

# Faith Without Works? (James 2:14-26)

Expository Lessons from the Letter of James

---

## I. Introduction and Review

- a. This is an extremely *practical letter* to help Christians who are striving to follow the way of life laid out by Jesus.
- b. In the first half of **James chapter 2**, we addressed how we cannot discriminate against other Christians, treating those who are materially wealthy among us differently from those who are poor.
- c. Now, in the second half of **James chapter 2**, we will encounter the importance of not just believing in Jesus and his teachings (faith) but also putting His teachings into practice (works).
  - i. The discussion at the end of this chapter, on the relationship between faith and works (highlighting that works are also essential), has become the most famous and controversial part of this letter.
  - ii. This was the reason for Martin Luther's contempt for this letter and his disparaging remarks.
  - iii. However, while some passages become controversial because they are hard to understand, or because more than one interpretation is possible, that is not the case here!
  - iv. James' writing on this point is abundantly clear. Everyone knows what he is saying. It's just that some people don't like it (it blows the foundation out from under Luther's doctrine of 'justification by *faith alone*').
    1. As a result, Protestant Reformers and their followers have had to downgrade James' letter and fabricate an alleged conflict between the teachings of Paul and James.
  - v. Here James lays out, in extremely clear language, the relationship between faith, work, and salvation.
  - vi. In this lesson, we will look at what James taught and see how this is completely consistent with what was taught by Jesus, as well as by other apostles such as Peter and Paul.

## II. The Big Question Asked by James

- a. Read **James 2:14**.
  - i. **The Big Question:** “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?” (**James 2:14**, NKJV)
    1. Or from another translation: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith *but does not have works*? Can that *faith* save him?” (**James 2:14**, ESV)
- b. Before we proceed, try to answer that question yourself, based on everything you have read or heard from the Bible. I will give you *three options*:
  - i. **Option 1: YES;** If someone believes (has faith in Jesus) they can be saved even if he or she does not combine that belief with works (obeying His commands); *OR*
  - ii. **Option 2: NO;** If someone believes but does not combine that with works, they will not be saved; *OR*
  - iii. **Option 3: EMPHATIC NO;** Of course not, and everyone should know that! Faith without works is absolutely useless!

## III. James Answers the Question He Raised

- a. Read **James 2:15-26**.
  - i. **His Answer to the Opening Question:** An ‘*Emphatic No*’!
- b. For those who have been influenced by the teaching of Martin Luther and his fellow Protestant Reformers, this passage will likely be disturbing.
  - i. After all, it demolishes some of the core teachings of Protestantism, such as the ideas that we are saved by faith (belief) alone, by grace alone, and that works have nothing to do with our salvation.
  - ii. More on the implications of this passage will be discussed in the latter part of this message. But first, let’s make sure we understand what James is saying here and how he builds his case.
- c. Consider how James makes his case.
  - i. In this passage, James uses logic, colorful analogies, the example of his own life, and two examples from the Old Testament to prove his point.
  - ii. In the midst of his explanation, he insults those who believe otherwise, referring to them as fools!

- d. **First, an analogy.** This is like someone who encounters a naked or destitute person, has kind words, but does nothing to help.
  - i. Read **James 2:16-17**.
  - ii. I consider this similar to a reverse of the Good Samaritan story of **Luke 10**. There, Jesus told that story to show what it means to “love your neighbor as yourself”. He concluded by telling His hearers, “Go, and do likewise” (**Luke 10:37**).
  - iii. Having good wishes but not combining it with action, in this case, is *useless* for both the person in need (materially) and for the one who neglected to show mercy (spiritually).
  - iv. Likewise, James makes the point that belief without an obedient response (works) is useless as well!
- e. **Second, the example of James’ own life.**
  - i. Read **James 2:18**.
  - ii. James challenges his hearers that he will show them his faith *by his works*.
    - 1. You can tell if someone has true faith by looking at what they do; how they live.
- f. **Third, logically showing how useless faith (without works) is.** The example of the demons.
  - i. He mocks his hearers, taunting them, “You believe? ...*Even the demons* believe – and tremble!”
  - ii. James has a good point here. In the gospels, there are examples of *demons* who believed in Jesus. Certainly, they aren’t saved! Recall the story of Jesus casting out demons in Capernaum, in **Luke 4**.
    - 1. “And demons also came out of many, crying out and saying, ‘*You are the Christ, the Son of God!*’ And He, rebuking them, did not allow them to speak, for they knew that He was the Christ.” (**Luke 4:41**, NKJV)
    - 2. There is a type of faith that does not lead to salvation (which the demons and the unrighteous can have). However, that is distinct from “saving faith”, which involves an obedient response (repentance, doing what Jesus says).
- g. **Fourth, he rebukes those who are foolish enough to believe that works are not necessary for salvation.**

