

# THE DUAL REQUIREMENTS OF FAITH AND WORKS

James 2:14–26

By Dub McClish

## Introduction

These verses on the interrelationship of faith and works at once comprise one of the best-known and most controversial sections of the epistle of James. The very way in which James approached this subject implies that it was also one of considerable controversy in the first century. Protestant denominationalism has largely ignored this section of Scripture because it is one of supreme embarrassment to it. To a great degree this predominant attitude may be traced to Martin Luther, the sixteenth century reformer. The story is rather well known that in his overreaction to the meritorious works taught by Roman Catholicism (in which he was once a principal), he misread Paul's affirmations concerning salvation by faith in Romans as salvation by "faith alone." Thus, when he came upon the passage before us that denied his "faith only" perversion and emphasized the proper role of the works of man in his salvation, he rejected the teaching of James as contradictory to that of Paul. In fact, he labeled the letter of James "a right strawy epistle," and disavowed its equality with Paul's letters (an apt demonstration of the power and danger of blind prejudice).

The background of this context is seen as early as verses 22–25 of chapter 1. There James affirmed that men must not only **hear**, but **do** the Word of God, "the perfect law of liberty," if they are to be blessed of God. Verses 26 and 27 further indicate that worthwhile and pure religion as defined by God requires more than mere profession. It is rather seen in such works as controlling the tongue, helping the helpless, and in all ways behaving above reproach. Chapter 2, verses 1–13 continue this theme, emphasizing the practical meaning of faith as it pertains to equal treatment of brethren. In the section before us, both argument and illustration demonstrate that faith, the very basis of the Christian religion, actually exists only as it works or acts.

## Exegesis of James 2:14–26

### ***Verse 14: A Twofold Question***

"What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?" With this arresting two-fold question James introduced his inspired discussion of the relationship between faith and works as they pertain to salvation. He set forth a hypothetical man who professed faith, but who was inactive and did not work. Even if such a so-called "faith" were granted to be in some sense real, how would it benefit anyone, including its

professor? What good would it do? The implied answer is a resounding negative—“None whatsoever”!

James asked a second question about this hypothetical man and his “faith”: “Can faith save him?” Of course, a man is saved by faith, as the New Testament teaches consistently. However, James was asking if a do-nothing, inactive, all-talk-and-no-work “faith” could save? The American Standard Version says, “Can that faith save him?” Again, the implied answer is definitely, “No, it cannot”!

### ***Verses 15–16: An Illustration***

“If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and 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?” To illustrate how worthless a non-working faith is, James suggested this hypothetical situation. The one who claims to have faith, but will not work, will dismiss a naked and hungry fellow-Christian with empty words of blessing instead of supplying the items needed. He may even congratulate himself on his sympathy and helpfulness toward those who are unfortunate. The question of verse 14, “What doth it profit?” is then repeated with the same negative answer implied. Such a “faith” is of no worth whatsoever. The illustration used by James focuses attention on the Christian’s responsibility to help the helpless as ability and opportunity allow, a theme James had already introduced in 1:27 and that the New Testament teaches throughout (e. g., Mark 14:7; Acts 2:44-45; Gal. 2:10; 6:10; Eph. 4:28; et al.).

### ***Verse 17: A Conclusion***

“Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.” As if the implied answers to the questions he had propounded were not forceful enough, James drew the conclusion for his readers. As illustrated in verses 15–16, a faith that does not busy itself in works that please God is not worthy to be called “faith.” Empty words do not help the helpless. Likewise, **any** claimed “faith” without accompanying works is of no value. It is actually dead, nonexistent. Just as pure religion does not exist apart from doing God’s will (1:22–27), so true, living faith is impossible without appropriate works. In this verse James introduced a thought to which he repeatedly returned in the remainder of this section of Scripture: *faith without works is dead*.

