

J The Book of James

Session Six:
October 26, 2004

James 2:14-26—Faith and Action v. Faith-in-Action

James 2:14-17—Round One: More Than Words

❖The Text (NRSV)

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can 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.

❖What’s going on here?

-v.14—The first question with this section is how it connects with the previous material. Although the new tone and topic seem abrupt, James gives us several cues that he is following a single train of thought. Go all the way back to 2:1 and compare it with 2:14—both have the address, “my brothers and sisters,” and both ask questions about authentic faith (in the Greek, this is even clearer, since both use the expression “to have faith,” whereas our English uses “believe” in 2:1).

James spent 2:1-13 asking whether faith that allowed partiality was really faith. Here, in 2:14-17, he broadens the question to ask whether faith that doesn’t come to expression in who we are and how we act is really faith. Faith that has no such expression is only lip service, according to James, and in this whole section, James uses the word “faith” to mean “statements of belief.” So when James asks, “Can faith save you?” (and all the Lutherans in the crowd have a knee-jerk reaction and say, “Of course!” without thinking) he means a “faith” that is only words—that is a matter of *information* only.

We should also note that James does not think that faith (true faith, as James understands it) is bad or insufficient—he calls the poor “rich in faith” (and

means it as a good thing) in 2:5, and back in 1:3, thought of faith as something so valuable it needed to go through a purification and refinement process like precious metal. James *does* think that words are not enough, but faith is more than words. The confusion comes when James uses the same word for true faith (the trust in God that shapes a person’s whole life) and the faith-in-name-only that is really only pious sentiment or statements about God.

-v.15-16—Just as with his example in 2:2-4, James illustrates his point with an example of how the Christian community treats the poor. The example demonstrates how words alone are not only impotent but reveal apathy underneath. He is almost asking, “If you say you are concerned, but don’t *act* on your concern, are you really concerned?” If this is the case, there is a disconnect, a fragmenting of what I say and what I do. And for James, this fragmenting is the opposite of the wholeness and integrity of life that God wills and intends for us. Note also that the point of this illustration is to describe what faith is like more than to command a particular work of charity.

-v.17—Following from this mini-parable, if “faith” is analogous to the empty well-wishing of the story, then “faith” by itself is dead—in fact, it’s highly questionable if it’s really faith we’re talking about here. Just as in v. 15-16 make clear that neighbor love is more than pity or awareness of need, faith is more than something I say, and it is more than information.

James 2:15-16	James 2:14, 17
-saying, “Well, I hope you find some food and clothes	-“faith” (understood as words alone or nice thoughts)
-providing food and	- “works” (faith-in-action)
James clearly seems to say that we need faith+works to be saved. But for him, that is what true faith really is—what his opponents call faith+works is what James thinks of as living faith.	

Time Out: More Than Faith Alone?

To hear James tell it, faith without works is dead; but to hear Paul tell it, faith is what justifies us and opens up new life. So which is it? Maybe we need to define the terms of faith and works as each writer uses them. We've already heard James use "faith" to refer both to a life-changing trust in God (a true faith) and to an uncommitted affirmation of propositions (a lip service kind of faith). So when James calls faith-without-works dead, he is referring to this second kind of faith in-name-only. Paul would most likely agree that the first definition is true faith and the second one is just pretending. And when Paul declares the faith justifies, he is referring to the faith that is a trust in God, not just beliefs about God, a faith which expresses itself in life.

It's also important to note the differences between Paul and James on the concept of "works," too. Paul's assertion that words of the law are not necessary to be justified before God generally refer to ritual works within Jewish law (things like circumcision, dietary laws, etc.). When James gives examples of what he means by "works," he almost always refers to showing love and compassion for another.

Finally, it is critical to understand that Paul and James are each addressing different points of Christian life—this is again a question of whether the issue is "getting in" or not. Paul, writing to new Gentile converts, is asking about how we first are put into right relationship with God, so his answers always center on God's grace in Jesus Christ given through faith (alone). James is addressing a community that understands itself already to be in this right relationship (and that God was the one to do this—see 1:18). And so James' questions and answers center on living into their identity as the people of God. Put very simply side by side with clarified terms, Paul and James are each saying:

Paul denies that pre-conversion works are necessary (in order to attain a right relationship with God).

James denies that post-conversion works are optional (since we are already in a right relationship with God).

James 2:18-20—Round Two: Show Me

❖ **The Text (NRSV)**

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?

❖ **What's going on here?**

-v.18-20—In these verses, James employs *diatribe*, a debate with an imaginary opponent. James is probably drawing from real life arguments he has heard. Chances are very likely that James is familiar with the writings (or at least the basic theology) of Paul and is writing against people who have good astray from Paul's own teaching. (They have probably taken Paul's teaching about being justified by faith alone and interpreted "faith" as a list of statements I believe about God.)

One of the challenges of this passage is knowing where the imaginary opponent's speech stops and where James' response begins. (Remember, the original Greek doesn't have quotations marks or other punctuation.) Our NRSV translation thinks the opponent stops with "You have faith and I have works." The rest, then, is James' response. Others suggest that James' response doesn't begin until 2:20. In this case, the opponent would be trying to get James to admit that faith can be separated from works, something James thinks is not possible.

Either way, James' point, contrary to that of his opponent, is that true faith is inseparable from its expression in our life and action—in our works. In fact, anything that can be separated from a person's way of life is not real faith. The demons are given as an example (whether by James or by an opponent, the

idea of the argument is about the same): clearly, the demons believe the fact that there is one God, and yet even more clearly, they are opposed to God's will and Reign. Whatever the demons have (and James doesn't call it faith), it is not sufficient to be saved, to be pleasing to God, or to be a part of God's Reign. For James, if your *belief* still allows you to trust in yourself rather than God, your belief is not *faith*. For that matter, if you claim to believe in God but can compartmentalize that belief so that it never affects

Connections: Believing About and Believing In

- What is the difference between saying, "I believe that God exists" and "I believe in God"? Are they the same? Do you need one to say the other? Does your faith in God matter in your life—how?
- How do James' words about faith and works make you feel? Why do they affect you as they do?
- If someone asked you to show your faith apart from doing something, how would you respond?

how you live and no one ever knows it, that belief is not the faith that marks the firstfruit people of God.

❖ A Case Study in Faith that Acts

As we think about the connection between things we believe *about* God and what it means to believe *in* God, a contemporary example might be helpful. The following statements come from the website of cigarette manufacturer Philip Morris:

Philip Morris USA agrees with the overwhelming medical and scientific consensus that cigarette smoking is addictive. It can be very difficult to quit smoking, but this should not deter smokers who want to quit from trying to do so.

And here's another quotation, also from the Philip Morris website:

Philip Morris USA (PM USA) agrees with the overwhelming medical and scientific consensus that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema and other serious diseases in smokers. Smokers are far more likely to develop serious diseases, like lung cancer, than non-smokers. There is no safe cigarette.

The point of examining these warnings in the context of Bible study is not to condemn you if you are a smoker, but rather to examine the connection—or disconnection—that occurs between what we believe and what we do. Knowing from whom these statements come, what does this say to you about belief and action? Is faith simply a matter of having correct factual information about something? Is faith more than that? What is the connection between believing and acting here? What would James say about the disconnect between stated belief and actual practice here in the Phillip Morris website? What does this suggest about the nature of real faith?

❖ Space for your own thoughts and notes...