

# Salvation by Works?

**James 2:14-17** Every time I attempt to talk to someone about the fact that "good works" are not necessary for salvation, that a person is saved by what they believe, faith alone, not what they do, James 2 always comes up. "What about James?"

**James 2:14** What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Faith cannot save him, can it? (Greek.)

The translation just given is based on the original Greek and is crucial to a correct interpretation. The form of the question which James asks in the last part of the verse is one which expects a negative response. The expected answer, from James's point of view, would be: "**No, faith cannot save him.**" This verse has been appealed to over the centuries to support the idea that works are necessary for eternal life. This could very well be one of the most difficult verses in the Bible. It is surrounded by much confusion and multiple interpretations. This verse in James caused Martin Luther to call the book "The epistle of straw" and even to question its inclusion in the canon of Scripture.

## **THE PROBLEM:**

James seems to be contradicting the biblical teaching of salvation by faith alone. He seems to be contradicting the Reformation principle of "sola fide" -- faith alone! Look at what James says:

- James 2:14 .....Faith cannot save him , can it?
- James 2:17 (NKJV) Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.
- James 2:20 (NKJV) But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?
- James 2:26 (NKJV) For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

James says, without a doubt, "works are necessary for salvation." That is clearly what he says here.

Do you hold to the verbal inspiration of Scripture? Do you believe that the Bible is the Word of God? If you do, then you must admit that something is wrong here, either Scripture contradicts itself or we're interpreting something wrong. Now, which one of those are you more comfortable with? James is not discussing a doctrine of salvation which is based only on faith. **James insists that works are necessary for salvation.** Many interpreters have seen James as standing in opposition to the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone. I'm sure you can understand that. Let's look at what Paul says about justification.

**Romans 3:24-28 (NKJV) being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, 26 to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. 27 Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.**

Paul says that a man is justified by faith apart from any works.

**Romans 4:5 (NKJV) But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,**

Does that sound like it contradicts James 2:14? James says that faith alone cannot save, but Paul says it does. Paul says it is all of faith, and works play no part.

**Romans 5:1 (NKJV) Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,**

Again Paul says that justification is by faith alone.

**Romans 11:6 (NKJV) And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.**

Paul is saying here that grace and works are mutually exclusive. If salvation is by grace, then works play no part. Can you understand why people have a problem reconciling James and Paul? James says, "Faith alone cannot save," and Paul says, "Faith alone saves." Martin Luther, using Romans, began the reformation on the principle of "Sola fide" -- faith alone. No wonder he called James a "strawy epistle." James clearly states that works are necessary for salvation.

Many expositors have tried to harmonize James and Paul, but all harmonizations with a doctrine of "sola fide" are awkward and forced. Guthrie wrote, "It may well be that James is correcting a misunderstanding of Paul or vice versa, but it cannot be said that James and Paul are contradicting each other." What is the difference? What he is saying is that one of these guys is wrong and the other is straightening them out. What about inspiration? How can an inspired writer of God's Word be wrong? The Bible, all of it, is God's inspired inerrant Word.

S. Zodhiates wrote, "Paul and James do not stand face to face fighting against each other, but back to back fighting different foes." If you are fighting opposite foes, aren't you fighting each other? If James is fighting the doctrine of salvation by faith alone and Paul is teaching the doctrine of salvation by faith alone, then James is fighting Paul!

Albert Barns, commenting on James 2:14, writes,

He doubtless had in his eye those who abused the doctrine of justification by faith, by holding that good works are unnecessary to salvation, provided they maintain an orthodox belief. As this abuse probably existed in the time of the apostles, and as the Holy Ghost saw that there would be danger that in later times the great and glorious doctrine of justification by faith would be thus abused, it was important that the error, should be rebuked, and that the doctrine should be distinctly laid down that **good works are necessary to salvation** (emphasis mine DBC). The apostles, therefore, in the question before us, implicitly asserts that faith would not 'profit' at all unless accompanied with a holy life, and this doctrine he proceeds to illustrate in the following verses. Barns Notes on the New Testament, James-- Jude, page 42.

So, according to Mr. Barns, we are saved by faith plus works. In other words, we must "earn" our way into heaven by our good works. Barn's statement, "faith would not 'profit' at all unless accompanied with a holy life" is probably held by most folks in the church today.

Johnstone writes, "That faith can save a man, and that nothing else can, is written throughout the scriptures as with a pencil of light." I agree whole heartedly! The scriptures clearly teach that salvation is by faith alone. Because of the conflict between James and Paul, a desperate effort has been made to avoid the impact of James 2:14 by translating it as "that faith" (NASB) or "such faith" (NIV). Indicating that there is a "kind" of faith that does not save.

