

Faith and Works in James

Before we get into the passage, let's start with a question.

What do you think of when you hear the word faith?

For most of us, faith is something people either have or they don't. Some people are believers, some people aren't. Faith is the thing that puts you on one side of the line or the other. You either carry it or you don't.

James is about to complicate that. In a good way.

He is not interested in whether you can claim faith. He is interested in whether your faith is alive.

And he has a very specific way of checking.

We all know the gap. The distance between what we say we believe and how we actually live. It is not comfortable to look at directly, but it is there. If you have been a follower of Jesus for any length of time, you know that beliefs can sit in your head without doing much. You can hold a conviction on Sunday that has no visible effect on how you treat people on Monday.

James opens this passage with a scene that is almost uncomfortable in how recognisable it is.

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed 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?” James 2:14-16

There is a person in genuine need. Right there. Real need. And the response is warm words with empty hands. Go in peace. Keep warm. God bless.

James is not saying that person is a hypocrite who deliberately chose to do nothing. He is asking a sharper question than that. He is asking whether the faith that produced those words is actually alive at all.

That question is not aimed at someone else. It lands for all of us.

James draws his conclusion immediately, and he does not soften it.

“So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” James 2:17

Dead. Not quiet. Not resting. Dead.

James uses that word four times across this passage, along with a cluster of others: useless, unable to save, ineffective. He is making one point, with great persistence, from every angle he can find. A faith that produces nothing is not a subdued faith. It is not a faith waiting to be activated. It has no pulse.

He then does something brilliant. He turns to face an imaginary interlocutor, someone who wants to push back, and he asks them to demonstrate their faith without any evidence of it. Show me, he says. Show me this faith that has nothing to show.

Then comes the line that should stop us.

“You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder!” James 2:19

The demons have correct theology. Their doctrine of God is sound. They believe that God is one. And they shake with terror in the knowledge of it. At least they respond to what they believe. James is asking, pointedly, whether someone who claims faith and then does nothing has even managed that much.

It is a hard line. And it is meant to be.

Before we go further, it is worth pausing here, because someone has probably told you at some point that Paul and James are in contradiction. And if you have ever placed these two texts side by side, you can see why people say that.

Paul writes in Romans 3:28: a person is justified by faith and not by works of the law.

James writes in 2:24: a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Those two sentences look like a direct collision. It is not a new problem. Martin Luther was so troubled by it that he called James an epistle of straw and came close to removing it from the New Testament entirely. That is a serious reaction from a serious theologian, and we should not pretend the tension is not real.

But here is what careful reading of both writers shows. Paul and James are not answering the same question. They are in different rooms, addressing different problems, in different communities.

Paul is writing to people who believe that their religious performance, their ethnic identity, their law-keeping, is what

earns them standing before God. His insistence is that no amount of striving gets you there. You come by grace, through faith. Not by works.

James is writing to people who have taken something like that to a dangerous conclusion: that because faith is what saves, all you need is to believe the right things. You can hold correct doctrine and ignore the person in front of you. You can confess the creed and leave the hungry unfed. James says that is not faith. That is a claim.

One is fighting the corruption of faith into self-earned religion. The other is fighting the corruption of faith into empty intellectual agreement. They are both right. And they are pointing at the same truth from opposite sides. Paul himself, it is worth noting, was never comfortable with faith that did not produce a changed life. In Galatians 5:6 he writes about “faith working through love.” That phrase could sit in the middle of James 2 without causing any disruption at all.

The tension is real. The contradiction is not. James now does what good teachers do. He calls witnesses. And the two he selects are worth paying close attention to, because they are not a matched pair.

The first is Abraham. The father of Israel, the patriarch, the man to whom God made the great promise. James takes him back to the moment when he laid his son Isaac on the altar, and says: look. His faith was not separate from that act. His faith and his works co-operated. They moved together. His faith was, James says, completed by what he did.

“You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works.”
James 2:22

The second witness is Rahab. A Canaanite woman. A prostitute. Someone on every possible margin of the world James is writing in, and the world his readers would have known. She is as far from the patriarch Abraham as you can travel. And James puts her alongside him without hesitation. She welcomed the Israelite spies. She hid them. She sent them out another way, at genuine risk to herself. Her faith moved her body. She did something. James calls that justified.

The pairing matters. Together they say: this is not about status, or heritage, or how impressive your credentials are.

Living faith looks the same in a patriarch and a prostitute. It

is faith that goes somewhere.

And then James closes the whole passage with an image that stays with you.

“For just as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.” James 2:26

A body without breath is not a sleeping body. It is a corpse. The absence of breath does not make it a quieter kind of living. It makes it dead. James is saying the same about faith that has nothing to show. It is not a less energetic version of real faith. It is the other thing entirely.

James is not introducing a works-based salvation here, and we should be careful not to hear him that way. He is not saying you earn your place before God by doing enough. He is saying something about the nature of living things.

Living things move. A tree that produces no fruit is not a humble tree. It is a dying tree. Faith that produces nothing is not quiet faith.

It is faith that has no life in it.

The works James is describing are not religious performance or law-keeping. They are mercy. They are compassion. They are the turned-toward-the-person, hands-open, practically available kind of love that meets a real need in a real life. What he calls works are what a living faith looks like from the outside, because it cannot help but look like something.

That is not something you can manufacture. You cannot perform your way into it. It flows from a faith that is genuinely alive, a faith that has God as its object and the person in front of you as its immediate concern.

So let's get specific.

James's question is not abstract. It is personal. Where is your faith showing up? Not in what you say you believe, not in the answers you could give to theological questions. In what your faith is actually producing.

Think about the people in your orbit right now. Your household, your community, the people you see regularly. Is there someone whose need you can actually meet? Not a grand gesture. Not something requiring a special set of circumstances. Something real, something concrete, something on this side of possible.

Do it.

Not to prove your faith to anyone, including yourself.

Do it because a faith that is alive is a faith that moves. Do it because that is what James is describing when he talks about faith that saves.

“So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” James 2:17

James is not asking for perfection. He is asking whether there is any sign of life.

The demons believe and shudder. That is the floor James sets for mere intellectual belief. Correct doctrine, held at arm's length from your life, with nothing to show for it.

What James is describing is something far warmer than that. Far more costly. And far more alive. A faith that travels through your life and leaves something behind it. A faith someone else can see the evidence of, not because you were performing, but because it was real.

My hope and prayer is that you carry that with you. Not as a burden but as an invitation.

The question of whether your faith is alive is not a question designed to condemn you.

It is the question of someone who wants you to have the real thing.

James wants that for his people.