

WANTED: FAITH ALIVE AND NOT DEAD

BY DR. JERRY VINES

By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study Series from Jerry Vines Ministries
2295 Towne Lake Parkway
Suite 116 #249
Woodstock, GA 30189

Let's Begin

Suppose you had a headache and went to the medicine cabinet to look for some relief. Among other things there you find a bottle of medicine which has a great reputation for relieving headaches. Scanning the instructions, you know precisely how much to take, when to take the medicine, and the expected results. Suppose further that you know this medicine is very good medicine; you believe the label; and, not least, you wholeheartedly accept the claim that if you took the medicine, your headache would go away.

Nevertheless, instead of taking the medicine you firmly believe would solve your painful problem, you place the bottle back on the shelf and walk away with your headache still pounding away. You do not lose your headache even though you believed everything about the medicine. This is an example of empty belief, empty faith. It is what James calls in chapter two "dead faith." A dead faith is faith which, on the surface at least, believes all the right things, but it produces no acts of love in the Biblical sense. Contrarily, James insists on a working faith, a faith that breathes.

A living, breathing faith bears *three particular marks* we must consider. Therefore, as we explore chapter two together, note the outline we will follow below.

- I. A Living Faith Achieves Works as well as Words (vv. 1-18)
- II. A Living Faith Affects Heart as well as Head (vv. 19-20)
- III. A Living Faith Acts Publicly as well as Privately (vv. 21-26)

I. A Living Faith Achieves Works as well as Words (vv. 1-18)

As we noted in chapter one, some attempt to interpret James' letter to be in direct conflict with many statements of the Apostle Paul. Whereas Paul makes it clear that no one may be justified in God's sight by keeping—in whole or in part—the moral law (Gal. 2:16), James appears to suggest a works-based righteousness (2:14-16). Indeed this very concern led the famed Reformation leader, Martin Luther, to dismiss James' book as "an epistle of straw."

As we shall discover, however, no basis exists for asserting James contradicts Paul. In fact, as we have already observed, James dealt with faith in the very first chapter, discussing it well before he deals with works. In addition,

James' concern hinges not on asserting a works-based righteousness apart from faith; rather he insists *genuine works presuppose a genuine faith. In other words, James is arguing that the only real faith is a living, working faith.*

James focuses on illustrating genuine faith.

Notice how James opens the second chapter, "My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?" (vv. 1-4). For the entire first half of the chapter, James focuses on illustrating genuine faith.

First, he issues a *prohibition* (v. 1). The central issue James chooses to illustrate the authenticity of our faith is favoritism. Undoubtedly, James may very well have had Proverbs 28:21 in mind, "To have respect of persons



is not good..." When Scripture speaks of favoritism, it is not speaking about the natural favoritism we would have for our children, for example. We "play favorites" with them by sending them to college. No one expects us to avoid favoritism by sending other children to college rather than our own.

Instead, James is concerned with respecting or favoring a person by considering some external glory we find in them. In short, we pay them undue attention because they are rich or politically powerful or even culturally popular, for example. The reason is simple. Not only is partiality inconsistent with "the faith," it is also inconsistent with

Christ, "the Lord of Glory." Faith in Christ is the great equalizer of all human beings. As one so well put it, "the ground is level at the foot of the cross." In the New Testament, all people are accepted. No racial superiority or socio-class prejudice is allowed. God is no respecter of persons (cp. Lev. 19:15; Rom. 2:11).

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Next, James offers a specific *illustration* by taking the reader to a typical assembly of the gathered church (vv. 2-4). Consider the imaginative scene James creates. The service is just beginning; people are still coming in; the chatter of folks fellowshiping continues. In walk two individuals. On the one hand, there is a rich man, one of the wealthiest men in the city. He is ushered to the most prominent seat in the assembly room. On the other hand, the second man is not rich at all; instead he is horribly poor. His clothes are shabby, and dark circles under his eyes betray his going days without proper food. He works but only doing odd jobs since he has no craft with which he is skilled. No one offers him their seat. The ushers ignore him. Hence, he sits either on the floor or stands in the back of the assembly hall.

James point could not be more striking. The gathered church is snobbishly committing the sin of favoritism, the very favoritism about which James is concerned. The church of Jesus Christ must not treat one type of person different from another type, whether the basis of the favoritism is wealth or the color of one's skin! Christ was the Lamb of God which took away the sin of the world. His death demonstrated loving no one race above another. Or, in James' illustration, one who possesses a "gold ring, in goodly apparel" on one hand, and "a poor man in vile raiment" on the other. Such judgment is superficial and thus is worthy of sharp criticism.

Finally, James goes on to make a specific *application* of the illustration he offers (vv. 5-13). There are *three realities* pertaining to the sin of favoritism all believers must face.

The first reality is to face the contradiction. The fact is, God has chosen the poor. In other words, He is surely not ashamed of them. The bottom line is, someone may be poor in money but rich in health, in faith, in Kingdom life. Hence, if we reject the poor in wealth, for example, we are rejecting those whom God accepts, loves, and blesses.

The second reality is to face the transgression. While some may feel it is a "little" sin to be partial and show favoritism, James is clear such behavior is decidedly

Reflection Connection

How does your church respond to the different "classes" of people who attend your church? How about different races? Is there a healthy integration within your congregation?



against God's law. Twice he asserts that favoritism breaches God's Divine command, "But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors..." For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law" (vv. 9, 11). If we break the law at even a single juncture, we become *lawbreakers*, moral criminals. In fact, failure to love a person properly is a form of murder. The "royal" law calls believers to love all men equally not partially.

