

Dead Faith **James 2:14-26**

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Significance of this Passage

- Famous passage
- Debated passage
- Puzzling passage
- Difficult passage
- Key passage regarding spiritual maturity
- Most common proof text for works-based gospel models

Background and Context

- **Author:** James, the Lord's brother
- **Date:** early to mid 40s AD
- **Recipients:** Jewish believers who began fleeing Jerusalem in 35 AD after the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8:1)
- **Occasion:** In light of this persecution, James writes his scattered church members and challenges them to persevere in their faith.

Unique Features of the Epistle

- Parallels and Allusions to the Sermon on the Mount
- Probably the earliest NT book
- "brethren" 15X
- "save" 5X
- "profit" 2X; "gain" 1X
- "testing; trials" (*dokimos*)

Theme of the Epistle

James teaches us that mature faith in Jesus Christ *should* result in outward behavior that is consistently obedient to God's will, in spite of one's circumstances. The theme of the book is "a spiritually mature faith in the midst of trials."

Immediate Context of the Passage

- In 1:21-27 James challenges his readers to not only hear the Word but *do* the Word as well.
- In 2:1-13, James points out that hearing and doing the Word of God means showing mercy and compassion to others. Failure to do this means a failure to inherit the Kingdom rewards that await mature believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ.
- This section flows perfectly into 2:14-26 where James talks about the further value and benefit of living out one's faith by being not only a hearer but by being a doer as well.

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?
(James 2:14)

James 2:14

- Note the word “profit.” (*ophelos*)

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?
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- Note the connection between “speaking” and “doing” in verse 12 and “saying” and “working” in verse 14.

So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty.
(James 2:12)

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?
(James 2:14)

James 2:14

- Note the word “profit.” (*ophelos*)
 - Comes from verb “ophello” meaning to increase or heap up. (Cf. 1 Cor. 15:32)
 - Points back to the judgment in vv. 12-13.
- Note the connection between “speaking” and “doing” in verse 12 and “saying” and “working” in verse 14.
- The required answer to the question, “Can faith save him?” is “No.”

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?
(James 2:14)

James 2:14

- What does James mean when he teaches that faith alone *cannot* save those who do not have works?

Most Bible students and teachers erroneously suggest that James is requiring both faith and works to get to heaven.

“Where there are no works, we *must assume no faith exists either....* No works, no faith. *Real faith* inevitably produces faith-works.”

“True faith shows itself in good deeds. Thus...we are justified by faith alone, but justifying faith is never found alone. True faith is always accompanied by non-saving, but absolutely necessary works. True faith brings forth good works. If there are no good works, there is no true faith.”

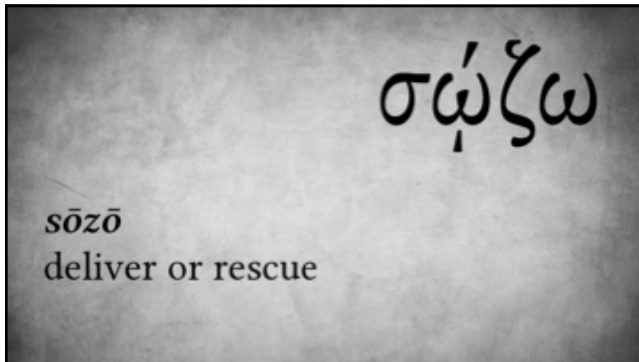
“Faith obeys. Unbelief rebels. The fruit of one’s life reveals whether that person is a believer or an unbeliever. There is no middle ground.”

“If we are not doing them [i.e. good works], this is a sign that we are not genuinely converted.”

“There is no doubt that Jesus saw some measure of real, lived-out obedience to the will of God as necessary for final salvation.”

“What God will require at the judgment is not our perfection, but sufficient fruit to show that the tree had life—in our case, divine life.”

Is that what James 2:14-26 really teaches?



“Save” in the NT

- 107 uses of the Greek verb σωζω (sodzo)
 - 60 times = physical deliverance from harm, sickness or danger (58%)
 - 33 times = eternal deliverance into heaven
 - 11 times = deliverance into the Messianic Kingdom
 - 3 times used in passages that are not supported by the best Greek Mss. (disputed texts)

The English words “save” and “salvation” are NOT technical terms that refer to individual eternal salvation.

