

James 2:18-26
“Working faith”

- I. Introduction**
- II. Vs. 18-20 Demonic faith**
- III. Vs. 21-24 Abraham’s example**
- IV. Vs. 25-26 Rahab’s example**

I. Introduction

The maintenance of authentic faith has been in challenge from the foundation of the church onward. There can be a glaring gulf between professing faith and the passionate practice of it. I find it fascinating that such a challenge wasn’t unique to our time as James clearly address it in this letter. Reading his letter reveals that he took considerable literary devices to try to get his point across. Having used an illustration that the proof of faith is personal and continual transformation James continues to illustrate this with examples that were designed to arrest the attention of his readers. There are far too many churches that are at best a service club, where personal commitment and transformation is lacking. Such Christians that attend these churches are undistinguishable between nonbelievers. Such professed faith is lacking any distinctive transformation. The problem was an early one we find based upon James words in his letter. These followers of Christ were all Jewish and upon their allegiance to Jesus as their Messiah, learned that they were no longer obligated to many of the legalistic works that had been required by the Rabbis as Jesus had satisfied the Laws demands, He had paid the penalty and had offered new life to all who trusted Him. Now the problem was that some of these followers believed that such “freedom in Christ” removed any responsibility to life righteously.

II. Vs. 18-20 Demonic faith

Vs. 18 It is clear that James wanted to shock his readers into the reality that “true faith works” but before he does so he proposes a hypothetical conversation with a person who is objecting to his above statement in verse 17 where James emphatically stated that “*Thus also faith by its self, if it does not have works, is dead.*” This hypothetical person claims that James only has works while he is in possession of faith. James answer is to pit the two positions against each other where James rests his proof of faith on his works and challenges his objector to prove their faith apart from works. James isn’t arguing for the lack of faith in the Christian life he is rather describing what that saving faith looks like as to distinguish it from mere intellectual profession. His point is that “*professed faith*” that doesn’t produce outward transformation isn’t saving faith.

Vs.19 Ready to drive home his point James shows that such intellectual profession of truth if it does not bring with it a response in action is not saving faith. To do so James takes the great “Shema” which is the first Hebrew word found in Deuteronomy 6:4, 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41. The word is “Hear” followed by “O Israel: The LORD your God, the LORD is one!” It describes the unity of God and is the Jewish confession of faith. The reciting of this phrase was far more than an orthodox creed as many believed that it had saving power simple by repeating it. They would repeat it morning and night and it was seen as the duty of every pious Jew. The rabbis taught that, “Whoever reads the Shema upon his couch is as one that defends himself with a two-edged sword.” “They cool the flames of hell for him who reads the Shema.” While these statements help the reader understand why James uses this illustration it is also interesting that James does not ridicule this practice as he says, “*You believe that there is*

one God. **YOU DO WELL.**” Clearly intellectual agreement with truth is far better than believing and trusting in a lie. But as fundamental and essential as “monotheism” (the belief in only one God) is when compared to “polytheism” (the belief in many gods) it is still not enough to save a soul who has that belief alone. James’ criticism isn’t with what a person believes but that such belief is only intellectual assent with no transforming union with God. To drive this home James says that, “**Even the demons believe---**” and James adds that **they have an emotional response to their intellectual assent** as they “**tremble**”. It must have shocked the readers to learn that demons have faith! The Bible goes further in many verses to tell us what they believe and again it may surprise you that their faith is quite orthodox:

1. First, as noted here they believe in the existence of God. The demonic world is neither atheists nor agnostics.
2. Second, according to Mark 3:11-12 whenever they ran into Jesus they acknowledged His deity as well as His relationship with the Father.
3. Third, according to Luke 8:31 and Mark 5:1-13 they believed in hell knew that Jesus was their judge and even submitted to the power of His word and authority.

