

CHAPTER VIII

Faith without Works

James 2:14-24 is a passage frequently questioned by the lost after they hear the gospel of salvation through faith without works.

Actually, to receive proper understanding of this passage is not difficult when one keeps in mind some simple principles valuable in discerning any Scripture:

1. To whom is the author writing . . . lost or saved people?
2. What situation prompted the writing of this passage?
3. A careful study of the passage, verse by verse, not adding to or taking away from the Word of God.
4. Comparison of this passage with other passages in the Bible on the same particular issue.

Looking at James 2:14-24 from the above standpoints we find:

1. It is written to the saved, to believers. In verse 14 James says “my brethren.”
2. This entire epistle is written to Christians for their instruction on conduct and Christian service.
3. Below is a verse-by-verse consideration of the passage. James 2:14, “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?” James asks if there is any profit, any value, any fruit, if a man claims to have faith in Christ and yet doesn’t live and serve as a Christian should.

Christians are told in Ephesians 2:10, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus UNTO good works, which God hath before ordained that we SHOULD walk in them.” It is true that those who are saved are saved by faith and not by what they do; but, AFTER they are saved, God wants them to do good works.

Titus 3: 8 points this out so clearly: “This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to MAINTAIN GOOD WORKS. These things are good and profitable unto men.”

In order to help people and have a ministry with them a Christian must be careful to live a good testimony. Titus 3: 14 tells us, “And let ours also learn to maintain good works for necessary uses, that they be not UNFRUITFUL.” If you want to bear fruit for the Lord you must do good works . . . not to be saved . . . but to be fruitful.

So to answer James’s first question—There is no profit, no fruit, if a man says he has faith but doesn’t produce any works. He is saved, but he is an unfruitful Christian. John 15: 2 warns those who are saved—in Christ—but do not bear fruit, “Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh away....” God removes the Christian who is a stumbling block to others.

The next question in James 2:14 is “Can faith save him?” Romans 4:5 answers this clearly: “But to him that worketh NOT, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith IS COUNTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS.” Yes, faith can save him. In fact, nothing else could. When a person tries to be saved by faith and works, he cannot be saved (Romans 11:6; Gal. 5:2; Gal. 5:4).

James 2:15, 16, “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?" The answer is that it doesn't profit that hungry person at all. You have not helped a person's material needs—you have not provided him with food or clothes—just by telling him to leave in peace.

James 2:17, "Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone." Yes, it is true, that if you have faith in Christ, but do not work and serve the Lord, your faith will not bear FRUIT. The word "dead" in this verse is "nekros" (Greek) and means "useless." (See Greek-English Lexicon, by Arndt and Gingrich, Univ. of Chicago Press, page 536.)

If you have faith in the Lord, but you don't do anything for others, your faith will not be of any value to them. It will be useless to them. You are not demonstrating your faith in Christ to others by just telling them to "Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled," if you are not willing to do something to help them. In fact, you will be a discredit to Christianity and do much harm to the gospel.

James 2:18, "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." A Christian could say, "You have faith and I have good works. You tell me you have so much faith without showing me any good works, but I will tell you I have faith, and you can SEE that I have faith because my works SHOW that I believe."

James 2:19, "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble." Even the devils cannot deny there is a God. But believing in God isn't enough to save. You must believe what God, the Lord Jesus Christ, has done for you and accept His payment for your sin to be saved.

James 2:20, "But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?" As in v. 17, faith without works is of no use to other people. A saved person who doesn't serve the Lord lives a vain, useless Christian life. He will be chastised in this life and have no reward in the thousand year reign of Christ (Hebrews 12:6; I Cor. 3:15). He will not have love, joy, or peace in his life, as these things are not the results of living for yourself, but the results of living for the Lord, disciplining your life under the direction of, and by the power of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

James 2: 21, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?" The answer to James's question here is "YES!" Yes, Abraham was justified by works WHEN he offered up Isaac. But the question is, justified BEFORE WHOM? Before men, or before God? AT THAT TIME when men saw the

great faith Abraham had, that he even offered his son to God at His request, Abraham was justified in the sight of MEN. They knew, by his works, that here was a man who truly had great faith in God. His faith was DEMONSTRATED in the sight of man by his works.

But WHEN was Abraham justified in the sight of GOD? The Lord justified Abraham by his faith MANY YEARS before he offered up Isaac. In fact, Abraham was justified before Isaac was even born! "And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

Galatians 3:6-11 is very clear on this. "Even as Abraham BELIEVED God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of FAITH, the same are the children of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through FAITH, preached before the GOSPEL unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed.

So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham. For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. But that NO man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for the just shall live by FAITH."

James 2: 22, "Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?" How true and clear this verse really is. PEOPLE see, YOU see, that Abraham—through faith—through absolute trust and confidence in God—offered up his son . . . and this act (work) proved to people that he certainly had GREAT FAITH.

James 2:23, “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.” The Scripture that was fulfilled is Genesis 15:6, “And he BELIEVED in the Lord, and He (God) counted it (Abraham’s faith) to him for righteousness.” Yes, Abraham’s BELIEF was imputed to him for righteousness. God puts His righteousness to the account of the believer because He has already paid the penalty of the believer’s sins.

