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The Book of James, Dead and Useless Faith

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Greg Beaupied / cell: (919) 710-9147 / Greg.Beaupied@capitolcom.org / 206 New Bern Place, Raleigh, NC 27601

James 2:14-19

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

Introduction

There are two directions that might take a person away from Christ and, therefore, not have a true saving faith. First, it is a deadly mistake to think that good works has any value to earn salvation. It will be clear that James loudly proclaims a true believer in Christ will do good works, but the Scripture equally declares good works do not produce salvation. Second, another person might know all of the correct doctrines about Christ: His dying on the cross for salvation, His resurrection, His authority over Heaven and Earth, and His deep love for mankind, and yet that person may only possess an intellectual knowledge of the facts without possessing saving faith.

A faith that believes we are saved by works alone is dead. A faith that believes we are saved by knowledge of doctrine without works is also dead.

Let us be blunt and to the point as we unpack this portion of James' message. True saving faith believes that Christ lived and died to secure our salvation; it personally trusts in the saving work of Christ; it repents of sin; and it produces works that please God because the one who is saved is a new creation—he or she is born again.

Faith that is not accompanied by good works is dead and useless. Works that are not accompanied by true faith in Christ

are dead and useless. Both sides are found on the “currency” of salvation.

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?

It is obvious in the Greek original that the answer to this question is, “It is no good.” The biblical Greek has a particular way of asking a question when the answer is negative and another way of asking a question when the answer is positive. James is actually saying, “If a man claims to have faith without deeds, that faith is no good.” As one aphorism states it, “We are saved by faith alone but never by an alone faith.” True faith produces good works.

We should also notice that James states that this man *claims* to have faith. Many claim to have faith but that is as deep as their faith goes. In America the majority of people would claim to have faith, but all too often this is a profession that is empty of God-pleasing works.

James has been writing about this true faith all along. True faith trusts God with joy during trials. True faith produces people who are not merely hearers but doers. True faith seeks to care for widows and orphans. True faith does not display favoritism among individuals. Here, James is really saying the same thing he has already been saying—he just does it bluntly without beating around the theological bush.

Can such faith save him?

Again, the answer to this text is unmistakably obvious in the original. The only answer grammatically possible is, “No.” It might be wrongly assumed that James is contradicting what Paul says when he declares, “We have been justified by faith” (Romans 5:1). Remember Paul also said, we are “created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (Ephesians 2:10).

Jesus, Paul, and the other New Testament writers agree with James that faith without works is dead. Jesus told us to let our good works shine, but he also said that not everyone who says, Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5:16 and 7:21). Hebrews says without sanctification no man will see

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the Lord (2:14). John tells us, “he who does what is right is righteous” (1John 3:7).

Therefore, we must not look for contradictions in Scripture where none exist. We need to be careful to read the Bible as a whole and not pull out one verse and pit it against another verse. It has been said a text without a context is a pretext.

Phony Compassion

If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

James gives us a specific example of the principle he has been teaching. *Saying* you care about a person is not the same thing as *doing* acts of compassion that demonstrate real concern. If a person says he cares but takes no opportunity to actually help the person then his words are empty. Do your words match your actions (verse 1:26)?

James asks another one of those “negative answer” questions, “What good is it?” The only possible answer is, “It is no good.” How often we say kind things to someone but fail to do the kindness needed to relieve their burden. We may foolishly think we have done something good by feigning compassion but James says our so called compassion is worthless.

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

The illustration is complete and the lesson is bluntly stated: Faith that does not produce godly actions is dead.

Presumption

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

This passage can be somewhat difficult to understand because we do not know who the “someone” refers to and that can hinder us from getting the point. James is saying one person has faith but no works are evident, and another person has obvious good works. If both claim to be Christians by

professions of faith, which one is more likely to have real, substantive faith?

Faith is invisible and we cannot see it. What we can see is the fruit of true faith. *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith* (2 Corinthians 13:5).

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

Knowing about God without trusting Christ for your personal salvation puts you in company with demons! The comparison is intellectual assent vs. saving faith.

Intellectual assent is the kind of knowledge one can learn by taking a New Testament course in college. It is possible the professor who is teaching the course knows the Bible in great detail, understands Hebrew and Greek, knows both systematic and biblical theology, and grasps the intricate details of redemption history but still is not a believer—he may be an atheist! The students receiving the instruction may have a better understanding of biblical facts than they possessed before taking the course, but are no closer to God than when they began. Many teachers and learners use their “knowledge” to bolster their doubts, not to better understand God and the hope of eternal life. Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.

Millions of people know about God, dutifully go to church (even the “right” church), have fond memories of childhood Sunday school, but they are trusting in their knowledge of religion and failing to trust God and the hope of redemption offered by Him through Christ alone.

Points to Ponder...

1. Knowing about God is not the same thing as knowing God, even when the knowledge about God is correct.
2. Faith is invisible so we only have two ways of knowing if a person might have faith. One way is words that express faith, but the better way are actions that demonstrates faith.
3. Remember many of the good works of true saving faith have already been mentioned by James, and others will follow in his epistle.
4. Read Luke 6:46-49.