

**James 2:14-17**  
**“Dead Faith”**

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**I. Introduction**

We come now to an infamous passage that is supposed by some scholars to be an attack upon the Apostle Paul’s doctrine of salvation by faith instead of works. Martin Luther disliked this letter so much he referred to James as a “*epistle of straw*”. Such an assumption is ignorant in multiple accounts. First, neither Paul nor James sat down to write doctrinal positions; both wrote letters that presented truth. Furthermore, it is inconsistent to think that James wrote an attack on Paul’s position when James wrote first prior to Paul’s writing and possibly before his conversion. James’ letter has a practical purpose not a theological one and wants only for the reader to understand the purpose and practice of maturity in the believer. **James’ position is that works is the proof of faith not the means of faith!**

Years ago, a cartoon poking fun at the modern western church appeared in the New Yorker: The fake advertisement was for the “LITE CHURCH” that boasted of 24% fewer commitments, home of the 7.5 tithe, 15-minute sermon, 45-minute worship service. They had only 8 commandments instead of the 10 and you got to choose which ones. They only had 3 spiritual laws instead of the 4; they were everything you wanted in a church....and less! That is the stained-glass experience so many professing believers want in the modern church, no quickening of the conscience, no feeding of the mind, no opening of the heart, not commitment-----no real faith! Half of professing Christians

haven't been to a church in the last three months, a third haven't attended in the last year. **What's going on?** Chuck Colson called this the Mc Church mentality where Christians are in search of what suits their appetites for the moment and hopefully can be consumed sometime after we have our order and before we have been on the road five minutes. These consumers, as Chuck Colson called them, are not interested in what the Bible says but only in what it can deliver to their felt needs! What's amazing is that this was what concerned James thousands of years ago at the beginning of Jesus' church. In James' letter he wants the reader to examine what type of faith they truly possess. Are they merely "**pretenders**" or are they true "**possessors**" of faith? Faith isn't a feeling any more than the Holy Spirit is a force! **Faith is: Absolute confidence in God and His word seen in our acting upon that Word.** It reminds me of the story of Jean-François Gravelet the most spectacular tightrope-walker, of his day. Born in 1824, he was nicknamed 'Blondin' for his blond hair and in 1859 he became the first person to cross Niagara Falls over 1000 feet with a 60 feet dip in the middle. Having accomplished this feat multiple times, the press became a bit disinterested so Blondin asked, "*Do you believe I can cross these falls?*" The reply from the press was a unanimous "Yes!" To which he replied, "*Which one of you will climb on my back and go with me?*" **And with no takers his manager became the first person to cross the falls on the back of another.** This illustration to faith has two realities:

1. First, **life can and does place you on the back of Jesus.**
2. Second, **it's a lot easier to watch Jesus from the bank cross the great divides in life and a whole other thing when you are on His back even though you know He can cross them without any problem.**

Saints, **faith doesn't come into play in our lives until it is personal, until we are moved from the banks of the challenges of life to Jesus' back as He carries us across.** Whether

you have no choice to get on His back or you have made a conscience choice to do so know this, **the joy is not in the crossing, it's in Who's carrying you!** In the remainder of this chapter James will write about what true faith is and isn't as he will describe **three kinds of faith and only one of which is true!**

A simple outline of this section using James' own description's reveals to us:

- I. Vs. 14-17 Dead Faith
- II. Vs. 18-19 Demonic Faith
- III. Vs. 20-26 Dynamic Faith

## II. Vs. 14 What profit?

Vs. 14 Faith and works are mentioned together 10 times in 13 verses in this section.

James is about to set forth a clear distinction of faith: *"Faith without works is dead."*

James states that, "works" are not an added extra to faith but rather an essential part faith.

