

## James 2:14-26

# Works Without Faith is Dead

Without a doubt, the most controversial and difficult passage in James is right here. So significant is the difficulty that Martin Luther wrote James off as an “epistle of straw” and placed it at the end of his translation of the Bible hoping few would make it that far to read. He told his students that anyone that can reconcile James 2:14-26 with the teachings of the Apostle Paul would be given his doctoral hat.

Challenge accepted.

For Luther (and others), the controversy regards the biblical teaching on Justification by Faith alone. Scripture is clear that we are saved (justified) by faith apart from works. The only “work” that saves us is the finished work of Christ at the cross and the empty tomb. He settles our debt. He saves us from sin. He crushes the serpent’s head. He conquers death. We merely receive the promise.

James agrees with that assessment. At no point does he suggest that salvation is a combination of both faith and works. Rather, he is writing to a different audience with a different purpose. Saved by the works of Christ, we are called to do the works of Christ. That is James’ point.

He begins by asking a piercing question, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (vs. 14) One can easily see, in isolation, why Luther assumed James is addressing salvation. Notice where he goes next. “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? <sup>17</sup>So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (vs. 15-17)

Clearly, James is concerned with a passive, private faith that fails to address the needs of our neighbors. Merely saying, “be warmed and filled,” is not the same as warming the cold and filling the hungry. James goes on to argue that faith is demonstrated by works. Again, this is not to suggest one’s salvation is based on works, but that the redeemed heart is a sanctified one.

“Show me your faith,” he writes, “apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” (vs. 18b). Given that saving faith is a transformation of the heart, it can only be demonstrated by acts of love. Consider one’s marriage. If you say you love your spouse but refuse to demonstrate that love, how real is it? So too, if we say we have faith yet fail to demonstrate it, how genuine is it? How can we believe in a resurrected Christ who healed the sick and loved children while remain cold-hearted and passive to the needs of our neighbors?

Jesus makes a similar argument when he suggests, “every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.” (Matthew 7:17-18)

In short, James (as well as the rest of Scripture) wants us to limit salvation to faith, but the Christian life, lived by faith, is demonstrated by acts of love and sanctification. What good is joining a sports team content with sitting on the bench? Would one not want to practice hard and earn their spot on the team? Why, then, do so many Christians profess faith, but show no clear evidence of it?

The God who saves, sanctifies. The God who justifies, moves us to do the deeds of Christ. Show your faith by showing your works. Show your works to show your faith.