

MYTH 5

Good Works Are
Proof of Salvation



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*What use is it, my brethren, if
someone says he has faith
but he has no works? Can that
faith save him?*

*Even so faith, if it has no works,
is dead, being by itself.*

*But are you willing to recognize,
you foolish fellow, that faith without
works is useless?*

*For just as the body without the
spirit is dead, so also faith without
works is dead.*

James 2:14, 17, 20, 26

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TRUTH
GOOD WORKS REVEAL MATURITY

For more than a decade I taught seminary courses in Bible and theology. On the first day of each class, I handed out a syllabus detailing the expectations and requirements for the course. How each performed on the various assignments determined his grade in the course. What set each one apart was the effort expended on homework and individual performance as a member of the class. The basis for grades rested largely on these criteria. Everyone knew that grades did not prove if they were students. Instead grades demonstrated whether they were exceptional students.

Student or Homework

The interpretation of James 2:14-26 has been pressed through different theological grids, resulting in entirely different viewpoints on the meaning of the phrase “dead faith.” James began this section by stating a general principle, “What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has not works? Can that faith save him?” (v. 14).¹ James anticipated a negative response to those two questions. Then the remainder of the section addresses the open-

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ing principle: faith does not save; works are required. This passage either concerns the *proof of saving faith* or it addresses the *evidence of a believer's growth* in maturity. The message of the text holds completely different implications with opposite consequences for those desiring to please God. To understand what James was saying, we will look at the context and then at the specific passage. It is critically important to know if the focus is on the believer or on

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the believer's works from our analogy about the student's homework. When a student neglects to do his homework, does that render him no longer a member of the student body or does it mean he is lazy and unproductive?

James 1–2 in Context

In the study of any passage, contextual considerations are crucial and this is especially true in the Book of James. Chapters 1 and 2 of James are a unit, beginning in 1:2-4 with the focus on "trials," "faith," and being "perfect" (mature) and ending in 2:21-23 with a "trial" of Abraham's (Gen. 22:1 and Heb. 11:17 indicate that this event in Abraham's life was a trial), "faith," and being "perfected." The epistle of James is written to believers, as seen in his frequent reference to "my brethren" (1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14). James teaches that the correct responses of a believer to various trials over time will *demonstrate* the steadfastness of his faith and his level of maturity. These responses do *not prove* he has saving faith (1:2-4). The illustration of Abraham offering up his own son as an sacrifice (2:21-24) concludes the whole section as an example of a believer who responded in faith, a manner approved by God. From

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his thirty-year walk with the Lord, he became the one man whom God called a “friend of God” (2:23).

Contextual Considerations

Specific contextual issues already addressed in detail in an earlier work, *Hold Fast*,² provide supporting evidence for a proper interpretation of James 2:14-26:

Issue and Myth in *Hold Fast*

Initial versus present salvation—*Myth 1: It’s Always about Heaven or Hell*

Faith is inactive and passive—*Myth 2: Faith Is Active*

Faith is simple trust—*Myth 3: Faith Is a Tricky Word*

Faith is not dissected—*Myth 4: Faith Is Distinguished by Head & Heart*

Demons are not savable—*Myth 4: Faith Is Distinguished by Head & Heart*

Faith does not persevere—*Myth 10: Perseverance Required*

Justified by faith and by works—*Myth 11: Works Required*

Faith and works cooperate—*Myth 11: Works Required*

Context of James 2:14–26

As already noted, the focus of James 1–2 is believers and their growth toward maturity. There is no reference to or mention of people who pretend to be believers but actually are not. This idea is alien to the context. Also the logical end of that interpretation would be that if Abraham had not been willing to offer up his son, he would not have been saved. Yet that is the view of Roman Catholic theology (*justification is by faith, but not by faith alone*), Reformed theology (*salvation is by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone*), and Arminian theology (*salvation is by faith alone, but it can be lost through lack of works*). Each of these positions requires works as proof of salvation and as essential if one is to remain saved. To refer to the student illustration again, in these theologies homework determines whether someone is a student. However, James’s concern

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was not to determine who is saved. Instead he was discussing the spiritual growth and maturity of the believer, which is evidenced in good works.

From James 2:14–26 all would agree that faith without works is of no use to the believer or to the body of Christ. Three issues create theological tension: Whom was James addressing? What is the meaning of the word “dead”? What is the meaning of the word “save”?

Whom was James Addressing?

