

Can that faith save Him? – The final line of our verse is constructed so as to expect a “no” answer: “That kind of faith cannot save anyone, can it?”¹ The point is that faith without works is not saving faith at all. It is merely “religion” without the very substance of God’s saving grace in Yeshua.

15–16 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?

Here James gives us a good analogy of what he taught us in the previous verse about someone who “says” he has faith but his life (words and actions) shows no evidence to support his words. He sets forth the analogy by using “brother or sister,” which sets the story within the context of the gathered, believing community. This does not limit it to the believing community, but makes the point all that more clear. For such a brother or sister is “without clothing” (γυμνός, *gumnos*), which can carry the sense of “inadequately clothed” but most often is used in the Apostolic Scriptures to denote “naked” or “uncovered.” James thus uses a “worst-case scenario” to emphasize his point.

Seeing a fellow believer in such dire straights calls for action, not simply words. For when one says to such a person, “Goodbye, I hope you have a good day” and turns away, that person’s words are not only worthless, but even worse. They indicate a total rejection of the person who is impoverished and no doubt of low social standing.

Then James uses exactly the same phrase as he did in the opening of v. 14, “what use is that?” τί τὸ ὄφελος (*ti to ophelos*). In other words, such “niceties” are worthless because they do nothing to aid the person who is in need. Once again, if the one who professes “faith” in God is supposed to emulate God’s ways, then does he realize that God demonstrated His love by giving His own Son, Yeshua? The one who has faith without works does not at all understand or accept what God Himself has revealed about the salvation He has accomplished in Yeshua.

Here, once again, the Scriptures also teach us that God is concerned with the physical needs of mankind, thus considering the physical or material aspects of life as having high importance. This is in direct opposition to the gnostic heresy which considered the physical world to

1 See Chris A. Vlachos, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: James* (B & H Pub., 2013), p. 87. The use of the Greek negative μή gives this sense.

be endowed with evil and therefore to be shunned. On the contrary, God created the physical world and stated that it was good. The material world, when utilized to honor God by using material things in accordance with His revealed righteousness, is sanctified and therefore of true value.

17 – Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

In the Greek, the word “faith” (ἡ πίστις, *hē pistis*) is with the definite article “the,” which points back to the previous verses, and therefore should be understood as “that kind of faith” referred to in the previous context. In fact, as the previous verses make clear, merely professing to have faith, i.e., to be a “believer” or a “Christian,” but having no evidence of a life given over to obeying God, is not true faith at all.

This is made amply clear by James when he writes “if it has no works, is dead.” The profession of faith, therefore, if it is not accompanied by a life lived out in accordance with God’s word, is not faith at all, but mere words that seek to convince others of something that has no reality. True faith is the result of being born from above so that the believer becomes a new creation, all of which is evident by one’s thoughts, words, and actions.

Therefore if anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. (2Cor 5:17)

Even as breath is a sure sign that a person is living, so progressing in living a life that pleases God by obeying Him is the very “breath” of saving faith. All too often, people have come to the erroneous conclusion that “membership” in a “religious” group or movement is the sum and substance of being accepted by God and being granted eternal life. But “faith that is dead” is one’s words unmatched by one’s life, and this means it is not faith as God defines it and is therefore useless.

James refers to such mere professions of faith as “being by itself,” (*καθ’ ἑαυτήν, kath’ heautēn*). The sense of the phrase is “according to itself” or “considered alone,” that is, without concomitant works. Referring to a mere “profession of faith,” Mayor notes:

...the absence of fruit shows that it is not merely outwardly inoperative but inwardly dead.¹

¹ Joseph B. Mayor, *Ephesians*, p. 95.

18 – But someone may well say, “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”¹

James now introduces an illustration of someone who would argue that James is wrong in his categorical statement that “faith without works is dead.” The interlocutor confronts James by stating that he has truth faith without works, apparently simply by stating “I believe” or “I have faith.” The one who disagrees with James is not denying that someone might show their faith by their works, but what he is affirming is that concomitant works with faith is not absolutely necessary—one can have genuine faith without works.

But James responds by requiring “show me,” which in itself obliterates the argument of his interlocutor, for the whole point James is making is that genuine faith is always “seen,” that is, accompanied by life actions and words that align with what God deems as “righteous” and therefore “good.” His opponent, however, affirms that he has faith without needing to make it “seen.” This would be like someone who boast that he is able to play a musical instrument. After making such a statement, those who have heard his claim ask him to pick up the musical instrument and “give us a tune!” His response is: “No, I don’t need to play the instrument to prove I’m able to do so. My words ought to be sufficient evidence of my expertise.” Someone might quip: “If you really can play it, then show us.”

