

Faith Works: The Book of James

Showing Faith by Works

James 2:18-26

Mark Vroegop

But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead (James 2:18–26, ESV).

It's a rite of passage with the start of the New Year.

Not long after we've completed our New Year's celebrations, the commercials start for exercise equipment, weight loss programs, and the newest diet plan. I'm sure that many of you, like me, are trying to figure out what adjustments need to be made in 2021.

Imagine a commercial that sounds like this:

For only \$19.99 a month, you can join the "Dad-Bod" diet community. We'll send you a weekly plan for what you should eat. You'll receive daily emails helping you to think differently about yourself. And you'll have access to a series of work-out videos. We've launched this new diet community because Dad-Bod guys need help. However, you need to know that our diet isn't proven, our emails are pretty unhelpful, and our fitness program is too easy. Actually, the program doesn't work. We just want you to think it works, for \$19.99 a month.

Who wants that kind of program? No one. Why? Because the value of a diet or fitness program is how it works. You're willing to pay \$19.99 a month as long as it does something.

On the other side of the equation, some of you know that when you've found something that does work, it's amazing. And not just when it comes to fitness or diet. When you've discovered something that helps you change, assists you in making better relationships, creates greater togetherness in marriage, or gives you a path to be free from an addiction, you'll tell everyone about it.

“I found something that works!” is a powerful statement.

Faith Works

I trust that you know the same is true for your spiritual life. You are listening to this sermon today, and I would guess that you are looking for something that works. And I’ve got good news for you. Faith in Jesus works! The gospel is good news because it causes people to be born again. A personal relationship with Jesus changes people.

The reason why our mission is to *ignite a passion to follow Jesus* is because we believe that true and lasting change happens when people put their faith in Jesus.

Or to summarize it with the kind of language that James uses: Faith Works.

Last week, Pastor Jeff Brown helped us understand the warning that the second chapter of James is giving us. James 2:14-17 cautioned us about having a faith that doesn’t create right actions. Jeff cautioned us about a faith that is only for “show;” something that sounds alive but is dead.

This week’s text continues that theme with a further explanation that goes even deeper. It shows us that faith works!

Now there are other ways to say this. You could summarize this text with the following statements:

- Faith alone saves, but a faith that saves is not alone
- True faith creates true works
- We must show our faith by our works

I don’t want you to see this text as saying something only negative. I want you to realize the hope of a gospel that is more than just belief. It is a message that changes your life!

Three Reasons Faith Works

James is concerned that there are believers who fail to understand and apply the connection between faith and works or belief and actions. A friend might say, “Why are you paying \$19.99 for a diet program that doesn’t work?” James wants to realize that faith should work. Here’s why:

1. My Beliefs and Actions are Linked

James begins in a theoretical category. He wants us to understand that there is a direct linkage between what we believe and our actions. He refutes the separation of faith and works.

In verse 18, he creates a hypothetical conversation. It’s as if he’s having a debate with someone: “You have faith and I have works.” It would seem that this person is arguing that faith and works are different gifts. One person has faith. The other has works. The argument might have been that different people express their Christianity in unique ways. Some people have the gift of faith; others the gift of works.

James rejects this separation because it minimizes the linkage between beliefs and actions. It fails to realize the centrality of how faith and works are connected.

If you learn that a friend is going to donate blood, you'd cheer him on. If he donates a kidney, you'd pray for him. If he says he's going to donate his heart—you'd better ask a lot of questions. There's a difference between the link in living and what you donate. Life and the heart are linked.

This connection is made clear with the statement: "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." The keywords are faith *apart* from works and faith *by* my works. James wants to bring faith and works together. But that's not all. It's more important than that.

In verse 19, he gives an illustration regarding demons. He begins by commending the belief "that God is one." James is quoting a well-known phrase from the *Shema* which is taken from Deuteronomy 6. It was recited three times a day by Jews.¹

But he turns it around. It's a rhetorical trap! He says, "Even the demons believe—and shudder!" The point should be painfully obvious. Merely knowing something isn't enough. What's more, mere belief isn't sufficient either. Separating belief and action isn't just a bad idea; they are so connected that disconnecting them causes them to be void of meaning. Or in James' example: mere belief is nothing different than what demons do.

Belief and actions are always linked. In other words, the purpose of belief is to create new actions. Faith in Jesus changes your life! That's how it works. In the Old Testament, the promise sounded like this:

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezek. 36:26–27).

In the New Testament, it sounds like this:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8–10).

Belief and actions are gloriously linked together. Faith in Jesus is not only something you believe, it's something that changes your life.

2. My Actions Complete My Beliefs

¹ Douglas J. Moo, [*James: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 139.

The second reason that faith works is because actions complete our beliefs. Faith and works are more than linked; what we do validates, proves, and strengthens our belief. A lack of action invalidates, disproves, and weakens our belief.

James is pretty passionate in verse 20. He calls out the foolishness of faith without works. He says, “. . . faith apart from works is useless.” The Greek word means not functional, idle, or fruitless. Faith that doesn’t work doesn’t work. Positively, it means that true faith creates tangible real actions.

Skip ahead to verse 22, and we the same thing: “You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works. . .” (James 2:22). The keywords here are “active” and “completed.” James wants us to see that faith is working as it works through works. There’s not a hand-off. Actions are taken because of faith. Every right action taken is a faith action.