### ***Verses 18–19: A Hypothetical Claim and a Challenge by James***

“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. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.” In his third suggested hypothesis in this con-

text, James wrote of a possible attempt to answer his arguments (some may have actually thus argued on the subject). The respondent to James might say, “One person might approach God through his faith, while another might do so through his good deeds, and both might please God.” This *I’m okay, you’re okay* approach to religion is commonly held at present. The Protestant branch of sectarianism holds that men are saved by faith alone, while the Roman Catholic branch contends for salvation by meritorious works. They have both become so maudlin and convictionless in their hyper-tolerance that generally they opine that either position, if sincerely followed, is accepted of God.

James immediately responded to this baseless, irrational argument by issuing a challenge to his respondent: “Demonstrate, prove your faith without your works.” Of course, such was and is impossible. “Faith” in the abstract is similar to electricity in that it cannot be literally seen itself. Both are “seen,” demonstrated, only in the effects or works, which they produce. Without works faith is only a claim. However, James correctly argued that by his works he (and therefore, any person) could demonstrate his faith. The implication is that only by one’s actions can one prove and demonstrate his faith.

James further answered his hypothetical respondent by suggesting a humorous illustration of “faith” that is inactive. He employed considerable sarcasm in applying his illustration. James granted that there is a certain kind of “faith” that may exist apart from good works. It is the kind that intellectually acknowledges the existence of one true God. It is even commendable to have this kind of faith as long as one is not content with only this measure of faith. However, this is the same kind of faith in God the devils (“demons,” ASV) have and they have such strong faith that they tremble at the very thought of God. This fact is illustrated repeatedly in the New Testament. As the Lord and the apostles cast demons out of their human hosts, the demons acknowledged God and/or Christ (Mat. 8:29; Mark 1:24; Acts 19:15; et al.). They tremble in terror of their horrible eternal fate at the Judgment (Mat. 25:41).

By means of this reference to the faith of demons, James demonstrated the folly of thinking that mere intellectual assent or belief is sufficient to save. The devils have such a faith, but they do not serve or obey God. Such faith does not avail to salvation—whether in demons or men. Therefore, one who boasts of his faith, but does not serve God through good works is no better off regarding eternal salvation than are the demons themselves. How a stronger demonstration than this of the insufficiency of mere intellectual faith could be set forth, I cannot imagine!

### ***Verse 20: A Conclusion Repeated***

“But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?” Here James returned to the conclusion previously stated (v. 17). He prefaced this conclusion by shaming one who would claim to believe and even argue such a foolish premise that faith could either be demonstrated, or in reality, even exist, without (“apart from,” ASV) works. It is such an obvious matter that everyone should be able to see and willing to acknowledge that works must always accompany true faith. Nicoll has an excellent description of the sense of James’ opening words of this verse: “‘Dost thou desire to know,’ i.e., by an incontrovertible fact; the writer then, like a skilled disputant, altogether demolishes the position of his adversary by presenting something which was on all hands regarded as axiomatic.”<sup>i</sup>

One who gainsays this point is vain (literally, “empty-headed”)—he has taken leave of his rational faculties! Due to a Greek textual variation, in place of *dead* the ASV has *barren*. However, the sense differs little with either word: that which is dead is barren, unproductive, useless and that which is useless is, in practicality, dead. Such is the “faith” of one who does not work for God.

#### ***Verses 21–24: Abraham, an Illustration of Living Faith***

“Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar” (v. 21)? To illustrate that living faith requires action, James introduced Abraham and his faith. How was he justified? Not merely by a **profession**, but by a **proof** of his faith. While we see this principle in other events of Abraham’s life, it was principally and ultimately seen in his offering of Isaac upon the altar. When Abraham raised his knife to slay Isaac for the commanded sacrifice, God’s angel told him, “Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: **for now I know that thou fearest God**, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me” (Gen. 22:12, emph., DM).

“Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?” (v. 22). James was quick to point out that he was not intending to de-emphasize the faith of Abraham, but to emphasize it in its proper perspective with his works. He argued that faith cooperated and interacted with his works for a perfect blending of the two elements. His mighty faith in God caused him to do what God commanded and his works served as the perfect proof of his faith. His faith would have been unperfected, incomplete, thus dead, had he not done the work God commanded him to do. Abraham’s faith was so powerful that he reasoned that God would raise Isaac up again if he killed him as a sacrifice (Heb. 11:17–19).

