

The unfolding of your words gives light.

Faith That Works

An Exposition of the Book of James

¹⁸But someone may well say^a, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works^b." ¹⁹You believe that God is one You do well^c; the demons also believe, and shudder^d. ²⁰But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless^e? ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar^f? ²²You see that

^a 2:18 **But someone may well say.** James is making use of a debate technique where he creates an imaginary "someone" to raise common objections to his teaching.

^b 2:18 **show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.** Here is the key phrase in this section: "show me." James readily confesses in the next paragraph that Abraham was justified before God because he believed, but that faith convinced no one on earth. The world stands by and watches those of us who claim to believe in Christ and says, "Show me."

^c 2:19 **You believe that God is one You do well.** Believing the great Jewish confession of faith found in Deuteronomy 6:4 is the foundation of knowing God. But is memorizing the catechism and "believing in God" proof of a changed heart? Read on.

^d 2:19 **the demons also believe, and shudder.** Can a demon have faith? According to this the answer is yes. This argument reinforces James' contention that there are different kinds of faith. The kind of faith that saves is distinct from the kind of faith that gives intellectual assent. Even a demon knows the facts of his own imminent demise and believes them. Albert Barnes points out that demons are not atheists (as much as they must like to promote it). The word translated "shudder" implies something shaggy or bristling like hair standing on end. There may be some sarcasm on James' part here. He may be saying, "at least the faith of demons produces something in their lives."

^e 2:20 **But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless.** The older manuscripts have a play on words here (works/useless = *ergon argay*). The foolish or "empty" fellow does not see that faith without works is "inactive and ineffective and worthless" (*Amplified Bible*).

^f 2:21 **Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar.** Does James contradict Paul? It will help us understand the apparent contradiction if we recognize that the word "justification" is used in more than one way. We properly understand the biblical doctrine of justification as the judicial act of God by which he declares men righteous based on the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). But words mean different things based on context. Clearly Paul used the word *dikaioo* to describe the imputed righteousness of Christ. Elsewhere the word was used to mean "to vindicate."

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. Matthew 11:19

For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. Matthew 12:37

When all the people and the tax collectors heard this, they acknowledged God's justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John. Luke 7:29

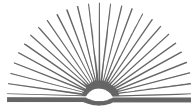
Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children. Luke 7:35

But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Luke 10:29

James 2.18-26
Steven Svendsen, Sr.

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faith was working with his works^a, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected^b; ²³and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,"^c and he was called the friend of God^d. ²⁴You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone^e. ²⁵In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way^f? ²⁶For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead^{g,h}.

I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted. Luke 18:14

and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses. Acts 13:39

^a 2:22 **You see that faith was working with his works.** This is a very straightforward translation showing that faith and works are inseparable.

^b 2:22 **as a result of the works, faith was perfected.** That is, faith was brought to maturity. A tadpole is a frog but you cannot see it until its legs come out and it loses its tail. Likewise genuine faith finds its maturity in good deeds.

^c 2:23 **and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."** James did not seek to correct or contradict Paul as some have surmised, especially since he wrote these words several years before Paul write Romans.

^d 2:23 **and he was called the friend of God.** From God's viewpoint, Abraham was justified by faith.

^e 2:24 **You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.** So why is precisely the opposite statement one of the five solas of the Reformation? As has been demonstrated, James and Paul are looking at justification from two angles. Alexander Ross, in his commentary on James, points out the complementary theology of Paul and James (*The New International Commentary on the New Testament*) by saying, "They are not antagonists facing each other with crossed swords; they stand back to back, confronting different foes of the gospel."

^f 2:25 **was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way.** Rahab risked everything for the armies of the living God.

^g 2:26 **For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.** The word "spirit" may refer to our immaterial self or simply our "breath" as evidence of life. A mirror held to the mouth of a corpse will not fog. Doing good works is the breath of faith.

^h 2:18-26 Genuine faith demands more than just warm feelings toward God or toward people in need. Genuine saving faith comes out when you are confronted with difficult circumstances. Here are three examples:

1. When confronted with a needy person, compassionate works come out. This comes from the front end of this text. Seeing people without basic necessities stirred our Master (Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). It should move us.
2. When confronted with a difficult command, compliant works come out. Abraham's obedience went against the strongest human attachment because his faith was genuine.
3. When confronted with a risky mission, courageous works come out. Rahab demonstrated loyalty to the Lord even when she could have paid with her life.

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