They have prayed a prayer at some point in their life to receive Jesus. Many have been baptized, but they have a dead faith. James teaching sounds like bad news, but it is not, it is good news and it is gracious news. It is news that will help us to avoid spiritual death and judgment. James does not teach this to make people in his church feel bad about themselves, but to help us examine ourselves to see if we possess genuine, authentic faith.

In 2 Corinthians 13, Paul says,

⁵ Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.

Our assurance of salvation is based largely on the life change that God brings about in our lives when we are born again. I once heard a question that challenged me when I was a little boy: if you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Think about that. Would there be any of your co-workers who would rise up and say, “She does not speak or act like the other people around here. She is different. She honors God in the way she lives. God is really important to her, and I know that not because of what she says, but because of how she lives.” Would there be any witness who could say, “He came to my house when I was in need and he showered me with the love of Jesus.” Or “She cared enough about my soul to talk to me about the Gospel even though I knew it was uncomfortable for her and even though she knew that I would not like it. That is what she did for me.”

Christian, I would encourage you to make two lists sometime today. On the first list, jot down the desires you have to grow in Christ-likeness. Put on that list the hopes you have to see your faith more in action so that you would have more joy in God’s salvation and more evidence of a genuine, living faith. On the second list, jot down the praises that you have for those areas in your life that God has already brought about radical transformation; evidences of God’s grace powerfully at work within you. Take some time to consider these matters.

If you examine your faith and find yourself lacking evidence of God’s work of grace at all, do not ignore the symptoms! Living faith is not far from any one of us. It can be ours if we desire it, for God is a giving God and He will give us living faith if we seek Him with all of our heart. I encourage you, as you write down those lists, if you have a long list of those things you desire and to have God’s grace at work to change you, but you have nothing on the other side that says “This is evidence of God’s transforming grace in my life,” I would encourage you to talk to a pastor or to a Christian friend about this matter of concern. Call out to God and say, “Lord, I desire to have living faith. I do not know if my faith is dead or alive. I cannot change myself, but you can change me through your son, Jesus. Please Lord, give me your life. I want to live for You and for your glory and I trust in Jesus as my Lord and Savior.” God will answer your sincere request for His grace to make you a new person.