

Faith and Works

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? ²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ²³ Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’, and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? ²⁶ For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

1. Faith and Action (2.14-17)

(14) What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? At the beginning of Chapter 2, James has taken issue with the ‘acts of favouritism’, which vitiate the faith ‘in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ’. He asks them whether their acts of favouritism demonstrate their faith in Christ (although remember that the Greek could also mean ‘the faith of Christ’). In James 2.14-17, James now asks his brothers and sisters ‘what good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works?’ He then gives a series of concrete examples of actions that are required to demonstrate faith. He asks ‘Can faith save you?’ if people lack clothing or food. Note the echoes here again of the teaching of Jesus in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25). Empty rhetoric is not enough. Words which appear to be apparently kind and merciful are vacuous and meaningless if you are not prepared to back them up. He makes the following sharp observation: **(16) what is the good of that?** And then he says **(17) So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.** This phrase is striking and sets up an intriguing contrast with Paul. As the argument develops in this section, we begin to appreciate that while Paul, in Romans and Galatians, appeals to Abraham to teaching that we are justified (i.e. restored to a right relationship with God) not by works of the law but by faith, James appeals to Abraham to teach that we are justified by our actions and not by faith alone. What do we make of this apparent contradiction?

Dale Allison suggests six different ways of accounting for this contradiction: “(i) James and Paul wrote independently of each other, so neither was concerned with the other; and if one did know what the other taught, he was no consciously being oppositional. (ii) Paul responded to James or to followers of James in order to correct or rebut him or them. (iii) Paul agreed with James but sought ‘to prevent a mischievous use’ of his words, which the apostle ‘thought likely to be perverted by the Judaisers who were corrupting the Gospel of Christ’. (iv) James responded to Paul in a polemical fashion. (v) James responded to Paul but sought to clarify his teaching, and not counter it. A recent variant of this last position is the thesis that James is a second-century, canonically conscious pseudepigraphon composed in part to stave off heterodox interpretations of Paul. (vi) James reacted negatively not to Paul but to some form of (distorted) Pauline antinomianism.” (Allison, *James*, pp.427-429). In *City of God*, St Augustine comments on the tensions between Paul and James and their different understandings of the relationship between faith and works. He argues that Christians enjoy peace with God both now and in their future eternal joy because of their faith. Peace with God in this life, however, is primarily more ‘the solace of our misery than the positive enjoyment of felicity’, because this life consists more in the remission of sins than in the perfecting of virtues’. That is why Christians pray that their trespasses be forgiven as they forgive those who trespass against them. There are some prerequisites for this prayer to be effective, though, and Augustine links James and Paul to make his case: ‘And this prayer is efficacious not for those whose faith is ‘without

works and dead' (James 2.17, but for those whose faith 'works by love' (Galatians 5.6). Augustine seeks to harmonise the teaching of James and Paul – but does the teaching of the New Testament need to be harmonised? Is it legitimate for the pages of the New Testament to provoke debate and discussion?

2. **Objections (2.18-26)**

(18) But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. James outlines a series of objections to what he has said. But this passage is perplexing. Who is the 'You' and the 'I' in this verse. Also, how far does the quoted material extend? Remember that there are no inverted commas in Greek. 'You have faith and I have works' appears to say something different from the next sentence. But equally, the interlocutor may be suggesting that the distinction between faith and works is absurd. It may be possible to separate them contextually but they cannot be separated in real life.

It is not clear whether the objection comes from a critical friend or an imagined opponent, but Gowler suggests that the diatribe format (with the strident 'senseless person' in 2.20) suggests that an imaginary opponent is the most likely candidate. **(19) You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.** Note the character of faith here. There is an allusion to the Shema, the monotheistic confession of Judaism (Deuteronomy 6.4). It is echoed in the Nicene creed, 'We believe in one God'. But perhaps James is suggesting that this only hints at the fullness of faith – even the demons believe this. The Shema demands not only the confession that the Lord is one, but that the believer should love God with all one's heart, soul and might, and obey God's commandments (Deuteronomy 6.4-9). Faith demands action – mercy, compassion and hospitality to all. **(20) Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren?** The implication is that the interlocutor is still not impressed. So James appeals to the witness of scripture. He offers two illustrations: Abraham (vv. 21-24) and Rahab (v. 25).

(21) Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? (22) You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. (23) Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and he was called the friend of God. (24) You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. The example of Abraham and the reference to his famous deed of obedience in the sacrifice of Isaac (remember according to Genesis 22, an angel stayed Abraham's hand at the last moment) is controversial in two ways: first, in affirming the connection between faith and works, we also need to recognise that Abraham's actions might be construed as unethical even though the story of the Aqedah is celebrated because it demonstrates Abraham's obedience and his faithfulness in carrying out the will of God. Secondly, this passage is controversial because Paul argues in his letters that faith is sufficient for justification without works of the law. Paul's argument rests on a passage from Genesis, 'Abraham believed and it was reckoned to him as righteousness' (Genesis 15.6). Note that James quotes exactly the same verse! Both James and Paul appeal to Abraham but draw very different conclusions. Note the description of Abraham as 'God's friend' (v. 23). It is a title that is often applied to Moses. It is one of the highest honours a human being might obtain. Note this passage from Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*: 'Since the goal of the virtuous way of life was the very thing we have been seeking, and this goal has been found in what we have said, it is time for you, noble friend, to look to that example and, by transferring to your own life what is contemplated through spiritual interpretation of the things spoken literally, to be known by God and to become his friend. This is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because, like slaves, we servilely fear punishment, nor to do good because we hope for rewards, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by some businesslike and contractual arrangement. On the contrary, disregarding all those things for which we hope and which have been reserved by promise, we regard falling from God's friendship as the only thing dreadful, and we consider becoming God's friend the only thing worthy of honour and desire. This, as I have said, is the perfection of life' (Gregory of Nyssa).

(25) Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? The story of Rahab might be less familiar to us. She is a marginalised, Gentile woman, who was almost certainly poor and portrayed in the Book of

Joshua as a prostitute. Rahab received and protected the two spies sent by Joshua to Jericho (Joshua 2.1-14). James states that Rahab was ‘justified by works’ when she welcomed them and saved their lives. In some ways, these are strange examples. Note the accent on hospitality in both Abraham and Rahab.

(26) For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead. James repeats the point made in v. 17, but here introduces the analogy of the spirit and the body. But has he got them the right way round? Surely faith and soul, being the internal elements, and body and works, being the visible elements, should be correlated. Luther once said: ‘O Mary, the mother of God! What a terrible comparison that is!’ A bit awkward!

- (1) Is it possible to believe something without your beliefs shaping your actions?
- (2) What do we find particularly challenging about this passage?
- (3) Do you see echoes of the argument between James and Paul in society today? In the church?
- (4) What does the phrase ‘friendship with God’ mean to you?