This is James’ main point in this passage of his epistle. True saving faith, itself being the gift of God’s grace, is always accompanied by a life that is transformed more and more to live and act in a way that honors God and conforms to the very likeness of Yeshua Himself. This is precisely what Paul emphasizes in his Epistle to the Romans.

Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Messiah was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:4)

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He

1 For the textual variants on this verse, see Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd edition (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), p. 609.

also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.
(Rom 8:29–30)

In this “unbreakable chain” of theological truths, Paul makes it clear that all those whom God “foreknows” inevitably are “glorified” and none are lost. This means that all those whom God “foreknew” are destined to become conformed to the very image of God’s Son, Yeshua. And this is precisely James’ point: true saving faith will always be evidenced by a life that is transformed by God’s grace, applied by the intercessory work of Yeshua through His Spirit, bringing the child of God to be more and more marked by living in accordance with God’s will. This is accomplished through the ongoing application of the Scriptures, regular prayer, and life-interaction with other believers.

19 – You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

James now gives us a perfect illustration of what was apparently happening in his day, and continues to be the case even to our present times. This is someone who would openly confess that God exists and think that such a confession is all that is necessary to be guaranteed to “obtain heaven” and “escape hell.” It is the person who raises their hand at an evangelistic meeting and is told they are now “saved forever,” but who has not inwardly exercised true repentance and faith.

James states that the person believes “God is one.” The Greek (εἷς ἔστιν ὁ θεός) could be understood as referencing the *Shema* (Deut 6:4–5), “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!”, a basic confession of historical Judaism including the followers of Yeshua, for Yeshua quotes this text to define what is the most important commandment of the Torah (cf. Mk 12:29–30).

The point that James is making seems obvious: people can regularly go to the local Synagogue and invoke the *Shema* and in so doing, think that this places them in favor with God as those who are eternally His and who therefore will be blessed and saved by His great power. But James shows the utter weakness of this by stating that even the demons know there is one God, the God of Israel, and they tremble. But most assuredly the demons have not submitted themselves to God in faith!

When speaking of the demons trembling in their knowledge that there is one God, James may well be referencing the events recorded in the Gospels when Yeshua came into the “country of the Gadarenes” and cast demons out of two demon-possessed men, sending them into

a herd of swine.¹ Or when Yeshua cast out demons from the man in the Capernaum Synagogue.² Here is yet another example of how the Apostolic Scriptures affirm the divine nature of Yeshua, for they trembled at being confronted by Yeshua and had no power against Him. Or to put it another way, how do we know that the “demons also believe, and shudder”? Because they trembled and were banished by the command of Yeshua who is Himself God in the flesh.

20–21 But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?

Once again, James reiterates his primary point, that “faith without works is dead,” though here he substitutes “useless” (*ἀργός*, *argos*), a word that carries the sense of “idle, lazy, unproductive, useless, worthless.”³ And he addresses his words to the “foolish fellow” who has been the one whom James has set forth in his explanatory “interchange” with an opponent who disagrees with James’ primary emphasis that true faith and works always go together. The one who thinks they can have true faith without demonstrating that faith by their life is foolish indeed, for they have entirely neglected the clear teaching of the Scriptures. And it is to Abraham that James turns as proof.

It is in this verse (v. 21) that the statement of James has been misunderstood and taken out of context, so much so that Luther himself considered the Epistle of James to not have been written by an apostle and as not worthy to be considered Scripture. Luther wrote regarding the epistle of James:

But to state my own opinion about it . . . I consider that it is not the writing of any apostle. My reasons are as follows. First: Flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture, it ascribes righteousness to works...⁴

St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to the others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.⁵

1 Cf. Matt 8:28ff; Mark 5:2ff.

2 Cf. Mk 1:21ff; Lk 4:31ff.

3 *BDAG*, “*ἀργός*,” p. 128.

4 *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), p. 362.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 397.

But what Luther and others missed in James' claim that "Was not Abraham our father justified by works" is that he is referring to Abraham being "justified" in the sight of men, not God. For the Scriptures are clear that Abraham was justified before God, i.e., declared "not guilty" on the basis of his faith in the promised redeemer Who would pay the penalty of sin for all whom He would redeem. James will use Gen 15:6 in v. 23 as the very foundation for his statement that Abraham was justified by works.

Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. :וְהֵאֱמַן בַּיהוָה וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה: (Gen 15:6)

The primary issue in understanding the importance of this text is to discover to what the word "it" refers in the phrase "and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." The Hebrew is very clear in providing an answer, for the verb חָשַׁב, "to account, reckon" has a feminine singular objective pronoun attached: וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ, *vayachsheveha*, and it is this pronoun that is translated "it" in our English bibles. Without getting too involved in Hebrew grammar, the important point to make is that the gender of a pronoun must match that to which it refers. In this Genesis text, the closest antecedent is the obvious noun "faith" as indicated by the verb "he believed." The word "faith" in Hebrew, אֱמוּנָה (*emunah*) is feminine in gender. Thus, the Hebrew is clear that what was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness was his faith in the coming Promised One, Yeshua.

To properly interpret the statement of James, that "Abraham our father was justified by faith," one must do so within the context in which he states this. And what is the context? That a person who has been given true, saving faith will evidence this by living in obedience to God and His revealed will. Thus, when James states that "Abraham...was justified by works," he is not referring to gaining right-standing before God, but rather as demonstrating his true faith by obeying God in the most difficult of requirements, the willingness to even offer Isaac as a sacrifice as God commanded. By his willingness to do so he demonstrated to those people who knew him that his faith was real. In short, he proved to the people of his family and community that he was a man of faith, that is, he "justified" his faith in God to them by obeying Him even when to do so required more than what any father could be expected to give. The writer to the Hebrews gives us an added insight into the genuine nature of Abraham's faith when he writes:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, “IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED.” He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type. (Heb 11:17–19)

What gave Abraham strength to carry out this most difficult commandment given to him was his faith in God, that He is able to overcome death by the power of resurrection and that He would do so because God is holy and always keeps His promises.

22–23 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,” and he was called the friend of God.

Now James applies the illustration to his main thesis, that genuine faith always produces works of righteousness. But notice how he pairs faith and works in this text. He states: “faith was working [together] with his works” (ἡ πίστις συνήργει τοῖς ἔργοις αὐτοῦ). The Greek *συνεργέω* (*sunergeō*) carries the sense of “to engage in cooperative endeavor, work together with, assist, help.”¹ James’ meaning is obvious: by faith the child of God desires to obey and honor Him, and the more such works characterize the believer, the more he or she is able to obey the Lord, for a life of obedience creates spiritual strength by which the flesh is more and more overcome and submission to God becomes the common pattern.

...*faith was perfected* – This is what James means when he teaches us that “faith was perfected” in Abraham. The word “perfected” (τελειόω, *teleiōō*) pictures “bringing something to its goal,” or “realizing an expected accomplishment.”² Abraham grew in faith through obeying God, even in the most difficult of situations. Thus, James is teaching us here that genuine, saving faith grows stronger through the exercise of obedience to God. Manton puts it this way:

...faith working together with obedience is made perfect—that is, bettered and improved, just as our inner vigor is improved by physical exercise. In short, works do not complete

1 BDAG, “συνεργέω,” p. 969.

2 Ibid., “τελειόω,” p. 996.

faith by communicating their perfection to it but by stirring its own vigor.¹

...and he was called the friend of God. – Here, once again, James gives us a clear explanation of what he means when he writes that “Abraham our father was justified by works.” He was justified in the eyes of those who witnessed his faith and not only those who were in his own generation. For it must have become a common thing to refer to Abraham as “the friend of God,” since it was not until Isaiah gave his prophecy and the historian penned 2Chronicles that the phrase “the friend of God” became forever established as the statement of Scripture.

But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham My friend, you whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its remotest parts and said to you, ‘You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you. (Is 41:8–9)

Did You not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel and give it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever? (2Chr 20:7)

24 – You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

That Abraham would be called “the friend of God” labels him as a man of true faith. That this epitaph became eternally embedded in Scripture demonstrates the very lesson James is teaching: Abraham’s faith was justified or seen as genuine by his righteous works, that is, obeying God even in the most difficult of situations. God looks at the heart and knows those who stand justified, declared righteous, by faith in Yeshua. Man sees one’s works, and only works of righteousness are the inevitable fruit of faith.

James is simply reiterating what Yeshua Himself taught:

So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. (Matt 7:17–20)

¹ Manton, *James*, p. 254.