First, it has been established that James was writing to believers, using Abraham (2:21–24) as an illustration of an Old Testament saint from Genesis 15:6 (see Rom. 4:1–3). James wrote to *believers* (James 1:18, those whom God “brought...forth by the word of truth”) who have the option, like Abraham, to choose to experience growing fellowship with God through obedience or to be lazy and miss increasing intimacy with Christ.

What Is the Meaning of the Word “Dead”?

Second, “dead” (*nekra*) is used by James in 2:17 and twice again in 2:26. “Dead” also may have been used in 2:20, but there is better evidence for the use of “useless” (*argh*).³

“Faith, if it has no works, is dead” (v. 17)

“Faith without works is useless” (v. 20)

“The body without the spirit is dead” (v. 26)

“Faith without works is dead” (v. 26)

Death, which means *separation*, is best understood by asking the question, “Separation from what?” “Death” can mean (1) separation from God eternally, (2) separation from physical life, or (3) separa-

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tion from God temporally (i.e., lack of fellowship). In 1:2-4 James presented a progression, a process leading to maturity. “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” While this pictures growing intimacy in fellowship with Christ, 1:14-15 presents quite a different story. James wrote of the path leading to death. Here James warned of a separation from God. “But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.”

This is where theological differences become evident. If you think that a believer’s faith cannot falter, dead faith would mean eternal life is lost. If you think that proof of a believer’s faith is required to substantiate salvation, then failure would indicate salvation never occurred. However, if you understand that God saved and continues to save (the emphasis of the verb form in Eph. 2:8) each believer, then death in James 1:15 must relate to a separation from shared experiences with God—loss of fellowship. In addition there is the possibility of a shortened physical life—“sin unto death” (1 John 5:16)—if a believer continues to walk apart from God.

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What Is the Meaning of the Word “Saved”?

Third, the context must determine what one is saved from. Since “save” means *deliverance*, James 2:14 can be understood as asking a question, “Delivered from what?” Salvation can be un-

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derstood as (1) deliverance from spiritual death, at initial salvation, (2) deliverance from sin's influence, in the Christian life, or (3) deliverance from God's discipline such as premature death, relating to a shortened physical life. Since the believer has already been "brought...forth by the word of truth" (1:18) at initial salvation, deliverance from sin's influence in the believer's walk is the

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primary focus of this text. This parallels Paul's appeal for believers to "work out your salvation" (Phil. 2:12). This is the reason James instructed believers to "receive the word implanted, which is able to save you souls [lives]" (1:21). "Receiving the word implanted" does not refer to receiving Christ for saving faith; rather, the verse is saying that the believer is to embrace that implanted word so as to save his life now from the consequences of

sins.⁴ First Peter 2:1-2 parallels this text. Then in 1:22-25 James gave an illustration of what he meant by "saving your life." "But prove yourselves doers of the word...one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it...this man will be blessed in what he does." The believer is to embrace God's Word by looking at it intently, and by abiding and obeying. This is every believer's choice. If he chooses well, he is "blessed" (1:25), being content. "Doing," that is, knowing and keeping God's Word, delivers the believer "from the death-producing effects of sin" to contentment in fellowship with Christ.⁵

The Content of James 2:14-26

The progressive development of James 2:14-26 is based on a general principle with four supporting illustrations.

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Principle—Faith without works will not save (v. 14)

Two questions requiring a negative answer in each case provide the general principle of the text from verse 14 to 26—*faith alone will not save; it must have works*. “What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?” In view of the fact that James addressed believers who already possess eternal life and given the fact that Ephesians 2:8-9 specifies that salvation is totally a gift from God and not by works, the works in this passage must refer to the good works of Ephesians 2:10. Then salvation in James 2:14-26 refers to deliverance from a loss of intimacy in fellowship with God. This *saving-your-life* theme first occurred in 1:21 after James told believers to embrace the Word to save their lives (1:18). James then continued to show the connection between faith and works (2:14-26).

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However, the argument is not that faith is not present, but that works are not present. The issue does not concern passive faith,⁶ but rather passive believers. Works that are based on obedience to God’s Word (1:21) can save from sin’s consequences in one’s daily life. James is concerned about action—behavior that reflects God’s presence. Works are the means to “work out your salvation” (Phil. 2:12) and “save your life” (James 1:21; 2:14), delivering the believer from the death-producing effects of sin and into intimacy with Christ. Each of the following illustrations supports the general principle of James 2:14.

