

Faith Works

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At the heart of this passage is a dialog between two people: “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.” Faith & works. Here we have a fictional dialog, though very real in substance, between two people, a “faith” person and a “works” person. Which are you? Are you a person who says, faith is what really matters, you’ve got to put your trust in the right place in Jesus. Or are you a works person who says, faith and theology don’t really matter, you’ve got to *show people Jesus*. According to James, salvation hangs on your answer.

What James Means by “Faith”

James puts it all on the line when he says: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” Paul would give an emphatic yes, “we are saved by faith not a result of works” (Eph 2; Rom 4). James, on the other hand, gives an emphatic no: “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24). Who is right? Both of them. We know that both must be true because of the doctrine of *perspicuity*, which says that Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture. This means that if two texts seem to contradict one another, we can be confident that the error is on our part and not on the Scriptures. The Bible always maintains an internal coherence. We have to press our biases to see how. So how does this all fit together? To understand, we will need to establish what *James* is saying. Too often evangelicals assume the superiority of Paul, interrogating James with Paul. Martin Luther, the German Reformer, called James a book of straw: *Therefore St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it. (LW 35:362)* “Then I shall make rubble of it. I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove...” Let’s put Luther to the test by taking James’ meaning and then coming back to this apparent contradiction. James takes on the “faith alone” position by setting out a case study of person who, when given an opportunity to feed and clothe a brother, says “Go in peace, be warmed and filled.” Depending on how this phrase is taken, it can mean “take care of yourself” or “good luck with that.” Now would you ever do this? What about when a person in your city group pours out their heart about a struggle, physical, financial, or spiritual, and *nobody says anything*? Everyone looks to the leader, but basically says to the person “be warmed and filled; ill pray for you.” But do you pray for them? Do you check in to see how things are going later on in the week? Do you look to buy them groceries or encourage them to fight sin well? Some of you do (SWC)! But if you don’t James says, “Your faith is dead.” Lifeless. This phrase “go in peace” was a common Jewish way to say goodbye. It’s comparable to the Christian saying “I’ll pray for you.” Go in peace, wholeness, flourishing but I won’t lift a finger to help you. Go with the assurance of my prayers, but I won’t lift up a prayer for you. [On the spot prayer this week.] But you know, very often people will pick up Christian language just to fit in with the group, *without meaning what it means*. We say, “bless you” but we don’t bless people. We focus on self. In our church, people pick up really good vocabulary like “gospel, gospel-centered, missional” and use it like they know what they are saying, but it can be clear from their life that they don’t. Now, why would you do that?

Use terms you don't mean? You might use the words to impress others, so they will think highly of you or because you think it will make you more accepted by the church. That's not a problem with church; it's a problem with you. You care more about what others think than what God thinks about you in Christ. You care more about fitting in socially than you do understanding the terms theologically. So you end up saying "me-centered" when you say "gospel-centered." You're using the words to attract attention to yourself. Your faith is fake. James picks on the faith person a little more: "[You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!](#)" Now we're getting to orthodoxy. It's not just the greetings that you use that show your brittle faith; it's your beliefs. The person of faith is intensely concerned right beliefs. This phrase, God is one, is foundational theology and comes from the Jewish Shema, which expresses belief in one God—monotheism. This was unique in the ANE and in the Greek world. It made Judaism and Christianity stick out. The oneness of God means that he has no rivals; he is self-sufficient and supreme, worthy of worship. So it's definitely true, but believing that it's true isn't enough. You can believe something to be true, without it having any impact in your life. You can insist on orthodoxy until you are blue in the face, and people not see it in your life. In fact, people might see the opposite. Shema was the basis of spiritual superiority, pride, among some Jews. Perhaps like being part of a missional or gospel-centered church today. James is saying your beliefs aren't enough. Goodness, you share those same beliefs with the demons who shudder! At least they respond in humility and not hubris. Right doctrine isn't enough. This is a huge problem in Christianity today. Many people call themselves Christians but they really aren't. They have the beliefs but they don't have the behavior. They possess mere belief, a rational Christianity devoid of works. It's all intellectual. Christianity is in their head not in their hands. It's *mere* faith. This is precisely what James is attacking—mere faith—intellectual faith. He calls this "faith" person foolish, really the word is empty. Their faith might be orthodox but its empty, void, lacking life and fruit. If this is you, James says there's no way you've been saved, rescued, placed in Christ. Otherwise you'd live like Christ. Proof of salvation isn't a past prayer; its present day works (1:18). Faith without works is dead.

