

“Saving Faith Explained”

James 2:14-26

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Introduction: The great Martin Luther said, at one time in his Life, that the book of James was wood, hay, and stubble. This section of James was one of the reasons. Our passage today shows just how important context is. I respect Luther immensely so I tread on theologically thin ice this morning. I have read much of Luther’s thoughts in his introduction to the book of James and Revelation. Luther has some good points I would challenge anyone to deny. Yet, I think that we are looking at only one side of the coin. We, as Christians often use language that is confusing. For example, we say all the time that we are saved by grace. Yet, Paul says, we are saved by grace- through faith. We can use scripture in any way we want, and skew it to our own liking, if we are not careful.

So with that, let me read a few of Luther’s thoughts, and then we will tackle this passage. I think when we put other passages with James’s thoughts, we can make it clearer. Remember, we learn hermeneutically **to let clearer passages explain more obscure passages. Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation.**

Remember that Luther was the founder of the Protestant reformation. He was fighting the Catholic Church. In his day, the very issue of indulgences (buying salvation with works and deeds) was the main heresy of the day.

Question: Why did Martin Luther reject the book of James? What does the Bible teach about faith and works?

Answer: Martin Luther was born in 1483 in the town of Eisleben, Germany. He is known for nailing his “95 Theses” to the door of a

Catholic church on Halloween in 1517. His hope was that the church would change some of its practices and doctrines he felt were not right. The Catholics, however, did not appreciate his criticisms (to put it mildly) and soon excommunicated him. His efforts, along with others, were the catalysts for what is called *the Protestant Reformation*.

Several religious, and various kinds of encyclopedias, offer explanations regarding why Martin Luther (at least during part of his life) did not like the book of James. First, however, according to one Biblical Commentary, his opinion of the book (written in his preface to the New Testament) was as follows.

The Believer's Study Bible states that Luther, at least for a period of time, thought that the book of James contradicted what (he believed) was the **Apostle Paul's teaching** that justification came by faith alone (article on the canonicity of the manuscript). The Bible Knowledge Commentary admits, in its preface to this Biblical book, that it was “well known” that Martin had problems with this New Testament work.

Luther, according to the Holman Bible Dictionary Disciple's Study Bible, and other references, had the greatest difficulty with what James wrote about faith and works in the second chapter of his book. Some of the key parts from verses 14 to 26, which Martin disagreed with, are in our text today. This is the reason for this brief history lesson.

Luther's very Own words from his Intro to James and Jude.

Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude (1522)

Though this epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, ¹ I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the

law of God. However, to state my own opinion about it, though without prejudice to anyone, I do not regard it as the writing of an apostle; and my reasons follow.

In the first place it is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works. It says that Abraham was justified by his works when he offered his son Isaac; though in Romans 4 St. Paul teaches to the contrary that Abraham was justified apart from works, by his faith alone, before he had offered his son, and proves it by Moses in Genesis 15. Now although this epistle might be helped and an interpretation ² devised for this justification by works, it cannot be defended in its application to works of Moses' statement in Genesis 15. For Moses is speaking here only of Abraham's faith, and not of his works, as St. Paul demonstrates in Romans 4. This fault, therefore, proves that this epistle is not the work of any apostle.

In the second place its purpose is to teach Christians, but in all this long teaching it does not once mention the passion, the resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. He names Christ several times; however he teaches nothing about him, but only speaks of general faith in God.

Read text: 14-26

We are going to divide this text into three sections to explain what saving faith really is.

1. Dead Faith vs. Active/Profitable Faith
2. Demonic Faith vs. Experiential Faith
3. Dynamic Faith vs. Barren Faith

I. Dead Faith vs. Profitable Faith: Verses 14-17

James 2:14-17

14 What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, 16 And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? 17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

KJV

- You may be thinking that this is much to do about nothing but as Wiersbe says, *“if we are wrong **here** it is a matter of eternal salvation.”*
- Your faith must be profitable and not dead.
- Let me say upfront that I do believe that we are saved by faith and that there is nothing that you can do that can take the place of the work, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. **I believe that James is dealing with proof of salvation. Although much of what he writes can be confusing because of the context in which he writes. I say it differently than James, but it means the same thing. “I say, no change, no Christ.” I need to see a difference in your life so that I can see some life. I want to see action. If your working faith is dead, then you may not have had a saving faith.**
- I am afraid that many people have claimed to have faith and show no evidence of it. **They have a dead faith.**
- There will also be many who will perform many works and deeds for conscience sake and still not know Jesus.

