

With Works
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James 2:14-26

Did you ever see the movie, “*Weekend at Bernie’s?*” Remember the plot? **What illusion did the two friends spend the weekend trying to maintain?**

Bernie had no pulse and no breath, yet they kept dressing him up and propping him up to create the illusion he was alive. Bernie had no breath or pulse. Bernie might have looked alive from a distance but Bernie was dead. If a body has no breath, no pulse, and has to be propped up, it’s a corpse. What does that have to do with James chapter two?

In chapter two of his letter to persecuted new Christians, James makes a bold statement: faith without works is dead.

The Big Idea: True faith produces visible change. Profession of faith without a changed life is like a dead body without breath or a pulse. Obedient Christ-like behavior is the “vital sign” that proves living, authentic faith in Christ.

Let’s begin by reading James 2:14-26 then we will unpack some key verses.

James 2:14–26 (ESV)

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So 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 apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham

our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

- Verse 14: What good is it if you say you have faith in Christ but there are no works? Is that evidence of real saving faith? Verse 17: Faith by itself without any works is dead. **What do you think he means by “works?”**
- Here is a definition that I think applies: “Works” (in James 2) is obedient behavior that looks like Jesus and pleases God.
- If a patient is unconscious **what’s the first thing we check for?**
- Think of “works” as the pulse and breath that proves our faith is living.
- Obedient, Christ-like behavior that pleases God is the “vital sign” of authentic living faith in a life that has been changed by Jesus.
- Verse 18: Now someone may argue, *“Some people have faith; others have good deeds.”* They might say: *“You may be all about doing church work and good deeds, my faith is more personal and I keep it to myself!”*
- James replies, *“How can you show me your faith if you don’t have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds.”* [Emphasis mine] ¹
- Some might have pushed back arguing, *“Wait a minute! I believe in God!”*
- James responds, (verse 19) You say you have faith because you believe in God. Even the demons believe this, and it scares them to death!
- **What is the difference in “believing” in Jesus and “trusting” Him?**

- **How can this misunderstanding of “believing” be dangerous?**
- Warren Wiersbe: *“No man can come to Christ by faith and remain the same any more than he can come into contact with a 220-volt wire and remain the same.”ⁱⁱ*
- True faith produces visible change. Profession of faith without a changed life is like a dead body without breath or a pulse.
- It’s true that salvation is a free gift and not earned by good deeds (Eph. 2:8-9.) We don’t HAVE to do good works to be saved, but if we have been saved we will WANT to obey and please God. Obedient Christ-like behavior is the “vital sign” that proves living, authentic faith in Christ.
- James gives some practical examples of what living faith looks like.
- Verses 15 and 16 focus on doing good deeds for those who need help.

¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,
¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,”
 without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?

- Good deeds are certainly a part of obedient, Christ-like behavior.
- Jesus said in Matthew 25:40 (ESV) *‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ⁱⁱⁱ*
- When people are in need and can’t help themselves, followers of Christ should be the first in line to help; but “works” are more than just helping the poor or downtrodden. James gives two other illustrations:

James 2:20–23 (ESV)

²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God.

- Another example in verse 25:

²⁵ And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

Chuck Swindoll writes:

“James selects two extremes: Abraham (the father of the Hebrews) and Rahab (a Gentile harlot.) What a difference! Every Christian finds himself or herself somewhere between Abraham and Rahab.”

- Bible students know that in Hebrews 11 both Abraham and Rahab are recognized for their faith in action:

Hebrews 11:17 (NLT)

¹⁷ It was by faith that Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice when God was testing him. Abraham, who had received God’s promises, was ready to sacrifice his only son, Isaac,

Hebrews 11:31 (NLT)

³¹ It was by faith that Rahab the prostitute was not destroyed with the people in her city who refused to obey God. For she had given a friendly welcome to the spies. [The spies Joshua sent to Jericho – Joshua chapter two]

- **Do you know where else Rahab shows up in your Bible? (Matt. 1:5)**
- **What did Abraham and Rahab (who were so very different) have in common that got them into the Hebrews 11 “Hall of Faith?”**
- In a word: Obedience. Wiersbe: *“The men and women of faith named in Hebrews 11 were people of action: God spoke and they obeyed.”^{iv}*
- In verse 24, James makes a statement that on the surface seems like a theological problem especially after we just studied Galatians.

²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

- Paul wrote in Romans 3:28 (ESV) ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.
- **Is James contradicting Paul? Why not?**

- If I believe God's word is true then it cannot contradict itself so there must be an explanation to what seems like a contradiction.
- In verse 24 **justified**, the Greek term *dikaioō* means “to vindicate” or “to prove or demonstrate something to be true or just” (see Jas 2:21)^v
- A verse from Galatians gives us another clue: Galatians 5:6 (ESV) ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. [Emphasis mine]

John MacArthur writes:

“James and Paul both echo Jesus' preaching. Paul's emphasis is an echo of Matthew 5:3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." James's teaching has the ring of Matthew 7:21: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven." Paul represents the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount; James the end of it. Paul declares that we are saved by faith without the deeds of the law. James declares that we are saved by faith, which shows itself in works. Both James and Paul view good works as the proof of faith—not the path to salvation.”^{vi}

John Piper writes:

“When Paul teaches in Romans 4:5 that we are justified by faith alone, he means that the only thing that unites us to Christ for righteousness is dependence on Christ. When James says in James 2:24 that we are not justified by faith alone he means that the faith which justifies does not remain alone. These two positions are not contradictory. Faith alone unites us to Christ for righteousness, and the faith that unites us to Christ for righteousness does not remain alone. It bears the fruit of love. It must do so or it is dead, demon, useless faith and does not justify.”^{vii}

So, What's the Takeaway?

- Remember “Weekend at Bernie's?” Bernie had no breath or pulse, so they had to keep propping him up. Bernie might have looked alive from a distance but Bernie was dead.

- If a body has no breath, no pulse, and has to be propped up, it's a corpse.
- James says in verse 26: For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.
- We defined "Works" (in James 2) as obedient behavior that looks like Jesus and pleases God.
- Profession of faith without a changed life is like a dead body without breath or a pulse.
- Obedient Christ-like behavior is the "vital sign" that proves living, authentic faith in Christ. True faith produces visible change.
- So, how are my vital signs? Does my life as a follower of Christ have the pulse of loving others and caring for them? Do I have enough obedience to God's word to "fog a mirror?"
- We don't HAVE to do good works to be saved, but if we have been saved we will WANT to obey and please God.

ⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Jas

2:18). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

ⁱⁱ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 2, p. 354).

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Mt 25:40). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

^{iv} Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 2, p. 355). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

^v Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). *Faithlife Study Bible* (Jas 2:24). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

^{vi} [https://www.gty.org/library/questions/QA81/Does-James-2-contradict-Romans-](https://www.gty.org/library/questions/QA81/Does-James-2-contradict-Romans-4)

^{vii} <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/does-james-contradict-paul>