**James 2:14 (NIV) What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?**

**James 2:14 (NASB) What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?**

Translating it this way is an unjustified exaggeration of the "article of previous reference" in the Greek and has nothing to commend it here. The article of previous reference says that since there is a definite article with faith, "the faith" (ten piston), we can substitute words such

as "that faith" or "such faith." With abstract nouns like "faith" or "love," the article is perfectly normal when the noun is used as the subject. The construction of James 2:14 is identical to that found in:

**James 1:4 (NKJV) 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.**

But no one attempts to translate this as "but let 'that' patience, or 'such patience' have its perfect work." The same construction is found in:

**1 Corinthians 13:4 (NKJV) Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up;**

We don't translate this as "that" love or "such" love suffers long. In James 2, the definite article also occurs with "faith" in verses 17, 18, 20, 22, and 26. The attempt to single out 2:14 for specialized treatment carries its own refutation. Why do they try to change what James is saying? They are trying to make James say that it is a certain kind of faith that saves you. But, **James point is clear, faith alone cannot save.** Did James really disagree with Paul on salvation being by grace through faith alone? Notice what he wrote in:

**James 1:17-18 (NKJV) Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. 18 Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.**

Good gifts come from God and salvation is one of those good gifts. God, by a sovereign act of His own will, gives us grace and faith to believe His Word. James sees the new birth as a sovereign act of God. James and Paul were in fundamental harmony about the way eternal life is received. For both of them, it is a gift of God, graciously and sovereignly bestowed.

#### **THE PROBLEM'S SOLUTION:**

What then does James mean in 2:14? We need to apply a very basic rule of hermeneutics; "determine carefully the meaning of words." The Greek verb *sozo* used in 2:14 for "save" has a wide range of possible meanings. It can mean: "physical healing, rescue from danger, spiritual deliverance of various kinds and preservation from final judgement and Hell." We must determine its meaning from its context. To help us understand how James uses it, look at how he closes this letter:

**James 5:19-20 (NKJV) Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, 20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.**

Here the meaning of the verb "*sozo*" is clear. It refers to preservation of the physical life from death. The Greek expression "*sozin ten psuche*" is a standard and normal way of saying, "to save the life." There is no text in the Greek Bible where it can be shown to have the meaning "to save the soul from hell." The theme of the book of James is found in:

**James 1:21 (NKJV) Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls (life).**

James is talking to Christians, telling them that they can save their lives (they're already born again) from the damage that sin brings if they will walk in holiness. He has already warned them of the death dealing consequences of sin:

**James 1:13-15 (NKJV) Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. 14 But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. 15 Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.**

Again, he is writing to believers. In verse 21, he suggests that the antidote to the kind of consequence spoken of in 1:15, is the life saving capacity of God's Word. This theme is repeated frequently in the Proverbs.

**Proverbs 11:19 (NKJV) As righteousness leads to life, So he who pursues evil pursues it to his own death.**

In 1:21-25, James says that his readers will be "saved" from the destruction that sin brings if they are doers, rather than just hearers, of God's Word. And in 2:14-26, he is saying that they will be saved in the same sense, not by what they believe (faith), but by what they do about what they believe (works). The reason that James 2:14 seems to be contradicting the doctrine of justification by faith alone is because many have missed James **subject**. James is not talking about eternal life and how to obtain it. James is writing about preserving temporal life and the damage that sin brings to the life of a believer.

**James 2:12-14 (NKJV) So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. 14 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?**

James is asking, "Does the fact that you are a believer save you from the temporal judgement of God if you live in sin?" His question demands a negative answer.

The idea of temporal judgement in the life of a believer is also taught in the parable in Matthew 18 on forgiveness:

**Matthew 18:32-35 (NKJV) "Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.**

The master is God, and the forgiveness is speaking of redemption.

**33 'Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?'**

Compassion is a work that this believer was not doing.

**34 "And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.**

This is a picture of temporal judgement because of sin. Notice the next verse:

**35 "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."**

God will bring temporal judgement on those believers who do not live out the principles of their faith. If your faith doesn't work -- live out the teachings of Christ,-- you will suffer temporal judgement because of it. The solution to the problem of James 2:14 is simple -- understand the correct **subject**. No text can be read correctly when the writer's real subject is not perceived. James' subject is "deliverance from temporal judgement (physical preservation), not eternal redemption." He has already made it perfectly clear that eternal life is a gift of God's sovereign choice. Now, someone is bound to be thinking, "Are you trying to tell us that for many centuries of Christian teaching the church has missed the true meaning of this passage?" Yes, I am! You do consider yourself a protestant don't you? Would you have discouraged Martin Luther or John Calvin in their attempt to reform the church?

