

## Introduction

After two weeks away from James we return to [James 2](#) to pick up where we left off. James wrote to the church that had fled persecution in Jerusalem after Stephen's martyrdom. As they suffer persecution, they are tempted to respond sinfully. They want to fight fire with fire.

James reminds his readers of Jesus' teachings. Jesus told his disciples that they would suffer. He taught that their suffering was part of the plan for the church.

James teaches that persevering through suffering is one the ways God brings his people to maturity. God tests his people with trials to bring them to maturity. To gain maturity is better than to avoid suffering. James writes that God will give them the gifts of wisdom and a mature faith if they can endure the trial of persecution without resorting to anger and partiality.

This morning, we turn to one of the most controversial passages in the New Testament. Paul says that a person is justified by faith *apart from the works of the law*. Here, James says that one is *not saved by faith alone, but they must have works too*.

As is the case with all Holy Scripture, there is no contradiction between James and Paul. I hope to show this throughout the sermon.

This morning I will draw out three points from this passage:

1. Faith by itself does not profit (vv. 14-17)
2. Belief and faith aren't the same (vv. 18-19)
3. Faith apart from works is useless (v. 20-26)

# Faith By Itself Does Not Profit. (vv. 14-17)

Verse 14 asks a question, “**What good is it if someone says he has faith but does not have works?**” Another way this can be translated is “**What does it profit if someone says he has faith but does not have works?**”

James is addressing an issue that he has brought up from the beginning of his letter. Every issue that James addresses, anger, partiality, and mercilessness, are all ways his audience are trying to bring about the “righteousness of God.” This is what James was getting at when he wrote in [James 1:20](#) “the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

James is once again pressing the issue with his audience. Do you really want God’s justice? Do you really want the righteousness of God? Well, you’re going about it all wrong.

If James’ readers are going to reap a harvest of righteousness, they cannot be those who say they have faith but not works. According to James, “**That faith cannot save.**”

James begins to deal with this issue by offering another parable like he did at the beginning of [James 2](#). Here, James brings up a new issue, not the issue of partiality, but of self-preservation. In this parable James writes “**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’ readers are likely living in difficult circumstances. They have limited means. Their temptation would be to look out for themselves. To preserve oneself even with a brother or sister came to them in need. But worse than this is the idea that someone would gloss over their unwillingness to help their brother or sister by saying pious words, “**Go in peace, be warmed and filled**”.

James condemns a faith that goes not further than the lips.

James is not unique in the New Testament when it comes to stating the need for faith to take shape in our whole lives. James, Paul, Peter, and Jesus, all teach the need for faith to take shape into action.

This is what James is getting at and why he can write in verse 17, “**Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.**” James is not speaking of performing works as a way to merit salvation. Rather, he argues that faith must take on a certain form. It can’t be empty faith.

## Belief and Faith Aren’t the Same (vv. 18-19)

Understanding this helps us to see what James is doing in the next section. In verses 18-19 James anticipates an objection and shows why it is so foolish.

The objection is that someone would say, “**You have faith and I have works.**” Another way you can understand this is that someone is saying, “That’s all well and good for you to do good works, but I’m going to focus on the beliefs we hold.”

This is particularly tempting in our own day. We live in an ideological age. We are fooled by our internet echo chambers into believing that the most important thing about life is the unique set of beliefs we hold.

Beliefs are important. You can come and ask me about what I believe or what my opinions are about a lot of different topics and I’ll tell you what I think and why I think that’s important. But you are a fool if you think that the essence of Christianity is summed up in getting around a bunch of people who hold all the exact same opinions as you do. No, the essence of the faith is to live your life in loving service to God and to your neighbor.

This is why we must take heed to what James says in verse 19, “**You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!**”

When Jesus came to the country of the Gadarenes in [Matthew 8](#) he meet two demon-possessed men. They cried out to Jesus, “**What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?**”

The demons believed who Jesus was. They knew him to be the “Son of God”. But their belief could not save them.

And neither can a certain set of beliefs save you. No matter how many great podcasts you listen to and accounts you follow, they cannot save you. It is Jesus who saves you. And when Jesus saves you, he calls you to a new life, not merely a new set of beliefs.

James writes in the tradition of the Biblical wisdom. In the Bible, wisdom is spoken of as one of two paths. The path of life and the path of death. The path of wisdom and the path of folly. [Psalm 1](#) (which was our Gradual) presents the paths in the righteous man and the wicked.

James tells us that those who want to have their “faith” apart from works are like the wicked and foolish man who will not stand on the day of judgement.

But the person who ***shows their faith by their works is like the wise, blessed, and righteous man of [Psalm 1](#), they are like their lord Jesus!***

## Faith Apart From Works is Useless (vv. 20-26)

In verse 20 James refers to his opponent as “***you foolish person***”.

They are a fool is because they are like the double-minded or unstable person from [James 1](#) or like the person who only hears the word but doesn’t do it.

Remember, James writes to those who claim that they want to the “the righteousness of God” in their midst or to reap a “harvest of righteousness”. But they are going about it all the wrong ways.

If they are really want to bring these things about in their midst, they must understand that a faith without works is useless.

James gives three examples to illustrate his point. Abraham, Rahab, and a body without a Spirit.

I want to spend most of this time with the example of Abraham. Briefly though, Rahab’s situation is like those James is writing to. She had to risk much to protect the spies. But as she did this, she was saved. Her faith took the form of works.

On to Abraham. Specifically, James recalls the binding of Isaac from [Genesis 22](#). In [Hebrews 11](#) you read “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac,” (11:17). This helps us understand this relationship between “faith” and “works”.

James emphasizes *the action* that Abraham took when he carried out the “*work*” of obeying God by offering up Isaac.

The author of Hebrews emphasizes that Abraham carried out these actions *by faith*. What’s more, James too shows this same relationship between *faith* and *works* in verse 22, “***You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works***”.

What James writes here you can also find in the gospels, the letters of Paul, and throughout the Bible. Faith and works go alongside one another. James does not write of “*works*” as something to merit one’s salvation. Rather, a vibrant faith will always express itself in a changed life.

In verse 22 James claims that Abraham’s faith was ***completed by his works***. Remember, this word for “completed” is that same word we’ve noted several times in this series that refers to “maturity”.

Abraham was made “*complete*” or “*mature*” in his faith *after* God tested him. This is exactly what God is doing with James audience. God is testing them and what James wants them to know, is that “***the testing of your faith produces steadfastness***. And when ***steadfastness has its full effect*** they will be ***perfect and complete, lacking in nothing***. (1:3-4)

The same is true for all of God’s children. When you walk through tests and trials, and come out the other side, you are confirmed in your faith. This is true even when you stumble through the tests that God puts you through. Even when you seem to fail the test, when you come out the other side still holding to Jesus, you are strengthened and matured in your faith!

To sum everything up, James offers up one more illustration, “***For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.***”

This is a very helpful way to conclude, because it helps us understand that James does not believe “works” are something that earns one’s salvation.

He alludes to [Genesis 2:7](#) where God breathed into Adam’s nostrils so that he became a living creature. Just as the Spirit is a gift, so too are works. Works are not something we produce of our own efforts in order to get merit God’s favor. Rather works are gifts from God.

As Paul says in [Ephesians 2:10](#) “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Let us walk in the good works God has prepared for us!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!