

# Faith & Deeds - James 2:14-26

## INTRODUCTION – What is Saving Faith?

Question: What does it mean to become a Christian?

Saved by grace through faith – New Testament very clear about this (e.g. Ephesians 2:8&9) – we cannot earn God's favour and His forgiveness is a free gift to us received through faith

BUT, what is this faith that saves?

The problem is that there are so many professing Christians worldwide but we seem to have so little impact. Even those who identify themselves as "evangelicals" (for example perhaps 34% of USA citizens) often disappoint (divorce rates among "evangelicals" in USA are reported to be no different from the general population). Although the leadership of a local evangelical church like BCCC has a responsibility to try to ensure that prospective members or those being baptised are true believers, it does not always happen. In fact, this has been a problem since the very beginning of the church (see the example of Simon the sorcerer in the church in Samaria in Acts 8:20-23).

The concept of faith includes three strands:

### a) Intellectual assent – agreeing that certain things are true

BUT demons agree – they believe in one God just as the Jewish confession of Deut 6:4 (which James alludes to in verse 19) said. During Jesus' public ministry the demons often spoke most clearly about His identity and authority. Satan could sign the doctrinal basis of our church! Clearly intellectually agreeing to a list of truths is not enough to have genuine faith, although it must be part of genuine faith.

### b) Emotional response – feeling moved by God's love or fearful of His judgement

The demons respond to the fact of God's existence – they shudder. Many people respond emotionally to the gospel – either like the demons fearing His judgement (this is particularly true for young children) or being moved by His love, but there is no depth to their commitment. Saving faith must include

### c) Act of the will – committing oneself to obey Christ

True faith includes a commitment of the will. This can be likened to marriage, which is not just about saying yes to a few questions, or about the emotional and physical attraction between the bride and groom, but also depends on the vows they make to one another and their commitment to follow them through.

All three aspects are necessary in conversion – a healthy conversion will demonstrate all three, as the mind, heart and will are engaged, and if anyone has one or two but not all three there may well be questions about their spiritual position. So, we might ask, how many non-believers are there in membership in Christian churches and even in evangelical churches? How much damage has been done to the reputation of the gospel as a result, and how can we be less careless so that this problem is reduced in future?

## PAUL VERSUS JAMES? – The Controversy

This passage centres on the issue of how deeds or actions relate to faith. In fact, this issue is the central theme not only of this passage but of the entire epistle. In Chapter 1 we have already seen how he warns us not to merely listen to the word of God but also to do what it says (1:22), and in this section he says no less than three times that faith without deeds is dead (vv 17, 20 & 26). The relationship between faith and deeds is a central question for Christians, and this passage of James has led some to suggest he was in conflict with Paul. So, then, conspiracy theories about the origins of the Christian faith are much older than the *Da Vinci Code*! These people suggest there was a power struggle in the early church between James (and probably Jude), who represented the true teaching of Jesus (which, they claim, was much more Jewish than later Christianity), and Paul, who devised his own theology with influences from Greek philosophy. Peter supposedly wavered between the two, but was more in line with James. Over time, Paul's theology supposedly became dominant and Christianity moved away from its Jewish roots into the form that we see today. The church later covered this early division up to give the appearance of a unified faith with a pure apostolic succession.

However, these claims raise very important questions about why the books of James and Jude are in our Bible at all. If the early church was divided in this way, with Paul winning in the end, then why did the Christians who compiled the New Testament books include James, since they were supposedly compiling it after Pauline theology had become dominant? Obviously these believers did not see any conflict between James and Paul, and it is at least possible that this is because there never was such a fundamental theological split between them! Still, before looking at what James actually says it is worth considering this controversy in more detail.

The argument goes as follows:

1. Paul majors on faith and grace as the means of salvation, and says works are of no importance
2. James majors on works and says that faith alone is not enough to save a person
3. Therefore Paul and James hold two irreconcilable positions

However, there are several key problems with the James versus Paul hypothesis:

- **Paul consistently emphasises the importance of works in the Christian life** – Paul could not conceive of true faith remaining alone any more than James could, but always saw it as expressing itself through a transformed lifestyle: “the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6). This is a consistent theme in the New Testament:
  - John the Baptist expected that true repentance would show in actions (Matthew 3:8)
  - Christ said that through deeds people would know His followers (Matthew 7:15-21)
  - Paul consistently emphasised actions as the basis by which Christians demonstrate the reality of their faith and will be judged by Christ (Romans 14:12, II Corinthians 5:10)Paul himself had to argue against potential perversions of his insistence on justification by grace through faith which may have led to a loss of morality (see Romans 3:8, 6:1&2, I Corinthians 6:12).
- **Paul and James refer to two different kinds of works (Greek *ergon*)** – When Paul says we are saved through faith, not works, his emphasis is on the futility of “works of the Law” (a phrase not translated in the NIV but used repeatedly by Paul – see Romans 9:32, Galatians 2:16, 3:2, 3:5, 3:10 in the KJV – but never by James), meaning attempts to earn God’s acceptance through ritual religious acts. James, on the other hand, in this passage emphasises works reflecting godly character – we could call them “works of compassion” or “works of mercy”. Paul is concerned with the pointlessness of trying to earn salvation through observance of the Law, while James is concerned with the fact that true Christian faith will always lead to actions that are in keeping with the moral Law.
- **Paul and James are addressing different concerns** – Paul’s concern was legalists who suggested that salvation is through works, while James’ concern was with libertarians who suggested that faith could be internal and did not have to transform a person’s lifestyle.
- **Paul and James are describing two different stages of Christian experience** – Paul describes the person who is not a Christian and explains how they can be saved, whilst James describes the person who professes to be a Christian and explains how this claim is nonsensical if it is not supported by the evidence of a transformed life.
- **Paul and James use the word “justify” (Greek *dikaioō*) in two different ways** – James uses the word in the classical Jewish sense to mean effectively “to declare righteous” or “to show to be righteous” (in other words a person is “justified” when their actions prove that they are a righteous person). Paul (for example in Romans 3), however, uses it in a new way to mean “made right with God” or “declared not guilty” (in other words to describe the process through which God can make a sinner right with Himself). Both uses have the same root idea – in both cases the person is right with God and seen to be so – but James focuses on the evidence of that reality, while Paul focuses on the process by which that reality comes to be. In fact James never uses the noun “justification”, which is used by Paul.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that James had a different view of who Christ was or the significance of His life than Paul. In his letter James describes Jesus as:

- i. *The Lord Jesus Christ* (1:1) – this is the same title used by Paul, Peter and Jude, and refers to His divinity and Messiah-ship. James also describes himself as Christ’s servant.
- ii. *Our glorious Lord Jesus Christ* (2:1) – to describe Jesus as glorious is to ascribe to Him the attribute of deity. James clearly recognised Christ’s divinity.

## FAITH & DEEDS – The Core Issue

Having established that James and Paul were not actually leaders of rival factions within Christianity, we must consider what James actually says about the relationship of faith and works. This can be summarised in two key statements:

- **Faith without works is dead (vv14-17)**

James uses what might sound like an almost ridiculous story to illustrate this point. Imagine if one of the brothers or sisters in the fellowship had not enough clothes to keep warm or remain decent and not enough food to feed themselves (the description in v15 carries the idea of desperate need). Wouldn't it be ridiculous if I turned around as they were walking out the door and said "Have a nice day, make sure you wrap up well, it's getting chilly and I hope you enjoy your Sunday dinner" then patted them on the back and waved them off? Of course, one problem we may face today is that many people do come and go from church and never open up to share or seek help for deep needs they may be feeling, and too often we (and perhaps especially leaders) can be too busy or insensitive to pick up the tell-tale signs and get beneath the surface of things. But, assuming I knew that this was the situation and I still did nothing. Would my words mean anything? Wouldn't they just be a formality – comfortable for me to say, but of absolutely no value to the brother or sister who is in need? Could I honestly say that I had true compassion on them? Now imagine that I stand and preach the gospel message, claiming that God can transform the life of those who trust in Him, but my attitude to others and my lifestyle are no different from the average person on the street. Do my actions not contradict the message I claim to believe in? Surely those who hear me preaching will come to one of two conclusions – either the message I am preaching is false or I have not truly received that message and have not really had an encounter with God! They would be absolutely right to think that. Now, since the gospel message is not flawed, surely they would be right to assume that my faith is defective! James is saying quite starkly that true faith must express through works. If a body is cold, unresponsive to any stimulus and completely still you don't need a medical degree or the assistance of CSI to figure out that it is probably dead. As James puts it in his summary statement in verse 26, "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead".

