
Prayers

To God

Pray to the Lord Your God for strength for Life's journey. Praise Him for all He has done for you in the past and look forward to the future.

For myself

Weekly theme: doubts

Lord God Almighty, You are the Judge of all and You know the depths of our hearts and You shine light on our inner selves. You know where there are doubts in my life, doubts about various parts of Your Word, worries about whether the church is truly Yours, concerns about what is preached, and doubts about my own faith and the faith of others. Deal gently with me, Lord God, and confront my doubts with Your love, Your peace, Your healing, and Your assurance of full grace. I praise You, Lord God for Your love! **Hallelujah!**

For others

Listen to the news on the radio or look at it on the internet. Pray for the items that are drawn to your attention.

Meditation

I worship the Lord with all my heart.

I do so because I wish to; I have decided to;

I set myself towards my God and will not be distracted.

My heart is fixed on Christ alone.

I worship the Lord with all my soul.

I yield all things to Him; I offer myself unreservedly;

I rejoice at heaven's touch and submit to God's mandate.

All I am belongs to Christ alone.

I worship the Lord with all my mind.

I pay attention to His will; I want to follow Him;

I listen to God's eternal Word and pursue my lifelong quest.

My inner being is known by Christ alone.

I worship the Lord with all my strength,

I love the Body of Christ; I will be faithful forever;

I strenuously pursue my call to love and care for others.

This faith in Christ will never be shaken!

Bible Passage

James 2:20-26

²⁰ You idiot! Do you want proof that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹ Wasn't our ancestor Abraham made right with God through deeds when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You can see that his faith and deeds were working together, and faith was completed by what he did. ²³ The scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend.

²⁴ You see that a person is put right with God as a consequence of deeds and not because of faith by itself. ²⁵ Here is another example; was Rahab the prostitute not also put right with God because of her deed in welcoming the messengers and sending them out by another road? ²⁶ For just as the body is dead without the spirit, so faith is dead unless it is put into action.

Review

Here is the most contentious of passages in James. If we read verse 24 without having taken in the very clear doctrine of salvation by grace just confirmed by James in the previous verses (see yesterday's study), we are likely to misunderstand him completely. In this way, Martin Luther famously rejected what James wrote and proclaimed the letter an 'epistle of straw'! This only goes to show that a great saint can still be someone who misunderstands God's Word, and we should not imagine that we can play about with Scripture with such freedom!

We must emphasise that James' point is not to change the basic Christian doctrine of salvation by faith in the grace of Christ alone. It is to make the point that such a faith is fundamentally something that is demonstrated in the true believer, and the demonstration of this faith is the proof of it. By saying '*do you want proof that faith apart from works is useless?*' (2:20), James is not trying to say that you are saved by what you do. He is making the point that if someone claims to have faith but this does not show itself in practical, real life, then it is probably not faith at all.

We will get a better picture if before moving on, we go back to the example James gives in chapter 2 of the man who fawned over the rich when showing them to their places (2:1-7). If this man were to refuse to listen to James' rebuke claiming that he was a man of faith and did not need to be reproved, then something was very wrong with his faith. Someone who claimed salvation but who cheerily did the very opposite of the teaching of Jesus without repentance could hardly, in all sincerity, claim to be saved by His blood!

As James now continues, it is this concern that is uppermost in his mind. He gives examples of faith in action from the Old Testament, from the life of Abraham and from the ancient story of the occupation of Canaan by Israel and the fall of Jericho.

To begin with, James refers back to one of the foremost stories of Genesis, '*wasn't our ancestor Abraham made right with God through deeds when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?*' (2:21). The story of Abraham is recognised by Jews and Christians as fundamental to the relationship between God and His people, so it is good that we are directed by James to

this story. But as so often in the Bible, reference to one part of a story brings to mind the rest of the story as it is found in the Bible.

According to Genesis, at the beginning of the story of Abraham, God is recorded as granting 'righteousness' to Abraham on account of His faith; '*Abraham believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness*' (Genesis 15:6). This famous incident is quoted by Paul in Romans 4, where he argues that faith is more basic to our relationship with God than obedience to the Law, given centuries later, to Moses. Why then does James turn elsewhere in Abraham's story to speak of similar things, and then tell us that Abraham was justified by his 'almost sacrifice' of Isaac on mount Moriah (Genesis 22:2)?

