

FAITH THAT WORKS
Jas 2:14-26
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Martin Luther (1483-1546), the Catholic monk and father of the German Reformation, changed the course of church history when on October 31, 1517, in Wittenberg, he posted on the door of the Castle church ninety-five theses for debate. Several years prior to this pivotal event, probably in 1514, Luther had the famous Tower experience at which time he came to realize that God's righteousness in Romans 1 is not the justice that we have to fear but the positive righteousness that God gives believers who trust in Christ. The Apostle Paul's teaching in Romans and Galatians transformed Luther's life. Luther, in turned, charted a new course for church history. Furthermore, Luther created the set of lenses through which these letters of Paul have been read in Protestant churches for nearly five-hundred years. And this brings me to the letter written by James. Confused? Allow me to explain.

Luther did not think highly of the Book of James. He called it an "epistle of straw" and relegated it to a secondary status within the New Testament. Why? Because for Luther, James directly sets himself in opposition to the doctrine of justification taught by Paul. According to Luther, what Paul and James write about justification, faith, and works is contradictory and irreconcilable. Simply put, Paul is right and James is wrong. With all due respect to Luther, I think Paul and James are *both* right and that Luther misunderstood James. In the preface to his work on Romans, listen to these words from the pen of Luther.

What a living, creative, active powerful thing is faith! It is impossible that faith ever stop doing good. Faith doesn't ask whether good works are to be done, but, before it is asked, it has done them. It is always active. Whoever doesn't do such works is without faith; he gropes and searches about him for faith and good works but doesn't know what faith or good works are. Even so, he chatters on with a great many words about faith and good works.¹

¹http://www.ccel.org/l/luther/romans/pref_romans.html (February 9, 2003; trans. by Andrew

For me, there is a great irony here. Luther's description of faith in Romans captures the very essence of what James writes in chapter 2, verses 14-26. *No one has more forcefully expressed the meaning of faith in James than Luther when he was speaking about Paul in Romans.* And now we are ready for what is perhaps the most significant and most controversial paragraph in the Letter of James.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can [such] faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

¹⁸But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. ²⁰Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? ²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ²³Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," [Gen 15:6] and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? ²⁶For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead (Jas 2:14-26, NRSV).

In 1:22-25 James insists that his readers be not only hearers of the word but also does. Now he insists that "faith alone" is not adequate without the works of faith (vv. 18-26). In 1:27 James identifies the care for those in need as the mark of true religion. Now he shows how false is a faith that refuses help to those in need (vv. 14-16). *James argues that the actions reveal the attitude and make it "alive."* Faith without works is dead. A work-less faith is a worth-less faith. And notice the vicious cycle: faith that produces no works is dead; dead faith cannot produce works.

But there is an objection! Someone might say, "You have faith and I have works." In other words, faith and works need not be connected: they can be seen as separate spiritual gifts. "One person has faith; another person has works." James refers to the objector as "foolish" or "senseless" or "empty-headed," and attacks the separation of faith and works. James does not argue for faith instead of works or works instead of faith

or even works above faith, but for faith *and* works. *Works are not optional additions to faith; they are essential expressions of faith.* Faith is the root; works are the fruit. Faith compels works; works complete faith. Works do not secure our salvation; they show our salvation. In the words of John Calvin (1509-1564), “While it is faith alone that justifies, the faith that justifies is never alone.”

The fact that James once again chooses an example of mistreatment of the poor in the Christian community makes it clear that the illustration represents a pattern of behavior that is all too typical for James’ readers. The refusal to provide for an obvious need not only hurts the one who is needy, it also raises a question about the spiritual state of the one who refuses to relieve the need. *This type of faith is inwardly defective and outwardly deficient—it is dead.* Perhaps this is one of the reasons James recounts the stories about Abraham and Rahab. In the Jewish tradition, both figures were remembered and revered as models of faith and hospitality: Rahab because she welcomed the “spies” into her home, Abraham because he received the three “men” who visited him and brought predictions about his family. The combined examples of Abraham and Rahab show how active faith demands a sharing of gifts that God has given and a providing of space to those whom God sends unexpectedly.² Patriarch and prostitute alike had faith that was *demonstrated* by their actions. As goes the saying, “People don’t care how much we know until they know how much we care.”

At this point, I would like to offer a solution to the so-called conflict between Paul and James. I must confess at the outset that my solution is only suggestive and may be seen by some as simplistic. *When Paul and James use the terms “justify,” “faith,” and “works,” they do so in different contexts and with different connotations.* (1)☐Paul uses “justify” to refer to the initial declaration of a sinner’s innocence before God; James uses “justify” to refer to the ultimate verdict of innocent pronounced over a person at the last judgment. Paul denies the need for deeds prior to conversion, and James declares the necessity of deeds after conversion. (2)☐“Faith” for Paul means acceptance of the gospel and attachment to Jesus Christ. For James, “faith” means the assertion of monotheism, that God is one (and even the demons have this type of faith). For Paul, “faith” is a

²See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, NIB, vol. 12 (Abingdon, 1998), 198-199.

personal commitment to and trust in Jesus Christ that leads to living like Christ—and Paul commends this type of faith. For James, “faith alone” is orthodox opinion, believing the right doctrines and saying the right words but doing nothing—and James condemns this type of faith. (3)☐“Works”—or to be more specific “works of the law”—for Paul designates Jewish deeds of formal obedience to the Law that provide a person a basis for boasting in their good achievements—and Paul condemns these works. For James, “works” are deeds of Christian love, deeds that fulfill the “royal law” of love for one’s neighbor—and James commends these works. *To sum up, James and Paul are dealing with two different situations: Paul is dealing with those who believe they are saved by works, and James is dealing with those who believe they are saved without works.*³ So then, Paul and James compliment one another. Together they say, “It is true that faith alone saves. It is also true that the faith that saves is never alone.”

Now I must warn you: combining James and Paul will result in a conclusion that is as uncomfortable as it is unavoidable. James denounces doctrinal correctness that is lifeless and Paul denounces legalistic practice that is spiritless. *A faith that is purely doctrinal and does not result in loving deeds is a dead sham, totally useless for salvation.* “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Gal 5:6). On this, Paul and James agree!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), German theologian and Lutheran pastor, refused to yield to the Nazi power in Germany and identified himself with the resistance movement against Adolf Hitler. Arrested by the Gestapo in 1943, he was executed in 1945 on a charge of treason. A simple tablet in the Flossenbürg village church is inscribed: “Dietrich Bonhoeffer a witness of Jesus Christ among his brethren.”⁴ In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer writes:

. . . only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes. . . . If the first half of the proposition stands alone [“only those who believe obey”], the believer is exposed to the danger of cheap grace, which is another word for damnation. If the second half stands alone [“only those who obey believe”], the believer is exposed to the danger of salvation through works, which is another

³“In brief, James and Paul are dealing with two different situations: Paul with the self-righteousness of Jewish legal piety and James with dead orthodoxy” (George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1993), 639).

⁴H. D. McDonald, “Bonhoeffer, Dietrich” in J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (Zondervan, 1978), 141-142.

word for damnation. . . . *only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.*⁵

Believing without obeying is dead doctrine, and James denounces such faith.

Obeying without believing is dead practice, and Paul denounces such works. It is true that faith alone saves. It is also true that the faith that saves is never alone.

This morning I am not seeking a faith that will move a mountain; I am struggling for a faith that some how will move me. In the words of Charles Kingsley (1819-1875), “I do not want merely to possess a faith, I want a faith that possesses me.”

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⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 2d ed. (trans. by R. H. Fuller; Macmillan, 1959), 69, 74, 69.

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