



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## So You Say You Have Faith?

James 2:14-26

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### *Introduction*

1. In the preface to his commentary on Romans, Martin Luther wrote the following:

O it is a living, busy active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.<sup>1</sup>

2. That was cited in Douglas Moo's commentary on James to emphasize its irony, for Luther is well known for criticism of James and especially James 2 and its emphasis on works.
3. But, that points to a misunderstanding of James or Paul, not the Bible's teaching on faith. The wording differs, but Jesus (Matt. 7:21) and Paul (Gal. 5:6) sound like James 2, our text.

### *Body*

#### I. Setting.

- A. James is still pursuing the theme begun in 1:22: real faith is active, not just affirming.<sup>2</sup>
  1. He narrowed the focus to authentic religion, defined in terms of holiness and care for the oppressed (1:26-27).
  2. He moved to concern for the poor (2:1-13), singling out the sin of partiality (2:1, 9) as a negative example of how not to do the word.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 144.

<sup>2</sup> Thematically, the sections develop the same way. [1] The general principle is affirmed (1, 14). [2] A specific example of the violated principle is given (2-3, 15-16). [3] The principle is re-stated and/or expanded (4, 17). [4] The reason for accepting James's point is elaborated in a response to the wrong view (5-7, 18); with an exhortation to go beyond the commended, but limited right behavior that has been exhibited (8, 19); and finally with an explanation of the correct view (9-13, 20-23). For discussion of stylistic similarities, see Ralph Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary 48:78-79.

- B. Verse 13 connects the sin of partiality to the larger issue of true faith: Doers of the word replace partiality toward the poor with acts of mercy toward them.

## II. Teaching.

### A. The principle stated and illustrated (2:14-17).

1. James begins with a question designed to be answered in the negative:<sup>3</sup> Faith without works is no good and cannot save.
2. He illustrates with an especially distressing situation (15-16).
  - a) A “brother or sister” is barely clad (γυμνός, *gymnos*; naked, bare, inadequately dressed; perhaps destitution due to indebtedness;<sup>4</sup> cf. Matt. 6:11).
  - b) The response, “Go in peace...” “takes the form of a prayer” (Blomberg and Kamell, 143), amounting to the hope that God will provide for them, but doing nothing as one of his children to be part of the process.
  - c) “What good is that?” James repeats; again, “No good at all” is the expected answer.
3. Verse 17 re-states the point in stronger terms: “Works are not an ‘added extra’ [to faith] any more than breath is an ‘added extra’ to a living body.”<sup>5</sup>

### B. Rebuttal of an objection.

1. Verse 18 introduces an objection in a verse that is one of the most difficult in the New Testament.<sup>6</sup>
  - a) Translations that end the quotation with “... and I have works” are likely closer to what James meant.<sup>7</sup>
  - b) Apparently, some saw faith and works as different gifts, in effect: “You are gifted for works, I am gifted for affirmation and reflection on doctrine.”<sup>8</sup>
2. James replies: merely affirming orthodoxy is not genuine faith: the demons can recite (and believe) the Shema, the “crucial belief for both Jews and Christians” that distinguished them from almost all others (Blomberg and Kamell, 135) (v. 19).

### C. Verses 20-25 use two prominent examples of true faith to clinch James’s point.

1. Verse 20 restates (for the third time) the point, this time in unflattering terms: “do you want to know, O empty (κενός, *kenos*) person...” (Blomberg and Kamell, 135)?

<sup>3</sup> “The idiomatic question with which James begins means ‘what good is it?’ This was a common way for writers of the time to introduce rhetorical dialogue, presenting an argument with which the author disagreed” (Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 129).

<sup>4</sup> Frederick William Danker, with Kathryn Krug, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 82.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, 122.

<sup>6</sup> Commentaries discuss multiple options (4, 5, even 8) for translating and interpreting of verse 18.

<sup>7</sup> The NIV is similar to the ESV, the helpful difference being that it inserts a paragraph break in the middle of v. 18.

<sup>8</sup> The NLT captures this sense: “Now someone may argue, ‘Some people have faith; others have good deeds.’ But I say, ‘How can you show me your faith if you don’t have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds.’”

