

Grace and works

'Faith alone saves us but the faith that saves is never alone'

J.I. Packer

Chapter 2:14-26

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. ²⁰ You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. ²⁵ In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Chapter 3:13-18

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

Background:

James was initially a controversial book, primarily because of this passage, which appears to contradict Paul's teaching on justification by faith.

Reflections on tricky verses:

James 2:14:

- ‘What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?’: Note that he doesn’t say ‘has faith’ but ‘says’ he has faith – it seems that he is attacking an empty claim regarding faith, not faith itself.
- ‘Can that faith save him?’: ‘that’ faith – a faith of the kind of quality that is not demonstrated in action

James 2:18:

- ‘I will show you my faith by my works’: This adds to the point – that we demonstrate our faith by our actions.

James 2:23:

- Note that Abraham is credited as righteous by God in Romans, cited by Paul as an example of justification by faith.

James 2:25:

- Rahab is included with Abraham to show that anyone can be credited as righteous.

James 2:26:

- The analogy with the body and spirit shows that faith and works are almost indivisible, or at least deeply connected.

Chapter 3:13-18 furthers this point, that our actions can either *affirm* or *deny* our beliefs/statements about our beliefs (notice verse 14 ‘false to the truth’ and verse 13 ‘show by your good life...’).

Lastly, remember to look to the context. In the passage immediately preceding this one, James has challenged his readers with this: ‘do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Jesus Christ?’ (2:1). The implication is: your beliefs (or statements about them) and your actions aren’t matching up. Your actions indicate something other than faith in Jesus, the glorious one.

Two dangers:

1. To imagine that this is teaching that our works contribute to our salvation – that we somehow *earn our salvation with what we do*. This idea is problematic for a number of reasons:
 - a. It is unbiblical. The idea is expressly condemned many places in the Bible (See for example Galatians 2:15-21 - see especially verses 16 and 21, and Galatians 3. See also Romans 3:21-26 and Romans 4).
 - b. it undermines God’s grace
 - c. It undermines the value and significance of Jesus’ sacrifice for us
 - d. it puts pressure on us, which constrains us, whereas God’s intention is to free us
 - e. it’s a proud notion to imagine that our behaviour contributes to our salvation.

2. To be so fearful of making the first mistake that we ignore or underplay James' teaching on this issue altogether. James' point is a very important one: our faith should be demonstrated in our actions. If not, what is the use of it? If we say we love God, but never act like we do, it is fair to question whether we actually do love him. Similarly, how can I say that I believe that *God* is loving and generous, without that belief having any impact on *my* love and generosity?