

James 2:14-20 – Dead Faith – Part 1

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Introduction

How we live our lives declares our values, philosophy, and the very foundation of our lives. James teaches that the genuineness of a profession in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is evidenced more by what a person does than by what he claims. A person who professes Christ but who does not live a Christ-honoring life is a fraud.

Just because a person states that he is a Christian does not make him one. Faith can be placed in many things, but only Jesus can save. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 7:21-23, **“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. ²² Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ ²³ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”**

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Introduction

Listen to the words of Jesus:

Matt. 7:16–20

You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor *can* a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

The church today desperately needs to recognize and deal with the fallacy that mere acknowledgment of the gospel facts as being sufficient for salvation. Knowing the truth is not the same as Faith!

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Introduction

This is not to say that one is saved by works. Salvation is entirely by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Ephesians 2:10 goes on to state that we were saved to do good works. True saving faith will produce good works. An absence of a changed life and Christlike character points to a questionable foundation. Having knowledge about Christ does not save.

One needs to have faith and surrender one's life to that knowledge. James 2:14-20 gives three characteristics of a false, dead, and empty faith. It is marked by **empty confession** (v. 14); **false compassion** (vv. 15–17); and **shallow conviction** (vv. 18–20).

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James 2:14-20

What *does it* profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what *does it* profit? ¹⁷ Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! ²⁰ But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?

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An Empty Confession

James 2:14

What *does it* profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?

The key phrase to understanding and properly interpreting this verse is “**if someone says**”. James does not say that this person has saving faith, but that he claims to have it.

No **particular kind of faith is mentioned**, but the context indicates that it refers to acknowledgment that one knows the basic truths of the gospel. A person making such a claim would believe in such things as the existence of God, Scripture as the Word of God, and, presumably, in the Messiahship of Christ and in His atoning death, resurrection, and ascension. The issue is not what he knows, but that he has no works. The **verb form** in that phrase describes someone who continually lacks evidence to support the claim of faith he makes.

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An Empty Confession

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Likewise, **no particular type of works is specified**; but the obvious meaning is that of righteous behavior conforming to God's Word. Some of the righteous and godly works James has already mentioned are endurance (1:3), perseverance under trial (1:12), purity of life (1:21), obedience to Scripture (1:22–23), compassion for the needy (1:27), and impartiality (2:1–9). Later he mentions such things as acts of compassion (2:15), control of the tongue (3:2–12), humility (4:6, 10), truthfulness (4:11), and patience (5:8).

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The question "**Can that faith save him?**" is not offered to dispute the importance of faith, but to oppose the idea that any kind of faith can save (cf. Matt. 7:16–18). The grammatical form of the question calls for a negative answer—"No, it cannot save." A profession of faith that is devoid of righteous works cannot save a person, no matter how strongly it may be proclaimed. It is not that some amount of good works added to true faith can save a person, but rather that **faith that is genuine and saving will inevitably produce good works.**

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Paul is adamant that salvation is by grace, but as was read in Romans 2:6-16 there is a relationship between faith and works. This **debate between profession and salvation was not an issue** until about seventy years ago.

The church began teaching another gospel. The essence of faith was redefined as knowledge. Repentance of sin was declared to be works, and the gospel was watered down to mere acknowledgement of the historicity of the person and work of Jesus. Scripture cries out that **faith is not the acknowledgement of the truth, but a surrender to it**. A proper understanding and surrender to Christ's work at the cross demands a turning away from our sin. The understanding of the Deity of Christ is to acknowledge and surrender to His Lordship. He is the Lord God – I am his servant!

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This generation has compartmentalized their knowledge so that it has no real impact on life. Many Christians today believe that Jesus created the world just a few thousand years ago, but at the same time talk about the dinosaurs becoming extinct millions of years ago. Both sets of knowledge cannot be true. A choice must be made. **What set of knowledge will become the foundation on which you will build your life?**

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The error described here is known as “**easy-believism**”. Listen to what Jesus says in John 5:28-29,

“Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹ and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

We have studied that **Christ died to restore believers back into the image of God.**

The image is more than a pale reflection. It speaks of the very **essence of our lives and actions**. True regeneration will shout forth by doing God’s work. No one is saved without becoming a “new creation” and, by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the new creation produces such righteous works as repentance, submission, obedience, and love of God and fellow believers. Salvation **does not produce immediate perfection, but a new direction**. Our new nature hates sin, loves the Lord, and seeks to know Him and obey His will begins to manifest itself in behavior.

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So What...

We each need to examine ourselves. Do we really live what we believe? We all fail, but we should be seeing growth and progress in our lives. This change is not something that we paste on. It is an outgrowth of a New Heart and Mind.

If someone were to look at your life, would it declare that you are a follower of Christ?

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