

A Simple, Practical Explanation of James 2:14-26

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Introduction

This article is really a series of notes used to preach and teach this passage to our congregation. It is not intended to be exhaustive but practical- something people can easily grasp and use in their lives and in witnessing opportunities. As we all know, James 2 seems to come up often when witnessing. If you find these notes helpful, feel free to use them in ministry.

James 2:14-26

This section is *practical*, just like the epistle *has been* up to this point, and just like the rest of the letter *will be* after this section.

The main reason this section has been so controversial is because people are trying to interpret it out of context. They violate one of the fundamental rules of sensible Bible interpretation, namely, keep it in the context.

FAITH THAT WORKS is the issue, not eternal salvation. It is a forceful plea to believers to put their faith into action.

2 observations before we begin:

1. It is written to Christians, not unbelievers. v.1, 5, 14, as well as the other 12 times in this letter bear this out.

2. God's word cannot contradict itself. I say this because the Bible states clearly that there is only one way of going to Heaven. It is by faith alone in Jesus Christ. John 14:6, Acts 16:31, Romans 4:5, Galatians 2:16, Ephes. 2:8-9.

Look especially at James 1:17-18.

James 1:17-18 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

¹⁸Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

This fact in itself should settle once and for all that James 2:14-26 is not referring to eternal salvation.

Does it not refer to salvation though? Yes, but a PRACTICAL salvation from a ruined life and unfavorable judgment at the J. S. C.

James 2:14 What *doth it* profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?

v. 14. Save him from what? The answer is simple. It is 2 fold and is found in what we've already studied:

1. From a ruined life of sin. James 1:21.

James 1:21 Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.

2. From hard judgment at the Judgment Seat of Christ. v. 12-13.

James 2:12-13 So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.
¹³For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.

Can faith alone save him? The answer simply is "NO!" Faith alone cannot save him from a ruined life and future judgment. V. 15-16 illustrate verse 14.

James 2:15-16 If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food,
¹⁶And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what *doth it* profit?

v. 16. What does it profit in a practical sense, if you are saved but don't exercise that faith and help those in need, whatever the need is. What good is that? It is useless.

3 Important Points:

1. The very fact that James recognizes their faith shows they have it, BUT IT WASN'T PRODUCING!!! That is the issue.

2. The word "dead" does not mean non-existent. It is the word "nekros" and means barren, useless, idle. The root word means "like a corpse." Verse 20 and 26 have the same word. EX. a car battery. We say it is dead. We mean it is not producing. We do not mean that if you look under the hood, you will not find a battery there!

3. This word is used other places and how it is used is significant to our understanding:

a. The prodigal son in Luke 15:24.

Luke 15:24 For this my son was **dead**, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

If you remember the story, the son took his portion and went away in rebellion and wasted it. After a while he came to his senses and came back home. Did he ever cease being a son? That

would be ridiculous. The father though says that his son was dead and is now alive again. Simply put, the son had been barren and fruitless, AS GOOD AS DEAD, but not literally dead. He had been idle, but now by the fact that he was coming back, he was showing signs of life again.

b. The body of Abraham and the womb of Sarah in Romans 4:19.

Romans 4:19 And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now **dead**, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the **deadness** of Sarah's womb:

It is clear that Abraham was alive when he considered his body dead. Simply put, his body was considered past the age of being fruitful. It was barren and idle in regard to children. Sarah's womb was considered exactly the same, as the same word is used describing her condition.

Now, let's go back to James 2:17.

James 2:17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

Simply put James is telling us that faith alone, if it is not manifesting itself by works, is idle and useless. It is dead in that it is showing no signs of life. Our faith won't do anyone any good if we don't exercise it.

Also, our lives WILL NOT be delivered from destruction in this life simply because we are saved from Hell. We must work out our faith to be fruitful and useful.

Philip. 2:12-13 Wherefore, my beloved, as ye 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.

¹³For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of *his* good pleasure.