Those who have read through the famous stories of Abraham in Genesis 12-22, will realise that this is a long story that describes a journey of faith that cannot be summed up in one quote. The faith of Abraham had to be tested in all manner of life experiences before God was certain that it was complete. James is right in saying that it was only when Abraham demonstrated his faith by being willing to sacrifice his son, that God was eventually able to do what He wanted through this great man, and to make him into the 'father of many nations' through his son Isaac and his many descendants (Genesis 22:14f.). Before this Abraham experienced constant testing by God, but after this, the covenant of God was fulfilled through him, and the great story of God's relationship with people on earth moved on. In other words, Abraham was a man of faith not just because God was gracious to him, which he undoubtedly was, he was a man of faith because although he did not always obey God, he was eventually obediently in doing what God required of him concerning his son (Genesis 22). Now this was the proof of faith, evidenced to this day through the fact of the existence the people of Israel, Isaac's children through Jacob.

James' point is the same in his use of the story of Rahab the prostitute, from Joshua 2 and 6, though this is undoubtedly more controversial than the story of Abraham. If you read the whole of Joshua 2, you will read the story of Rahab's hiding the spies sent into Canaan by Joshua. These men were on a clandestine exploratory trip in the Promised Land, which was ultimately successful when Joshua led the Israelites in battle against the formidable city of Jericho (Joshua 6). Clearly, Rahab helped the spies and won for herself the favour of being saved from the city when the Israelites invaded (2:12f., 6:17f.); such deeds were crucial to Israel's success, but was this the proof of faith?

In the first century AD, Rahab was indeed celebrated as one of the ancient people who though not Israelite, were 'God-fearers'. That is, they were Gentiles who believed in God and worshipped Him alongside the people of Israel. We do not make much of Rahab today, but she was a notable character from history for the people of the early church (Matt 1:5, Hebrews 11:31), and we must remember this when interpreting James' letter. For him, Rahab's faith came from her being a God-fearer, and the proof of her faith came in her deeds to help God's covenant people take possession of God's promises. James' point is therefore understandable; '*just as the body is dead without the spirit, so faith is dead unless it is put into action*' (2:26). Rahab's practical faith was an essential ingredient to the story of Israel's 'Promised Land'.

With all this in mind, we must therefore read verse 24 with caution, and not in isolation from all James says here in chapter 2. I have already outlined James' doctrine here, which is not that people are saved by works and not by faith, rather, that they are saved by means of genuine faith that is put into action. Surely this is not something we should argue about, but rather something to be done in our lives. It is only by following our Lord's instructions to preach and baptise, for example, that we can deliver God's Kingdom!

Discipleship

Application

Disputing faith and works

Disputes in the church over the issues of 'faith and works' have often occurred because Christian leaders have not thoroughly examined and studied the Bible, and do not understand the relatively simple points made in the study above. One of my reasons for writing as I do is to try and make these things clear. There is no need for Christians to be divided over this issue of 'works' and 'faith'.

Problems with practical Christianity

It is undoubtedly true that the famous evangelist, John Wesley, spent the early part of his life working as hard as humanly possible to win God's favour, before discovering that this was not the way to find his salvation. His consequent preaching of salvation by faith alone, something that he picked up from German connections tracing back to Luther (and beyond), cemented this doctrine in the life of evangelical Methodism and Anglicanism in the eighteenth century AD.

It had become necessary to emphasise this preaching because too much religion had deteriorated into a system of 'doing things' such as going to church and saying prayers. However, a detailed examination of Wesley's works reveals that he was a man of practical faith and preached this. He was not someone who cast aside the wisdom of James in his letter (as Luther did). He is a substantial example of someone who demonstrated his faith in every aspect of his life, and James would have understood this. If we want to be God's people today, then we should remember that faith must be shown through what we do.

Ideas for what to do

- Take a look at your daily life. In what ways do your deeds demonstrate your faith? Over the course of a week, try to make a list of the things you do as a consequence of your faith. You may find this task impossibly difficult or far too easy, but it is worth doing.
- Pray for the church, divided as it is in so many ways. Pray that God's people will find the unity that He longs them to have in Him.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. The passage also mentions the example of Rahab the prostitute (Josh 2:1f, 6:17f). Look up this character and assess whether she helps James' point.
2. What does the life of Abraham say to you about faith (see Genesis chapters 15 and 21)
3. What things happen today which make you doubt people's faith? In the light of this passage, why?

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, You alone know when You will come again in glory and bring all this world's suffering to an end. Strengthen Your people who live through troubled times today, and save them, we pray, from the Evil One. In the midst of this troubled world, make Your people one in You; AMEN