- **Faith and deeds are complementary, not contradictory (vv18-22)**

So, then, faith without deeds is dead. However, James imagines an opponent's reply to this assertion in verse 18. This opponent is claiming that it is perfectly acceptable for one person to be strong in faith and another to be strong in deeds. Perhaps these are just two different types of personalities or two people with different gifts. You can imagine this person saying to the one who serves in the church, "Keep up the good work, I'll be praying for you!" and then going home. James, however, rejects this suggestion outright. He challenges this opponent to show him his faith without deeds. In other words, James is asking how you could possibly know that someone has true faith if they have no deeds to accompany it. You cannot see into a person's heart to know that they have a living relationship with God, but as Christ said the fruit a person's life bears tells you what kind of tree they are (Matthew 7:20)! When the Spirit is at work in a person He produces His fruit (Galatians 5:22). If the Spirit is not at work in a person then they do not belong to Christ at all (Romans 8:9). The reality is that faith and deeds are not in conflict, they are in a dynamic relationship. Faith comes first, and it expresses itself in deeds. You could have deeds without faith – many people perform good deeds but do not have faith in God – but you cannot have true faith without deeds. To illustrate this connection further James appeals to two Old Testament examples:

**a) Abraham our father** – Since James is writing to Jewish converts it is natural for him to call Abraham "our ancestor", but since the Greek word is literally "father", it could also be reference to Abraham as the father of the faithful (Romans 4:16). "Abraham believed God and it was credited to Him as righteousness" (v23). This verse from Genesis 15:6 is the key principle in Abraham's story, to which Paul refers in both Romans (4:3) and Galatians (3:6) as the proof that Abraham was justified on the basis of faith before he obeyed the demands of the law (in particular before he was circumcised, since God had not given the command of circumcision yet). Paul uses this fact to prove that justification is the result of faith in God. However, James is concerned to show that the reason we know this faith was real is because of the way Abraham proceeded to live a life of obedience to God, culminating in his readiness to offer his only son Isaac to God (v21). James brings these two truths together by saying, "his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did" (v22). The word "made complete" is the same word that is used by Paul in II Corinthians 12:9 where Paul quotes the Lord saying to him, "my power is made perfect in weakness". Now it should be obvious from that usage that this phrase does not mean that the thing being made perfect or complete was somehow deficient to begin with, as if God's power was deficient until Paul was weak, but that it has now been given the opportunity to express itself fully or has now accomplished its intended purpose. Just as Paul's weakness gave the opportunity for God's power to be effective and to be seen, so Abraham's offering of Isaac gave the opportunity for his faith to be effective and to be seen. If Abraham had failed to offer Isaac it would have shown that his faith was not genuine saving faith and that he was not justified. In this sense a person is not justified by faith alone,

because faith that is alone is not saving faith – the person is also declared right before God on the basis of the demonstration of their faith in the things they do (v24). It would be nonsense for a person whose life has borne no fruit to claim to be justified, right before God, on the basis of some supposed unseen faith that has never shown itself.

- b) Rahab the prostitute** – no Jewish person would have doubted that Abraham was the supreme example of faith and conduct, so highly respected was he, but perhaps they might have complained that Abraham was an exceptional case rather than the standard by which others should be judged. James nails the coffin lid firmly shut over this loophole by referring back to another example. This time he uses someone who is far from the ultimate example – a woman who came from outside the Hebrew nation and was far from morally pure. Yet, James says, she too was considered righteous because of her action in rescuing the Israelite spies in Jericho. This action revealed her faith in the God of Israel (Joshua 2:8-13) to be the real thing – genuine faith that led her to risk her life to rescue the servants of the “LORD ... (who) is God in heaven above and on the earth below”. Had Rahab simply said to the men “Go, I wish you well; keep safe and avoid capture” rather than hiding them on her roof it would have revealed her faith to be just as hollow as that of the person in James’ example in verse 16. Rahab went on to become a figure in Old Testament history no less significant than Abraham in her own time, for she was a direct ancestor of King David and therefore of the Lord Jesus Himself. She truly deserves her place in the role call of the faithful in Hebrews 11:31.

So, then, professed faith that does not demonstrate itself (is not made complete) through actions is not saving faith at all – it is a dead, useless, sorry counterfeit of genuine faith and cannot save a person. Genuine saving faith always leads to God-honouring, servant-hearted service just as it did in the life of father Abraham and mother Rahab – works of obedience to God and mercy to others. This too is attested to by Paul, who says that we are not saved through works, but we are saved for good works that God has prepared for us in advance (Ephesians 2:8-10). Good works grow from genuine faith as naturally as apples grow from an apple tree.

## **CONCLUSION – Time for Action**

How then are we to respond to what we have learnt? There are three areas of application:

### **a) Our own spiritual position**

I am not suggesting that we should live in a continual state of uncertainty about our spiritual position, but I would not be honest if I did not challenge you with this truth today. Are you sure that your faith is genuine saving faith rather than just intellectual assent or an emotional response?