- i. Read **James 2:20**.
  - ii. He addresses those who think otherwise as “O foolish (empty, vain) man”.
- h. **Fourth, James points to the example of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac. from Genesis 22.**
- i. Read **James 2:20-24**.
    - 1. James rebukes those who disagree with him here, as being fools. “O foolish man...”, then points to the example of Abraham, the father of faith.
    - 2. After Abraham obeyed, took Isaac up the mountain, and raised his hand to slay his son, the Angel of the Lord responded, “*Now I know that you fear God, since for My sake you have not spared your beloved son.*” (**Genesis 22:12**)
    - 3. James explains from this example that effective faith is “working together” with works. Through works, one’s faith is *made perfect* (= made complete, lacking nothing).
      - a. The term “perfect” here means ‘complete’, rather than ‘flawless’. Similar to how the ‘perfect tense’ in grammar refers to an action that has been *completed*.
      - b. Consider also how this same passage from **James 2:22** is rendered in the ESV:
        - i. “You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was *completed* by his works;” (**James 2:22, ESV**)
    - 4. Here, James recalls that Abraham was called ‘God’s friend’, perhaps a reference to a statement by King Jehoshaphat in **2 Chronicles 20:7**.
  - i. **Fifth, the example of Rahab risking her life to protect the spies, in Joshua 2.**
    - i. Read **James 2:25**.
    - ii. Recall that in the story of Jericho in **Joshua 2**, Rahab recounts that all the people in the city heard about the Lord parting the Red Sea, vanquishing the Egyptians, and the Amorite kings Sihon and Og. They were all afraid of the Lord. However, only Rahab was willing to take action and risk her life for the Lord.

- iii. Of all those in the city, only Rahab (who acted on her faith) and her household were spared. And she had been a Gentile prostitute!
- iv. Note that both the stories of Rahab and Abraham are used in **Hebrews 11**, the greatest chapter of the New Testament, in defining and describing what true saving faith is. In that chapter, it draws on multiple Old Testament examples to illustrate what true saving faith looks like (belief combined with an obedient response, including perseverance to the end).
- j. **Sixth, the analogy of a dead body without a spirit.**
  - i. “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” (**James 2:26**, NKJV)
  - ii. According to James, faith without works is similar to a body without its spirit. It is just a dead shell. It has no life in it. It is useless, rotting, and fit for nothing but burial.
    - 1. This statement was especially disturbing to Luther, who insisted that James had it exactly backwards!

#### IV. This is So Clear – Why the Controversy?

- a. Protestants, following Martin Luther and the other Reformers, teach that we are saved by “faith alone”, and “grace alone”. They teach that works are not necessary for salvation, but rather are the natural outcome after one is saved.
  - i. However, I am only aware of one place in the New Testament that we find the expression “faith alone”. It is here in **James 2**:
    - 1. “You see then that a man is justified by works, and *not by faith only*.” (**James 2:24**, NKJV)
    - 2. “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” (**James 2:24**, ESV)
- b. In the face of such a clear refutation of what most Protestants are teaching as a foundational doctrine, how can they justify teaching something like this?
  - i. They cherry-pick certain statements by Paul (overlooking others that contradict what they teach), and take them out of context (**Ephesians 2:8-9** being the classic example).
    - 1. Even in the early church, while Peter was living, he warned that Paul’s writings included some things that were difficult to understand, which certain people had misunderstood or

distorted. So perhaps it should not surprise us that the same thing happened in the 1500s (Luther) and is still happening today.

- a. "...as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are *some things hard to understand*, which untaught and unstable *people twist to their own destruction*, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures." (**2 Peter 3:15-16**, NKJV)
- ii. They then posit that the true gospel was revealed through Paul in his letters, and that we must look there (rather than to Jesus or the other apostles) to understand what the "true gospel" is.

## V. What Jesus Taught about Works and Salvation

- a. As Jesus clearly stated, He is our ultimate teacher in all spiritual matters. Therefore, let us *start with what He taught* on this subject (the relationship between works of obedience and our salvation).
  - i. "But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for *One is your Teacher, the Christ*, and you are all brethren." (**Matthew 23:8**, NKJV)
- b. "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then *He will reward each according to his works*." (**Matthew 16:27**, NKJV)
  - i. This is talking about the Day of Judgment, at the Second Coming.
  - ii. This is the same Greek word "works" (Greek, dictionary form: *ergon* / *ἔργον*) as is used by James and Paul.
- c. "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say? Whoever comes to Me, and hears My sayings *and does them*, I will show you whom he is like: He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently against that house, and could not shake it, for it was founded on the rock. But he who heard and did nothing is like a man who built a house on the earth without a foundation, against which the stream beat vehemently; and immediately it fell. And the ruin of that house was great." (**Luke 6:46-49**, NKJV)
  - i. For those who insist on following "Paul's gospel", please keep in mind that Luke was a frequent traveling companion of the apostle Paul. Early Christian writers understood Luke's gospel was the one preferred by Paul.