Matt 7:21

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' 23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

NIV

- To answer James... *yes, true faith can save a man without works or deeds, but saving faith will produce works. Luther and James were speaking from two separate positions.*
- In **Gal 6:10** we are told to do good to all men and especially to the household of faith. In **Matthew 25:40** we are told that what we have done to the least of the brethren we have done unto Christ. Notice 1 John 3:16-17.

1 John 3:16-17

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 17 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?**

NIV

- James speaks from this position.
- Notice what John says... **“How can the love of God be in him?”** Christ is the example of faith with works. Tell your wife you love her and then never show it and see what happens.

- Remember the parable of the good Samaritan. Two men from the temple walked right by the man who was dying. Both the Priest and the Levite that just came from the temple service, where they served God for a lengthy time, but they both passed right by the man in need. If you challenged both men on their theology, their salvation, and their love for God, they would have **defended** their faith. Yet neither man would have **demonstrated** his faith. **That's what James' teaching is all about.**

Illustration: James had just mentioned two people in the previous verses. A rich man and a poor man. The lesson there was- do not show favoritism. The lesson changes slightly here. If both men ask for food or clothes, do not refuse them. **How can you say that you are saved, and that you have saving faith, if you turn them down and just give a word of prayer.**

Now there are a lot of lessons to learn here. I don't give people money very often. But if I know of a legitimate need for food and clothes, I feel the scripture speaks to that. I am to feed another human if I have the means and I know the need is real. **However, I never gives strangers money no matter how good and polished their story is. They will buy drugs with the money. Don't do it.**

Many use intimidation and opportunistic strategies to get money from people and churches.

Greek: *heautou-* (Verse 17) *Refers to being alone. The KJV has this translation correct. Faith without works stands alone all by itself.* When faith is all alone, it can become wishful thinking. A correct definition of faith is trust in what God has said in His word. NIV, "By itself."

James is simply saying that you cannot come into contact with Jesus Christ and remain the same. You are either dead or alive.

1 John 5:12

12 He who has the Son has **life**; he who does not have the Son of God does not have **life**.

NIV

****If you have life you act a lot differently than when you are dead. Right? So does faith.*

Illustration: What do nurses check for when they take your blood pressure, temperature, and pulse? Vital signs. Vital signs are signs of life that are vital. That's all James is saying. No signs, no life.

II. Demonic vs. Experiential faith. Verses 18-19

James 2:18-19

18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. 19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.

KJV

James 2:18-19

18 But someone might argue, "Some people have faith, and others have good works." My answer would be that you can't show me your faith if you don't do anything. But I will show you my faith by the good I do. 19 You believe there is one God. That's good, but even the demons believe that! And they shake with fear.

Holy Bible: Easy-to-Read Version

- So Brother Jerry, how can someone think they are alive and be dead? I'm glad you asked. Remember this... for every truth, Satan has a counterfeit.

2 Tim 3:1-7

3 But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. 2 People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, 4 treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— 5 having **a form of godliness** but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. 6 They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, **7 always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.**

NIV

Verse 19 is quite clear. Belief is not experience. Do you believe in God? Oh yes brother Jerry, I believe that God exists and that He created all things. That is good, but it is simply knowledge.

There has to be a time of commitment and acknowledgement of Christ as Lord. It is not enough that you believe that He is Lord.... **Is He your Lord?** He is God... but is **He your God.**

James even says that the demons believe in God. The demons bowed to Jesus and were greatly afraid of Him. They knew His name and His power. They understood His mission. **But they are not saved.** If your Christian experience is simply knowledge about Jesus, and you have not given Him rule of your life, then you stand right now in danger of eternal separation from Him.

- A person may be stirred in their **intellect** and not make a commitment to Christ. Another person may be moved in their **emotions** and not commit to Jesus- both are lost.
- I like what Wiersbe says, *“Being a Christian involves trusting Christ and living for Christ; you **receive** the life, then you **reveal** the life. A Barren faith is not a saving faith.”*

III. Dynamic Faith vs. Barren Faith. Verses 20- 26

James 2:20-26

20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? 21 **Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?** 22 Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? 23

And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. 24 **Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.** 25 Likewise also was not Rahab

the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

KJV

Greek: In verse 17 James uses the word **nekros** for the word **dead**. It refers to death or anything necrotic. What is unique is that He uses a different word in verse 20 to better express his thoughts. “Dead, in verse 20 is the word **argos**, which is simply the word **ergon** with the alpha privative on the front. In other words, no activity. Barren, lazy, useless, unemployed, idle, inactive. (HCSB- useless).

