

# **LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for August 9: Show me your faith**

July 28, 2009

Faith, like love, is an invisible reality expressed and recognized in words, body language and action. Understanding this truth is not complicated. The difficulty is the falseness, deceit and pretension discovered or suspected in uncovering true faith or true love (Acts 5:1-11). Both faith and love are handily subverted by selfishness. Hypocrisy, pride and apathy are three huge temptations to the Christian, three fingers of the ugly hand of selfishness.

Do you know how much faith you have? Can you know how much, if any, faith your friends have by observing their good works?

Why is it that Christians do not understand that each believer is a working minister? If they do understand, why is there not more work? Is the lack of understanding the fault of the Holy Spirit for not inspiring, teaching or convicting; the fault of the pastor for not expecting more or being a proper example; the fault of the individual because of hardness of heart; the fault of Baptist theology or all of the above?

Has the church looked so inward that loving one's neighbor is nothing more than ministering to a needful church friend? Does the church seriously consider ministry a responsibility or even better an opportunity? Are Christians in the pew convinced that ministry is only a corporate expression of the church rather than an individual response to human need? Are Christians so busy going to church that encounters with human needs are minimized? Have Christians substituted prayer and giving for hands-on

involvement? The church that does not risk to minister is at risk of irrelevancy and death. Faith is what it does.

### **Faith without deeds (James 2:14-17)**

James continues to address the church family, calling his readers “my brothers” (v. 14). He explains and clarifies the nature of a faith that saves from the perspective of practical Christian living. This sermon or teaching could occur any Sunday in every church across our land.

Beginning with two questions, “What good is it ... if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” (v. 14), James illustrated and gave the answer as: “No, deedless faith is dead!” (vv. 17, 26). Tackling this extremely urgent issue, James builds his case.

In the best interest of discussion, comprehending definitions adds integrity to the learning process. “Faith” denotes trust, belief, reliance and commitment. Faith expresses faithfulness in the absolute and in loyalty in service to God. Faith is a permanent trust in God with reliability in obedience and guaranteed service.

“Dead” means useless and without value, commonly used to refer to a dead body and the dead in hades or heaven (Matthew 10:8; 1 Corinthians 15:35; Revelation 20:13), but also to inanimate things, such as faith (v. 26).

It is the opposite of living and used for the deadness of the heart; for example, the prodigal son was dead and came to life again (Luke 15:24), the church at Sardis was dead (Revelation 3:1), and the pre-Christian life is described as dead (Colossians 2:13; Ephesians 2:1-2). Faith that is dead is useless because it is lifeless and unresponsive to God. Faith by its nature can be either alive unto God or dead unto God.

Using a familiar and hypothetical analogy, a someone within the fellowship of the church who is “without clothes and daily food,” is turned away and

refused help. The illustration is directly related to an individual that declares himself a person of faith, who sees this need but, without love, turns the needy away even though he has the means of responding. He dismisses these fellow church members with a blessing that, perhaps, some other brother or God will do them well. His words betrayed his so-called faith and did nothing to benefit the destitute.

The genuine gift of salvation merges faith with sacrificial love, informed and guided by the Holy Spirit, which acts with compassion. A person who will not respond with compassion is a liar and true faith is not in him. Faith expressed with words devoid of action is worthless, dead and indicative of the consequence of ultimate separation to eternal death (For further study of the same conclusion by Jesus, see Matthew 25:31-46, especially verses 44-46).

Faith, by its very inherent nature, will produce good works. Works and faith are so related that faith that transforms exhibits the life of Christ by the way we serve others. Good works authenticate faith for faith is energetic in good works and not apathetic to human needs.

### **Deeds without faith (James 2:18-20)**

James is saying that a faith without works is not a saving faith. James sharpens his pen to consider the other position, through a dialogue with an imagined objector, that a person with works is not necessarily saved. This thoughtful dialogue expressed as “you have faith; I have deeds,” makes it very clear that James did not believe in a works salvation.

The argument, or dialogue, “you have faith; I have deeds” is about how one proves he has faith. The person who says he has faith has no proof of that faith except through his works. James challenges the objector to show his faith without deeds while James shows his faith by what he does (James 2:18). A dead faith will produce no works. Words of faith, too, must have

action to be credible. Works or deeds are the only possible visible way to prove one has authentic faith. Faith without deeds is dead and deeds, without faith, brings death.