Does Your Faith Work?

Well are you saying that we aren't saved by faith? Lets come back to the tension between Paul and James. How does the tension resolve? When we grasp their different meanings for "**faith.**" **For Paul, faith is genuine trust in God that issues in works.** Ephesians says we are saved by faith alone, but that faith is never alone. Paul immediately goes to good works, saying we are saved for good works that God prepared for us. **For James, the faith he has in view here, is empty faith, intellectual faith, mere faith. Different from Paul. Faith isn't genuine trust; it's empty belief.** He says that faith is useless, the word really means "doesn't work, broken." James' problem with intellectual faith is that it doesn't work. Real faith works. It acts. [Company A & B] True faith acts; it cares for the poor, the struggling, the person in your City Group. Now, if you're still following the argument, you may realize that we have cleared up their differences on faith but not on **works**. How can Paul say we are justified apart from works and James say we are justified by works? Let's see where James goes. Abraham. In verse 21 he makes the assertion that Abraham was justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar, and then in verse 23 notes that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Now if you know the Bible, you're

picking up on a discrepancy here since in Genesis 15 is where God actually credited Abraham's faith with righteousness. There Abraham trusts God's promise for a child who would carry on God's blessing of salvation to the world. But here it seems that James is saying it was the act of surrendering that very son, whom he and Sarah waited 20+ years, that act justified him before God. Can you imagine? You waited for two decades to have a child, you get him, he grows into a boy, and then God asks you to let him go? The see of the promise to bless the world? That was a good work. How do we know? Abraham was willing to surrender what mattered most to him. His son. He let it go! What's the one thing that wouldn't want to let go to God? The hope of a spouse? The promise of security? A child, a career, a house, a certain kind of future? Will you let it go? If not, you have mere faith. If there's something in your life that you refuse to surrender to God, that thing is your god. But if you do surrender it to him, you'll get more than you could ever conceive. You get Christ, the Lord of glory, God's son, and with him the full attention of the Creator. That beats the approval of others any day. Is there a contradiction in James reading of Genesis/Abraham? It depends on what he is saying. He says: "[You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works](#)" (22). James isn't trying to locate the nanosecond of justification. What he's trying to do is show us that true faith is never alone. It's pregnant with works. It's active. The word active is quite literally "works with." His point is that Abraham, the father of the faith, did not have mere faith. It wasn't wishful thinking or rational religion. He acted on it. It was working faith. How's yours? His faith was completed by his works. It was embedded with the dna of good works, inevitable, like yeast embedded in flour—the dough has to rise. True faith is embedded with works that will rise and flower into mercy, truth-telling, and holiness. If it has the right dna, it is encoded for reproduction. You'll make disciples. You'll take spiritual responsibility for someone else, like Jesus has of you, and intentionally move them along in working faith.

Highlighting Good Works

Now Paul uses Abraham to make the case for faith alone, but its this kind of faith, faith that works. So for Paul faith includes intellect (it thinks) and it includes works (it acts), but not the legalistic, merit-making works of the law. Those are bad works of self-righteousness. James is talking about good works, as does Paul, that flow from true faith. In this regard, Rahab the prostitute is a great example of faith that works. She didn't just convert under the pressure of Israelites who were marching around her city. She actually helped them by hiding them from the king and throwing a scarlet rope down the wall to let Israel back in. This, we're told, was a sign of her faith, throwing the rope down. Are you throwing others a rope? Rahab is listed in the great hall of faith (not works) because she acted on her faith (Heb 11). **A closing point.** Evangelical Christians have so emphasized faith that we have intellectualized it and reduced the value of works. We minimize them very often, and we need a good dose of James. For example, if you admired a Christian friend's act of mercy, self-sacrifice, hospitality, or wisdom, you would rarely point out that good work. Evangelicals don't celebrate good works because we over intellectualized the faith. But here's James boldly highlighting the working faith of a man and a woman, one of high social position and one of low position, equals in Christ. Jesus wants us to burst with bright works: "[let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven](#)" (Matt 5:17). You say, "I don't want to puff you up."



You're not responsible for someone else's pride but you are responsible for pointing out good works, letting them shine. You say, "I want God to get the glory not that person." Then point the works out, that are clearly the result of faith in Christ, and let the glory blaze. In your face, Luther. Lets go with Jesus, with faith that works.