“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” (v. 23). The statement of God

to Abraham to which James referred is found in Genesis 15:6: "And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness." Interestingly, God did not say this to Abraham after he had offered Isaac, but perhaps 20 years before Isaac was even born. Was James confused, thinking that God had counted Abraham's faith for righteousness only **after** he offered Isaac, instead of earlier? Hardly.

Even before the episode in Genesis 15 God had given Abraham the great three-fold promise, each part of which required an heir for fulfillment. Yet he and Sarah were now in their old age and still childless. The promise of God immediately precedent to Genesis 15:6 was that Abraham's seed would be as numberless as the stars of the heavens. It was this promise that Abraham believed without question, in spite of the seeming impossibility of its fulfillment, **which belief was counted to him for righteousness** (i. e., right-doing). In other words, his faith itself was counted as an act of obedience (cf. John 6:29) since there was nothing further demanded of him at the moment by God except to wait. Guy N. Woods has some helpful comments on this verse:

This was affirmed of Abraham after the illustrious patriarch had accepted, without question, and despite his childlessness, and the advanced ages of himself and his wife Sarah, God's promise of vast posterity. Not knowing at the time how such could be, he nevertheless *believed* that it would be and stumbled not at the promise of God in unbelief. This scripture (Gen. 15:6) is declared to have been fulfilled when Abraham's faith was made perfect. It is vitally important to observe *when* the scripture referred to was fulfilled. Though Abraham was *earlier* (Gen. 15:6) acknowledged as a believer, and his faith "reckoned" for righteousness, it was not until *later* (Gen. 22:1-19) that his faith was consummated (made perfect) in the act of obedience involving Isaac. Abraham believed God, prior to this act of obedience; i.e., he fully accepted God's word, and relied implicitly on the promises which it contained; and, as a result, his faith "was reckoned unto him for righteousness..." "To reckon" (*elogisthe*) is to regard, deem, consider, account; hence, God deemed, considered, regarded Abraham's faith as righteousness (right-doing). *Faith itself thus became an act of obedience; which, in its exercise, and when, at the moment, there were no additional duties devolving upon Abraham, God accepted as proof of Abraham's devotion.* One must not from this assume that the exercise of belief bestowed upon Abraham blessings apart from and independent of any obedience; though this conclusion is often drawn, it is an erroneous and hurtful one. In the nature of the case, the promise of great posterity involved matters which would require considerable time for their development; hence, there was nothing more, at the moment, for Abraham to do but to accept, without hesitation, the assurances of such from God. This, he did; and his acceptance thereof became *an act of righteousness* which God, in his turn, accepted, and put to Abraham's account for righteousness (right-doing). It is a violent perversion of this passage and historic incident from it to assume that because Abraham's faith was accepted as an act of righteousness where there was *nothing else required* of him *at the time* that in our case faith will suffice *without* the performance of those conditions which *are required of us now.*<sup>ii</sup>

Notice that James declared that the faith which God recognized and counted for righteousness in Abraham was not **perfected, consummated**, until he proved it in his obedience

concerning the offering of Isaac. Thus while a degree of faith in the sense of belief or trust may reside in one before obedience, it is not a perfected, saving faith until it proves itself in obedience, as with Abraham—“faith without works is dead.”

Note the great honor God conferred on Abraham in calling him “the friend of God.” The point is not that Abraham befriended God in believing in Him, but that God claimed Abraham as His friend due to his faith, perfected in his works. Through Isaiah, God addressed Israel, saying, “But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham, my friend” (Isa. 41:8). Jesus laid down the same basis on which he would call men His friends: “Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you” (John 15:14). In man’s relationship to Deity, it is more than merely an “honor” to be called “friend of God”; it is an earned privilege! God calls a man His friend, not because of the loud claim of “faith,” but because of the proof of faith in obedience.

“Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only” (v. 24). From all of the foregoing arguments and illustrations James had presented there could be but this one rational, correct conclusion. Note that James moved from the illustration of this truth in Abraham to the universal application of it: “a man,” that is, **any** man, **all** men. Any man who seeks to be justified in the sight of God will find it only through a faith that works, not by faith alone.