Context always determines meaning!

Save as Temporal Deliverance

- There are many examples where “save” refers to temporal deliverance in the NT.
 - E.g. Matt. 8:25; 14:30; 16:25; 24:22; 27:40, 42, 49; Mark 3:4; 8:35; 13:20; 15:30ff; Luke 6:9; 9:24; 23:35, 37, 39; Acts 27:20, 31; 1 Tim. 4:16; Jude 5, 23.

Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!”
(Matthew 8:25)

and begged Him earnestly, saying, “My little daughter lies at the point of death. Come and lay Your hands on her, that she may be healed, and she will live.”
(Mark 5:23)

Then His disciples said, “Lord, if he sleeps he will get well.”
(John 11:12)

Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we would be saved was finally given up.
(Acts 27:20)

Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.”
(Acts 27:31)

When you see the words save or salvation in your English Bible, always ask, “Saved from what?”

Salvation in the PAST	Salvation in the PRESENT	Salvation in the FUTURE
Saved from sin's <i>PENALTY</i>	Saved from sin's <i>POWER</i>	Saved from sin's <i>PRESENCE</i>
JUSTIFICATION	SANCTIFICATION	GLORIFICATION
Positional Righteousness	Practical Righteousness	Perfect Righteousness
One time event; at a MOMENT IN TIME	VARIOUS POINTS IN TIME throughout the Christian life	In ETERNITY
FAITH alone!	FAITH alone!	FAITH alone!
Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5	Phil. 2:12; Jas. 1:21 <small>www.NotByWorks.org</small>	Rom. 13:11; 1 Thess. 5:8-9

Save as Temporal Deliverance

- James himself uses the word four additional times where the meaning is clearly *temporal* in nature. (1:21; 4:12; 5:15, 20)
- In 1:14-15 James pointed out that sin in the life of a believer may result in physical death.

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.
(James 1:14–15)

James 2:14

- James’s point is that a believer who continues to live in sin cannot avoid the death-dealing consequences of sin...he cannot be *saved!*

Paraphrase of James 2:14

“What profit will it be for you fellow Christians, both at the Judgment Seat of Christ and in this life in general, if you don’t have good works to go along with your faith? Don’t you know that faith alone can not deliver you from the temporal consequences of sin?”

James 2:15-16

- In light of James’s point in verse 14, his illustration in verses 15 and 16 makes perfect sense.

If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?
(James 2:15–16)

James 2:15-16

- James illustrates the point that words alone are not enough to deliver someone from negative physical circumstances. It takes action. Words alone are of no value (i.e. no “profit”) to the one who needs food and clothing. To be of any benefit to the destitute, words must be accompanied by actions (cf. 1:22).

The point James is making in this passage has nothing to do with the *existence* of our faith; it has everything to do with the *effectiveness* of our faith!

James 2:17

- “Thus,” that is, “in the same way,” faith is of no practical profit to believers unless it is accompanied by good works. A hungry and naked person requires more than words to avoid adverse consequences. And likewise a believer requires more than faith to avoid adverse consequences.

Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

(James 2:17)

What is “dead faith?”

- Many Bible students have imposed their own theology on this one simple word. “Dead faith,” they carelessly assume, must be “non-existent faith” or “fake faith.” But that is not at all the case.
- Is “fake faith” even possible?

“Those who cling to the *promise* of eternal life but care nothing for Christ’s holiness have nothing to be assured of. *Such people do not really believe.*”

“People have a right to be suspicious of one who says he believes in Jesus *but fails to live up to that claim.*”

What is “dead faith?”

- James clearly did not believe that “dead faith” had never been alive. If he did, the reference in 2:26 to a “dead body” is confusing. After all, a corpse mandates a previously living body!

What is “dead faith?”

- Furthermore, the analogy in verses 15-16, make it clear that “dead faith” is not “non-existent faith.”
- The words of the Christian attempting to help a poor, destitute brother are neither “non-existent” nor “fake.” They are very much real. They are just useless.

What is “dead faith?”

- When it comes to their effectiveness in accomplishing the goal—physical well-being—they are as good as “dead.”

What is “dead faith?”

- James’s use of the adjective dead to describe such profitless faith is quite appropriate given the larger point he is trying to make.
- The issue that concerns James is an issue of *life or death*.