Illustration One—The Needy (vv. 15–17)

James presents a hypothetical illustration of a believer’s response to the needy, showing the worthlessness of empty words without action in helping those less fortunate. First John 3:16-18 (also written

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to believers, “little children”) is a parallel to this text, reinforcing the idea that words without actions are of no value. In each case the issue is not saving faith; rather the issue is passive believers who do not reflect His presence in their lives. This section ends with the statement in verse 17, “faith, if it has no works, is dead.” Faith is worthless without works.

Illustration Two—Demons (vv. 18–20)

Using a literary device to interject an imaginary spokesman into his argument, James continued his discussion of faith and works.⁷ A challenge is stated as to whether works are required to show the possession of faith (v. 18) and it is supported with the belief in God by the demons (v. 19). James concluded, “But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?” (v. 20). Demons, who can never be saved, respond in fear, knowing their former rebellion (Ezek. 28:16-19) sealed their future fate.⁸ Their response, then, should be a motivation for those who already possess eternal life (James 1:18) but are not embracing God’s Word (v. 21) and are therefore not Word-doers (vv. 22-25). If “shuddering” is the response of demons who cannot be saved, how much more should believers willingly submit to God in obedience, in gratitude for what Christ has done on the cross. The section again concludes with the words, “faith without works is useless,” demonstrating that faith is lifeless, useless, and worthless when it has no supporting evidence. Inaction not only conceals God’s presence in the life of a Christian, but it also shows complete foolishness on the believer’s part in not obeying God. This is a contradiction: the believer possess life, but he is not revealing it.

Illustration Three—Abraham (vv. 21–24)

Abraham’s faith and his works are shown as cooperating together, resulting in Abraham being justified by works (James 2:24) even though he had already been justified by faith (Gen. 15:6).⁹ A

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biblical distinction in kinds of works and in types of justifications are used by James in this illustration to confirm the principle that faith does not save and that works are required (v. 14). Abraham's life illustrates the connection between faith and works and the necessity for believers to embrace the Word (1:21) and become Word-doers (1:22-25). The introductory question "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?" refers to Genesis 22 and expects a positive answer, pointing out that Abraham was justified by works.

James argued that faith should not exist in isolation; rather faith is to cooperate with works, resulting in works further reinforcing the believer's faith (v. 22). In verse 23, James cited the Genesis 22 text (Abraham offering up Isaac), stating that "Scripture was fulfilled" by Abraham's obedience. Then James referred to Genesis 15:6 when Abraham was justified by faith. James connected these two events, indicat-

ing that the offering of Isaac fulfilled the earlier event, justification by faith. In effect, Abraham's action in Genesis 22 completed the process initiated in Genesis 15. Abraham had become who he always has been since Genesis 15. He reflected his relationship with God through his life. His works gave evidence of who he already was positionally. The reward of growing intimacy with God was that Abraham "was called the friend of God" (James 2:23) This section concludes with the statement, "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (v. 24).

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Illustration Four—Rahab (vv. 25–26)

Like Abraham, Rahab was justified by works (v. 25). Even

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though Rahab's faith is not indicated, it is implied from the context. James stated that it does not matter if one is a national hero or a harlot.¹⁰ The issue is whether faith and works are cooperating. The actions of Rahab, hiding and helping the spies in Jericho, showed that her faith (Josh. 2:11) cooperated with works. Supporting this

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argument, James wrote that a corpse cannot accomplish anything (James 2:26). Some equate dead "faith" with a dead "body," meaning that faith never existed. However, a dead body means there was once life. Likewise with faith, dead faith means faith once was there. Dead faith is now worthless or useless. In fact, you could insert the following clause—your car battery is dead apart from acid—to gain a proper understanding of the context. With-

out acid, a battery is useless. In support of faith cooperating with works, James declared that the physical body is useless if it no longer possesses a human spirit. This section concludes with the statement, "Faith without works is dead [worthless or useless]." James then was not saying there had been no faith; he was saying the believer's faith, without accompanying works, is useless or nonproductive.

Exceptional Homework

If James was addressing unbelievers about saving faith, then dead faith would refer to eternal separation from God. However, if James is actually speaking to believers in reference to sanctification, then "dead faith" refers to fruitless behavior—a temporal *fellowship issue*. Seeking to stir and stimulate believers to action, James's appeal was for them to evidence works, motivated out of gratitude. A passive believer is an inconsistency because his life is sadly of no

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value to the cause of Christ. Again the issue is not whether James's readers were saved; they were. James's point was that their lifestyle should show that they are saved.

