

Genuine Faith

James 2:14-26

I have faith!



Faith: Dead or Alive?

1. Read James 2:14-17.¹ James presents two questions (v. 14), an illustration (vv. 15-16), and a conclusion (v. 17). What kind of “faith” is James talking about? What is wrong with this kind of faith?

He has faith.



2. How do verses 15-16 illustrate this kind of faith? What are the answers to the questions in verse 14?²

📖 “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” (1 John 3:17-18, NIV)

3. Read James 2:18-19. Verse 18a presents the claim that some Christians have faith while other Christians have deeds. In other words, it is not necessary to have both. How should we respond to this claim?³

4. What do demons believe about God? What is wrong with the demon’s faith? How might human “faith” be like demon “faith?”⁴

Dynamic Faith

5. Read James 2:20-24. Why was Abraham “considered righteous” (literally “justified”)?⁵ What did Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac demonstrate?



¹ “deed” (ἔργον) – literally “work” – something that is done; in this context, a *good* action

² According to the Bible, genuine faith is evidenced by a commitment to do God’s will. If we say we have faith, but avoid doing what God wants us to do, our faith is empty. It is evidence that we lack *true* faith. The answers to the two questions are “it’s no good” and “no” (because it is not true faith).

³ Good deeds are not something we *add* to faith as if good deeds were optional. Faith without good deeds is “dead.” When James writes, “I will show you my faith by what I do” he does not mean that doing good deeds proves we have faith. Many people call themselves Christian, and do many good things, but they are not truly Christian if they don’t have faith. Christian faith involves belief and trust in Christ. However, true faith is evidenced by good deeds.

⁴ Demons accept that there is a God, and that God is one. They know enough about God to make them shudder (shake, tremble), probably in fear of God’s judgment. However, demons do not submit to the will of God. We can know a lot about the Bible and God on an intellectual level, but if we don’t accept God’s word as truth, and respond appropriately to that truth, it does us no good.

⁵ Verse 21 says, “for what he did” (*for his works*). But he did what he did because of faith. His actions were based on his trust in God. Verse 23 says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” This is a quotation of Genesis 15:6, and refers to Abraham’s belief that God would give him a son and many descendants. This was *before* Isaac was born. Because of Abraham’s faith, God declared Abraham righteous. But his faith was demonstrated by his deeds; thus he was considered righteous for what he did.

6. James says, “a person is justified by *what he does (literally ‘works’)* and not by faith alone” (2:24, *italics mine*). Paul says, “a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (Romans 3:20, *NASB*), and “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9, *NIV*). Do James and Paul disagree?⁶

7. On what basis was Abraham saved? How was Abraham’s faith “made complete” by what he did?⁷

 Read James 2:25-26. Rahab is another example of faith evidenced by actions.⁸

8. How would you define “genuine faith?” Summarize the relationship between faith and deeds.⁹



Reflection/Application

- Are you trusting in your good deeds to make you righteous, apart from faith in Jesus Christ? The Bible says we cannot earn salvation! If you have not trusted Christ, do so.
- If you claim to be a “Christian,” are you confident that your faith is genuine? Is it truly based in Christ? Is it merely intellectual belief or words, or is it evidenced by love & good deeds?
- What specific good deeds need to flow from your faith? What can you begin doing this week to put these good deeds into practice?

⁶ No. James’ “faith alone” is different from Paul’s “faith.” “Faith alone” is not *true* faith. James and Paul use the word “justify” differently. Paul uses “justify” to refer to God’s judicial act of declaring sinners righteous in His sight (involving forgiveness of sins). It is how a person *gets into* a relationship with God. James may use “justify” to refer to either 1) the “demonstration to be right” (that is, showing that a person’s faith is genuine); or 2) God’s ultimate vindication (final approval) of the believer at the judgment, which takes into account the things that person has done. Paul is concerned about people who believe they can be saved by their good works (at least partly). James is concerned about people who call themselves “Christian” but lack the good works that show true faith. Paul also believed that true faith is evidenced by works. Paul wrote, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6; also Ephesians 2:10).

⁷ Abraham was saved through faith, by God’s grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). However, Abraham’s faith was “made complete” by his works or deeds. “Made complete” may mean that his faith reached its intended goal.

⁸ See Hebrews 11:31. Rahab’s story is recorded in Joshua 2.

⁹ Genuine faith is based on a belief and trust in God, including His provision of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins, and was raised from the dead. Faith brings us into a relationship with God, and that relationship changes us. By the indwelling Holy Spirit, our values change, our love grows, and we want to do what pleases God. What we do (our deeds) is evidence that our faith is genuine. Jesus said, “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matthew 7:20). If we have genuine faith, Christ is in us, and we should bear fruit consistent with his character.