What is “dead faith?”

- Obedience to God’s Word can save the life of a believer from the deadly consequences of sin. Faith alone cannot do this.
- Most commentators deal with the word “dead” in this passage very simplistically.

What is “dead faith?”

- But the use of dead as a metaphor was as common in first century Greek as it is today. (“you’re dead wrong;” “he’s dead drunk;” “you’re a dead duck;” etc.)
- A believer who does not practice what he believes has a “dead faith,” that is, a faith that is ineffective and profitless.
- Cf. Romans 7:8

But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead.

(Romans 7:8)

James 2:18-19

- In these two verses James employs a literary technique that was quite common in first century moral arguments.
- It’s called: Interlocution. (The Objector/Reply formula)
- Here are a couple of other NT examples of this rhetorical formula.

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?”

(Romans 9:19-20)

But someone will say, “How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?” Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies.

(1 Corinthians 15:35-36)

James 2:18-19

- Based on the common use of this formula, as illustrated by Paul in Romans 9:19-20 and 1 Cor. 15:35-36, we know that the hypothetical objector’s statement includes all of verses 18-19.
- Then James’s response to the hypothetical objector begins in verse 20.

But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works. Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!”
(James 2:18–19)

But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?
(James 2:20–21)

The Hypothetical Objector (2:18-19)

- What objection is James anticipating by using the “objector/response” formula?
 - The objector, like James’s readers, thinks it is absurd to see any close connection between faith and works.

The Hypothetical Objector (2:18-19)

- The objector’s argument goes like this: “You can show me your faith *without* works, just as I can show you my faith *with* works. Faith and works do not need each other. Let me illustrate my point. You believe in the unity of God and you do good works. The demons believe the same thing and they do not do good works....they tremble.”

Remember the larger context

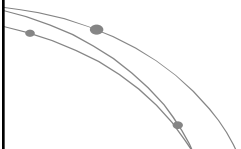
- James is answering this hypothetical objection because he believes his readers shared this attitude. His readers felt superior in their Christianity because of their Jewish heritage and culture. James’s point was that if they do not produce genuine good works—like compassion toward those less fortunate, for example—then their faith was dead.

Remember the larger context

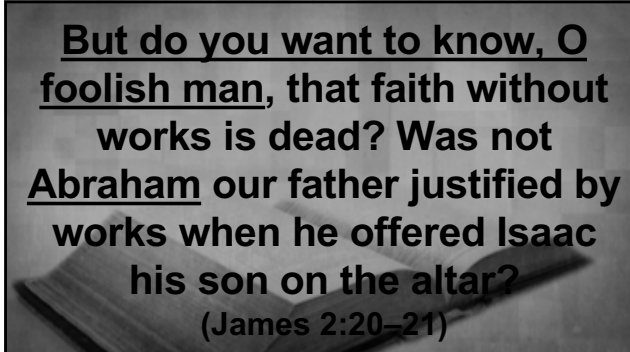
- His readers would have liked nothing better than to be able to prove that their orthodox faith was vibrant and mature even though they didn’t perform the good works James was requiring of them. They were looking to validate their sinful behavior.

James's Response to the Objector (2:20-23)

- James begins his response to the objector with the customary, "You fool..."

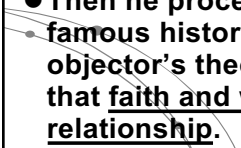


But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?
(James 2:20-21)

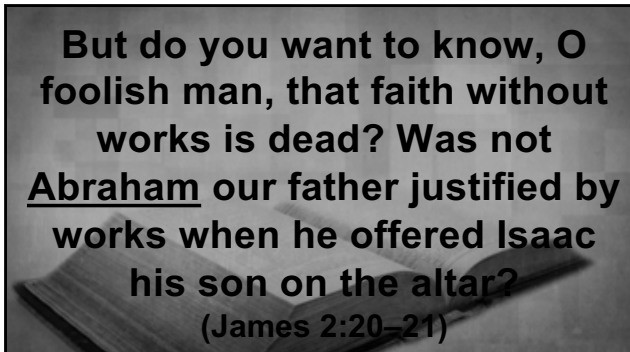


James's Response to the Objector (2:20-23)

- James begins his response to the objector with the customary, "You fool..."
- Then he proceeds to give the objector a famous historical example (unlike the objector's theoretical example) to prove that faith and works have a dynamic relationship.