Emperor Charles the V said of Luther at the Diet of Worms, "A single friar who goes counter to all Christianity for 1,000 years must be wrong." The greatest conviction of the Reformation was the supremacy of an appeal to Scripture over the tradition of the church. We must stand in the fundamental principle of the Reformation, "*sola Scriptura*" - the Scriptures alone!

The way I see it, we only have two options; We either see James opposing Paul and denying "*sola fide*" or we see his subject as different. As I have already said, every time I talk to someone about the fact that salvation is by grace alone, their first response is, "What

about James?" It is not too strong to say that the misreading of James 2:14-26 is one of the most tragic interpretive blunders in the history of the church. It is a misreading of this text that has caused believers to encourage people to find assurance in their good works. We tell them, "If you don't live a holy life, you must not be saved." If good works are really a condition, or an essential fruit of salvation, I can never really be sure of my eternal salvation. How do I know that I won't quit working some day? An insistence on the necessity of works undermines assurance and postpones it, logically until death. When an end cannot be achieved apart from certain things being done, those things logically become conditions for the end in view. To add works to faith is to make works essential to salvation.

I know a person who was very active in the Christian faith. I studied with him and prayed with him. For years he lived in fellowship with God and then he turned away, he gave up on Christ and began to live a life of sin. Many would say he must not have really been saved. If that is the case, how do you know that you are really saved? Is your assurance based on works or on the grace of God? Please notice clearly what John says about salvation:

**John 3:14-18 (NKJV) "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. 18 "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.**

What did the children of Israel have to do to be delivered from the snake bit? All they had to do was to look to the serpent. The same is true of salvation, you are saved by looking to Christ for your redemption. Do you see anything about works in this passage? It is all about faith.

**John 5:24 (NKJV) "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.**

**John 6:28-29 (NKJV) Then they said to Him, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" 29 Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent."**

The work of God is the faith that He works in you. If you believe, it is a work of God because you cannot believe apart from God's sovereign working in your life.

**John 8:24 (NKJV) "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins."**

Do you see any works in that verse?

**John 11:25-26 (NKJV) Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. 26 "And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"**

**John 20:31 (NKJV) but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.**

This is why John wrote the epistle, that you may believe. And through faith have life, eternal life. The Scriptures are CLEAR, eternal life is free to all those who believe, and on the authority of Jesus, the believer can know he has eternal life at the very moment he believes in God for it. The church has adopted the theory of "individual psychology" taught by Dr. Alfred Adler, "trust only in movement." He says, "We are not what we say but we are what we do." Is this approach scriptural? Some will say, "Yes, it's biblical to judge a person by their works?" Is it?

**Matthew 7:13-20 (NKJV) "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. 14 "Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. 15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. 16 "You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes 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.**

Isn't this passage teaching that we can tell a believer by their works? Are fruits equal to what they do? No! Their fruits are what they say, their words. Look at:

**Matthew 12:33-34 (NKJV) "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. 34 "Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.**

Fruit is not what they do, but what they say. If you want to know a false prophet, you can tell he is false by what he says. Listen to John.

**1 John 4:1-3 (NKJV) Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2 By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.**

You spot a false prophet by what he says. Out of his heart his mouth speaks. They may live very morally, as the Mormons do, and yet be false prophets. But what if someone says he is a Christian but he is living immorally? First, go over the gospel with him. There are many people who think they're Christians, who have no clue of what the gospel is. Once you have gone over the gospel and are sure that he does, in fact understand and believe it, then hold him accountable for his sin, bring him under discipline, if necessary.

#### **WHAT IS FAITH?:**

How does a person know if he really believes the gospel? One result of misreading James 2:14-26 has often been to render the concept of saving faith so mystifying that a person cannot know with certainty whether he, in fact, really believes. The additions in the NIV "such faith" and NASB "that faith" have given people the idea that they may have the wrong kind of faith.

Biblically defined, **FAITH IS: UNDERSTANDING AND ASSENT TO THE PROPOSITIONS OF THE GOSPEL.** If you were to ask me, "Where is my money?" And I said to you, "The check is in the mail." Now, you are either going to believe me, which is faith, you are trusting in what I said, or you are not.

**Romans 4:20-21 (NKJV) He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.**

Abraham believed what God told him, that is faith. No matter what the subject, whether it be God or botany, the psychology or linguistics of belief is identical in all cases. Believing that 2+2=4 is arithmetic. Believing that asparagus belongs to the lily family is botany.

Botany is not mathematics, but the psychology or linguistics of believing is identical. Christ's promises of salvation are vastly different from the propositions of botany. But **believing is always thinking a proposition is true.**

Is faith purely an intellectual exercise? Yes! Could someone believe with their head but not with their heart. NO! There is no such distinction! The heart in Scripture refers to the thinking process. You think with your heart.

