



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

So, You Say You Have Faith?

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Few passages in James have received more attention than 2.14–26. The fact that both Paul and James address the same theme with similar language, appealing to the same example from Abraham’s life to prove their points, makes comparison of the two both inevitable and “illuminating.” But some see the similar discussions of the relationship between faith and works as “two diametrically opposed” statements of salvation theology (Holladay 2005, 475).

We must be careful not to reach a conclusion about their teaching prior to examination of the respective texts or read James as if just twelve of his 108 verses state the letter’s main point and provide the key to understanding it as a whole (see Johnson 1995, 111–114). Instead, we should read both writers contextually, allowing each to “speak for himself rather than listening to one only through the voice of the other” (Holladay 2005, 475).¹ When we read James that way, we notice that he never connects the word *work* to the term *law*, but instead uses *work* in the sense of “working out” a profession of faith (Jas 1.25; 2.14, 17–18, 20–22, 24–26). This is how other NT writings typically use *work* (ἔργον, *ergon*; e.g., Matt 5.16; John 3.19; 10.25; Acts 9.36; 13.2; 26.20; Heb 13.21; 1 Pet 1.17; Rev. 2:2), including Paul in 50 of the 67 times the word appears in

¹ See the discussion of the importance of contextual study in Keener 2013 ([here](#)). He uses James 2 to illustrate.

his letters (e.g., Rom 13.3, 12; 14.20; 15.18; 1 Cor 3.13–15; 9.1; 15.58; 16.10; 2 Cor 9.8; 11.15; 1 Thess 1.3; 5.13; 2 Thess 2.17) (Johnson 1995, 60).

Clearly, closer examination of this text is worth our time. Thus, beginning with this discussion, I will present an overview of 2.14–26, elaborate some applications of the text, examine the alleged Paul–James tension in more detail, and explore what it shows about the nature of authentic faith.

The Setting for 2.14–26

In the last half of chapter 2, James continues the theme he introduced in 1.22: real faith is active, not just a profession. People with genuine faith do not merely hear the word, they are determined to be “doers of the word,” demonstrating perseverance in obedience to “the law of liberty” (1.22–25). Beginning in 1.26, James narrows his focus to deal first with some specifics of genuine religion—defined in terms of holiness and care for the oppressed (1.26–27)—and then with the concern the faithful should have for the poor (2.1–13), focusing in particular on the sin of partiality as an example of how not to be a doer of the word (2.1–9).

Thematically, 2.1–13 and 2.14–26 have the same basic structure. (a) The general principle is affirmed (2.1, 14). (b) A specific example of the violation of the principle is declared (2.2–3, 15–16). (c) The principle is re-stated and/or expanded (2.4, 17). (d) In response to a wrong view, the reason for accepting James’s point is elaborated (2.5–7, 18). (e) He exhorts the readers to go beyond the commended, but limited right behavior that has been exhibited (2.8, 19). (f) He concludes with an explanation of the correct view (2.9–13, 20–23) (see Martin 1988, 78–79).

The Teaching of 2.14–26

James begins verses 14–26 with two questions that he intends to be answered negatively: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (v. 14). “What good is it?” is an idiomatic question commonly used by “writers of the time to introduce rhetorical dialogue, presenting an argument with which the author disagreed” (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 129).

James then uses an illustration that depicts an especially distressing situation. “A brother or sister” is “lacking in daily food” and barely clothed (*γυμνός*, *gymnos*), that is, “naked, bare ... inadequately dressed, ... perhaps left destitute of standard wear through indebtedness” (Danker 2009, 144). The response to this case of destitution is in effect a hopeful but ultimately unhelpful prayer: “Go in peace, be warmed and filled.” The well-wishers correctly trust that God will meet the needs of his people but take no steps to help them (vv. 15–16) (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 143). James again asks, “What good is that?” As before, he expects the negative answer, “It is no good at all.” Verse 17 then states the point: “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is

dead.” In other words, “Works are not an ‘added extra’ [to faith] any more than breath is an ‘added extra’ to a living body” (Davids 1982, 122).

James then anticipates a rejoinder, phrased in a statement that commentators have found difficult to interpret: “But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (v. 18; McCartney 2009, 158–160, lists eight “suggested solutions”; cf. Johnson 1995, 239–240; Moo 2000, 126–130). The view that is likely closer to what James intended is reflected in translations that end verse 18 with a form of the phrase, “and I have works” (ESV and NIV are similar, the helpful difference being that the NIV clarifies by inserting a paragraph break in the middle of verse 18). Apparently, some were seeing faith and works as different gifts, in effect saying something like, “You are gifted for works, I am gifted for affirmation of correct teaching.”

James answers, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder” (v. 19). Merely affirming orthodoxy is not in itself authentic faith. The fact that demons can affirm the *Shema*, the Judeo-Christian belief that distinguishes us from everyone else (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 135), does not mean they exhibit authentic faith. In light of this fact, James states his point a third time, in unflattering terms. Translated literally, verse 20 asks, “do you want to know, O empty [κενός, *kenos*] person, that faith without works is workless [ἀργός, *argos*]?” (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 135; Bauer 2000, 128 defines *argos* as being unemployed, idle, unwilling to work).

Verses 21–25 illustrate and re-state the point by referring to two people who were known in Jewish writings for exemplary works of faith, notably their merciful actions (cf. 2.12–13). Abraham was said to have undergone ten tests, the ultimate being the offering of Isaac. Included in his tests were various acts of mercy shown to those who were in need of food and drink (cf. Gen 18.1–8; Heb 13.2; see the discussions in Davids 1982, 127; Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 138; Moo 2000, 108; and their references to Jewish writings such as *Jubilees* 19.9; Philo, *On Abraham* 167). Rahab was singled out in both Jewish tradition and later Christian writings (see 1 Clement 10.12) for her exemplary hospitality. In pairing a *good man* who was the ancestor of the *Jews* with a *bad woman* of *Gentile* ancestry, James emphasizes that regardless of one’s standing, whether one has authentic faith is determined by the evidence of a person’s deeds.

Notably, he says that Abraham’s faith was shown to be righteous (δικαιόω, *dikaioō*; v. 21) by his works. His “faith was working with [συνεργέω, *sunergeō*] his works [ἔργον, *ergon*] and faith was brought to maturity [τελειόω, *teleioō*] by his works” (v. 22; trans. Blomberg & Kamell 2008). In other words, “through his obedience his faith actually ‘grew up.’ Abraham’s faith was not mature until he acted on it” (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 137). This working faith was endorsed by God, James says, because it “fulfilled,” that is, it gave the fullest meaning to (πληρόω, *plēroō*), “the Scripture ... that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as

righteousness’—and he was called a friend of God” (v. 23, citing Gen 15.6; cf. 2 Chron 20.7; Isa 41.8). Verse 24 then reiterates the point a fourth time: “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

Rahab, James’s other model of exemplary faith, demonstrated it “when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way” prior to the destruction of Jericho (v. 25; cf. Josh 2). She did not merely affirm belief in YHWH, she acted on that belief and was therefore “justified” (δικαίωω, *dikaioō*; cf. v. 21).

James concludes with a fifth statement of the point: “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead” (v. 26).

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