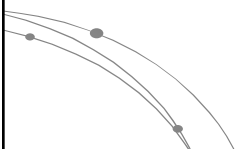


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(James 2:20-21)



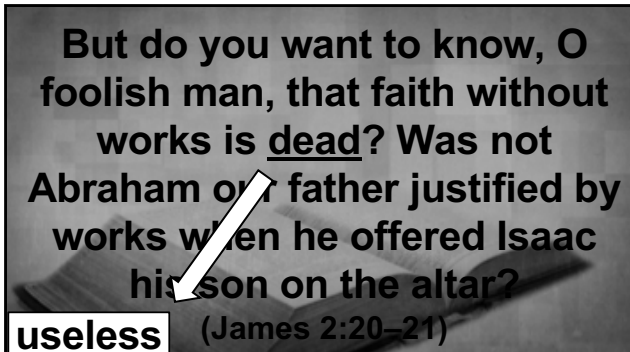
Note textual variant in v. 20

- Some older manuscripts say "useless" instead of "dead" in verse 20. (Cf. NIV)



But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?
(James 2:20-21)

useless



Note textual variant in v. 20

- Some older manuscripts say “useless” instead of “dead” in verse 20. (Cf. NIV)
- This implies that very early in the history of the church, the scribes understood James’s point in this passage. They knew that James was talking about ineffective faith, not non-existent faith.

James’s Response to the Objector (2:20-23)

- In refuting the hypothetical objection, James first chooses the most prestigious name in Jewish history, Abraham.
- In Christian circles, then and now, it was well known that Abraham was justified *by faith*. James here points out that there is another kind of justification, both for Abraham and us—justification by works!

Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God.
(James 2:22–23)

Justification by Works

- Based on the common misinterpretation of this passage, most commentators assume that James is talking about one justification that involves two parts: *faith plus works*.
- But this is not at all James’s point. James is talking about two kinds of justification: one before God (by faith) and one before men (by works).

But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?
(James 2:20–21)

Justification by Works Before Men

- Paul states in Romans 4:2, “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast, *but not before God.*”
- Both Paul and James taught that there are *two kinds of justification*.

Justification by Works Before Men

- One is eternal justification before God in which God declares us righteous based on our faith.
- The other is earthly justification before men in which our works demonstrate our faith to those around us.

Justification by Works Before Men

- Justification by works displays our practical righteousness in such a way that we are vindicated before people, not God.
- God looks at the heart (justification by faith); man looks on the outward appearance (justification by works).

James's Response to the Objector (2:20-23)

- James's point regarding Abraham is: "Don't you see that Abraham was *also* justified by his works when he offered his son Isaac to God?" (v. 21)
- "Isn't it obvious how his faith was cooperating with his works, and in fact, by works his faith was made *mature*?" (v. 22)

James's Response to the Objector (2:20-23)

- This is James's whole point in 2:14-26! *Faith must have works in order to grow mature.*
- Faith and works *need each other*. Not to get you to heaven, mind you; but to make a difference in this life.
- Without works, faith is not vibrant and active and useful!

James's Response to the Objector (2:20-23)

- The contrast in this passage is between *dead* faith and *mature* faith...it is between *ineffective* faith and *effective* faith...not between faith that gets you to heaven and faith that doesn't!

The Example of Abraham

- It took some 40-50 years between when Abraham "believed" the promise of God (Gen. 15) and when his faith became mature enough to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen. 22)!
- Are we to assume that Abraham wasn't really "saved" (i.e. "going to heaven") during that time??

Summary: Two Kinds of Justification

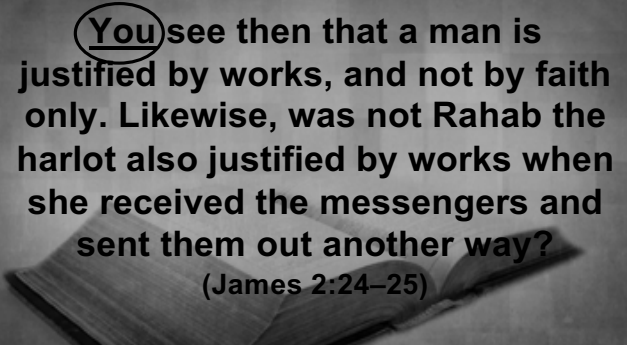
- When a person believes the Gospel, he is justified by faith alone before a holy God and receives the unqualified gift of eternal life.
- But only God can see this spiritual transaction.

