

JAMES 2:14-26 | WORKS IN THE KINGDOM GOSPEL

VERSE 14 –

The issue of “all talk, no walk” is always a problem among religions that require both faith and works, as Judaism did. Jesus mentioned this problem on several occasions, such as the story of the foolish man who built his house upon the sand (Matt. 7:26-27).

The question James brings to the table is none other than this: *can faith alone save?* While virtually every corner of protestant theology would give a resounding yes, even shouting the mantra “*sola fide*,” it is just as clear that virtually every corner of protestant theology would respond to the question of verse 17 with a clear answer: *no!*

The evangelical website *GotQuestions* displays this clearly in its answer about faith and works.

Grace through faith saves, and that faith is manifest in works. If someone claims to have faith yet exhibits no good works, his or her faith is “dead,” or nonexistent. The faith vs. works debate, then, is really no debate at all. Both faith and works are integral parts of the Christian life. Biblically, faith is the cause of salvation, while works are the evidence of it.¹

In short, Christianity answers the question by saying that faith is only evidenced by works and is non-existent without works, therefore **can faith save him?** It cannot.

As we continue to read this section of James, that is clearly his testimony as well.

The word **profit** is ὄφελος [ophelos], which is, taken broadly, *benefit*. James is implying that faith without works has *no benefit*. One could only assume that this meant that *faith without works cannot save*. This assumption will be confirmed in the verses that follow.

Does this mean that Ephesians 2:8-9 is wrong? Not at all. Rather, it means that James and Paul are not talking about the same kind of salvation. James’ message is Kingdom-based while Paul’s is Grace-based.

VERSES 15-16 –

James gives the first illustration of the necessity of works. This illustration comes from everyday living, while the other two come from Scripture.

The illustration is practical and clear, teaching that the verbal testimony does nothing to meet the need. It has no benefit. This aligns with other Hebrew epistles, such as 1 John 3:17.

VERSE 17 –

Could any verse of Scripture be so clear? This verse says that James rejects the *sola fide* idea of the reformation. This could be why Martin Luther had a very negative view of James. If Martin Luther had understood right division, he might have understood James and been more true to the *sola fide* concept.

Sadly, however, the rejection of James’ clear teaching is found throughout virtually all of Christendom. If James 1:1 is taken literally, then James 2:17 is in perfect harmony with all of Scripture.

Certainly if **faith...is dead** when it is **alone** then the question of v. 14 (**can faith save him?**) would require a negative answer.

¹ *What is the biblical understanding of faith vs. works?* <https://www.gotquestions.org/faith-vs-works.html> - accessed July 28, 2022.
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VERSE 18 –

James makes a “dare,” as it were: **shew me thy faith without works**. If one is discussing the Mosaic faith, it is an impossible dare (see Lev. 18:5). If one is discussing Pauline faith, then any display of works as proof of faith would *negate* faith (see Gal. 3:2, 5, 10, 11-12, etc.).

VERSE 19 –

The very heart of the Jewish faith is *the Shema*, found in Deuteronomy 6:4. The faithful Jew proclaims **Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord**. But James belittles any of his fellow Jews who do not follow that belief with *works*. His statement that **the devils also believe, and tremble** is nothing less than an outright condemnation of any kind of “faith alone” theology.

This is so problematic in Christianity (save the *right division* segment) that the preaching and teaching of this segment of Scripture inevitably works furiously to explain how James is not requiring works for salvation. The *right division* approach is so much simpler and allows words to retain their meaning.

VERSE 20 –

This is the second time that James had made this fundamental statement: **faith without works is dead**. Can a dead faith have any **profit** (v. 14)?

VERSE 21 –

James begins the second of three illustrations. Both this and the next illustration are from the pages of Scripture. Genesis 22:12 is the basis of James’ claim that Abraham was **justified by works**.

But Paul argues strongly that **if Abraham were justified by works, he hath *whereof* to glory; but not before God** (Rom. 4:2). In that context, Paul teaches that works receives in recompense a *debt paid* but not *grace* (see Rom. 4:4). Further, Paul says that **faith is counted for righteousness only to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly** (Rom. 4:5).

Since Paul and James are speaking of the same man using the same word (**justified**), either one of them is wrong about Abraham or they are referring to something different.

Both Paul and James are using Abraham to prove their point. Paul seeks to prove that Abraham was not held to the standard of the Law, which came later. James seeks to prove that faithful Jews should live like Abraham, who proved faith by works (compare v. 18).

Admittedly, this is one of the most glaring *contradictions* in the Bible. It does not serve believers well to be dismissive of the contradiction. Rather, responsible students of the Word remain comfortable with knowing that works belong to Israel (Eph. 2:10) and grace belongs to the body of Christ (Eph. 2:8-9 - one should note the change in pronouns between vv. 8-9 and 10).

VERSE 22 –

In Jewish theology, faith *plus* works work in tandem; faith creates works and works perfect faith. While this may happen in the Pauline pattern (1 Tim. 1:16), those under this new pattern are not judged by their works.

VERSE 23 –

Here James does something interesting in combining two separate Scriptures. First, he quotes Genesis 15:6, but then adds commentary, **and he was called the Friend of God** (as seen in 2 Chronicles 20:7 and Isaiah 41:8). Could it be that Genesis 15:6 is by *faith alone* (for that is all that is mentioned in the passage) and that receiving the designation as **Friend of God** is a result of the *works* of Genesis 22:10?

VERSE 24 –

James' illustrations (Abraham in v. 23, Rahab in v. 25) are Old Testament illustrations, and James was still living and operating in the age of the Law, not the revelation to Paul of the age of Grace (the Jerusalem council would not come until 4-5 years AFTER the book of James). This sheds light on James' conclusion of v. 24. Under the Law, *faith* and *works* were married together. Under grace, they are mutually exclusive (Rom. 3:28).

VERSE 25 –

James gives a one-verse illustration (his third) to illustrate the requirements of works. The illustration is of **Rahab the harlot**. The Jewish traditional belief is that Rahab converted to Judaism after being saved by Joshua (some even contend she became the wife of Joshua).

VERSE 26 –

James concludes by saying for the third time that **faith without works is dead** (v. 17, 20). He now gives the fourth illustration.

Notice the chiasmic structure of the illustrations:

A - From daily life (vv. 14-17)

B - From Scripture (vv. 21-23)

B - From Scripture (v. 25)

A - From daily life (v. 26).

When James says that **the body without the spirit is dead**, he is not referring to the Holy Spirit (note the lower-case "s"), but simply the "breath." Compare Genesis 2:7. Basically, he says, "a body that doesn't breathe is dead." James says that *works is to the Jewish faith what breath is to the physical body*.