

James 2:14-20 – Dead Faith - 2

1

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 of 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.

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).

2

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?

3

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.

Last week we looked that people have all kinds of faith, but what gives faith worth is its object. Faith placed in ourselves is misdirected. It must be placed in Jesus Christ alone. If one have true faith, it will be evidenced by a changed life.

We are not saved by works but works that are an outworking of a changed heart and life and are the signature of saving faith!

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A False Compassion

James 2:15-17

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James illustrates his point by comparing faith without works to words of compassion without corresponding acts of compassion. This is a fitting analogy, because dead faith can be characterized by false compassion, by a verbal concern for those in need.

The wording "**naked**" does not mean without clothing, but rather poorly clothed. It suggests that they were cold and miserable due to lack of proper clothes. In the same manner, "**destitute of daily food**" indicated insufficient nourishment for normal healthy living.

Instead of meeting the need, a reply is given, "**depart in peace, be warmed and filled**". This indicates an attitude of total disregard for the welfare of others.

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James raises the question, "**What does it profit?**" or "What use is that?" It needs no answer for such a response is totally worthless.

John deals with this same issue in **1 John 3:17**, "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?"

Just as professed compassion without kindness and care is phony, so is that faith which is nothing but an empty claim. This is a well-chosen analogy, because compassion is one of the evidences of true regeneration. James declares in verse 17 that such an empty faith is dead.

6

A Shallow Conviction

James 2:18-20

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?

The third characteristic of dead faith is a shallow conviction, a recognition of certain facts about God and His Word without submission to either.

"Someone" most likely refers to James himself. He is not speaking primarily of faithfulness, but about faith itself. He is saying to those who would oppose what he was saying, "You claim to have faith and that nothing else is necessary, that your faith can stand by itself before God and bring salvation. But the truth is, you cannot show me your faith without the works. True faith always gives evidence. You cannot demonstrate your kind of faith because you have nothing to demonstrate."

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Such dead faith is not really faith at all, certainly not saving faith. Living faith produces good fruit, for that is its nature and its purpose. Dead faith does not because it cannot. Jesus repeatedly warned against false confidence of salvation.

Listen to these words of Jesus...

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Luke 6:46-49

"But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?
⁴⁷ Whoever comes to Me, and hears My sayings and does them, I will show you whom he is like: ⁴⁸ 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. ⁴⁹ 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."

For other verses on this matter look up Galatians 5:6, 2 Peter 1:3-11, 1 John 2:4-11.

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Every true Christian has times of unfaithfulness, sin, and barrenness. It is during those times that he is in danger of losing assurance of salvation, for the blessing of peace and confidence from the Spirit is forfeited.

Security of salvation is eternal and permanent, being based on the Lord's sovereign power to keep those who belong to Him. But our confidence can waver during periods of disobedience.

10

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James states, “You believe that there is one God”. He states with a touch of sarcasm that “you do well”. Knowledge of orthodox doctrine is no guarantee of salvation. James states that even the demon are orthodox in the sense of knowing the truth about God. James point is that belief (knowledge) without obedience is the worthless kind of belief possessed by demons. They know the truth but hate it. The term “tremble” means that they shudder in fear for they know that eternal torment awaits them in hell. The man who does not live in the knowledge of God’s truth declares a “hatred” by his disobedience. He would do well to shudder at his state in life.

11

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Orthodox doctrine is better than heresy, of course, for it is true and points toward God and the way of salvation. But mere assent to it as true cannot bring a person to God and to salvation.

James asks in verse 20, “But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?” The word “**foolish**” means “empty or defective” and identifies anyone who opposes the truth that true saving faith produces works of righteousness. The word “**dead**” here means useless. It carries the idea of “fruitlessness”, or “lack of productivity”. “Every tree that does not bear good fruit,” Jesus said, “is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt. 7:19). A fruitless life is certain proof that it does not belong to God and is unacceptable to God, because it does not have His divine life within.

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So What ...

Just because a person says they are a Christian, or even use the words “believe” or “faith”, does not make them a child of God.

True faith is to acknowledge that something is true and to live in the reality of that truth. True faith must be in the person of Jesus.

He is the object which makes faith valuable. It was His sacrifice upon the cross which paid the debt for sin. One must place one’s trust in the finished work of Christ and build one’s life upon His word. What is the foundation of your life? Are you building your life on the reality of God’s truth? Can you stand with confidence before God knowing that you are trusting in the cross for your sin? Can you point to the changes that the Holy Spirit is working in your life? Can you give evidence to a living, life changing faith?