- Now that little word tells a story. Have you seen these demonic faith people? Barren, lazy, useless, unemployed

spiritually, inactive. I thank God that my name has never been on the inactive list at any church.

- He has to be your Savior by **experience** and your Lord by **obedience**. A mere acknowledge that God is real is not a saving experience. This is the point James is making. He must be Savior and Lord at salvation.
- Now we are given two examples to illustrate what James is teaching.
- 1. **Our Father Abraham-** After Abraham offered Isaac on the altar God told him that he knew he **feared** him. Nothing in that story says that Abraham was saved in Genesis 22. He was already saved. Note Genesis 15:4-6 (Salvation experience of Abraham). Same as Romans 4 as Paul says the same thing (Paul quotes from it). Paul says that It was accredited to Abraham. This is in Gen 15 **not** Gen 22.

Gen 15:1-6

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward."

2 But Abram said, "Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!"

4 And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." 5 Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

6 And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

NKJV

Rom 4:1-8

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? 2 If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about — but not before God. 3 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham **believed** God, and it was **credited** to him as righteousness." 4 Now when a man **works**, his wages are not **credited** to him as a **gift**, but as an **obligation**. 5

However, to the man who does not work **but trusts** God who justifies the wicked, **his faith is credited as righteousness**. 6

David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God **credits** righteousness **apart from** works:

7 "Blessed are they
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

8 Blessed is the man
whose sin the Lord will never **count** against him."

NIV (Psalm 32:1-2)

- We are saved by faith in Christ. God saved Abraham based on the promise of Messiah coming, and the land, and the progenitorship. That's the same message of the gospel you and I heard. The Gen. 22 story is an **illustration** of what God would do in the future. God illustrated Abraham's faith that he expressed in Gen 15 by testing his works.
- **One has said that Abraham was not saved by faith in works but by faith that works.**

I must say that verses 21, 23, 24 makes me nervous. Many pastors today do the same thing. They get so close to **"works based salvation"** that they make me uneasy. David Platt is one of those people. I've almost lost friends over my comments and my ire from many of Platts' comments. But in my opinion, any man who gets close to saying you can be saved by works will get my full attention. I don't care who he is. John MacArthur does the same thing at times. He is so particular about the process of salvation,

and how it comes about, that he makes people doubt their salvation. He sounds like he's making the mystery of salvation a ridged process. That in itself is works. Salvation is not a prayer or a set of rules. Salvation is a relinquishing of one's will and placing their trust in another. That person is Jesus Christ. Salvation is a conversion of the mind and will about Jesus Christ. There is no one certain prayer one must pray for salvation. This is a matter of belief, faith, and the grace of God all working together.

- Notice with me the word in verse 23, "Fulfilled." This is the word **pleroo**. This word means **completed** or **perfected**. In my mind, this explains a lot. When a person is accredited with righteousness by exercising their faith (belief), their faith will be completed or perfected by works. That is still happening today in my life, 40 years after salvation. Did not Paul express this when he said those that continue to the end will be saved. I was saved, I am being saved, and I will be saved.
- James is correct here, and it may not be good to question, but I wish this were worded differently. Yet, we have many scriptures to clarify. Remember, clearer passages explain more difficult or obscure passages. Our faith definitely is proved by our actions. That's what your baptism was. Faith does work together with works to some degree. We are not robots when we come to Christ as we operate by our free volition in coming to Jesus. God works all things together, but I have to say that there is nothing you can do by works to be saved. Nothing!

Eph 2:8-9

8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the **gift** of God: 9 **Not of works**, lest any man should boast.

KJV

- The **KJV** does a better job of translating verse 22.

22. Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was **faith made perfect?**

James 2:22-23

22 You see that his faith and his actions **were working together**, and his faith was made complete **by what he did**.

NIV

I would much rather say that his faith was made complete by what he did after he was made righteous by his saving faith. I like to recognize that saving faith is a gift from God. It is by grace and there is nothing you can do to buy it or beg for it. It's grace given. Faith comes by hearing and hearing the Word of God.

After salvation, God perfects our saving faith with acts of obedience. I believe that James is trying to express the fact that a dynamic *saving faith* **produces** acts, or deeds, of good works.

