



Faith and Works in James 2:14-26

Does this passage from James teach that works are a necessary component for salvation? Many would answer that James is not saying works are a necessary *requirement* for salvation, but a necessary *result* of salvation. Others object that this still makes salvation contingent upon works. How can this passage be reconciled to salvation by grace through faith alone as Paul teaches in Romans 3-5 and Ephesians 2? Some observations follow:

1. There is every indication that the readers were Christians. They were born from above (1:18), possessed faith in Christ (2:1), and called brethren (1:2, 19; 2:1, 14; 3:1; 4:11; 5:7,10, 12, 19).

2. The hypothetical “someone” in 2:14 is identified as “one of you” in 2:16. James assumes there may be individuals among his Christian readers who can have faith without works.

3. The context is bracketed by the theme of judgment (2:13; 3:1). The only judgment of Christians is the judgment seat of Christ, which is based on the believer’s works or lack of works (1 Cor. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:10). This fits James’s concern exactly.

4. The word “saved” is often used of Christians who are delivered from some undesirable fate (1 Cor. 5:5). James uses this word of a Christian’s possible fate in 1:21, 5:15, and 5:20. It is used in 2:14-26 to refer to a Christian delivered from an undesirable fate at the judgment seat of Christ such as having his works burned (1 Cor. 3:12-15) and losing his reward (2 John 7-8). Thus the profit James speaks of is not salvation, but advantages accrued in this life and the next.

5. James is not concerned with the *reality* of his readers’ faith, but the *quality* (1:3, 6; 2:1; 5:15) and *usefulness* (1:12, 26; 2:14, 16, 20 [NASB]) of their faith. James is not saying faith will manifest itself in works, but that without works faith is useless or unprofitable in this life and the next. James’ main concern is that his readers become “doers of the word” (1:22) which is the same as being a “doer of the work” who will “be blessed in what he does” (1:25). For example, faith that perseveres in trials earns a reward from God (1:3-12); and faith that is merciful to others receives God’s mercy at the judgment seat of Christ (2:8-13). But faith that does not work is “useless” towards these blessings and “useless” in helping others (1:26; 2:20 in some versions). The word “dead” should therefore be understood as *useless* or *unprofitable* rather than *non-existent*.

6. In 2:19 the faith of demons also shows the uselessness of faith without works. Their faith could not save them anyway, because it is only a faith in monotheism, not Jesus Christ. The point of their mention is that because they *only* tremble, they do not do any good works to alleviate a fearful judgment. Their faith is useless to them.

7. Many recognize that when James speaks of being “justified by works” (2:21, 24, 25) he is not speaking of the imputed justification which saves us eternally as Paul uses the term (Rom. 3:24; 4:5). This would be a contradiction in the Bible. James is speaking of a *vindication* before others. Paul even recognizes this use of the word “justify” in Romans 4:2. There are two kinds of justification in the Bible. One concerns practical righteousness that vindicates us before people. The other concerns judicial righteousness that vindicates us before God. James obviously uses the practical sense because

continued on back



Abraham was judicially justified in Genesis 15:6 (2:23) before he offered Isaac in Genesis 22 (2:21). His vindication by others is seen when they call him “the friend of God” (2:23). Thus Abraham’s faith was “made perfect” or mature by this demonstration of his faith (2:22).

8. In 2:26 James is not saying that *faith invigorates works*, but that *works invigorates faith*. It is works which makes faith useful, just as the spirit makes the body useful. The issue is not whether faith exists in a person, but how faith becomes profitable or useful to a Christian.

Conclusion

This passage in James is written to Christians to encourage them to do good works which will make their faith mature and profitable to them and to others. There is no contradiction between James and Paul. When Paul speaks of justification through faith alone, he is speaking of judicial righteousness before God. When James speaks of justification by a faith that works, he is speaking of a practical righteousness displayed before other people. In Romans 3-5, Paul is discussing how to obtain a new life in Christ. In James, James is discussing how to make that new life profitable.

If this passage is taken to mean that one must demonstrate a “real” salvation through works, then works unavoidably becomes necessary for salvation—a contradiction of Ephesians 2:8-9. Also, there are no criteria mentioned for exactly what kind or how much work verifies salvation. This opens the door to subjectivism and undermines the objective basis of assurance—the promise of God’s Word that all who believe in Christ’s work will be saved.