**Deuteronomy 9:4 (NKJV) "Do not think in your heart, after the LORD your God has cast them out before you, saying, 'Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land'; but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out from before you.**

**Proverbs 23:7 (NKJV) For as he thinks in his heart, so is he. "Eat and drink!" he says to you, But his heart is not with you.**

**Zechariah 8:17 (NKJV) Let none of you think evil in your heart against your neighbor; And do not love a false oath. For all these are things that I hate,' Says the LORD."**

The difference between various beliefs lies in the **objects** or **propositions** believed, not in the nature of belief. Faith must begin with knowledge, you can't believe what you don't know or understand. I understand the teaching of evolution; but I do not assent to it. **Belief is the act of assenting to something understood.** But understanding alone is not belief in what is understood. I understand Dispensational theology, but I do not believe it.

There are not different faiths but there are different "objects" of faith. Non-saving faith would be faith in the wrong propositions. For example, the Catholic faith is not a saving faith. It is non-saving because it counts on the efficacy of works to save. The Mormon faith is a non-saving faith because they deny the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ and they also count on the efficacy of works. Non-saving faith would be believing the wrong things.

Belief in the truth, nothing more and nothing less, is what separates the saved from the damned. Saving faith is understanding and assent to the proposition of the gospel. It is believing that Christ died to pay the sin debt of all who will put their trust only and completely in Him. If I have trusted Christ as my Savior, I can know that I have trusted Him just as surely as I can know whether or not I believe there is a China or that the earth orbits the sun.

#### **WHAT THEN IS DEAD FAITH?**

James 2:14-26 is the only New Testament passage which speaks of a dead faith. Please notice that the distinction in James is between dead faith and living faith, not false faith and true faith. Let's look as James' climax to this book:

**James 2:26 (NKJV) For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.**

James draws an analogy between dead faith and a dead body. If you were to find a dead body, you would assume that it had died, which would mean it was once alive. James can conceive of a "dead faith" as having once been alive. A person's faith, like his body, can die. James compares faith to the body and works to the spirit. Does that seem strange to you? Would you put faith with the spirit and works with the body?

James' point: works are actually the key to the vitality of faith. James' analogy shows, he is writing about the necessity of having works if our faith is to stay alive. Remember James is writing to Christians. Unless we act on our faith and live it out, our faith rapidly decays into dead orthodoxy. Good works are the spirit which animates the entire body. With out such works, our faith dies. But this does not affect our eternal destiny, but it does affect our temporal life and the preserving of it from judgement.

James is clearly teaching that works are necessary for salvation-- physical preservation. He states his argument in verse 14.

**James 2:14 (NKJV) What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?**

Then he illustrates his argument in verses 15-16:

**James 2:15-16 (NKJV) 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?**

The fact that the preserving of life lies at the heart of this illustration is apparent. Can the fact that a man holds correct beliefs and is orthodox save him from the deadly consequences of sin? Of course not! That is like giving your best wishes to a destitute brother or sister, when what they really need is food and clothing. It is utterly fruitless. Neither will your faith do your physical well being any good if you live in sin. To the Jew, almsgiving was of paramount importance. Ben Sirach said, "Water will quench a flaming fire and alms maketh atonement for sin." Tobit says, "I will behold thy face by almsgiving." The Jews of old, much like many today, made works a means of salvation. It is easy to see how this passage can be misinterpreted.

#### **ARGUMENT STATED:**

**James 2:17 (NKJV) Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.**

What are works? I think if we examine the context of chapter 2, we will see that the works that James is talking about are: **to love.**

**James 2:8 (NKJV) If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well;**

Paul says that faith works by love:

**Galatians 5:6 (NKJV) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.**

If your faith doesn't produce love, it is a dead faith and in danger of temporal judgement. The moral dynamic of faith is love. Since faith is invisible, a person's possession of faith is dependant upon his verbal testimony alone. How can you tell if a person has faith? They don't smoke, or drink, they live a very moral lifestyle. They witness to others of their faith. They give money to the church, they study their Bible, they are a sacrificial and giving person. Is that how you spot faith? I have just described a Mormon, who does not believe in the deity of Christ or in salvation by grace alone, and will spend eternity in Hell because of his unbelief.

Faith is static but love is always active. Love is obedience to God's revealed will:

**John 14:15 (NKJV) "If you love Me, keep My commandments.**

Love is active, it does something, and without it faith dies. Verse 17 says that if faith is by itself-- no love-- it is dead.

Believers, faith and works are connected. It is by works that faith is made mature. As we act on what we believe and live out our Christianity, our faith grows and matures. But if we fail to work -- love, our faith will die. And a dead faith, one that is unproductive, will come under the temporal judgement of God. Keep your faith alive-- walk in love.