



The unfolding of your words gives light.

Faith That Works

An Exposition of the Book of James

¹⁴What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works^a? Can that faith save him^b? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food^c, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled^d," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that^e? ¹⁷Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.^g

^a 2:14 **What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works.**

James is saying that there is no advantage or "use" (see also verse 16) in making claims that cannot be supported. As Proverbs 14:23 says, "In all labor there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty." Professions of faith get nothing done.

^b 2:14 **Can that faith save him.** The KJV translates this "can faith save him?" If this were correct, we might legitimately wonder if James contradicts Paul. However the original has an article and is properly translated "*that* faith" or "*that kind of* faith." It is not *faith* that James belittles in this passage, but *fraudulent* faith. There are different kinds of faith, as he goes on to illustrate.

^c 2:15 **If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food.** Those who see a contradiction between James and Paul overlook a number of things, not the least of which is the fact that Paul's Galatian legalists did not encourage compassion. The encouraged circumcision. Neither James nor Paul demand outward conformity to the Royal Law as a means of salvation. Both James and Paul (Ephesians 2:10) demand other-focused lives as evidence of genuine faith.

^d 2:16 **one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled."** This could be translated "warm yourself and fill yourself." Either way, the well-wisher is excusing himself from helping a vulnerable person. The well-wisher is sending someone away in need, hoping someone else will bother to help. Certainly this applies to those who have no food, but it also applies to our personal ministry to hurting people. What do you do when your friend is depressed or even suicidal? What do you do when your friend is bingeing and purging or cutting herself? It is much easier to pass them off to a secular "professional" or let them fade into the loneliness of the church than it is to get your hands dirty and minister God's all-sufficient word to their problems.

^e 2:16 **and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that.** See the echo of "what use?" from verse 14. Claiming faith without works is of no more benefit than well-wishes to a starving person. Feeling for someone does not help them.

^f 2:17 **Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.** Man was not created as an image to be put on display. He was created to live. Likewise faith.

^g 2:14-17 There are certainly differing viewpoints on the correct interpretation of James, not the least of which is the disagreement over whether we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. Some see a disagreement between James and Paul. Others reconcile the two but argue that Paul also believed we are saved by faith plus works. Others like me hold vigorously to the position that no works (legal or compassionate) can change our standing before God. Why even enter the debate? Is this relevant to real life? Yes. Here is why:

1. There are different kinds of faith.
2. You either have saving faith or you do not.
3. The kind of faith you have is a matter of public display.

James 2.14-17
Steven Svendsen, Sr.

©Rice Lake Baptist Church, 104 East Barker Street, Rice Lake, Wisconsin, 54868 – <http://www.ricelakebaptist.org> – 715.234.1966

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way and that you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction.
Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.