1. For examples of early Christian writers attesting to the close relationship between Luke's gospel and Paul, please see:
  - a. "Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him."
    - i. (Source: Irenaeus, writing c. 180 AD, in *Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 1; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 414.)
    - ii. See also further discussion in chapters 13-15 of the same work, pp. 437-439.
  - b. "For men usually ascribe Luke's form of the gospel to Paul."
    - i. (Source: Tertullian, writing c. 207 AD, in *Against Marcion*, book 4, chapter 5; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 350.)
  - c. "Concerning the four gospels... I have learned from tradition [= *what was handed down*]... third was that according to Luke, the Gospel commended by Paul, which he composed for the converts from among the Gentiles."
    - i. (Source: Origen, writing c. 245 AD, in *Commentary on Matthew*, book 1; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 9, p. 412.)
  - d. "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. *If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love*, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." (**John 15:5-10**, NKJV)
    - i. Jesus is the vine; we are the branches. Without Him, we can do nothing. Salvation is presented in connection with a relationship with Jesus.
      1. It is not a mechanical process by which we do certain things to "earn" our salvation on our own.

- ii. He says we must “abide in Him” lest we be cast into the fire for destruction. Then He explains what it will take to “abide in His love”: *keeping His commandments*.
- iii. We must keep His commandments, just as Jesus Himself did what His Father told him.

## VI. Peter on Works and Salvation

- a. “And if you call on the Father, who without partiality *judges according to each one’s work*, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear....” (**1 Peter 1:17**, NKJV)
  - i. Peter is writing this warning to Christians.

## VII. Paul on Works and Salvation

- a. Paul gives a summary to King Agrippa of what he had been preaching everywhere.
  - i. “Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.” (**Acts 26:19–20**, NKJV)
    - 1. **Question:** Did the apostle Paul believe that works befitting repentance from our sins were necessary?
    - 2. **Answer:** In Paul’s own words, YES!
- b. “But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who “will render to each one according to his *deeds*” [or “works”; see discussion below]: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.” (**Romans 2:5–11**, NKJV)
  - i. For some reason, in the popular so-called ‘Romans Road’ study used by evangelical Protestants (who assert we are saved by faith alone), when they do a chain study of selected verses from **Romans**, they never manage to include this one. They generally skip over **Romans chapter 2**, and start in **chapter 3** instead!

- ii. Paul here says exactly what Peter said. Namely, that God shows no partiality, and will judge each person (Jews and Gentile) "...according to his works" (**Romans 2:6**, ESV). You can see in an interlinear Greek New Testament that the word rendered "deeds" in the NKJV is the same Greek word "ergon", generally translated "works", as used by Jesus, Peter and Paul. Consider how that verse is rendered a few other of the more literal translations.
  - 1. "who will render to every man *according to his works*" (**Romans 2:6**, American Standard Version)
  - 2. "For he will render to every man *according to his works*" (**Romans 2:6**, Revised Standard Version)
  - 3. "who shall render to each *according to his works*" (**Romans 2:6**, Young's Literal Translation)
- c. Let's consider one more statement by Paul, where he connects "working" with "salvation", in **Philippians 2**.
  - i. "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, *work out your own salvation* with fear and trembling;" (**Philippians 2:12**, NKJV)
    - 1. The dictionary form of the Greek word that is translated "work out" here (katērgazomai / κατεργάζομαι). It is an intensified verb form of the noun (ergon / ἔργον) or "work".
    - 2. Here, Paul is addressing people who had already become Christians. However, he admonished them that each one must still "work out" his or her own salvation by continuing to obey God's commands.
  - ii. Paul seems to understand, as James did, that our faith and works must be working together. Through works (abiding in Jesus, obeying His commands, and persevering to the end), our faith can be "made complete" or "made perfect", as James said.

## VIII. But What About Paul's Teaching that We are Saved by Faith, not by Works?

- a. Many Protestants point to certain of Paul's letters, especially **Ephesians 2:8-9** and certain passages from **Romans** and **Galatians**, to attempt to establish that works (obedience to God's commands) are not necessary for salvation.
- b. **Question:** Is there a contradiction between what James taught and what Paul taught regarding the relationship between works and salvation? Or perhaps some degree of tension between the two? What do you think?

