

James 2:14-26 • Faith & Works

Introduction

The word “faith” can have a lot of meanings. So before we jump directly into James’ discussion of the topic let’s examine what is considered the definitive chapter on the topic in Hebrews 11.

Hebrews 11:1-3 defines faith as, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.”

If we only looked at these 3 verses the key words that might jump out to us are “hoped for”, “things not seen”, “what is seen was not made out of things which are visible”. In other words, “faith” might seem like something intangible, impossible to measure, only existing on some invisible level.

But note Hebrews 11:2: “For by it the men of old gained approval.” The writer of Hebrews continues with many examples of famous people and the examples of how their faith, in action, gained God’s approval:

- 11:4 – “....Abel **offered** to God a better sacrifice than Cain....”
- 11:5 – “Enoch....was **pleasing** to God.”
- 11:7 – “....Noah....in reverence **prepared** an ark....”
- 11:8-10 – “....Abraham....**went out**, not knowing where he was going.”
- 11:17 – “....Abraham....**offered** up Isaac....”
- 11:22 – “....Joseph....**gave orders** concerning his bones.”
- 11:23-28 – “....Moses....**refused** to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter....**left Egypt**, not fearing the wrath of the king....**kept** the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood....”

Every one of these examples is faith that put **SOMETHING** tangible into action in their life by taking a step, performing some action, or doing something beforehand that visibly revealed their faith in God to fulfill His promise. In Hebrews 11:6 it’s summarized, “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”

¹⁴What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?

[Read 2:14]

Q: Rather than using this question to judge others, turn its focus around on yourself personally. Is your belief in God enough to save you? Or is something more required?

A: The act of baptism is the external sign of “sanctification”, a public testimony that we are set apart from this world for Christ to **DO** His works on this planet. Belief is only the first step towards having “faith”.

¹⁵If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? ¹⁷Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

[Read 2:15-17]

Q: The Pharisees were the most zealous group seeking to live according to and uphold every letter of the Law. But what was Jesus’ criticism of them?

A: They forsook the spirit of the Law. Their interpretation and beliefs prevented them from loving God with all their heart and loving their neighbor as themselves. This is not a new message, but the New Testament equivalent of every Old Testament prophet’s message that to obey God is to show love in this life for others. or that faith is expressed in the actions of our love for men on earth as much as for God in heaven.

Q: What is the test by which we determine if faith is alive?

A: If we are loving others through our actions for them.

¹⁸But someone may well say, “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”

[Read 2:18]

Q: So if I have no works by which to prove my faith, what can I show you to prove I really do have it?

A: You can't. It's a rhetorical question that says if all you can do is talk about it then you don't have it. (Ever notice how some people spend the most time talking about the importance of something when there's no evidence in their life that they're actually **DOING** it?)

¹⁹You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

[Read 2:19]

Point: *It's not about theology, doctrine or statements of belief. Even the forces of darkness believe in those things. What makes us distinct in the Lord is action, not doctrine. Pilate **believed** Christ was innocent. Felix **believed** Paul was innocent. The Pharisees **believed** in the resurrection of the dead to be judged just as Paul. Positions, policies and belief systems do not constitute “faith”.*

²⁰But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?

[Read 2:20]

Point: *Isn't it interesting that James speaks of this like it's a very normal problem that every Christian must overcome, that at some point each person must overcome this obstacle. At some point every Christian must face the issue that “faith without works is useless”. **Q: Are you feeling resistance to this message? Why?***

²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? ²²You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; ²³and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. 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?

[Read 2:21-25]

Q: Here we have a summarized version of Hebrews 11. What did Abraham do to be justified?

A: He offered up Isaac on the altar.

Q: Was this the whole of his faith, the only thing that he needed to do?

A: According to v.22 it was part of the process of his faith being “perfected.”

Q: What does it mean to have one's faith “perfected”?

A: In v.23 Abraham first believed (offered up Isaac), his actions were reckoned to him by God as righteousness, and it all resulted in his being called “the friend of God.” Faith “perfected” is friendship with God resulting from putting obedience into action.

Q: What is significant about v.24? What are the 2 components necessary?

A: Works and faith. In other words, visible actions and invisible commitment. Throughout this passage **EACH** has been an equal partner in the equation.

²⁶For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

[Read 2:26]

Point: *No matter how hard we “believe” with our heart and soul and mind, “faith” is not achieved without taking action and becoming involved. And no matter how involved and action-oriented we are, our works are useless without the acknowledgment of our heart and soul and mind of Christ for Whom they're accomplished.*

Q: What has God been calling to you to do that you have not yet put into action, have not yet performed as a visible step towards attaining faith?

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