

Faith Or Works? James 2:1-26,

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ 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^[b] is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”

I have been told by people who the English language can be a very challenging language to learn. Part of that is because many ordinary words that we use in everyday conversation can have many different meanings. **Take the word “run,” for example, which according to dictionary.com, has over 179 different meanings for the word.** How would you understand the phrase, **“I need to run through this.”**

Does it mean you physically need to run through something?

Does it mean that you need to practice or review something?

The phrase by itself is rather ambiguous given the variety of meanings. That is not the only word with multiple meanings. Words like **“cut,” “hand,” “break,” and “set” all have over 90 possible interpretations.** How do we know what they mean? **We use context. Context helps us to better understand a word’s meaning. Context is important.** As we look at James chapter two, we see the same rule at play. Context is important, and it is key for how we understand this chapter. For here, James teaches us about works’ relationship with faith. For when we see James 2 within the context of Scripture and the book itself, the Apostles’ point becomes clear and understood.

James says in verse 14, **“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?”** Later in verse 26, he concludes, **“For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”** At a first glance, this seems to be at odds with the Apostle Paul, the champion of **“we are saved by grace through faith alone.”** James seems to muddy the waters by bringing works into the mix, and their role in salvation. It seems like we have a potential problem on our hands, here. But remember, we need to look at the context. We need to see James 2 within the context of Scripture, and especially, with the context of Paul.

Is James the Apostle at odds with Paul the Apostle? Why do they sound so different? **Paul and James both have different audiences.**

They are writing about two different sets of problems.

In his letters, **Paul writes against legalism, the idea that I saved by works rather than by grace.** Paul says that is not the case. We are saved by grace. We right with God through Jesus. Legalism is the problem that Paul writes about.

But this isn’t the problem that James faces. **The problem his audience faces his laxity. They are lazy and lukewarm in their faith. They say, “Since we are saved by faith alone, what does it matter what we do or not do? It doesn’t make a difference! We’re saved by grace, not works.”** That is James’ problem. Both apostles also have different focuses.

Paul writes about the root of salvation. He answers the question: **“What is the basis for my relationship with the God of the Universe?”** And it is from what we receive and are given in Jesus Christ, gifts like faith and His forgiveness. That is where our salvation and relationship with God comes from, and is based on.

James, however, writes about the fruit of salvation. **He talks about how we respond in faith to God saving us in Jesus Christ. He talks about the fruit of salvation, works.** That is what he is concerned about.

They also have different points. **Paul writes about how to know you're a Christian.** Again, it is by faith alone, by what we receive and are in Jesus Christ. This isn't based on what I have done or will do, but rather, what Jesus has done for me. James is concerned with how to show you are a Christian. He focuses on what does it mean that Jesus died and rose for me. He writes about what it means for our daily walk of faith. James and Paul have different contexts.

But do they conflict on their teachings about salvation? Paul gives the most definitive and clear explanation of how are saved, and how that relates to works. In Ephesians 2:8-10, he writes, **"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Jesus Christ for good works."** Did you catch that? **We are saved by grace through faith alone.** Our works have nothing to do with it. However, we have been given new life and have been created for good works. Good works naturally follow and flow from faith. **They cannot be separated from it although they don't save us.**

James would agree with this. He believes we are saved by faith alone. In chapter 1, he says that God gave us new birth through His Word of truth. In 1:21, he says we have the implanted Word which is able to save our souls. In chapter 4, he writes that God is able to save, and in chapter 5, says that God forgives as well as being merciful and compassionate. This is not a guy who thinks and says that works save. So, what is he saying here in chapter 2?

Remember his context? He is writing to those who are lax in their faith.

There are two sinful outcomes when Christians dismiss works because they cannot save. **A person does whatever they want because God's grace is there to pick us up, or we do nothing because it counts for nothing.** We treat them like the extra readings on a college class list that will not be on the test. We don't do them. But these actions aren't the response of faith, or are faith. **James is after a definition of faith that is comprehensive and distinct from those who say that deeds don't matter in light of faith. That is what chapter two is about, and so the apostle teaches about faith.**

He says that faith is not merely something that we say. **"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?"**

James is using an example where faith is completely divorced from works and faithful living. It is divorced from actions done in response to being saved. It is all talk. He says that is not a saving faith. This faith doesn't produce fruit in response to God's mercy and love given freely in Jesus Christ. **It is not the works save, they don't. This faith is responding to what God has given. James isn't wrong here about this faith. He gives an everyday example to prove his point.**

He says, **"If a brother or sister is poorly clothed, or literally, naked, and lacking in daily food, 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? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."**

In James' example, it is pretty obvious to see that the person is in need. Their clothes are tattered or they are naked. The person is weak from not eating. Seeing that, what do you do? The faith he described sees this and gives nice and pious responses. It says, **"Go in peace. Be warm. Be filled" and doesn't do a thing. He says not only does that do nothing for that person, it doesn't reflect faith. It doesn't respond to God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ. It really is just talk.**

And our text ends with verse 18, where he writes, **"But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."**

If you were to go to a nursery to buy an apple tree, **what would be some of the ways to know what you were buying.** You could certainly ask an employee, or check the sign or tag. **However, the most precise and guaranteed way would be to see if the tree actually had apples. You could without a doubt know that that tree produces apples. With the other options, you better hope they are right!** It is the same concept here.

A tree is known by its fruit. James says that we cannot see faith, but we can see the fruit of faith, which is good works. He builds on that with the examples of Abraham and Rahab, who acted in accord with their faith. James focuses on works, but we cannot forget the context.

We are saved by grace through faith alone. We are saved because of Jesus' death and resurrection for us that forgives us off all our sins. We have been given new life in Him through our baptism, that welcomes us into God's family as His loved and redeemed children. **Our works will never ever save us, nor do they count**

towards our salvation. They spring forth out of gratitude and love for what our God has done for us in and through Jesus Christ. We cannot ever forget this context. IN JESUS' NAME, AMEN.