***This flies directly into the face of those who say once you're saved, it doesn't matter how you live. Or once saved, to emphasize works is some type of legalism. If that is true then God is a legalist! See Titus 3:8

Titus 3:8 *This is* a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men.

James 2:18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.

v. 18-20 James gives us another example to show the folly of not working out our faith. You can't show your faith without works. By living out your faith it shows to the world that you have something. John 13:35, Matthew 5:16.

James 2:19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.

v. 19. This verse has been so badly butchered it isn't funny. Many use this verse to say believing in Christ is not enough to be saved. Notice though that believing in Christ for eternal salvation is not even mentioned in this entire passage!

What James is saying is this: It's good you believe there is one God but even the demons believe that! The issue is that your FAITH IS UNPRODUCTIVE! And this is what he says AGAIN in verse 20.

James 2:20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

The issue is that your FAITH IS UNPRODUCTIVE. The Lord is pleading with us in this passage to put our faith in gear and get with it! Don't sit back on the fact that you are saved forever and therefore, seeing the Lord will never kick you out of His family, become a lazy Christian. See v.14-19.

James 2:21-22 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?

²²Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?

v.21-22 The question must be asked, "What kind of justification is James 2 referring to?" Simply put, it is a PRACTICAL justification.

There are 2 kinds of justification:

A. Eternal, on the basis of faith alone.

B. Practical, on the basis of faith that is exercised by works.

James 2 is practical salvation. Now, let's get back to Abraham.

"Perfect" here does not mean to make authentic. It means to complete in the sense of bring to maturity. Abraham faced the toughest test of his life when he offered his son up on the altar. It was a test that stretched his faith. As a result, he was declared righteous in a practical sense in that he proved himself to be a Godly man by his works. Heb. 11:17. His life was delivered through his obedience to the Lord's command to offer his son up. The Lord considered him "just" in a practical sense. And that's exactly what verse 23 says:

James 2:23 And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.

Notice: His actions proved he had a living faith. The Scriptures were fulfilled in that Abe showed his faith by his works. This goes along with James 2:18.

His faith stretched and matured through obedience. As a result of his obedience he was called the friend of God.

John 15:14 Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.

Jesus was speaking to the apostles when He spoke these words in John 15. They were already saved.

James 2:24 Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

Justified in a practical way. We must have a working faith to be justified in this life and to have our lives delivered from destruction, ruin, and judgment. James 1:21, 2:12-13.

Our next example is Rahab the harlot.

James 2:25-26 Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent *them* out another way?

²⁶For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

The story is a clear one. The Israelites were going to take Jericho. The Jewish spies came in to spy out the land. Rahab hid them and then secretly sent them out so they could escape. She had them agree that she and her family would be spared their PHYSICAL LIVES by helping the spies escape.

Hebrews 11 is so clear:

Hebrews 11:31 By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace.

Rahab herself said it even clearer:

Joshua 2:13 And *that* ye will save alive my father, and my mother, and my brethren, and my sisters, and all that they have, and deliver our lives from death.

Simply put, her life was delivered from judgment and destruction because she believed and ACTED upon the faith she had. How clear can it be?

And this again is the point. We can KNOW what is right. We can already be saved from Hell. We can come to church 3 times a week. But until we act upon the Word of God and start living it out, what does it profit? Sin will ultimately destroy the life, if we don't work out our faith.

A dead body is still a body, but it is of no use. It is dead, barren, idle. It shows no sign of life. It is useless. This takes us back to verse 14: WHAT DOES IT PROFIT?

We must decide today how we will live our lives. Are we going to heed the warning of Scripture and live for the Lord? Or are we just going to do our own thing and not worry about it.

If you can walk away from this study and not be challenged to change, you're almost beyond help. I don't know about you, but I want my life to count for something.

God's desire is for us to have lives that have purpose. Lives that accomplish something for His kingdom and not just take up space like some cow out in a field.