- c. To address this, it is essential to keep in mind that the Greek word rendered “works/deeds/actions” (*ergon*/ ἔργον) is used hundreds of times in Scripture (including extensively in the LXX), and has a range of meanings, determined by context. For example:
  - i. The *works of God*. Things done by Him, including His creation of the universe. (For example, see **Genesis 1-2**, **Hebrews 1:10** and **4:3-4**.)
  - ii. The *works of Christ*. Things done by Him, including miraculous signs He performed. (For example, as in **Matthew 11:21-23** and **13:58**.)
  - iii. The *works of Satan*. (For example, see **1 John 3:8**.)
  - iv. The *works of men*, which can be morally either good or bad. Or it could refer to things done or made by the hands of men.
  - v. The *works of the Law of Moses*.
- d. Many references to the fact that we are saved by faith in Jesus and “not by works” are referring to the *works of the Law of Moses*.
  - i. For example, **Romans 9:32**, **Galatians 2-4**; and in my opinion, in **Ephesians 2:8-9** as well, based on reading that passage in context.
  - ii. The question of whether Christians still had to follow the Law of Moses was a major issue in the early church. This subject came up in Acts as well as in several of Paul’s letters. Consequently, there was much written in the New Testament dealing with this issue. Of course, the answer (arrived at in **Acts 15** but restated repeatedly thereafter) was that it was no longer necessary to follow circumcision or other requirements found in the Law of Moses.
  - iii. We are saved through a relationship with Jesus Christ that involves loving Him, obeying His commands, and continuing to be faithful to Him to the end. The Law of Moses was canceled, nailed to the cross, as Paul explained in **Colossians 2:8-23** and elsewhere.
  - iv. As Paul explained clearly to the Galatians: “We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might *be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law*; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.” (**Galatians 2:15-16**, NKJV)
    - 1. We can see from this example that the contrast Paul was making was between salvation through faith in Christ (which encompasses obeying Him) versus salvation through following the works of the Law of Moses (which has been canceled).

e. **Bottom Line:**

- i. On the one hand, *our own works* (action/deeds) demonstrating obedience to the commands of Jesus are necessary for our salvation.
  - 1. So say Jesus, Peter, Paul, and James.
- ii. On the other hand, works of the Law of Moses (including circumcision, Sabbath observance, eating kosher, etc.) are NOT required. We are saved by faith in Jesus, not by the works of the Law.
  - 1. So say Peter, Paul, and James (see **Acts 15** and Paul's letters).

**IX. Let Jesus Have the Last Word on This**

- a. Jesus speaks to the seven churches in Asia (Minor), including to the church in Ephesus, in **Revelation chapters 2-3**. In each case, he introduces what He is about to say with the statement: "*I know your works...*"
  - i. He concluded to the church in Ephesus:
    - 1. "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; *repent and do the first works*, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent." (**Revelation 2:5**, NKJV)
  - ii. To the church in Sardis, Jesus said:
    - 1. "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for *I have not found your works perfect* [*meaning "complete"; see ESV*] before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you." (**Revelation 3:2-3**, NKJV)
- b. John, discussing the judgment of God at the end, recounted:
  - i. "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And *the dead were judged according to their works*, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And *they were judged, each one according to his works.*" (**Revelation 20:11-13**, NKJV)

- c. Let us conclude with some of the closing words of the **Book of Revelation**, from Jesus Himself:
  - i. “And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, *to give to every one according to his work*. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last.’ Blessed are those *who do His commandments*, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie.” (**Revelation 22:12–15**, NKJV)

## X. Conclusion and Takeaways

- a. The word “works” has multiple meanings.
  - i. In each case, we must examine the passage in question in context, to determine whether the “works” being referred to are the “work of the Law of Moses”, or “works of obedience to the teachings of Jesus” or some other type of works.
- b. Paul and the apostles clearly taught that we are saved by faith in Christ, not by following the works of the Law of Moses.
- c. At the same time, James taught emphatically that we **MUST** have works (our works, obedience to the teachings of Jesus) to be saved on the last day. Belief only, without obedience to the teachings of Jesus, is useless. Even the demons believe!
- d. What James taught is totally consistent with what Jesus, Peter, and Paul taught. And if there is any shadow of doubt, Jesus made it completely clear what He will be looking for at the end, in the **Book of Revelation**.
- e. I realize that this simple teaching will be highly controversial in many churches. However, the Scriptures are clear and consistent. And make no mistake; this is absolutely foundational. This is a hill to die on.
- f. Study these things out for yourself. Be prepared to defend this teaching, to persuade others who have been mistaught. Works of obedience to the teachings of Jesus are essential for our salvation. Our faith and works must be working together.
- g. As James said: “Faith without works is dead!”