It is exceedingly interesting that inspiration has foreseen every false doctrine the devil could ever invent and has answered it in the Bible! It is especially intriguing to see that sometimes inspired men have used the exact terminology false teachers would use centuries later to formulate their false doctrines. An example of this is seen in the false claim that once a man is saved it is impossible for him to “fall from grace.” However, fifteen centuries before John Calvin introduced this doctrine, Paul had written that saved people **could** fall from grace: “Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace” (Gal. 5:4).

The statement of James in verse 24 is another illustration of the same phenomenon. The doctrine of salvation by “faith only” is generally credited to Martin Luther, the prince of sixteenth century reformers. It has captured practically all of Protestant denominationalism. A necessary corollary to this doctrine is a denial of the necessity of any act of obedience (particularly baptism) as a condition of salvation or receiving remission of sins. It is a source of wonderment that James used the very phrase Luther would adopt, “faith only,” and declare, in direct contradiction to Luther, that men are **not** justified by “faith only”! Abraham is “proof positive” that God does

not justify or save men on the basis of mere professed, “intellectual” faith, but on the basis of works that demonstrate true, living faith.

***Verse 25: Rahab, a Further Illustration of Living Faith***

“Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?” Just as Abraham was not justified by faith alone, but by works that proved and perfected his faith, so it was with Rahab. Perhaps Abraham and Rahab were selected to show that whether one is wealthy and powerful or from the lowest station in life, justification before God comes not through faith only, but through a working faith. Perhaps these two were chosen as respective representatives of those who are among the chosen people of God and those who are of Pagan origin, again showing that all, believers and unbelievers alike, are justified upon the same principle—an obedient, working faith.

Rahab is a remarkable example of the power of faith. Though a resident of the heathen city of Jericho around 1500 B.C. and a participant in the vile occupation of harlotry, through her faith she rose above those evil influences to be among those through whom the promised seed of Abraham would come to bless all nations (Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:16; Mat. 1:5). When Joshua sent the spies into Canaan in preparation for invading it, Rahab hid them and helped them escape certain death in Jericho. Through her faith in the God of whose wonders and might she had heard, she believed her city would be destroyed and she exacted a promise from the spies that she and her family would be spared (Jos. 2:1-14). Her faith was so great that the Hebrews writer included her in his list of the great heroes and heroines of faith (Heb. 11:31). Again, the point of it all made by James was that true faith, justifying faith, is more than a mere profession. Rahab’s faith was living and vital as seen in her works, which were prompted by and were in harmony with her faith.

***Verse 26: A Final Conclusion***

“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” In order to emphasize the truism that “faith without works is dead” for the third time in this context, James used an analogy. He alluded to the body and spirit of man. “Body” refers to the physical frame and structure of man. It is elsewhere described as a “tabernacle” that will be dissolved or put off at death (2 Cor. 5:1; 2 Pet. 1:13-14). The human body serves as a tabernacle or house for the “spirit,” the immortal nature or part of man. While it was not the primary aim of his words to do so, James incidentally provided a clear and most concise definition of both life and death: When the body and spirit are united life exists. When the body and spirit are separated death occurs. Our human parents gave us our bodies through God’s law of procreation (Gen. 1:28),

but our spirits (immortal souls) are given us by God (Ecc. 12:7; Heb. 12:9). At death the body, which is made from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7), goes to the grave to decay into dust from whence it came (Ecc. 12:7). However, the spirit of man lives on, never to die, in the vast realm of eternity, either with God in Heaven or with Satan and his minions in Hell (Mat. 25:46).

The last phrase of this verse is the grand summation and conclusion of the questions, hypotheses, arguments, illustrations, and analogies employed by James beginning with verse 14. Even as a person is dead when his body is without his spirit, so is faith dead when it is without its appropriate works. One must deny both inspiration and reason to allege that living, justifying, saving, perfected faith exists without its accompanying works.