Summary: Two Kinds of Justification

- When one is justified by works before men, he or she achieves an intimacy with God that is noticeable to others. Jesus said, "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you." (John 15:14) And James later says, "Friendship with the world is enmity with God." (Jas. 4:4)

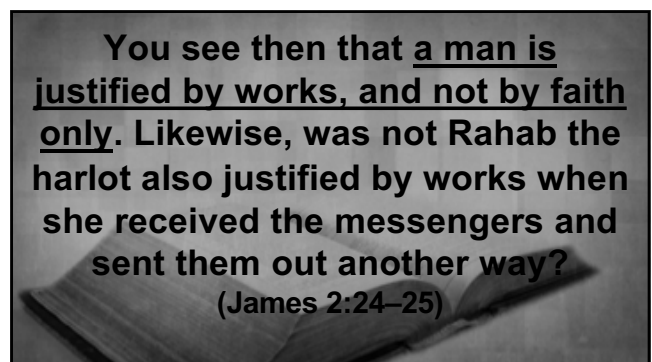
James 2:24-25

- Leaving the imaginary objector behind, James once again addresses his audience.



James 2:24-25

- Doesn't verse 24 imply that in order to *really* be eternally saved, we must have both faith and works? Not at all!
- Most people read this verse as if James is saying, "A man is justified by works, and not justified by faith alone."
- But what he is really saying is, "A man is justified by faith before God, and he is justified by works before men."



James 2:24-25

- In other words, James is insisting that “by-faith justification” is not the *only* kind of justification there is.
- There is also “by-works justification,” which is before men and results in both a maturing of your faith and special blessings from God.

James 2:24-25

- Rahab is another great example for James to use in making his point.
- Rahab is a striking example of a person whose physical life was *saved* precisely because she had works.
- Notice that James does not say, “Was not Rahab the harlot justified by faith *and* works?”

You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?
(James 2:24–25)

James 2:24-25

- Rahab, like Abraham before her, was justified by works in front of others; namely, before the nation of Israel.

James 2:26

- James’s point throughout has been that faith and works are related.
- Faith without works is *useless, ineffective, dead*.

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

(James 2:26)

James 2:26

- The analogy in verse 26 shows that works are the vitalizing spirit which keep one's faith alive and active. That is, faith remains vital and alive as long as it is being translated into real works of obedience.
- A body dies when it loses the spirit, which keeps it alive. In the same way, a person's faith struggles when it loses the animating factor of good works.

James 2:26

- Whenever a Christian ceases to act on his faith, that faith atrophies and becomes little more than a credal corpse.
- "Dead orthodoxy" is a danger that has always confronted Christian people, and we do well to take heed to this danger.

James 2:26

- If the common heaven/hell interpretation of this passage were correct, James's analogy of the body/spirit would make no sense.
- The common view states that so-called "real faith" is the active ingredient that inevitably produces good works.
- But James equates the spirit (the energizing ingredient) with works, not faith. Works energize our faith, not the other way around.

Summary of James 2:14-26

- James does not in any way insist, as so many suppose, that the presence of good works are a necessary or inevitable part of God's gracious deliverance of men from eternal damnation.
- Indeed, no biblical writer has stated the truth that new birth is a free gift more eloquently than James (1:17-18).

Summary of James 2:14-26

- But James *does* insist that, after man has received the free gift of eternal salvation by faith alone, his faith needs to be kept vital and dynamic by good works.
- A mature faith produces good works and good works continue to strengthen faith. Faith and works have a dynamic, beneficial relationship in the life of believers.

Concluding Thoughts

To use this passage to unsettle the issue of eternal salvation for today's Christian is a most serious error. Those who must look at their works to be sure that their faith is real have not yet clearly understood the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Those who hold to the erroneous heaven/hell interpretation of this passage are unwittingly (or perhaps intentionally!) holding the grace of God captive by their prideful, retributive outlook on life.