The third reality is to face the examination. According to Scripture, Christians are going to be examined by the Word of God at the judgment seat of Christ. The way we treat other people will be scrutinized by the Word as the standard. While partiality makes one a prisoner, love breaks the chains of bondage and sets us free! James concludes that "mercy rejoiceth against judgment" (v. 13). The judgment seat is not something Christians should fear, but only if he or she has lived a life which manifested mercy on earth (cp. Matt. 7:2). Our treatment of others will establish the guidelines of our examination at the judgment bar of God.

James now moves to ask pointed questions pertaining to faith and works. He writes, "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?" (vv. 14-16).

Note James' question, "Can faith save him?" Here he refers to a specific *kind* of faith. A clearer translation might be, "Can that [kind of] faith save him?" Hence, James is not saying faith does not save. Rather he is saying a faith which is not a productive faith does not save. Indeed such a faith is merely a *claim*, not a reality. People claim all sorts of things but mere claims cannot be mistaken for demonstrative proof.

The absence of genuine works proves the absence of genuine faith. Given the absence of genuine works, faith becomes merely a dead belief, a dead faith. The fact is, Paul most certainly does not disagree with James (Eph. 2:8-10).

II. A Living Faith Affects Heart as well as Head (vv. 19-20)

James writes, "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?" (vv. 19-20). Not only does a living faith achieve works as well as profess words, a living faith also affects our hearts as well as our heads. Faith is an *intellectual* matter—"Thou believest that there is one God..." Confessing monotheism (that is, the belief that one and only one God exists) is a good belief—"thou doest well." Not only is such a confession a good belief, but a reasonable conclusion from what we know. The skeptic would quiz the believer: "Have you ever seen God? I haven't." Yet, the believer responds, "Have you ever seen a mind? I haven't."

Reflection Connection

Do you think there is sufficient teaching on the distinction between believing in Christ with one's mind and believing on Christ in one's heart? Why or why not?



Additionally, James adds, “devils also believe.” In fact, they actually tremble in their belief. What they believe about God causes them to shudder in their belief. According to Scripture, demons have very orthodox beliefs, including the right view of Jesus as the Son of God (Matt. 8:29), the Holy One (Mark 1:24), and the Messiah (Luke 4:41). Demons also profess belief in hell (Luke 8:31) and a coming judgment (Mark 5:1-13). Interestingly, demons may be more orthodox than many Christian bodies today!

James’ point must not be lost: mere head knowledge will not save. If it could, demons themselves would be saved believers. One may have all the doctrinal facts straight but be headed to an eternity without Christ. One must believe not only the facts about Christ, but must also believe Christ, personally in the heart (cp. Rom. 10:9-10). There is a huge difference between believing *in* Jesus Christ and believing *on* Jesus Christ. One may believe in Christ with his or her intellect but never believe on Christ in his or her heart.

III. A Living Faith Acts Publicly as well as Privately (vv. 21-26)

Possessing a living faith affects our entire life, both privately and publicly. Note James words, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?... Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness... Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (vv. 21-26). James draws from two Old Testament examples to demonstrate his point.

First, he considers Abraham the patriarch, asking “Was not Abraham our father justified by works...?” Being known as the “friend of God” Abraham was considered the father of all faithful people. Paul used Abraham to demonstrate our salvation is by faith alone apart from works (Rom. 4:1-3). However, Paul referenced another episode to illustrate his point. Pointing to Genesis 15, he made Abraham’s personal faith the crux of his argument. In contrast, James focuses on Genesis 22 when Abraham offered Isaac his son on the altar. The difference is striking. Paul pointed to Abraham’s private act of faith before God; James pointed to Abraham’s public act of faith in God, offering his son up to God in sacrifice. In Genesis 15, Abraham said it—“I believe”; in Genesis 22, Abraham showed it—“I believe.” The private experience he had in Genesis 15 was publicly expressed in Genesis 22.

Are we any different? We are not. We are all called to experience God through simple faith in Jesus Christ. We too are called to publicly express our faith through baptism, church membership, and good works all for the glory of God. In short, if a person is saved, he or she will show salvation in daily life.

Second, he considers *Rahab the prostitute* asking, “Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works...?” Most knew the details of Abraham’s life. Indeed most would like to be like Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. On the other hand, who would want to be like Rahab? Not only was she a Gentile

Reflection Connection

It’s easy to understand why James used Abraham to illustrate living faith. However, why do you suppose James would use an immoral person as an illustration of faith that is alive?



and a woman, she was also a prostitute. Nonetheless, James uses her as an example of living faith! Spies coming to the city of Jericho to gather intelligence information for their raid, Rahab “received the messengers” and prepared a successful getaway. God honored her deeds as an honorable act of faithfulness toward Him. By her public deeds, she demonstrated her private faith. If Rahab can be saved, anyone can be saved. And, one is always saved by a living, working faith. Anything less is a dead faith (v. 26).

Golden Greek Nugget

James asserts “devils” believe and tremble in their belief (v. 19). The word translated “devils” is *daimonion* a form of the word *daimōn* meaning “demon.” The term often referred to pagan deities and false gods (cp. Acts 17:18). Yet, in Jewish understanding the term often referred to evil spirits or the devil. While “devils” is not wrong, the plural seems to imply there is more than one devil. However, there exists only one devil but many demons.

Wrap Up

Chapter two teaches us the nature of saving faith. And, the only faith which can save is a faith that is living, a faith which works. A working faith does more than talk; rather it does. It produces works as well as words. Moreover, a living faith affects both the head and the heart. There is a vast difference between believing in Jesus and believing on Jesus. Concerning the former, even demons possess that kind of faith. However, demons do not and cannot embrace Jesus Christ in their heart. On the other hand, we are called to embrace Him as Lord and Savior both privately in our heart and publicly with our deeds.