### **Exposition on Selected Themes in James 2:14–26**

#### ***Works as used by James***

There can be no doubt about the point that James was making: works are necessary to validate and complement faith. Real faith—living, productive, saving faith—is faith that works. Workless faith is dead. However, there are at least five kinds of works discussed in the New Testament. It is both appropriate and important to determine just what sort of works James envisioned.

(1) Hypocritical religious works were part of the behavior of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day. The Lord soundly rebuked such pretended piety that was actually done, not to please God, but to be seen of and to draw praise from men (Mat. 6:5; 23:5). James did not commend a kind of works that Jesus condemned so we can eliminate this as the kind of works that must accompany saving faith.

(2) Works of human merit or goodness by which one might seek to be justified apart from submission to the will of Christ and cleansing by the blood of Christ are referred to more than once by inspired men. It was this kind of works which Paul described in Ephesians 2:8: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." Clearly, the works here are deeds a man might do and then boast that he had saved himself, had earned God's grace, rather than receiving salvation as the gift of God through [the] faith. The same kind of works is in view in Titus 3:5: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost." Since Paul, inspired by the same Holy Spirit as was James, declared that we are not saved by our own good works or goodness apart from the grace and mercy of God, it is certain that James was not advocating this kind of works as the accompaniment to faith.

(3) Works of the law of Moses are a prominent subject in the New Testament, especially after the establishment of the church. Much of the Jewish population of the church constantly strove to bind the works of the law of Moses upon Christians as necessary to salvation. One of the mightiest battles of the first century revolved around this controversy. A major theme of Paul's letter to Rome was the refutation of this doctrine. He wrote: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds [works] of the law" (Rom. 3:28). His message to the Galatians was the same, but even more explicit: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Gal. 2:16). Again, since the inspired Paul most definitely said that men **are not and can not be** justified by the works of the law of Moses, these are not the works James advocated.

(4) The works of ungodly men, which we may call "evil works" are mentioned in various contexts. Paul wrote of the "works of darkness" (Rom. 13:12; Eph. 5:11) and of the "works of the flesh" (Gal. 5:19). The Lord spoke of men who ". . . loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). All such works are ungodly and are inspired of the devil. Servants of God can have nothing to do with such vile deeds so they are obviously not the works commended to us by James.

(5) Works that fulfill the commands of God are emphasized throughout the New Testament. The Christ knew that He must do such works: "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work" (John 9:4). All men must do the "works of God" (i. e., the works commanded by God) (John 6:27-28). Jesus was speaking of such works when He told the apostles, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

While Paul taught that we are not saved by works of the law of Moses (Gal. 2:16) or works of our own merit (Tit. 3:5), he most definitely taught that **works of obedience** are necessary for salvation: "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" (Phi 2:12). Peter had the same righteous works in view in his statement at the house of Cornelius: "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (Acts 10:34-35).

This kind of works is what James emphasized in his first chapter when he stressed that God blesses the "**doer of the work**" and not merely the hearer of the Word (Jam. 1:25). He then specified some of these works of God (controlling the tongue, helping the helpless, living a pure

life -- vv. 26-27) without which men practice vain religion . It was such righteous works (commandments) of God to which James referred in his hypothetical illustration of living faith (2:14-18). Likewise, it was to such obedient responses to God's will to which James referred in Abraham and Rahab that constituted the works by which they were saved and (by implication) apart from which they would not have been saved (vv. 21-26).

### ***The Alleged Contradiction Between James and Paul***

While more attention will be given to this question in another chapter in this volume, we will do well to give brief notice to it here. As indicated in the introduction of this chapter, at least since the sixteenth century it has been charged that James' teaching on salvation by works contradicted Paul's teaching on salvation by faith. This allegation has arisen from at least two crucial misunderstandings of Paul's teaching: (1) In various places Paul declared that men are saved "by faith" (e. g., Rom. 3:28; 5:1; et al.). Generally, as a reaction to the corrupt system of meritorious works native to Roman Catholic theology, the Reformers, led by Martin Luther, decided that Paul was actually teaching justification by faith alone. Thus, Luther added the word "alone" after "faith" in such places as Romans 1:16 and 3:28 when he issued his translation of the New Testament in 1522. Numerous examples of this fundamental misunderstanding are found in the Protestant creed books, one of which declares, "Wherefore, that we are justified by faith only, is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort."<sup>iii</sup> With this misconception (involving corruption of the New Testament text), it is no wonder that Luther saw a contradiction in the words of James: "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (2:24).