Col 2:8-10

8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. 9 For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. **10 And ye are complete in him**, which is the head of all principality and power:

KJV

Verse 23 is clear cut and lets us know that James does understand, and that he is clear, that we are only saved by faith.

James 2:23

23 And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.

KJV

Verse 24: I am your pastor and love you and you have heard me preach to you the infallible truths of this book and would never question God's Word. But I have to be honest with you, I wish the wording of this verse were different. James seems to contradict himself here and also the Apostle Paul in many places. We have to look at the context of both men's writings to get our answers and to look at the whole counsel of God. Let me give you a few translations that will help.

James 2:24

24 Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.
KJV

James 2:24

24 So you see that people are made right with God by what they do. They cannot be made right by faith alone.
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James 2:24

You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.
NIV

Paul was combating **legalism**. James was fighting **lazy, unresponsive Christians, with dead, demonic, and barren faith**. ***Paul had to teach that legalism can't save. James had to teach that works prove your salvation.*** James teaches that, faith and works, work together after salvation. Paul does say that we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus. Truly, the Word of God is a great book and far beyond our ability to grasp it all. What we do know, is it is trustworthy and inspired. Holy Spirit help us.

When we take the book of James in its entirety (Context), we can comfortably receive the message with clarity. The context of this verse, paragraph, chapter, and book, deals with Christian living after salvation. James is writing to believers; therefore, his main message is not to reach those who are lost, but those who are persecuted and trying to live for Christ. My belief is that James understands faith and salvation and also faith for Christian living. Context may show itself more important here than any other place in scripture. Context is king.

What concerns me is that a new believer or lost man could read this verse, in any translation, and misunderstand it. If read for its face value without context, the verse is not biblical. I think James may also be using the term justification in a different way also. In other words, your works will justify what you have declared in faith. I have full confidence in what the Holy Spirit has given us.

2. **The second example is of Rahab.** You may read what she did in Joshua chapter 2. She tied a scarlet cord in the window so that when the people of Israel took the city, and destroyed it, she and her family would be saved. The similarities to the Passover in Egypt are remarkable. May I just say that God was working in the heart of Rahab before the spies ever got there. Rahab was saved by her faith before the cord went into the window. That was an act of faith displayed... That's what James says in verse 24. She and her family were saved physically by the cord, but spiritually by the blood of the cross, not a cord in the window. Rahab gave lodging to the spies days before the invasion. She was trusting God way before that time. Rahab proved her faith with an act of faith displayed.

Verse 26: This really sums up what James wants to say. If you say a body is alive, and it is void of a spirit, I am going to question your sanity. I am not the smartest knife in the drawer, but I know

dead when I see it. And when I hear a “Christian” say they have life, and I don’t see works for the Lord, I start wondering about the health of that life. If it’s cold, necrotic, and without breath, it’s dead!

Yes... I have seen Christians out of God’s will that had dead, demonic, and barren faith. The heathen Lot was called a righteous man in the NT so don’t lose faith in the people you are praying for.

But as a general rule, no works, no life. No change, no Christ.

Some have a dead faith due to being out of God’s will. A time of chastisement and discipline will bring them back to the fold if they are truly saved.

Closing: Do you have a dynamic faith? Better question is... do you have a saving faith?

A few questions can help us:

- Has there ever been a time that you honestly knew you were lost and away from God? Have you admitted it to yourself and asked God to forgive you and save you from your sin?
- Do you understand the gospel? Jesus died for you and wants to save you, and has made that possible?
- Do you understand the consequences of rejecting Christ’s offer of salvation?
- If you have received Christ, has there been a significant change in your life? Are there works of service and discipleship going on? Are you growing?
- Do you desire the fellowship of God’s people?
- Is worship boring to you, or do you enjoy worshipping God? Do you enjoy the world more than the Kingdom?
- Do you secretly sin and enjoy it, or do you repent from failure and hate sin?

- Are you trusting Christ, and Christ alone, for salvation.
- Do you have a desire to read God's word?
- Do you have a desire to share Christ with others.
- Could you say that you are ready for the return of Christ?
- Do you have a relationship with the Holy Spirit? Does He convict, encourage, and lead you?
- Do you go through times of great commitment only to be followed by months of failure?
- Do you make excuses for sinful behavior and lack of commitment?

Let's close with a word from Jesus.

Matt 7:15-25

15 "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 **By their fruit you will recognize them.** Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, **but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.** 22 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' 23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine **and puts them into practice** is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

NIV