It is biblical to have assurance of salvation. In fact, John’s first epistle was written exactly with the intention of helping people to have assurance. However, John did this not by blindly promising that all who believe in Jesus are definitely saved, he did it through showing a series of proofs that demonstrate that a person has a genuine connection (“fellowship”, I John 1:3) with God:

- i. That they do not walk in darkness but in truth (1:6)
- ii. That they do what He commands rather than just professing to know Him (2:4)
- iii. That they do not love the world (2:15)
- iv. That they love their fellow Christians (3:14, 4:16)
- v. That they confess the correct doctrinal creed about Jesus’ identity (4:15)

In this list assent to the core truths of the faith is included (number 5), but the other four tests are all things that depend on our actions! We would be wise to test ourselves against John’s standards to ensure that our faith is genuine, and if we can see (or perhaps if others can see) these things in us then we can proclaim with John that “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son” (I John 5:11) and rejoice in this eternal life. If, on the other hand, you remain unsure, then rectify that today by humbling yourself under God’s hand, repenting of your sin and casting yourself on Him to save you. If you do this you will discover the power of the Spirit living in you to enable you to do the works He has prepared for you (Ephesians 2:10).

### **b) Lessons for how we do evangelism**

Sometimes the way we evangelise can open us to a higher risk of false professions of faith. We must be careful to remember:

- *Do not assume conversion based on intellectual assent or emotional response alone* – I have known situations at an evangelistic meeting where it was reported that a certain number of people had been saved. On questioning how the person knew this they replied because that number of people had raised their hands when the speaker asked who was interested in the

gospel message. I know for a fact that at least two of those people denied even having intended to become a Christian – they had meant that they had some more questions to ask. Too often we are so eager to see people saved that we assume conversion as soon as we see someone responding to the message in even the most superficial way. We need to follow up this initial response by speaking with the person and making sure they fully understand the implications of the gospel.

- *Do not force conversion* – someone has said “when fruit is ripe it comes off in your hand”. This is also true when it comes to reaping spiritual fruit. Sometimes we are so eager to see people saved that we pressurise them to receive Christ or urge them to pray a prayer. Whilst this may be well intentioned, it is highly dangerous. If the Spirit is convicting a person of their need of Christ, they will call out like the Philippian jailer asking what they need to do to be saved (Acts 16:30). They may need a clear explanation of the gospel, but they will not need to be persuaded that it is relevant to them. If the Spirit is drawing them they will come to faith, and you will have the privilege of seeing this happen. So, when we are counselling someone who is seeking salvation it is better to listen first to what they understand and intend before we launch into an explanation of the gospel, and it is better after we have explained the truth to allow them to respond in prayer using their own words rather than by repeating a prepared prayer. This way you can assess whether you feel their prayer is genuine or if they are not yet quite ready to enter the Kingdom. We should not be afraid of “mission the moment”, as it is the Spirit’s work to convict people of their need of Christ (John 16:8-11), rather we should keep consistent contact with them and offer to discuss things further after they have had time to consider things further. A pressurised decision is much less likely to be a genuine one.
- *Do not rush to give assurance of salvation* – just as conviction of sin is the Spirit’s work, so is giving assurance of salvation (Romans 8:16). When counselling a person who has just prayed a prayer of commitment to Christ I believe it wise to read Scripture that speaks of assurance of salvation, but to explain this in terms such as “if your prayer was genuine”. We cannot read a person’s heart, and it is not my place to tell someone conclusively at that point that they are now in the Kingdom (the apostles may have been able to do this, but we today do not have the keys of the Kingdom as they had). Rather, it is wise to encourage that person to continue on prayer, reading and applying the Bible and fellowshiping with God’s people and then to wait and see how their life progresses. If there is evidence of growth then you can rejoice at the birth this new brother or sister, and if not then you may need to counsel them further. They will gain assurance of salvation themselves as the Spirit testifies with their spirit and they continue to be taught the word of God and its promises.

### **c) Social action**

The person in verse 16 pronounces a blessing on the hungry, naked person, literally saying “Go in peace”. In effect this is a prayer committing that person to God. Of course, we would not be so uncaring, would we? Yet how often have we prayed for the needs of our brothers and sisters who are in need but done nothing to help them? How does this church measure up on this count? How does your life and mine measure up? True faith leads to action in compassion and service for others. Could it be that in our piety we have reduced the expression of our faith together to singing songs of blessing and speaking holy sounding words to one another (“I’m praying for you”, “God will provide – He’ll take care of you”) without actually engaging with those who are really in need? Could it be that God might just use us to be the answer to our own prayers, that perhaps He will say, “How about you giving or going to help your brothers and sisters who are suffering, rather than just praying for them”? We need to engage more socially in this country and also worldwide, and we need to seek out ways that we can do that and still stand firm for the gospel. Praise God that there are many wonderful Christian organisations through whom we can do this, but let us also seek God to ask whether this church together should be more involved in these ministries. If you have a suggestion that you feel God has laid on your heart please share it, and let us seek to display our faith through loving service.