(2) In various places Paul declared we are not saved by works (e. g., Rom. 3:27-28; 4:4-6; Gal. 2:16; et al.). Once more, following the lead of Luther, Protestant theologians generally have indiscriminately and mistakenly concluded that any and all "works" are thus excluded in obtaining justification. Again, given this erroneous view, James appears to be in irreconcilable conflict with Paul.

The truth of the matter is that inspired writers did not and could not contradict each other and James did not contradict Paul. However, he most assuredly contradicted the common Protestant **misunderstandings** of Paul. Neither Paul nor any other inspired writer ever taught salvation by "faith only," although they indeed consistently taught salvation **by faith**. Both of the letters of Paul that are held by Protestants to be the principal sources of justification by "faith only" (Romans and Galatians) contain strong disclaimers of any such doctrine. In the opening and closing words of his letter to Rome Paul set forth the kind of faith that justifies as obedient

(i. e., working) faith (1:5; 16:26). In the very heart of his argument to the Galatians he taught that the faith that avails anything before God is one that works through love (5:6). Thus, Paul taught that faith standing alone avails nothing. It is almost as though Paul anticipated the “faith only” error and placed these safe-guards against it in these letters so that men would be without excuse in so misconstruing him, as indeed they are!

When we understand that the works which cannot and do not save us were clearly identified by Paul as works of the law (Rom. 3:27-28) and works of our own righteousness or merit (Eph. 2:8-9; Tit. 3:5), then we can understand that not all human works are excluded by Paul as conditions of salvation. Further, when we understand that the kind of works by which James said we **are** saved (2:24), as already demonstrated, are works of obedience to God (thus not works of the law or works of merit), we can understand that such works ever have been and still are necessary to salvation.

Hebrews 11, often called the “roll of the heroes of faith,” well illustrates this principle. Each person mentioned was one of faith, but in each case that faith was demonstrated by works of obedience to God. Abraham and Rahab, both used by James to illustrate that justification is by works and not by faith only, are among those heroes of faith. Both of them were commended for a faith that was demonstrated by their works of obedience (Heb. 11:8, 17-19, 31).

Just as Paul taught salvation by faith, but not by “faith only,” likewise James taught salvation by works, but not by “works only.” The perfect blending and balance of the two is seen in Paul’s statement, “For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love” (Gal 5:6).

### ***The Two-fold Application of Faith Plus Works***

The principle, “faith without works is dead,” applies with equal force in two directions. (1) The contextual application is primarily to Christians. James makes the point in an unmistakable manner that a lazy, inactive, all-talk-and-no-action approach to religion is worthless to its possessor, to God, and to the world. Pity the saint (or the congregation) who has the ability and the opportunity to help some helpless person or to support one who needs help to preach the Gospel, but he merely mouths a pious blessing upon him while withholding his assistance. Pity the saint who rests his salvation on “being a member of the church of Christ,” but he lets others do his part of the visiting, giving, studying, encouraging, attending Bible classes and worship faithfully, and such like. Such a one has a dead and barren faith and the answer to James’ question, “Can that faith save him?” (2:14) is a resounding “**No**”!

(2) That justification is not by “faith only” also applies to the alien sinner. The advocates of salvation by “faith only” insist that salvation -- forgiveness of sins -- obtains at the moment one believes in Christ, apart from, without, and before any further acts of obedience. (Verily, we know of no religious error that is more fatal or damning in its consequences than this one!) However, James irresistibly argued that such a “faith” is dead, barren, unproductive. Obviously, a dead and unproductive “faith” cannot effect or produce anything, including salvation. Thus, for the alien sinner who seeks to be saved short of any work of any kind (thus by “faith only”), the answer to James’ question, “Can that faith save him?” is also a resounding “**No**”!

