

Dead Faith – James 2:14-20

Introduction

- MacArthur presents two excellent questions at the beginning of this section in his commentary on James:
 - How do you define faith?
 - How would you explain to a child why we ‘do good works’?
- In the ‘tests’ that James has established in the text, our faith can be considered ‘alive’ or ‘dead’.
 - Hint: If a person claims to have ‘faith’ that is never acted upon (or obeyed in practice) then it is no faith at all.
- Salvation is not a byproduct of the works we perform (as James established in 1:17-18) as salvation is a gracious gift from God.
- MacArthur states: “It is possible James was writing to Jewish Christians who had embraced the mistaken notion that since righteous works and obedience to God’s law were not efficacious for salvation, they were not necessary at all. Thus, they reduced ‘faith’ to a mere mental assent to the facts about Christ... The truth that James emphasizes in this text is that ***what we do reveals who we are. The genuineness of one’s profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is evidenced more by what a person does than by what a person claims*** [emphasis added].”

The Relation of Faith and Action (2:14-20)

- Read James 2:14-20
- This is a crucial section of James letter! A believe must not only demonstrate love by ready acceptance of others but must also demonstrate faith by responsible aid to others. James emphasizes the expression, evidence, and a few examples of ‘true’ faith.

Expression of True Faith (2:14-17)

- (v. 14) To properly interpret this section we must realize that James is not addressing ‘true’ nature of faith with his question, but false claims of faith. To merely claim to have faith intellectually is not the same as faith demonstrated in our living.
- (vv. 15-16) Helpful example: if a family is without clothing or daily food and you say to them ‘go in peace, be well and healthy’ – What good is it? (same question as in v. 14 for emphasis).

- (v. 17) Walvoord notes “The vain boast, faith by itself, or faith in and of itself with no evidence of action, is dead. Workless faith is worthless faith; it is unproductive, sterile, barren, and dead!”

Evidence of True Faith (2:18-20)

- (v. 18) Often misunderstood, this verse includes ‘someone’ making a claim about works that can be understood as a challenge “show me your faith apart from works” (Gk *choris* or without) and I will show you my “faith by works” (emerging from).
- I like John MacArthur’s comments on this – we don’t know if the ‘someone’ is an antagonist or actually James’ humble way of referring to himself; either way the points remain the same that faith is evidenced in works.
- (v. 19) A distinction can be made between ‘belief’ and ‘trust’ – and James will argue that ‘works’ can be argued too far. In other words, James did not say that ‘works’ are essential to faith, or that faith is unimportant. His argument was that works are evidence of faith. Some scholars consider this argument as James challenges the ‘someone’ to show his faith without deeds – the point being this cannot be done.
- (v. 20) James simply addresses the ‘someone’ as foolish (or vain) and moves on in his argument that flimsy faith is dead and empty.

Conclusion

- Jesus told a parable that also illustrates how true faith reveals itself through doing good to others:
 - Read Matthew 25:31-46
- Questions to ponder as homework:
 - What does this parable reveal about the relationship between faith and works? How is the King able to tell which are his true subjects?