

JAMES: Faith Without Works Is Dead

Understanding the Epistle of James

Lesson 3

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Introduction - (Continued)

Arguably, the word “*faith*” as far as James’s Epistle is concerned is the bone of contention in the entire epistle. In 13 verses alone, the Greek, *Pistis* “faith” and its cognate *pisteuo* “believe,” is used 14 times. Think of it. Bible teachers, theologians, great and small, scholars, the best and the average, pastors, and laymen, have all for centuries struggled with James 2:14-26,

“What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and 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 [what kind of application of God’s Word is that]? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may well say to me, ‘You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.’ You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder ...faith without work is useless. Was not Abraham our Father justified by works, when he offered up his son Isaac on the alter? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,’ and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone. And in the same manner was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works, when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (James 14-26).

To me, the above passage is the superstructure of the whole epistle. Sadly, an oversight by many interpreters of Scripture to clearly grasp the meaning of James 2:14-26, has wrecked the church in many fronts. The impact of their doctrinal error on Christianity today is beyond words! Of course, their lack of insight is quite explainable. Satan, whose job is to mask the truth, (2 *Corinthians 4:4*) seems to have concentrated his efforts on this passage to ensure obscurity in its

interpretation. Tragically, many, even the best of the best, have dropped the ball on the interpretation of James 2:14-26! No wonder why the church is so divided theologically!

Many have compartmentalized faith in a way that often raises the question “What is faith?” It is the translation of the word “faith” as “saving faith” that, to me, is the main root of the doctrinal error that’s haunting us today. That’s to say, THERE’S NO WAY ONE CAN INSERT “*SAVING FAITH*” IN OUR TEXT, AND NOT CONTRADICT BOTH THE TEXT AND THE REST OF SCRIPTURE. No way! Take for instance, if we employ the phrase “*saving faith*” in a verse such as James 2:14, “What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?” we are certainly to run aground with the apostle Paul whose position on justification by faith alone is crystal clear.

“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith [alone] apart from works of the Law” (Romans 3:28).

But was James contradicting Paul? Not at all! Nothing in Scripture suggests that. These men had mutual respect in all areas of their ministries and life in general.

Returning to our passage (James 2:14-26), the truth dawned on me when I did a personal study on the epistle of James. There and then it was settled in my mind once and for all that James was not talking about salvation; and so the word **faith** in these verses (2:14-26) except where the context specifies, refers to faith (not as in reference to trust, but to “the body of truth” “creed” or “orthodox”). With this revelation, the entire passage was in total harmony with the rest of Scriptures! With great joy, I began to examine commentaries on James, one after another, to see how many agreed with me; but to my greatest surprise only a fraction were.

The light went on in my study chamber; and I shouted for joy when I read the words of Dr. James Orr on the Book of James! There and then, it was apparent to me that I was not alone in my discovery. Better still, that I am not the first to discover the truth therein. Dr. Orr really hit it on target on our passage! His scholastic observation and commentary is note worthy. Accordingly we read,

“In the OT (AV) the word [faith] occurs only twice: Dt **32**: 20; Hab **2**: 4.... In the NT it is of very frequent occurrence, always representing, *pistis*, with one exception in AV (not RV), Heb **10**: 23, where it represents *elpis*, “hope.”¹ He went on to say, “Studying the word “faith” in the light of use and contexts, we find a bifurcation of significance in the Bible. We may distinguish the two senses as passive and active; on the one side, “fidelity,”

¹ James Orr (General editor), The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Hendrickson Publishers, 1939, 1956 volume II, p. 1087

“trustworthiness”; and “faith,” “trust,” on the other.”² He then gave diverse meanings to faith in light of contexts. “Another line of meaning is traceable in a very few passages, where *pistis* “faith,” appears in the sense of “creed” the truth, or body of truth, which is trusted, or which justifies trust. The most important of such places is the paragraph Ja[me]s 2: 14-26, where an apparent contradiction to some great Pauline dicta [pronouncement] perplexes many readers. **The riddle is solved by observing that the writer uses “faith” in the sense of creed, orthodox “belief.”** This is clear from ver 19, where the “faith” in question is illustrated: Thou believest that God is one.” This is the creedal confession of the orthodox Jew [highlights added].”³

Unger added, “James’s Epistle is aimed at Jewish believers tempted to substitute a head knowledge of the Law [creed or beliefs] for a heart experience of grace manifested in a holy life [application or divine works].”⁴ If we keep this line of thought in mind, if we come to a grip that the *faith* in question is not faith in relation to salvation, but faith in relation to **belief** or **creed**, then the entire Epistle will flow like a river into the Oasis of the entire Scripture.

In view of this insight, it becomes crystal clear to me that James was not talking about salvation. Rather he was emphasizing the fact that saturation of our souls with the knowledge of the Word of God without application thereof, is nothing more than suffering from a headache and at the same time holding cold medicine in our mouths without swallowing it. The medicine, though in our mouths would not save us from the shooting pain of migraine. Would it? Of course it would not! Indeed, “His teaching is a greatly needed corrective to the unreal, verbalistic kind of religion that claims allegiance to high **doctrine** but issues in living on a low and selfish level.”⁵

So James, out of his immense love for the Lord and his brethren, was alerting his audience of the danger of lack of production in the field of their spiritual life. On the one hand, he cautioned them that lack of obedience to the Word of God or spiritual production can lead to premature death. In this, he was following the line of Old Testament thoughts, “The fear of the Lord prolongs [human] life, But the years of the wicked will be shortened” (Proverbs 10:27). Or like Zane Hodges put it: “Can the fact that a person holds [sound] orthodox “save” him from the deadly consequences of Sin? Of course not! The very thought is absurd.⁶ James highlighted this in James 1:13-15, 21; 5:19, 20. We shall deal with these passages when we get to the text. On

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. p. 1088

⁴ Merrill F. Unger, Unger’s Survey of the Bible: Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, Oregon 1974, p. 355

⁵ Frank E. Gaebelin, The Practical Epistle of James: Doniger % Roughly, Inc., Great Neck, New York, 1955, P.73

⁶ Zane Hodges, The Epistle of James, Grace Evangelical Society 1994, p. 62

this, James and the Apostle Paul were in agreement, “For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die [literally you *are about to die*]; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body you will live” (Romans 8:13; cf. 8:6; I Corinthians 11:27-30).

On the other hand, James, as we shall see later on was letting his audience know that faith alone in Christ alone is not an end itself, but a means to appropriating blessing in the category of *beyond all we can ask or imagine*. He was letting them know that though a man is justified by faith alone for salvation, and he can also be justified, by obedience to God, for super abundant blessing like Abraham was (James 2:17-24; cf. Genesis 22:1-18). This is what Calvin discovered and came up with the idea of double justification, but in the end, as we shall see later in our study, he fumbled the ball and failed to score the touchdown!

With this illumination, we can hardly wait to dive into the main text and swim through the current of this awesome epistle, which is so rich in exhortation, encouragement, and challenge for us all in the Royal Family of God.

James 1:1: “James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad [diaspora], greetings.”

Here we shall begin when next we meet God willing.

END #3