It is apparent that one aim of the Protestant creeds and preachers over the years in their cry of “no works/faith only” salvation has been the exclusion of baptism in water as a condition of forgiveness of sins. It is consistently classified by such sectarians as a “meritorious work of man” and is thus allegedly proscribed in Romans 4:4-6, Ephesians 2:8-9 and similar passages. (We have a letter in our files from a Baptist preacher in which he refers to baptism for remission of sins as a “heresy.”)

Our first response to this is to observe that this application of these “no works” passages places them in direct conflict with the several explicit statements in which baptism is said to be a condition of salvation (e. g., Mark 16:16; John 3:5; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:20-21; et al.).

Our second response is to demonstrate that baptism in water is not in the class of works which Paul excluded as “works of merit.” Paul excluded baptism from meritorious works in Titus 3:5: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.” Note that Paul first affirmed that we are not saved by our own meritorious good works. Then he affirmed that salvation is according to God’s mercy, involving two agents: (1) the washing of regeneration and (2) the renewing of the Holy Spirit.

The first of these particularly concerns our present subject. None can seriously question that the “washing of regeneration” in Titus 3:5 is a reference to baptism in water. Thus, Saul was told to be baptized and wash away his sins (Acts 22:16; cf. John 3:5; Acts 2:38; 1 Pet. 3:21). If one argues that the blood of Christ washes sins away, rather than the water of baptism, we fully agree (1 Pet. 1:18-19; Rev. 1:7; et al.). If water could wash away sins there would have been no need for the blood of Christ. However, the fact that the blood of Christ is the sin-cleansing agent does not alter the Scriptural teaching that **it is in the act of baptism in water that sins are washed away by the blood of Christ!** While the blood of Christ is the cleansing agent, baptism in water is the time/place/act in which the agent is administered.

This being so, Paul forever took baptism out of the class of human works of merit. At the same time he identified it as part of God's plan of mercy for man's salvation. How could baptism be called a meritorious work of man unless man originated it? But he did not! Not only did he not originate it as a plan to save himself; for the most part he utterly denies its necessity!

It is a command of Christ -- thus a work of God -- to which man must submit. Paul taught that in submitting to it he invests his faith in God that He will fulfill His promise of forgiveness through the blood of Christ in baptism: "Having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:12, ASV). When one is accurately taught and Scripturally baptized his faith is not in the merit of his own act that he will be saved, but he has "faith in the working of God" to forgive his sins, according to His promise to do so (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; et al.).

If faith includes believing God's Word and responding in obedience (as James demonstrated in Abraham), rather than excluding baptism, **it must include baptism!** Furthermore, it must include the understanding that salvation, justification, forgiveness of alien sins is not promised and is not received before baptism has demonstrated true faith. Of course, faith must also demonstrate itself in an oral confession of faith in Christ (Acts 8:37) and repentance of sins (Acts 2:38) before baptism, but this in no way diminishes the necessity of baptism. These works, like baptism, are necessary demonstrations of faith (acts of obedience) that precede salvation. The alien sinner is not saved by faith only, but by doing the works of obedience Christ has specified. Such works grow out of true faith and culminate in baptism in water for remission of sins.

### Conclusion

The burden of James' message in this section is manifest: Man cannot be saved on a mere profession of his faith without working the works of God -- obeying His Word, be he saint or sinner. Any faith that is claimed apart from obedient works is an idle claim and bespeaks a dead faith that cannot save.

### Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., rep. ed., 1980), 4:447.

<sup>ii</sup> Guy N. Woods, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1982), pp. 145-146.

<sup>iii</sup> Alfred F. Smith, ed., *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Nashville, TN: Publishing House Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1934), p. 21.

---

**[Note:** I wrote this MS for and I presented a digest of it orally at the 9th Annual Denton Lectures, hosted by the Pearl St. Church of Christ, Denton, TX, Nov. 10–14, 1991. I directed the lectureship and edited and published (Valid Pub., Inc.) the book of the lectures, *Studies in James*.)]