James punctuates his argument with a strong conclusion: “You say that you believe (have faith) in ‘one God.’ What you have is not faith but knowledge.” Acknowledging the existence of God is not the same as a faith commitment to receive and yield to God. Knowledge of God, as helpful as it is, does not transform while faith in God does transform and redeem. The devil also believes in “one God” and trembles in fear. Those who are without works, should tremble and shudder like the devil.

One can verbalize the creed, “God is One,” as written in the Jewish Shema, but faith is more than words. The confession that “God is One,” is good but authentic faith, more than a creed, confesses the Christ is both Savior and Lord and goes to work.

### **Examples of faith that works (James 2:21-26)**

James turns to two biblical examples from the Old Testament of his understanding of faith: Abraham and Rahab, a patriarch and a prostitute. The use of the Old Testament suggests the readers had familiarity and knowledge of these examples and he proceeds to point out how invisible faith is demonstrated with obedience and visible deeds. Characterizing his opposition, he says, “You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?”

Abraham (vv. 21-24), the father of all by faith (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:11, Galatians 3:15-18), is the preeminent example. The one dominant theme of Abraham’s life is his faith in God. His faith was not abstract but observed and embodied in the difficult human struggle with hardship and doubt. Hearing the call of God to leave his homeland to establish a nation whose numbers would be like the sand of the seashore, he packed up and left,

being obedient to the voice of God.

He was faithful and obedient though the promise given to him was not fulfilled in his lifetime. It was not until Abraham's old age that Isaac, the miracle son of promise, was born from old Sarah's womb that had been barren. Abraham's faith was tested when he heard the voice of God asking that he sacrifice Isaac, his only son of the covenant, on a mountain in Moriah. In faithful obedience, Abraham responded and found God was faithful to him, providing a ram for the sacrifice rather than Isaac. The seed of God's mission to bring forth Christ began in the faithful heart of Abraham.

James has two summary statements from this illustration of Abraham. First, "You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did" (v. 22). Faith initiated Abraham's obedience and his obedience completed his faith. A merger or synergy of faith and works is a complete faith, a genuine faith. Faith saves, but works grow out of faith, spring forth from faith and are initiated by faith.

Second, "You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." Abraham's righteousness was because of his faith (James 2:23, Genesis 15:6). God looked at Abraham's heart and justified him because of his authentic faith. His righteous faith was demonstrated by his obedient life, having a faith that works.

The second example is Rahab, an extreme contrast to Abraham. She was a Gentile woman, a professional harlot who lived in Jericho. Rabbinic tradition describes her as one of the four most beautiful women in the world and an ancestor of eight prophets including Jeremiah.

Chosen specifically because of her sordid life, lower social standing, immoral lifestyle and different ethnic origin, James validated the transforming nature of faith that works. If faith can work in and through Rahab, it can work in anyone's life. Joshua 2:11 (see also, Hebrews 11:31)

testifies of her faith in God. Believing God and God's mission of Israel, she hid the spies who came to assess the city, asking for a promise that she and her family would not be destroyed. Before Joshua burned the city of Jericho, he had Rahab and her family removed.

The final proposition regarding this matter brings closure: "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (v. 26). Comparing the spirit with deeds, deeds indicate the life in faith, giving energy and vitality to faith, proving what it is.

## **Conclusion**

Controversy is no stranger to this passage and many scholars have written to reconcile Paul and James on the matter of the character of redeeming faith. The controversy is helpful in the discussion but a non-issue. For Paul, salvation is by grace through faith alone for good works (Romans 3:28; Ephesians 2:10, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"). For James, salvation is by grace through faith alone that produces good deeds.

We should be careful in our judgment. How can another person know for certain, beyond a shadow of doubt, whether another person is saved or lost? God is the only adequate judge for such a determination.

Affirming and understanding the statement, "Faith without works is dead," as a principle of the Christian life does not settle all of the issues. It may be there never was a saving faith to produce good deeds. On the other hand, it may be the faith that saves has been discouraged by despair, immaturity, stress, mental impairment, burnout, disappointments, unanswered prayer, unrealistic expectations, failures and other very human issues.

I have seen some wonderful mild-mannered, meek Christians overwhelmed by the petty angry criticism and distasteful hypocrisy of others that they have quit their ministry posts in tears. Maybe they had no faith to start

with, but maybe they became exasperated with the way they were treated by their colleagues. Not everyone who says they have faith is saved and not everyone who does good deeds will be saved.

Such reason does not negate the principle that "Faith without works is dead." Failure to respond to those naked and hungry, may cancel the glow of faith that hope has sparked God but is turned away by the loveless response.

James was with Jesus at the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 in John 9. Perhaps he absorbed the teaching of Jesus when he was asked, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 9:26-29).