

SESSION FOUR

Living with Genuine Faith (*James 2:14-26*)

“Genuine faith must go beyond the mere intellectual assent concerning biblical doctrines. People must let the implications of these doctrines radically affect their hearts so that they respond positively to God with the obedience and works of faith.” ~ Daniel Fuller

I. Overview

Thus far, James has understood “faith” to mean a complete trust in Christ (cf. 1:3, 6; 2:1, 5). This type of faith looks to exalt the Lord by seeking to depend upon Him for wisdom and direction. This kind of faith also seeks to live for the Lord by loving one another. In this portion of the letter, James will argue that the absence of these actions (i.e., love for the Lord and for others) indicates the futility of a supposed self-proclaimed faith. For James, faith and works are inseparable. Works is the natural product of genuine faith.

II. The Content

A. Illustration of a Worthless Faith (2:14-17)

v. 15 - James provides two descriptions of those in need:

“naked” - The term can refer to someone poorly clad or an individual wearing clothing useless against bad weather.

“lacking daily food” - The phrase suggests an individual habitually underfed, lacking food necessary for sustaining life and health.

In their commentary on the book of James, Blomberg and Kamell note the connection between the need for daily food and the petition for “daily bread” in the Lord’s prayer (Mt 6:11). They write, “God’s normal way of fulfilling this petition is through his people as they share with those in need, so the scandal of this example [in the book of James] proves even more shocking.” (*James*, 130; also, cf. Matt 25:42-43).

v. 16 - The pronouncement of blessing, “be warm and filled”, indicates that the speaker is aware of the needs this poor person possesses. As noted by Johnson, “It is not the form of the statement that is reprehensible, but its functioning as a religious cover for the failure to act.” (*James*, 239). This “blessing” lacked sincerity and indicated a failure to act on behalf of the poor person in need.

Even more insulting is that these verbs, “be warm” and “be filled”, are either in the “middle” or “passive” voice. If rendered in the “middle voice”, then the blessing should be translated: “warm yourselves and fill yourselves!” Such a rendering would make this blessing insulting and most outrageous (e.g., Hiebert, *James*, 180). If the verbs are in the “passive voice”, then the text would read: “be warmed and be filled”. Here the assumption on the part of the speaker is that God will provide—a religious cover for a failure to act. Either rendering portrays the insensitivity and hypocrisy of the blessing.

v. 17 - The context clearly indicates that “works” is not referencing the works of the Law (e.g., circumcision), but rather works of love (e.g., caring for the poor). Genuine faith results in a changed life.

B. A Rational Argument (2:18-20)

v. 18 - An objection is raised that “faith” or “works” may exist separately. However, the contrast is clear: no works, no faith.

v. 19 - A proper theology, while vital, results in failure if the knowledge is confined to the cognitive realm. As noted by James, even demons have a proper understanding of theology—an understanding that at least creates fear (cf. Mk 1:23-24; 5:7)!

v. 20 - The term “workless” suggests both intellectual and moral error.

C. A Biblical Argument (2:21-26)

1. Displayed in the Life of a Patriarch (vv. 21-24)

v. 21 - Abraham proves the reality of his faith as he offers Isaac as a sacrifice. The first-century Jewish philosopher, Philo, labels this “offering of Isaac as the greatest of Abraham’s works” (*Abraham* 167).

How does one reconcile the tension between James’ reference to Abraham’s justification through works and Paul’s reference that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works (e.g., Rom 3:28; 4:1-9)?

v. 22 - After waiting twenty years for the promise of a son, Abraham wrapped up all of his dreams and future promises in Isaac. And yet, Abraham was willing to risk all of this based on the conviction that God would keep His promises (cf. Gen 22:1-18).

v. 24 - As aptly noted by Davids, “The important point is that one must not read this verse with Pauline definitions in mind, but rather must allow James to speak out of his own background.”

2. Displayed in the Life of a Prostitute (v. 25)

The Jews viewed Rahab as an example of great faith because of her willingness to forgo her gods of Canaan to serve Yahweh (cf. Joshua 2:9-11; Jos. *Ant.* 5:5-30).

In Joshua 2:9-11, Rahab described the fear that fell upon all the people because they heard of the works of Israel's God and knew they were doomed. An interesting side note pertains to the demons trembling with fear in verse 19. Unlike the demons and her fellow Canaanites, Rahab feared God and acted upon her knowledge (cf. M. J. Kammell, "The Concept of 'Faith' in Hebrews and James," *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*).

The contrast between Abraham and Rahab should not be missed. "Whereas Abraham was a wealthy, moral male, the father of the Jewish nation, and a major figure in his society, Rahab was probably poor, definitely immoral, a female, an outcast of the Canaanite nation, and a minor figure in her society." (Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 140). Despite these differences, both biblical characters were willing to risk everything for their belief in God. Both individuals were noted for their charity and hospitality (cf. early Church writing, 1 *Cement* 10-12). And both Abraham and Rahab were included in the genealogy of Jesus (cf. Matt 1).

3. Conclusion (v. 26)

"Lip-service" Christianity fails to embody genuine faith. James is looking to the right kind of faith, a "faith that works."

III. Intersect

- A. Good deeds, absent from genuine faith, are useless and even damning.

Matthew 7:22-23 -

- B. Genuine faith is proactive, never passive.

1 John 3:10, 17-19 -

- C. We need to be careful that our words of encouragement do not become pious and hollow. We need to be sure that there is not a disconnect between our speech and our actions.

Matthew 23:27-28 -

"Faith and works are bound up in the same bundle. He that obeys God trusts God; and he that trusts God obeys God. He that is without faith is without works; and he that is without works is without faith." ~ Charles Spurgeon