Part of the confusion of this statement *"Can faith save him"* in verse 14 is the result of an inadequate translation in the King James Version when the scholars choose to translate this phrase by ignoring the Greek article in front of the word "faith". The right translation is *"Can **THAT** faith save him"*? **"What does it profit"** is literally **"What is the use?"** The claim of faith should be accepted but **A life must give expression to what the heart felt!**

Jesus was equally concerned about this as He said in Matthew 7:21 *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven."* James' words indicate that some of those that he wrote too substituted **words** for **deeds**. Their problem was NOT knowledge or ignorance, it appears that the problem lay in action as they believed that words were the same as works to which James says they were wrong! Simply put, **their walk didn't match their words!** To get to the point James asks three questions that he will answer in these verses before us

which both will clarify true faith as well as give the pretenders an opportunity to be possessor of true faith:

- A. **What kind of faith saves a person?**
- B. **Is it necessary to perform works in order to be saved?**
- C. **Can a person determine if they are exercising true faith?**

And the context of those questions is described in the parable of verses 15-16!

### III. Vs. 15-16 Talk is cheap

Vs. 15-16 James illustration shows that he has no tolerance for dead faith and the story ***assumes that the needs of the brother or sister is legitimate*** and should produce in the true believer's sympathy that moves a person to action. The Illustration reveals to his readers that real faith is ***much more*** than "***verbal affirmation***". The context reveals that James rejects mere "***verbal affirmation faith***" that lacks any demonstration. James says that ***a faith that cannot demonstrate its authenticity is NOT a genuine faith.*** Not all faith is redemptive; a faith that cannot authenticate its profession cannot save! Like a person who professes they are a good swimmer but has never swam nor gone into the water should not be too confident on their profession especially if they are in over their head in water. Any person can concede certain facts and truth but that is no different than the demons of verse 19. ***True faith displays itself in action not in intellectual agreement!*** Jesus said the same in Matt 7:21 "***Not everyone who SAYS to Me, LORD, LORD, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who DOES the will of My Father in heaven.***" *The issue of hypocrisy in the church is compounded when it is often the person who least lives what they say they believe all the while being the loudest about saying it. Apparently the paralysis that effects their actions doesn't interfere with their tongue!*

Another point that James illustrations brings is that such ***a verbal faith doesn't serve***, as it is incapable of doing so. In Matt 9:36 Jesus had compassion for the hungry

multitude, His heart was not hardened to their need, He did not give them only His words but also His works. There was **no truthful advice without a mouthful of food!** A satirical look at Jesus words in Matt 25:35-40 would sound very different if it was dead faith Jesus was talking about: *I was hungry, and you formed a committee to discuss my need. I was imprisoned, and you felt sorry about it. I was naked, and you discussed the morality of my appearance. I was sick, and you thanked God for your health. I was homeless, and you proclaimed that we have a mansion waiting for us in heaven. I was lonely and hurting, and you said you didn't want to bother me. You seemed so holy and close to God, but I'm still hungry, lonely and cold!* **There is no greater way to visibly defend our faith to a doubting world than to demonstrate it to the lost and hurting!** This is what John said in 3:17-18 *“Whoever has this worlds goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but indeed and in truth.”* In Jesus' parable of the “Good Samaritan” both the priest and the Levite had religious training each of them would have defended their faith but neither of them took the time to demonstrate their faith in loving works. It ought to be clear to all who read this first New Testament book that any personal declaration of faith that doesn't result in a transformed life seen in a demonstration of good works is only as lasting as the sound of their voice. James point is that any **declaration** of faith must have a **demonstration** of its validity!

#### IV. Vs. 17 Dead Faith

Vs. 17 The faith that is illustrated in this story is a “dead faith” as James so aptly states in verse 17 **“Thus faith by itself, if it does not have works is dead.”** John Calvin described it this way, **“It is faith alone that justifies, but faith that justifies can never be alone.”** Saving faith is a living faith and as such brings to life everything it touches has to

produce good living works! Dead faith has only intellectual comprehension but has never transformed the life. **Knowing what is right, must produce what is right, if we are to be right!** No person ill regardless of their profession of faith can remain the same it is an impossibility. John put it this way in 1<sup>st</sup> John 5:12 “*He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.*” Dead faith is a counterfeit faith that causes a person to have false confidence of eternal life. James concludes this section with a summarized statement that faith that is not accompanied by works is dead. It was not that it died, it was that it was never alive to begin with and was only a mere profession **this type of faith only has FORM but doesn't possess any FORCE!**