If a believer robs a bank and is apprehended, will his faith save him? No! He is not delivered from the death-producing effects of sin in his life. But if that same believer had been walking with Christ, obeying the Word, he most likely would have not robbed the bank. Dead, useless faith cannot save. Good works are *not a proof of eternal life*; however, good works are an *evidence of an abundant and profitable life* (John 10:10b).

GOOD WORKS REVEAL MATURITY
TRUTH

Myth 5, NOTES

1. A better translation of the last question in James 2:14 is “Is faith able to save him?” The Reformed view always translates “faith” by “*the* faith” or “*such* faith,” referring to a particular faith—non-working or no-saving faith. Zane Hodges observes, “Support for the renderings ‘such faith’ or ‘that faith’ is usually said to be found in the presence of the Greek definite article with the word ‘faith’” (Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 60). However, if taken in the way, in seven other verses (vv. 17, 18 (twice), 20, 22 (twice), and 26), one must likewise insert the article to be consistent in translating the text. After noting that verse 22 refers to Abraham’s faith, Hodges says, “In none of these places are the words ‘such’ or ‘that’ proposed as natural translations” (Ibid., 60). Further, Hodges suggests, “The attempt to single out 2:14 for specialized treatment carries its own refutation on its face. It must be classed as a *truly desperate* effort to support an insupportable interpretation” (Ibid., italics his).
2. Ken Neff, *Hold Fast* (St. Augustine, FL: LQ Press, 2010).
3. NET Bible, *Notes on James 2:20* (netbible.org).
4. Hodges, *The Epistle of James*, 39-42.
5. Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 190.

Just as disobedience causes separation from fellowship with God leading to God’s discipline and possible shorten physical life (1:15; 4:12; 5:15, 19-20), growth in obedience (1:22-25) produces increasing intimacy with God (1:2-4) and deliverance from sin’s impact upon the believer (1:21).

6. Neff, *Hold Fast*, 33-40.

Biblically, “Faith does not cause action; faith is inactive. It is passive” (p. 36); “Faith is passive, never, ever doing anything. Yet it is the basis for everything you do. Embracing facts as true, we make choices. While faith is only the basis, our motivations are the cause” (p. 40).

One may argue from Hebrews 11 that a believer’s walk by faith is an illustration of faith causing works and therefore this supports the faith-works teaching of the Reformed view. However, to do so is to miss the point that *faith is passive. Faith never, ever causes and therefore never, ever results in action/works.* Works reveal one’s motivation rather than one’s faith.

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Also to embrace the faith-works teaching of the Reformed view is to miss the concept of faith addressed in Hebrews 11:1-3 which extends throughout Hebrews 11. Faith is defined as “the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (v. 1). This definition has nothing to do with works; rather, faith is reliance on the evidence of a trustworthy God. It is the basis for works, not the cause of works. As such, Hebrews 11 provides a number of biblical examples of those who chose to obey God, based on their faith in His promises. Concerning these examples F. F. Bruce says, “In other words, they were men and women of faith. Their faith consisted simply in taking God at His word and directing their lives accordingly” (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 277). Note again that faith is passive and is the basis, not the cause, of works. Each example relates to a choice to obey God motivated by gratitude for God’s past work and the future promise of God.

“By faith” is used 18 times in Hebrews 11. Rather than a prepositional phrase, the dative form of the noun, faith, is used. It seems better to understand this use as a dative of means, indicating what one uses to accomplish something. Differing from the dative of cause, which designates the cause of action, the dative of means indicates the means by which some activity is accomplished. When combined with the definition of faith (v. 1), “by faith” refers to the basis of works, not the cause of action/works in Hebrews 11.

7. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle of the Hebrews and the Epistle of James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), 581-84; and Hodges, *The Epistle of James*, 64-66.

It is debatable as to whether this spokesman is an imaginary supporter of or objector to previous statements by James. Whichever approach is taken, the progression of thought moves from the spokesman, beginning in verse 18, to James’s response, in verse 20. For a discussion of the supporter view, see Lenski; for a discussion of the objector view, see Hodges.

8. Neff, *Hold Fast*, 61-63.

See these pages for a fuller discussion of the demons’ faith in James 2.

9. *Ibid.*, 144-51.

“God’s Word speaks of two kinds of justifications—one by faith and one by works.... Justification by faith *is realized* at initial salvation; justification by works *can be experienced* during our Christian life, as we live in harmony with God’s Word.”

10. Douglas J. Moo, *James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 117.