Furthermore, James says they trembled which is a word that means to “bristle” like the hair standing up on the back of your neck which tells us that they had an emotional response to the truth they hear. But such belief even in orthodox truth that has an emotional response doesn’t necessarily indicate “saving faith”. In Acts 8:13 Luke tells the story of Simon the sorcerer who Luke says not only “**believed**” but was even “**baptized**” but several years later his actions indicated that his profession of faith wasn’t true as he attempted to buy spiritual power. Peter rebuked him saying, “*You neither have part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness and pray if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.*” The tragic truth is that hell will have many people who were orthodox and

monotheistic who will forever reside there. Faith is far more than intellectual assent to orthodox truths even when such faith is accompanied with an emotional response. It must be as Paul wrote in Romans 10:9-10 *“If you confess with your mouth the Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”*

Paul answered the Philippian jailers’ question of *“What must I do to be saved?”* in Acts 16:31 with *“Believe IN the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”* The word “IN” here is (epi) in the Greek and means ***to move towards and rest everything upon Jesus!*** The first work we can do is completely trust Jesus and after this true faith will continue to keep on working! Like these demons, is a persons professed faith even in biblical truth doesn’t transform their character and conduct than it can not change their prospects for their eternal future. It is a sad reality that a person’s belief may be found on biblical truth all the while their character remains untransformed by this truth and remain evil. We must guard our hearts that can possess the acceptance of truth without allowing it to have any influence upon our life! There are good many pastors who seek to define “faith” as nothing more than a “positive mental attitude” but faith is much more than attitude as it requires action.

Vs. 20 James now picks his hypothetical discussion by asking, *“Do you need more proof that saving faith needs personal transformation?”* This question was aimed at the person who was convinced that intellectual assent to truth was all that was required by God for salvation. The word “dead” here in the Greek is a word that means barren, idle or useless. It is a play on words as it can read, ***“Faith without works doesn’t work!”*** *“O, foolish*

man” is “*O empty man*” and is used to describe a person who has settled in the fallacy that faith without works can work!

To prove his point James offers two examples from their first testament scriptures: Abraham and Rahab. Using these two as an examples couldn't have been more diverse as case studies; the patriarch and the prostitute.

III. Vs. 21-24 Abraham's example

Vs. 21-24 Abrahams example is powerful as he had received the promise from God as having descendants as numerous as the stars and 30 years later after Issacs birth Abraham was been told by God to take his only son up on mount Moriah and sacrifice him. The promise of God was colliding with the obedience to God. Most I know would simple disregard the works of obedience while claiming the promise, but you cannot enjoy the promises apart from the obedience and Abraham knew this. No compromise to God's word was made, no alternative interpretation was offered. Abraham's faith was being put to the test to see if it would cooperate with faith or seek to avoid it. This is easily the second most shocking command ever given by God only proceeded by His own to His Son Jesus. It was contrary to common sense, natural affection and all his dreams and hopes and finally it ran contrary to the word of God that through Isaac and he alone the promise he made was to Abraham was to be fulfilled. How could he do this? His faith is clearly seen in Genesis when after the third day he says to his servants, “*Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you.*” Amazing trust in God in spite of the fact that obedience to the word of God went contrary to the promise of God Abraham still could say from his heart, “*we will come back to you*”. It is here that Hebrews 11:19 offers an explanation such faith and obedience where

we read that Abraham “concluded that God was able to raise him (Isaac) up even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.” James summarizes Abrahams testimony by saying, “You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” The point he is making by using Abraham and Isaac is that Abrahams faith and obedience were inseparable. We are justified by faith alone that is never alone as true faith always works!

IV. Vs. 25-26 Rahab’s example

Vs. 25-26 It is believed by many that the addition of a second example to opposite of Abraham was brought forth because Abraham was the “the father of faith” and such a towering figure that the common person could claim that they could never be expected to embrace such faith that works. So, Abraham the patriarch, the moral, the righteous Jew is parried with Rahab the prostitute, the immoral, the gentile woman. Rahab had limited knowledge about God but had become disillusioned with the culture around her, she was treated just as an object. Yet she risked her life to save those Jewish spies and headed their words to save herself and her house from destruction. So if a woman like Rahab could exercise faith that works than so could anyone. She trusted and acted upon God word as just the mental accumulation of facts would not have produced the saving results. The concluding statement by James is that “*For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.*” Faith without the action of obedience is like a body apart from its spirit, dead! It is like a person perfectly embalmed in a sealed box to prevent decay; it may look a live but is just as dead as any other corpse. Comprehension of truth must lead to commitment to that truth for it to be true saving faith!