James 2:24, “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.” PEOPLE, then, see by a person’s works that he has faith. PEOPLE do not have the ability that God has to see a person’s faith—to know a person’s mind.

I Samuel 16:7 makes this very clear, “But the Lord said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as MAN seeth: for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.”

To briefly summarize James 2: 14-24—This passage teaches us that if people are to REALIZE that a person has faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, they must be able to see the person’s good works. Man looks at your LIFE and judges (rightly or wrongly) whether or not you have faith. Therefore, believers should take utmost care, as Titus 3:8 points out, to maintain a good testimony. This has nothing to do with the person’s salvation, but it does have a lot to do with how much influence his life is going to have upon others for the Lord Jesus Christ.

4. Compare James 2: 14-24 with verses in Romans, chapter four. This chapter is speaking of the SAME person, Abraham, and the SAME issue, his justification. Was he justified by his faith or by his works?

Romans 4:1, 2, “What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God.”

We just read, in James 2:21, that Abraham WAS justified by his works! Yes, indeed . . . WHEN he offered Isaac, his son, upon the altar, PEOPLE realized he had faith, and he was considered a great man in the sight of the people. His works justified him in the eyes of the people at that time. He could “glory” in the public acclaim of his great faith. But IN THE SIGHT OF GOD, he received justification many years before . . . as was pointed out . . . even before Isaac was born!

Although God wants us to live the right kind of lives, doing good works, serving Him, He doesn’t need our good works to SHOW Him we have faith. He is a “mind reader.” He knows how we really feel deep inside. Man doesn’t have this ability to know perfectly the thoughts of others.

God says in Ezekiel 11:5, “. . . I know the things that come into your mind, every one of them.” And in I Samuel 16:7, “. . . for the Lord seeth NOT AS MAN SEETH; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.”

The question raised in Romans 4:3 is: What does the BIBLE say about Abraham’s justification? “For what saith the Scripture? Abraham BELIEVED God, and it (his belief) was counted unto him for righteousness.” This is referring back to Genesis 15:6, as we quoted before.

Romans 4:4, “Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.” Salvation is by grace. If you work for something, your pay isn’t by grace; it is owed to you. A laborer gets his pay at the end of the week because he EARNED it by his work, not because of the GRACE of the employer.

But our salvation is by the GRACE of our Lord Jesus Christ, and not as the outcome of our works. And it is a good thing salvation is by grace and not of works because nobody could be perfect enough for heaven by works, anyway. If a person thinks he could get to heaven by his good works, a good question to ask him is, “How many good works do you think you have to do to go to heaven?” or “How good do you think you would have to be to go to heaven?” God says if we sin in just one thing (James 2:10) we are still imperfect, even as if we had sinned a lot.

God doesn’t save anyone who is trusting Christ AND ALSO trusting his GOOD WORKS to save him. Because salvation is by grace, it cannot be of works at all. Romans 11:6, “And if by grace, then is it no

more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.” (It’s like saying: “If you have ice, then you do not have steam, because if you had steam you would no longer have ice. But if you have steam, then you do not have ice, otherwise steam is no longer steam.”)

In salvation, grace and works are “mutually exclusive.” Satan is always trying to reverse things in people’s minds. He tries to get them to think they have to work to be saved, and then tries to keep them from working after they are saved. I PRAY that you wouldn’t let Satan ever confuse your message of God’s saving grace!

Romans 4:5 is one of the clearest verses proving salvation is by faith, without works. Let’s examine this verse phrase by phrase.

“But to him that worketh not” . . . To him who doesn’t do ANY work at all.

“But believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly” . . . But believes on Jesus who gives His righteousness to sinners.

“His faith is counted for righteousness” . . . God sees his faith, and because of his faith gives him righteousness.

Romans 3:28 gives God’s judgment and wisdom on the matter in finality, “Therefore we CONCLUDE that a man is justified by faith WITHOUT the deeds of the law.”

Then, referring back to the thirty-second Psalm, Romans 4:6-8 tells us, “Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth RIGHTEOUSNESS WITHOUT WORKS, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.” Blessed is the man of whom God says, “I will not charge your sins to you. I have paid for them Myself.” God says this, however, only to the man who trusts Christ alone for his salvation. God never says this to the man who tries to get to heaven by his own works, in full or in part.

In trying to lead a person to the Lord, answer his questions as briefly and simply as you can. Agree with him— Abraham WAS justified by his works— but NOT BEFORE GOD. Go into detail only as you have to.

If the person does not, for some reason, seem to understand the true meaning of James, chapter two, even after you have explained it to him using Romans, chapter four, we recommend that you take him back to Ephesians 2:8, 9 and stay there a while. If by this time he doesn’t see the light, perhaps his problem doesn’t come from a particular passage like in James, but rather from a complete lack of comprehension of the plan of salvation itself. Go over it again with him. Stay with clear, positive Scriptures on salvation because it will still be the GOSPEL that will be the power God uses to bring him to Christ for salvation.

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