

FPFWC Christian Development



Faith and Wisdom in James

August 2020

Winter Quarter

August 15, 2020

Lesson #3 –Living Faith

SCRIPTURE TEXT – James 2:14-26

Key Verse- *As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. —James 2:26*

ICE BREAKERS

1. What questions could Christians ask themselves that would reveal whether their faith was dead or dying?

LESSON BACKGROUND –

For all the controversy that James 2 has generated on the role of works over the centuries, it can come as a surprise to see how often works are related to salvation elsewhere in Scripture. Consider the scene Jesus paints in Matthew 25:31-46. In the judgment, individual believers are judged on the basis of what they have done or not done—their works.

Also a pointed statement is Revelation 20:12, 13, where the apostle John says he

saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.

As important as that issue is, it's easy to allow it to overshadow something else James stresses: the specific economic needs—the reality of life for so many in the ancient world—that drives much of his thoughts in James 2. The first half of the chapter (verses 1-13) warns against discriminating against the poor in favor of the rich; economic need also is an integral part of his argument regarding faith and works in the second half—today's text.

LESSON COMMENTARY –

Value of Good Works (2:14-26)

2:14. For James, being "quick to hear" (1:19) meant to be prompt to obey God's command to do good deeds that benefit others. But the readers had neglected good works, content to claim their justification before God by faith alone. James agreed that justification before God was by faith alone. But believers must add works to their faith to develop maturity. Then they will be justified (called righteous) by their works in the eyes of other people (cf. Mt 5:16). A person who says he has faith finds it easy to talk his faith while lacking useful deeds. Bible

teachers may be in mind (cf. 3:1-12). The question Can [" that" is not in Gk.] faith save him? demands a negative answer in Greek ("Faith cannot save him, can it?") and appears to contradict justification by faith alone (Rm 3:27-28; 4:4-5; Gl 2:16; Eph 2:8-9). But James's use of the Greek verb "save" (soizo) is flexible. This is evident in 5:15, where James uses the word in a way that does not mean "delivered from eternal judgment." Contextually, "save" in v. 14 is equivalent to the believer's triumph over a stern evaluation ("judgment") by God mentioned in 2:13 and 3:1 (an inclusio). (Also see comments on "save" at 1:21.) So the phrase, "Can faith [alone] save him?" asks if a believer without acts of mercy will be able to escape a strict evaluation at the believer's final performance review.

2:15-16. What if a Christian brother or sister has life-threatening conditions such as lack of clothing and need of daily food? Well-wishing words cannot provide any meaningful assistance for them. So it is if one has genuine faith, but does not activate it during times of trial. What use is that? suggests especially that when saving faith is connected with action, there is great benefit in this life.

2:17. The conclusion (even so) is that faith, without works, is dead. Faith is all by itself and lacks vibrancy. A "dead faith" is a weak, lethargic (immature, but nevertheless present) faith (cf. "sin is dead," Rm 7:8; also see "Introduction: Recipients"). James's point appears to be that if one has true faith in Christ, it does one no practical good in this life of trials if it is not put into action. Neither does a "dead faith" "save one's life" (see the comments on 1:21).

2:18-19. The words someone may... say introduce an imaginary opponent ("well" is not in the Gk. text). In two other NT passages introducing an imaginary objector, the response of the inspired author begins with a remark of his opponent's foolishness (cf. Rm 9:19-20; 1Co 15:35-36). This makes it likely that the objector's words to James continue through v. 19 (cf. Richard Francis Weymouth, *The New Testament in Modern Speech*, ed. Ernest Hampden-Cook (Boston: Pilgrim Press), 1903) and James's response begins in v. 20 with "you foolish fellow." The opponent challenges: Show me your faith by [some Gk. texts read without] your works, and I will show you by my works my faith [the order of the Gk. words is given]. The opponent insists that faith cannot be seen through works. One may start by naming a doctrine and then try to show the work that will always come from that belief ("show me your faith by your works"). Or one could do the reverse. He could name a good work and try to demonstrate the doctrine that must be behind it ("and I will show you by my works my faith"). The opponent thinks both are impossible. Suppose James starts with a doctrine: "I believe God is a God of love (doctrine). So I treat others with sacrificial love (a good work)." The objector would answer, "Ha! I know lots of people who love others sacrificially and don't even believe in God. So works don't show what you believe!" The objector is so confident in his argument that he answers for James: "James, you believe that God is one [a doctrine], and you do well, i.e., you do good works. But the demons also believe God is one [a doctrine], but do no good works. They just shudder in fear of judgment." With this argument, the objector rests his case.

