

Fact Sheet for **“Faith without Works”**  
**James 2:14-26**

Pastor Bob Singer  
06/30/2019

The Apostle Paul wrote to those who were well acquainted with the Jewish belief that if you were in obedience to the Law of Moses that would make you righteous (justified) before God. But Paul, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, and as to the Law a Pharisee, clearly argued that God’s way of being justified was by faith (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16)! Now we come to what James, Jesus’ own brother, and head of the church in Jerusalem, would write...

**2:24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.**

Wait a minute! Have we just found a contradiction in the Bible? Did Paul say one thing while James said another? Not at all! Let’s take a closer look as to what James was meaning.

**14a ¶ What good (advantage, profit, benefit, gain) is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?**

What value does that faith have if it is not accompanied by works? This is certainly true of what we call “saving faith.” If someone says they have asked Jesus Christ to be their savior and forgive their sins, but there is no change of life and they continue to live like the world, then there is ample reason to doubt the genuineness of their faith. But the word “someone” in this verse is not limited to people who are Christians in name only. Real Christians too can step into the trap of relying on their faith, but have little devotion. Their faith is not accompanied by the works it should have. And think about this. You can do really well in one area and really poorly in another. James then presented an example of a work that should accompany a healthy faith but highlighted their problem with money.

**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 is that?**

The words “go in peace” were a polite Jewish saying (1 Samuel 1:17; Mark 5:34; Luke 7:50). Remember that there were very few safety nets in that day. This is one sort of work that should accompany true faith.

**17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.**

Workless faith is worthless faith. James is pressing them towards devotion. Their problem they had with money was not only in its gaining. It is also in its holding.

**18a But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.”**

The pronouns “you” and “I” in this verse have thrown some commentators off track. Think about James’ line of reasoning. James is pressing his Christian readers to show the works that accompany true faith. They were having a problem with this, particularly as it related to money. If this hypothetical individual was saying that James (“you”) have faith and I (this “someone”) have works, then this would turn the whole passage upside down because James was pressing them to have works that accompany true faith. You would have expected this hypothetical individual to have said, “You have works and I have faith.”

There is another way of looking at this verse that fits very well in the context of James’ reasoning. This is a statement that asserts that faith and works aren’t necessarily related to one another. In other words it is possible for one person to have faith with few works, and another to have works with little faith. You could phrase it this way... “One person has faith, another has deeds.”

**18<sup>b</sup> 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!**

Now here is a little interpretive gem. The word translated "faith" in James is the noun "pis'-tis." The word translated "believe" in verse 19 is "pis-teu'-oh," the verbal form of that noun. James was still speaking about faith here when we read "believe"! You could translate this verse, "You have faith 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.**

There is no contradiction with what Paul taught. If these three passages are studied in their own contexts the seeming contradiction disappears. Paul, in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians, was countering the Jewish idea that salvation was gained by being obedient to the Mosaic Law. When he wrote of faith in these verses he had in mind true faith. James wrote his words to those who had a weak faith, that is it was a faith with shallow devotion.

**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.**

James spoke to a specific problem that his readers had, and it related to money. Let's take the principle that James was pointing out and apply that to our lives...

### **Faith without works is useless**

As I mentioned before we may be doing very well in one area and very poorly in another. How do you know?

#### **1. Pay attention to the Holy Spirit's voice**

*Read Hebrews 4:12.* What is the Holy Spirit saying to you about your actions in relation to God's Word? It can be easy to justify yourself.

Here's one that catches a lot of Christians. *Read Romans 12:18; Galatians 5:22-23.* I've known known people who are truly Christians but who, from time to time, have trouble relating kindly to other Christians. Their faith is not translating into their works. Here's another that snares many Christians. *Read Hebrews 13:4.*

If you think about it you can come up with a whole multitude of other examples.

#### **2. Pay attention to yourself, not to others**

Read what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:3).

#### **3. Think about how others are reacting to you**

Pay attention to their words, tone of voice, and body language. Do this not just for strangers, but more importantly for those who are close to you and know you well. Are they angry at you or hurt by you? Don't just quickly write them off. Prayerfully evaluate your actions in light of God's Word. If you need to ask someone you trust for advice. You will know it clearly when the Holy Spirit says you need to change or are righteous.

This is what James meant when he wrote that faith without works is useless. And both he and Paul would agree in their theology.