What’s more, actions complete faith. The word for “complete” means to perfect or make mature. It’s the same word used in James 1:3-4 about trials—“that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” The same idea is in James 1 in regards to trial. Now, it is connected to faith and works.

Our actions make our beliefs complete. What you believe is reinforced by your actions. Acting on belief strengthens belief. They are that connected.

To make this point incredibly strong, James appeals to Abraham. Do you know why? Because his Jewish audience would have venerated father Abraham, who was an example of faith. But he was also an example of works.

In verse 23 we read: *...and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God* (James 2:23).

This is referring to the moment in Abraham’s life when God promised him, in Genesis 15, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abraham believed God’s promise, and he was counted righteous. But James is more interested—for his case—in Genesis 22. This was the moment when Abraham’s faith was tested.

For those of you unfamiliar with the story, Abraham was commanded by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac, who was the fulfillment of God’s promise in Genesis 15. James says this about Abraham: *“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?”* (James 2:21). He’s referring to the proof of Abraham’s faith as recorded in Genesis 22:12:

He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

The actions of Abraham made his belief clear. His works confirmed the substance of his faith. His actions gave evidence that his belief in God was more than just words or something intellectual.

Actions complete belief. They verify that our belief is real. That’s important, especially as it relates to the issue of assurance. Many Christians think that assurance (knowing I’m really a Christian) comes from

remembering what the gospel is and when we received it. Certainly, that is an important part of assurance. But some people struggle with assurance because they feel a great disconnect between what they believe and what they do. Candidly, they should feel a tension because the gospel works!

The book of 1 John is all about assurance. And here is how John says it:

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked (1 John 2:3–6).

If you are struggling with assurance it may be because you know that faith should work. Try taking steps of obedience. Allow the Spirit of Christ to do his work in you. Act in faith knowing that those actions will strengthen your faith.

My actions complete my belief.

3. My Spiritual Life Was Meant to Work

The third reason that faith works is because God designed our spiritual life to work. Faith is not merely something that we understand, think about, or believe. Faith does something in your life. It affects you at the core of your being, your identity, your thinking, your affections, your words, and your actions.

In verse 24, James says, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” Now James is not addressing the same issue from the same direction as Paul was in Romans 4:2-8. In Romans, Paul is concerned about those who were adding works to justification as a means of acceptance before God. James is concerned about people removing obedience from the effect of justification. Paul is looking toward justification—to establish it. James is looking backward at justification—to validate it. Chris Bruno writes:

James insists that the kind of faith that truly justifies results in transformation. It’s a faith that moves beyond believing what is true and even having a fitting emotional reaction. It’s a faith that rests in God’s promises and acts on those promises. It’s a faith that is ultimately inseparable from good works.²

Previously, James used the example of Abraham. Now he uses Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho who hid the spies because she believed “the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth below” (Josh. 2:11). Verse 25 identifies Rahab as one “who was justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way.” James surely knows what Joshua 2 says about her.

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/james-really-contradict-paul/>

His point here is not about the source or the beginning of her faith. His point is that her actions flowed from her faith. Rahab would have never hidden the spies had she not believed. But she would have perished among the city of Jericho had she not acted upon her faith. Her works verified that she was a true believer.

This is the central point that James is making. Faith without works doesn't work. Spiritual life, birthed by faith, was meant to work. In verse 26, James uses another illustration: the body and the spirit. A body without a spirit is dead. And James connects this to faith and works. Faith without works is also dead.

That's the negative way to say it. Positively, it would sound like this: faith with works is alive! That's really what James is arguing for. Faith was meant to work!

During our reading of Hebrews 11 in the New Thirty plan, I was struck by what is often called the "The Hall of Faith" chapter. But when I read it, I was struck not only by the faith but also the works that accompanied it. A few examples:

- *By faith Abel offered to God as more acceptable sacrifice (Heb. 11:4)*
- *By faith Noah constructed an ark (11:7)*
- *By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance (11:8)*
- *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac (11:17)*
- *By faith Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter (11:24)*
- *By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land (11:29)*

And then, note this signature verse that is filled with action:

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment (Heb. 11:32–36).

In fact, the writer of Hebrews says about these people: "...of whom the world was not worthy" (11:33).

What kind of people are described this way? They're the people who were filled with faith *and* who acted accordingly. They didn't just believe. They obeyed!

And it's no wonder that Hebrews 12 begins with a call to run with endurance the race set before us (works) while looking to Jesus (faith).

Oh, Christian! The offering of the gospel has more effect than merely determining your eternal destiny. Receiving Jesus is so much more than providing an entrance into Heaven. It is that! But a relationship

with Jesus transforms you. The miracle of the gospel changes your identity so that everything about you changes. Not perfectly. Not without fits and starts. But the gospel works!

So let it work! What step of obedience do you need to take—not because you have to but because you want to? Maybe you need to be baptized. Perhaps it's time to join this church. Maybe you need to target a prevailing sin in your life. Allow Jesus to bring restoration and healing to something that is broken in your life. But can I remind you: faith in Jesus works!

And then a word to those of you who are not Christians, or to those who, despite what you say, know Christianity isn't working for you. Listen to me: God loves you. He knows all about your "junk." And he also knows that you cannot make life work without him. Are you tired? Are you weary? Why not come to Jesus today? Come to him. Receive him. Invite him to be your Savior and Lord. Make today not only the day you believe, but the day when everything changed!

Because it will. Do you know why? Because faith works!

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