

Day 7

James 2.14-26

Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

What therefore God hath joined together let not man put asunder (Matt 19.6). If that dictum were applied to this passage of James a lot of needless theological conflict would have been avoided. Unfortunately, James has been misinterpreted as pitting faith against works, supposedly arguing that we are saved by the latter, not the former. That is not what James does. His whole point is to bind faith and works together; in his mind they are inextricably joined.

James is not in fact debating the issue of *how* one is saved at all. He has already said enough to indicate that he believes salvation is God's gracious gift (1.18, 21), given "to those who love him" (1.12). His first exhortations were about keeping steadfast faith (1.2-4; 12) and his final exhortation concerns returning to the truth and being forgiven, which will save the soul from death (5.19f.). Nowhere does he suggest that a person is saved by good works apart from faith.



No, James' concern here, as it has been since 1.19, is with the fruit which a saving faith produces. Faith which produces no fruit at all, or fruit that is evil, proves itself not to be saving faith. This is consistent with what both his elder brother (Matt 7.21-23) and John the Baptist (Matt 3.8) preached.

In today's passage his initial focus is on fruitless faith. His example is a person who claims to have faith while showing no compassion to a desperately needy brother or sister. It is not that he is unaware of their need; he is, but he addresses it in a heartless, even cynical way. Such a person's fruitless faith is "dead" says James. There are strong parallels between James' example here and Jesus' Parable of the Final Judgment (Matt 25.31ff.).

The "someone" (in v.18) into whose mouth James puts the words "You have faith and I have works" is someone representing his own position. James asserts that the one who claims faith without works can produce no evidence of his faith, whereas the person who has works can boast a faith to which his works testify. Those who have faith but no good works proceeding from it are to be congratulated, says James sarcastically, about as much as demons – who know very well who God is, and so can be said to be 'believers' too. However, their faith is hardly a saving faith.

In vv. 20-25 James appeals to the lives of two very different heroes of the faith: Abraham the Patriarch and Rahab the harlot. Both performed courageous acts which testified to their great faith. More than that, their faith was active *in* their works as the animating and motivating force. Their acts of faith, in turn, completed their faith. The two – faith and works - are thus demonstrated to be inextricably bound together: no one can be justified by one apart from the other (v.24). Faith which bears no fruit in a person's life is like a body from which the spirit has departed: it is dead.

To ponder

What works that you do testify to your faith?

To pray

Gracious heavenly Father, I thank you for the heroes and heroines of faith whose lives are recorded in the Scriptures. Help me to have the same courageous faith so that I too might do works that glorify you and minister to the needs of my brothers and sisters; in Jesus' name I pray. Amen.