2. Verses 21-25 feature two examples who were known in Jewish writings for their exemplary works of faith, especially merciful works.
  - a) Abraham was said to have undergone ten tests, the capstone of which was his offering of Isaac; included were various works of mercy for those needing food and drink (see Gen. 18:1ff.; also Heb. 13:2).<sup>9</sup>
  - b) Rehab was noted (in both Jewish tradition and later Christian writings — see 1 Clement 10, 12) for her exemplary hospitality.
  - c) Pairing them allows James to stress that, no matter what the standing of the person (good, man, Jew, prominent vs. bad, woman, Gentile, nobody), authentic faith was evident “because of their deeds” (Blomberg and Kamell, 140).
3. Abraham’s faith was “shown to be righteous” (δικαιόω, *dikaioō*) by his works.
  - a) His faith “was working (συνεργέω, *synergeō*) with his works (ἔργον, *ergon*) and faith was brought to maturity (τελειόω, *teleioō*) by his works” (v. 22) (Blomberg and Kamell, 137).
    - (1) “. . . [T]hrough his obedience his faith actually ‘grew up.’ Abraham’s faith was not mature until he acted upon it” (Blomberg and Kamell, 137).
  - b) Verse 23 cites Genesis 15:6, the epitome statement of Abraham’s faith, which James says was brought to the fullest meaning (πληρόω, *plēroō*) by his works; therefore, he was called “a friend of God” (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8).
  - c) Verse 24 states the point for the fourth time.
4. Rehab’s reception of the messengers and assistance in their escape (in hopes of her own salvation — see Josh. 2) also exemplified active faith.

D. Verse 26 states the point for the fifth time, a more intense restatement of v. 17.

### III. Application.

- A. Authentic faith is not found only in ritual or orthodoxy (v. 19).
  1. This was an age-old problem for God’s people and one James clearly rejects (see Jer. 7:1-14 where they thought “right worship substituted for merciful behavior” — Blomberg and Kamell, 144; also Jas. 1:26-27).
  2. “Tragically Hell will have its share of people who are monotheistic, Trinitarian, orthodox and *lost*.”<sup>10</sup>
- B. Authentic faith cares about the poor and oppressed.
  1. The principle in James 2 is broader, but we must not stress it to the exclusion of James’s application; the dispossessed are in view from 1:26-2:26.
  2. “James certainly would share the concern of [those who seek] to do far more for the poor, individually and systemically, than many branches of recent Christianity have attempted” (Blomberg and Kamell, 143-144).

<sup>9</sup> See the discussions in Davids, 127, and Blomberg and Kamell, 138. Relative to offering Isaac, *Jubilees* 19:9 reads, “This (is) the tenth trial with which Abraham was tried. And he was found faithful, controlled of spirit” (in Blomberg and Kamell, 138). Philo alludes to Abraham’s hospitality and “calls this ‘offering of Isaac’ the greatest of Abraham’s ‘works’ (*On Abraham*, 167)” (Moo, 108).

<sup>10</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, 112.

- C. That said, we should not think that the principle is limited to James's specific application.
1. "James would most assuredly insist that it counts for nothing to claim to accept a free gift of salvation without transferring one's allegiance to Jesus as the Ultimate Master of one's life and possessions" (Blomberg and Kamell, 144).
  2. But, too often, people see faith solely in terms of church going (if that; for some, it's simply being "on the roll") where "not only does faith not require any relationships or obligations with others, but any suggestion that it does is met with resistance."<sup>11</sup>
  3. Whatever the precise percentages, it is apparent that the majority of ministry is left to the minority of members.
  4. James would ask, "Do you really believe? Your works say differently."

### Conclusion

1. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, concerned over the lack of authentic Christian faith in his time, once told a parable about Duckland.

It was Sunday morning, and all the ducks dutifully came to church, waddling through the doors and down the aisle into their pews where they comfortably squatted. When all were well-settled, and the hymns were sung, the duck minister waddled to his pulpit, opened the Duck Bible and read: "Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Use your wings!" It was a marvelous, elevating duck scripture, and thus all the ducks quacked their assent with a hearty "Amen!" — and then they plopped down from their pews and *waddled* home.<sup>12</sup>

2. James would say that if we really believe we can "fly," then we certainly should not be "waddling"! Do you have faith, or just say that you do? Think about that and what your response to Jesus should be.

May 22, 2011; updated June 29, 2016  
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<sup>11</sup> Pheme Perkins, *First and Second Peter, James and Jude*, 113, in Blomberg and Kamell, 145.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, 115; cited from Gary Vanderet, *Discovery Papers* Number 3989 (May 25, 1986), "The Skill of Genuine Faith."