2:20. James's response now begins (vv. 18-19 are the objector's thoughts). The opponent's words are foolish and lack wisdom (1:5; 3:13-17). Often Christian teachers (3:1) have an unteachable spirit. Likewise, James questions if his opponent is willing to recognize the truth: faith without works secures eternal life but is useless to meet the practical needs of others, to experience blessings for one's self in this life, or to gain eternal rewards.

2:21-23. Abraham initially believed God and was justified before God by faith alone (Gn 15:6; Rm 4:1-5, 9-12; Gl 3:1-6). His faith was in a God who could resurrect the dead (Rm 4:17-21). In Gn 22, 30 years after his initial faith for which God counted him righteous, Abraham offered up Isaac his son on the altar (Gn 22:1; Heb 11:19). You see (second person singular) corrects the objector's contention that faith cannot be seen in works. Abraham's faith is unmistakably visible. Being justified by works is not before God (Rm 3:20; Gl 3:11) but before people (cf. Mt 5:16).

In addition, justified sometimes means "to demonstrate that one is in the right" (cf. Lk 7:29, 35; Rm 3:4; 1Tm 3:16) and does not always have the Pauline sense of "God's declaration that one is innocent of the charge that he is a sinner" and is given eternal life. Abraham's faith was cooperating or working with his works, so that faith might be perfected (teleioo), i.e., matured. Abraham's works brought added depth in a practical sense to the faith he possessed inasmuch as it enabled him to experience the blessings of a fresh encounter with God (cf. Gn 22:15-19), and he gained an extraordinary reputation among men (he was called the friend of God, v. 23; cf. 2Ch 20:7; Isa 41:8). A believer combines faith with good works, not so that he can attain heaven, but so that he may gain spiritual blessings in this life and honor from the Father in the world to come.

2:24. You see (second person plural) now addresses the readers. The word alone (monon) modifies the verb justified, not the words by faith: "You see that a man is justified [i.e., demonstrates to others that he is righteous or holy; see the comments on "justified" for v. 21 above] by works, and not only [monon] by faith." James was calling attention to two ways of justification: by faith before God, and by works before people. While one is justified (declared righteous) before God by faith alone, one is justified (demonstrates his godliness) before people by his or her works.

2:25. By faith (Heb 11:31) Rahab the harlot received the Jewish spies and hid them in her house (Jos 2:1-24). She could have betrayed the spies, but she sent them out by another way, adding works to her new faith. Rahab had faith in the God of Israel (Jos 2:11), yet if she had not acted on that faith, she would have perished when Jericho was destroyed (see comment on 1:21 on "save your souls"). Instead, she activated the faith she had, hid the spies, was spared, and experienced God's blessings among the Jewish people.

2:26. For a body to be active and alive, it must have a spirit. So also faith in Christ must have works added to it since works give vitality and energy to faith.

LESSON NUGGET – Faith is not something you only talk about; it is something that motivates your life so that you think of others and serve them. Abraham was saved by faith, but he proved that faith by obeying God and offering his son (Gen.22). Rahab was saved by trusting God, but she showed the reality of her faith by protecting the spies. James and Paul do not contradict each other. We are justified (declared righteous) before God by faith, but we are justified before men by works. God can see our faith, but men can see only our works.

Sources: *Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary*