

Faith According To The Apostle James

Acts 5:32; Romans 1:5; Romans 2:8; Romans 16:26; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Ephesians 2:10; 5:9; James 2:14-26; 2 Peter 1:10; 1 John 2:5

A154

Adapted from: [*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*](#) Volume 33(1990)

The release of *The Gospel According to Jesus* sparked a more spirited discussion than either I or my publisher anticipated. The book's central premise is that the gospel summons sinners to yield to Christ's authority. I was aware, of course, of those who decry that teaching as "lordship salvation." They propound the notion that any demand for surrender in the gospel invitation amounts to salvation by works.

Realizing that the book would confront these sensitive and controversial issues, I was nevertheless unprepared for the mass of letters I have received from thousands of readers. Thankfully the great majority have been positive and encouraging, coming from Christians who have struggled with the difficult questions the book addresses and are thankful for its head-on approach. Not everyone has been affirmative, of course. A few have written to challenge the book's conclusions, dispute this or that assertion, question my exegesis, argue the theological fine points, object to my terminology, or even voice doubts about my orthodoxy. I have carefully read every such letter, weighing the criticisms and attempting to understand what those who disagree are saying. A common thread manifests itself in nearly every area of dispute: Our differences all seem related to our conflicting perceptions of what Scripture means when it speaks of faith. Michael Cocoris, for example, is distributing a lengthy review in which he has written: "MacArthur charges those who reject lordship salvation with teaching that salvation is merely giving intellectual assent to biblical facts ... He leveled that charge against me (pp. 38, 45) and . . . he accuses Dr. Tom Constable, a faculty member at Dallas Seminary, of the same thing." Cocoris says, "Neither I nor Tom Constable believes that all a person has to do to be saved is believe facts." "Faith," Cocoris continues, "is more than mental assent. It is trust in the person of Jesus Christ. . . . In the chapter by Constable that MacArthur quotes, Constable . . . constantly refers to believing as trust. He says things like 'there is nothing more for a man to do but trust in Christ's work as being sufficient for his salvation.'" Cocoris presumes that referring to faith by its synonym "trust" sufficiently distinguishes it from mental acquiescence, though in his review he does not describe specific characteristics of trust that make it more than an intellectual matter. Zane Hodges, on the other hand, is uncomfortable with the "prejudicial connotation" of the expression "intellectual assent," but he appears to acknowledge that the phrase adequately describes his view of faith. "Assent," he points out, simply means "meaningful agreement." The negative undertone, he suggests, is caused by modifiers like "mental" or "intellectual," meaning "nothing more than 'of or pertaining to the intellect'" but often taken to imply "detachment and personal disinterest." "In this context we should discard words like mental or intellectual altogether," Hodges adds. "The Bible knows nothing about an intellectual faith as over against some other kind of faith (like emotional or volitional). What the Bible does recognize is the obvious distinction between faith and unbelief!" Hodges never specifically defines what it means to

believe. He is troubled by attempts to analyze faith from a theological perspective or explain in detail what it means to believe. To him the meaning of faith is self-evident. His latest book includes a chapter titled “Faith Means Just That—Faith.” He writes:

A Greek reader who met the words “he who believes in me has everlasting life,” would understand the word “believe” exactly as we do. The reader most certainly would not understand this word to imply submission, surrender, repentance or anything else of this sort. For those readers, as for us, “to believe” meant “to believe.” Surely it is one of the conceits of modern theology to suppose that we can define away simple terms like “belief” and “unbelief” and replace their obvious meanings with complicated elaborations.

He continues: “It is an unproductive waste of time to employ the popular categories—intellect, emotion, or will—as a way of analyzing the mechanics of faith. Such discussions lie far outside the boundaries of biblical thought. People know whether they believe something or not, and that is the real issue where God is concerned.” In the end, Hodges proposes something of a description of faith, though not really a full definition: “What faith really is, in biblical language, is receiving the testimony of God. It is the *inward conviction* that what God says to us in the gospel is true. That—and that alone—is saving faith.”

Is that an adequate characterization of what it means to believe? Can faith be passive? Is it true that people know intuitively whether their faith is real? Do all genuinely saved people have full assurance that they really do believe—never doubting? And cannot someone be deceived into thinking he is a believer when in fact he is not? Can a person think he believes, yet not truly believe? Is there no such thing as spurious faith?

Scripture plainly and repeatedly answers those questions. Imitation faith was seen as a very real danger by NT writers. Many of the epistles, though addressed to churches, contain warnings that reveal the apostles’ concern over church members who they suspected were not genuine believers. Paul, for example, wrote to the Corinthian church: “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?” (2 Corinthians 13:5). Peter wrote: “Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about his calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble” (2 Peter 1:10).

I. James’ Assault On Spurious Faith

Evidently there were some in the early Church who flirted with the notion that faith could be a static, inert, inanimate assent to facts. The book of James probably the earliest NT epistle, confronts this error. James sounds almost as if he were writing to twentieth-century “no-lordship” advocates. He says that people can be deluded into thinking they believe when in fact they do not, and he says that the single factor that distinguishes counterfeit faith from the real thing is the righteous behavior inevitably produced in those who have authentic faith. These are the questions the “lordship salvation” debate must ultimately answer: Is it enough to know and understand and assent to the facts of the gospel—even holding the “inward conviction” that these truths apply to me personally—and yet never shun sin or submit to the Lord Jesus? Is a person who holds that kind of belief guaranteed eternal life? Does such a hope constitute faith in the sense in which Scripture uses the term? James expressly teaches that it does not. Real faith, he says, will produce righteous behavior. And the true character of saving faith may be examined in light of the believer’s works. This

is consistent with all of Old Testament and New Testament soteriology. One enters into salvation by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8–9). Faith is by nature turned toward obedience (Acts 5:32; Romans 1:5; 2:8; 16:26), so good works are inevitable in the life of one who truly believes. These works have no part in bringing about salvation (Ephesians 2:9; Romans 3:20, 24; 4:5; Titus 3:5), but they show that salvation is indeed present (Ephesians 2:10; 5:9; 1 John 2:5). Put another way, “faith is always *obedient* faith. Salvation by faith does not negate the necessity and importance of works. Rather it calls for good works as a consequence of faith.” Works, then, distinguish true faith from counterfeit varieties.

“It is evident that there is faith and FAITH,” Roy Aldrich wrote in reference to James 2. “There is nominal faith and real faith. There is intellectual faith and heart faith. There is sensual faith and there is spiritual faith. There is dead faith and there is vital faith. There is traditional faith which may fall short of transforming personal faith. There is a faith that may be commended as orthodox and yet have no more saving value than the faith of demons.” James attacks all brands of “faith” that fall short of the Biblical standard. What I and others have sometimes termed “mental assent” James characterizes as mere hearing, empty profession, demonic orthodoxy, and dead faith.

1. *Mere hearing.*

James wrote: “Prove yourselves doers of the Word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22). James uses a substantive (*poietai*), “doers of the Word” or “Word-doers,” instead of a straightforward imperative (“do the Word”). He is describing characteristic behavior, not occasional activity. It is one thing to fight; it is something else to be a soldier. It is one thing to build a shed; it is something else to be a builder. James is not merely challenging his readers to do the Word; he is telling them that real Christians are doers of the Word. That describes the basic disposition of those who believe unto salvation.

Hearing is important, as James has emphasized in 1:19–21. Faith comes by hearing (Romans 10:17). Actual faith, however, must be something more than mere hearing. Lenski writes: “To be only a hearer means more than to be lazy in doing; only a hearer means hearing without real faith. Like Paul, James knows that faith cometh by hearing, and hearing is by the word of God (Romans 10:18) [*sic*] which is to be heard in faith. Its first and foremost call is: ‘Believe!’ That is why we do the Word by faith, and why faith is called obeying the Word. Where true faith is found all ‘else follows.’” Hearing is a means, not an end. The end is faith, which results in obedience.

True believers cannot be hearers-only. The Greek word for “hearer” (Romans 10:22) is *akroates*, a term used to describe students who audited a class. An auditor usually listens to the lectures but is permitted to treat assignments and exams as optional. Many people in the Church today approach spiritual truth with an auditor’s mentality, receiving God’s Word only passively. But James’ point, shown by his illustrations in verses 23–27, is that merely hearing the Word results in worthless religion (Romans 10:26). In other words, mere hearing is no better than unbelief or outright rejection. The hearer-only is unregenerate. James reiterates truth he undoubtedly heard firsthand from the Lord himself. Jesus warned against the error of hearing without doing (Matthew 7:21–27), as did Paul (Romans 2:13–25).

James says that hearing without obeying is self-deception (James 1:22). The term for “delude” (*paralogizomai*) means “to reason against.” It speaks of skewed logic. Those who believe it is enough to hear the Word without obeying make a gross miscalculation. They deceive themselves. Robert

Johnstone wrote:

Knowing that the study of divine truth, through reading the Bible, giving attendance on the public ordinances of grace, and otherwise, is a most important duty,—is, indeed, the road leading toward the gate of everlasting life,—they allow themselves, through man’s natural aversion to all genuine spirituality, to be persuaded by the wicked one that this is the sum of all Christian duty, and itself the gate of life, so that in mere “hearing” they enter in, and all is well with them. To rest satisfied with the means of grace, without yielding up our hearts to their power as means, so as to receive the grace and exhibit its working in our lives, is manifestly folly of the same class as that of a workman who should content himself with possessing tools, without using them,—madness of the same class as that of a man perishing with hunger, who should exult in having bread in his hands, without eating it,—but folly and madness as immeasurably greater than these, as the “work of God” (John 6:29) transcends in importance the work of an earthly artisan, and “life with Christ in God” the perishable existence of earth.

James gives two illustrations that contrast hearers-only with obedient hearers. The first is that of the mirror: “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does” (James 1:23–25).

“Not a doer” is literally “anot-doer,” someone whose disposition is to hear without doing. Contrary to some commentators, “looks . . . in a mirror” does not describe a hasty or casual glance. The verb (katanoëo) means “to look carefully, cautiously, observantly.” “The man carefully studies his face and becomes thoroughly familiar with its features. [He] listens to the Word, apparently not momentarily but at length, so that he understands what he hears. He knows what God expects him to do. Any failure to respond cannot be blamed on lack of understanding.” James’ point is not that this man failed to look long enough, or intently enough, or sincerely enough—but that he turned away without taking action. “He has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was” (James 1:24). This passage is reminiscent of the unproductive soils in Matthew 13. The person who hears the Word does not have the proper heart response, and therefore that which has been sown cannot bear fruit.

James’ point is twofold. First, he is illustrating the urgency of obedience. If you do not deal with what you see while you are looking into the mirror, you will forget about it later. By Monday morning you may forget the impact of Sunday’s sermon. By this afternoon, this morning’s readings might be a dim memory. If you do not make the necessary responses while God is convicting your heart, you will probably not get around to it. The image reflected in the mirror of God’s Word will soon fade.

Second, and more pointedly, James is illustrating the uselessness of passively receiving the Word. Verse 21 spoke of how we are to receive the Word: “Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.” The conjunction “but” (de) at the beginning of verse 22 is used in a continuative or emphatic sense. It is equivalent to “moreover” or “now,” implying that what follows is not a contrast but an amplification of the command in verse 21. In other words, James is saying that it is wonderful to be receptive to the Word—to hear with approval and agreement—but that is not enough. We must receive it as those who would be doers. Nondoers are not true believers.

James gives a contrasting example. This is the effectual doer: “One who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does” (James 1:25). The word translated “looks intently” is *parakupto*, the same word used in John 20:5, 11 to describe how John stooped to peer into Jesus’ empty tomb. The word is also used in 1 Peter 1:12 of the angels who long to look into things concerning the gospel. It speaks of a deep and absorbing look, as when someone stoops for a closer examination. Hiebert says the word “pictures the man as bending over the mirror on the table in order to examine more minutely what is revealed therein.” Implied is a longing to understand for reasons that go beyond the academic.

This is a description of the true believer. In contrast to the hearer-only, “he bent over the mirror, and, gripped by what he saw, he continued looking and obeying its precepts. This feature marks his crucial difference to the first man.” This man is gazing into “the perfect law, the law of liberty” (James 1:25). That refers to the gospel in its fullest sense—the whole counsel of God, the implanted word that saves (James 1:21). Burdick writes:

It is not merely the OT law, nor is it the Mosaic law perverted to become a legalistic system for earning salvation by good works. When James calls it the “perfect law,” he has in mind the sum total of God’s revealed truth—not merely the preliminary portion found in the OT, but also the final revelation made through Christ and his Apostles that was soon to be inscripturated in the New Testament. Thus it is complete, in contrast to that which is preliminary and preparatory. Furthermore, it is the “law of liberty” (Gr.), by which James means that it does not enslave. It is not forced by external compulsion. Instead, it is freely accepted and fulfilled with glad devotion under the enablements of the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:22–23).

James is not speaking of law in contrast to gospel. “The perfect law of liberty” is the law written on the heart, the implanted Word (James 1:21). Those who understand the phrase “the perfect law of liberty” to mean something separate from the gospel miss James’ point. In describing the man who looks at the Word and continues in it and is blessed, he is portraying the effect of true conversion.

Does this mean that all true believers are doers of the Word? Yes. Do they always put the Word into practice? No—or a pastor’s task would be relatively simple. Believers fail, sometimes miserably, as we see in Scripture. But even when they fail, true believers will not altogether cease having the disposition and motivation of one who is a doer. James, then, offers these words as both a reminder to the true believer (the “effectual doer,” James 1:25) and a challenge to unbelievers who have identified with the truth but are not obedient to it (the “forgetful hearer[s]”).

James’ second illustration of the deceptive nature of hearing without obeying is that of the unbridled tongue: “If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless. This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:26–27).

The word translated “religious” in verse 26 is *threskos*, often used in reference to ceremonial public worship. It is the word Josephus used, for example, when he described the worship of the Temple. *Threskeia* (“religion,” James 1:26–27) is the same word Paul used in Acts 26:5 to refer to the tradition of the Pharisees. It emphasizes the externals of ceremony, ritual, liturgy, and so on. James is saying that all such things, when divorced from meaningful obedience, are worthless. All of us struggle to

control our tongues. James wrote: “For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well” (James 3:2). But this man’s tongue is like an unbridled horse. He lets it run wild while deceiving his own heart (James 1:26). He is not battling a transitory lapse in tongue control. He is dominated by a pattern that characterizes his very nature. Though he professes to be religious, his character does not live up to his claim. While he undoubtedly thinks of himself as righteous, he is misled about the efficacy of his own religion.

Lenski writes: “Well, this man has ‘religion,’ *acultus exterior*, but . . . it does not get him the goal for which religion is intended. James does not say . . . ‘empty,’ for this man’s religion has a sort of religious content, but it is one that does not save his soul or make him . . . ‘blessed.’ Despite his external religion, his constantly unbridled and out-of-control tongue demonstrates a deceived and unholy heart, for “the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart” (Matthew 15:18). “The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart” (Luke 6:45). Our Lord warned: “By your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned” (Matthew 12:37).

Simon Kistemaker notes the significance of the expression “deceiving his own heart”:

This is the third time that James tells his readers not to deceive themselves (James 1:16, 22, 26). As a pastor he is fully aware of counterfeit religion that is nothing more than external formalism. He knows that many people merely go through the motions of serving God, but their speech gives them away. Their religion has a hollow ring. And although they do not realize it, by their words and by their actions—or lack of them—they deceive themselves. Their heart is not right with God and their fellow man, and their attempt to hide this lack of love only heightens their self-deception. Their religion is worthless.

This worthless religion contrasts sharply with the true religion that is “pure and undefiled . . . in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27). James is not here attempting to define religion but rather to set forth a concrete illustration of the principle he began with: that true religion involves more than mere hearing. True saving faith will inevitably bear the fruit of good works.

2. *Empty profession.*

The first thirteen verses of James 2 continue to expand on James’ contention that believers are by disposition doers of the Word, not mere hearers. He confronts the problem of favoritism, which evidently had arisen in the church or churches James was writing to. Bearing in mind that this is the context, we move ahead to James 2:14. Here, after warning his readers that they were facing judgment for their unholy and unmerciful behavior (James 2:13), James turns to the heart of the matter: their apparent misconception that faith is an inert ingredient in the salvation formula. His challenge could not be clearer: “What use is it, my brethren, if a mansayshe has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?” (James 2:14, italics mine). No less than five times in this passage (James 2:14, 17, 20, 24, 26), James reiterates his thesis: Passive faith is not efficacious faith. This is a frontal attack on the empty profession of one whose hope is in a dormant faith.

Bo Reicke writes: “It must be noted that the discussion is about a person who only asserts that he has faith. This person has no real faith, since his faith does not find expression in deeds. The author

does not take issue with faith itself, but with a superficial conception of it which permits faith to be only a formal concession. He desires to point out that a Christianity of mere words does not lead to salvation." C. E. B. Cranfield likewise observes: "The clue to the understanding of the section is the fact (very often ignored) that in verse 14 . . . the author has not said, 'if a man have faith,' but 'if a man say he hath faith.' This fact should be allowed to control our interpretation of the whole paragraph. . . . The burden of this section is not (as is often supposed) that we are saved through faith plus works, but that we are saved through genuine, as opposed to counterfeit, faith."

James cannot be teaching that salvation is earned by works. He has already described salvation as a "good thing bestowed" and a "perfect gift" given when "in the exercise of his will [God] brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be, as it were, the firstfruits among his creatures" (James 1:17–18). Faith is part and parcel of that perfect gift. It is supernaturally bestowed by God, not independently conceived in the mind or will of the individual believer.

Here is a crucial point often missed by the champions of "no-lordship salvation": The faith a believer fixes on Christ for salvation is substantially different in character from everyday varieties of faith. Faith in Christ for salvation cannot be compared to believing in the integrity of the President of the United States. It is not like trusting the quality of the water we drink, or having confidence that the mailman will deliver our mail, or relying on the skills of the builders and engineers who build the buildings we inhabit, or knowing that our photos will be developed on time. Hebrews 11:1 shows the supernatural quality of divinely bestowed faith: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." "Assurance" there is hypostasis, made up of stasis "to stand" and hypo "under." It refers to a foundation, the ground on which something is built. Moulton and Milligan cite hypostasis in ancient Greek literature as a legal term referring to "documents bearing on the ownership of a person's property, deposited in archives, and forming the evidence of ownership." They say that is the sense conveyed in Hebrews 11:1 and offer this translation: "Faith is the title-deed of things hoped for."

And so the *KJV* rendering of Hebrews 11:1 is a good one: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." That reveals faith as a supernatural ability to apprehend spiritual reality invisible to the eye of flesh. Hebrews 11:27 characterizes Moses' faith the same way ("he endured, as seeing him who is unseen"). Faith is not a wistful longing, or a blind confidence, or even "inward conviction." It is a supernatural certainty, an understanding of spiritual realities, "which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him. For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God" (1 Corinthians 2:9–10). Faith is a gift of God, not something conjured up by human effort, so no one can boast—not even about his faith (cf. Ephesians 2:8–9).

In the phrase "if a man says he has faith, but he has no works" (James 2:14), the verbs are present tense. They describe someone who routinely claims to be a believer and yet continuously lacks external evidence of faith. The question "Can that faith save him?" employs the negative particle *m?*, indicating that a negative reply is assumed. It might literally be rendered: "That faith cannot save him, can it?" James, like John, challenges the authenticity of a profession of faith that produces no fruit (cf. 1 John 2:4, 6, 9). The context indicates that the "works" he speaks of are not anyone's bid to earn eternal life. These are acts of compassion (James 2:15).

"Faith" in this context must carry the full soteriological significance (James 2:1). James is speaking of

eternal salvation. He has referred to “the word implanted, which is able to save your souls” in 1:21. Here he has the same salvation in view. He is not disputing whether faith saves. Rather, he is opposing the notion that faith can be a passive, fruitless, intellectual exercise and still save. Townsend writes: “Where no works exist it must be supposed that no faith exists either. So a man who claims to be a believer, yet has no works to demonstrate the reality of his faith, will find that such ‘faith’ does not justify him at all, for it is not real. After all, it was Jesus who said, ‘You will know them by their fruits’ (Matthew 7:16 RSV), and James expounds this emphasis faithfully.”

Here even Charles Ryrie sounds like an advocate of “lordship salvation”:

Can a non-working, dead, spurious faith save a person? James is not saying that we are saved by works, but that a faith that does not produce good works is a dead faith. . . . Unproductive faith cannot save, because it is not genuine faith. Faith and works are like a two-coupon ticket to heaven. The coupon of works is not good for passage, and the coupon of faith is not valid if detached from works.

James follows with an illustration comparing faith without works to phony compassion, words without action: “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?” (James 2:15–16). The faith of a false professor is similarly useless: “Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself” (James 2:17).

James concludes with a challenge to those whose profession is suspect: “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’” (James 2:18). Commentators disagree on whether “someone” refers to an objector and how much of the discourse that follows is to be attributed to this “someone” as opposed to James himself. However one reads it, the essential point James is making is clear: The only possible evidence of faith is works. How can anyone show faith without works? It cannot be done. Even Cocoris, a staunch opponent of “lordship salvation,” fails to suggest an illustration of inactive faith: “A truck driver may believe the bridge is safe, but he does not believe in the biblical sense until he drives onto the bridge. A person may believe the elevator will carry him to the top of the building, but he does not believe in the New Testament sense until he steps into it. A person with his clothes on fire may believe that the swimming pool will save him, but he is not saved until he dives into the pool.”

What are those but examples of faith that demonstrates its commitment in works? Barnes distills the sense of the passage: James was not arguing against real and genuine faith, nor against its importance in justification, but against the supposition that mere faith was all that was necessary to save a man, whether it was accompanied by good works or not. *He* maintains that if there is genuine faith it will always be accompanied by good works, and that it is only *that* faith which can justify and save. If it leads to no practical holiness of life. . . . it is of no value whatever.

3. *Demonic orthodoxy.*

James continues his assault on passive faith with this statement: “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder” (James 2:19). Orthodox doctrine by itself is no proof of saving faith. Demons affirm the oneness of God and tremble at its implications, but they are not redeemed. Matthew 8:29 tells of a group of demons who recognized Jesus as the Son of God. They

even exhibited fear. Demons often acknowledge the existence and authority of Christ (Matthew 8:29–30; Mark 5:7), his deity (Luke 4:41), and even his resurrection (Acts 19:15), but their diabolical nature is not changed by what they know and believe. Their fearful affirmation of orthodox doctrine is not the same as saving faith.

James implies that demonic faith is greater than the fraudulent faith of a false professor, for demonic faith produces fear whereas unsaved men have “no fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:18). If the demons believe, tremble and are not saved, what does that say about those who profess to believe and do not even tremble? (cf. Isaiah 66:2, 5).

Puritan Thomas Manton perfectly sums up the subtly deceptive nature of the sterile orthodoxy that constitutes demonic faith:

[It is] a simple and naked assent to such things as are propounded in the word of God, and maketh men more knowing but not better, not more holy or heavenly. They that have it may believe the promises, the doctrines, the precepts as well as the histories . . . but yet, lively saving faith it is not, for he who hath that, findeth his heart engaged to Christ, and doth so believe the promises of the gospel concerning pardon of sins and life eternal that he seeketh after them as his happiness, and doth so believe the mysteries of our redemption by Christ that all his hope and peace and confidence is drawn from thence, and doth so believe the threatenings, whether of temporal plagues or eternal damnation, as that, in comparison with them, all the frightful things of the world are nothing.

4. *Dead faith.*

James utters his strongest rebuke so far: “Are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?” (James 2:20). He labels the objector “foolish,” meaning “empty, defective.” The man is hollow because he lacks a living faith; his claim that he believes is fraudulent; his faith is a sham. Hiebert writes: “‘Wilt thou know’ (*theleis gnonai*), ‘are you willing to know,’ implies an unwillingness by the objector to face the issue. His unwillingness to agree with the truth set forth is not due to any obscurity of the subject but to his reluctance to acknowledge the truth. The aorist infinitive rendered ‘know’ also can mean ‘recognize’ or ‘acknowledge’ and calls for a definite act of acknowledgment by the objector. His refusal to do so would imply inner perversity of will.”

Both “faith” and “works” in verse 20 carry definite articles in the Greek text (“the faith without the works”). “Useless” is *argos*, meaning “barren, unproductive.” The sense seems to be soteriological sterility: “It is unproductive for salvation.” The Textus Receptus uses a word meaning “dead.” Certainly that is the sense conveyed here (cf. James 2:17, 26). “Faith is useful when joined to works, but alone it is just dead, totally useless. Dead orthodoxy has absolutely no power to save and may in fact even hinder the person from coming to living faith.” And so “James is not contrasting two methods of salvation—one of faith and one of works—but two kinds of faith: one which saves and one which does not.”

James is simply affirming the truth of 1 John 3:7–10: “Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as he is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that he might destroy the works of the devil. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: Anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.” Righteous behavior is an inevitable result of spiritual life. Faith that fails to produce such

behavior is dead.

For brevity's sake, we must forego looking closely at the examples of living faith from the lives of Abraham and Rahab (James 2:21–25). Nonetheless, here is an abridged statement of the point James is making: Abraham and Rahab, though they came from opposite ends of the social and religious spectrum, both had an attitude of willingness to sacrifice what mattered most to them because of their faith. That submission was proof their faith was real.

The most serious problem these verses pose is the question of what verse 24 means: “You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.” Some imagine that this contradicts Paul in Romans 3:28: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” I take James' statement as a literary device, a metonymy of effect for cause, where the result of a thing is substituted for the action that produces it. Calvin understood this passage in the same sense and wrote:

It appears certain that [James] is speaking of the manifestation, not of the imputation of righteousness, as if he had said, Those who are justified by faith prove their justification by obedience and good works, not by a bare and imaginary semblance of faith. In one word, he is not discussing the mode of justification, but requiring that the justification of all believers shall be operative. And as Paul contends that men are justified without the aid of works, so James will not allow any to be regarded as justified who are destitute of good works. . . . Let them twist the words of James as they may, they will never extract out of them more than two propositions: That an empty phantom of faith does not justify, and that the believer, not contented with such an imagination, manifests his justification by good works.

James is not at odds with Paul. “They are not antagonists facing each other with crossed swords; they stand back to back, confronting different foes of the gospel.” As we have seen, in James 1:17–18, James affirmed that salvation is a gift bestowed according to the sovereign will of God. Now he is stressing the importance of faith's fruit—the righteous behavior that genuine faith always produces. Paul, too, saw righteous works as the necessary proof of faith. The very purpose of salvation, he wrote, is that God might remake us “in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). According to Paul's theology Christ “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for himself a people for his own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:14).

Those who imagine a discrepancy between James and Paul rarely observe that it was Paul who wrote: “For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law will be justified” (Romans 2:13). Thus “the error that James attacks Paul also condemns.” Paul never advocated a concept of faith apart from works. “He avoided any possible misunderstanding concerning the moral consequences of his doctrine by demanding unconditionally the fulfillment of the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).”

When Paul writes that “by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight” (Romans 3:20) he

is combatting a Jewish legalism which insisted upon the need for works to be justified; James insists upon the need for works in the lives of those who have been justified by faith. Paul insists that no man can ever win justification through his own efforts. . . . James demands that a man who already claims to stand in right relationship with God through faith must by a life of good works demonstrate

that he has become a new creature in Christ. With this Paul thoroughly agreed. Paul was rooting out “works” that excluded and destroyed saving faith; James was stimulating a sluggish faith that minimized the results of saving faith in daily life.

James and Paul both echo Jesus’ preaching. “Paul repeats Matthew 5:3, James repeats Matthew 7:21ff. We may stress this observation—that Paul is representing the beginning, whereas James is representing the end of the Sermon on the Mount.” Paul declares that we are saved by faith without the deeds of the law. James declares that we are saved by faith, which shows itself in works. Both James and Paul view good works as the proof of faith—not the path to salvation.

II. Hodges’ Assault On The Ordinary Interpretations Of James 2

It is worth noting that Zane Hodges has published a pamphlet on James 2 that challenges more than four centuries of Protestant scholarship. Acknowledging that his views are unusual, he suggests that all the conventional interpretations of James 2 are fundamentally in error and proposes in a 32-page tract to straighten them out. Because his voice is so influential among those who are persuaded of the “no-lordship” position, I mention his booklet and will interact with three basic claims he makes to buttress his interpretation.

1. *Who is being warned?*

Hodges says first of all that the warnings of James 2 cannot be directed at false professors. Whatever James means, Hodges asserts, must be a warning aimed at genuine believers:

There is nothing in James’s text to suggest that he directs his warnings about a dead faith at those who were never really saved at all. On the contrary, James addresses himself to people he calls, “my brethren” (James 2:14). Earlier in the chapter he speaks of them as possessing faith in Christ (James 2:1) and warns them not to mix it with partiality toward men. Still earlier he describes his readers as born from above (James 1:16–18). The suggestion that James thinks of some of his readers as possibly unconverted is *totally unfounded* in this epistle.

At first glance it seems Hodges may have a point. James repeatedly calls his readers “brethren” (James 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19). But as we have noted, it is common for apostolic writers to include in letters addressed to churches stern warnings for those whose profession of faith was questionable. Many if not most commentators view the warning passages in Hebrews as exactly that kind of admonition. And although Paul began 2 Corinthians by saying, “Our hope for you is firmly grounded” (2 Corinthians 1:7), he added the familiar warning of 13:5: “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith.” So the fact that the epistle was addressed to the “brethren” does not prove Hodges’ point. James surely knew that it would be read by all who identified with the churches, and thus the warnings to false professors are both essential and appropriate.

2. *What kind of salvation is in view?*

Hodges’ whole interpretation hinges on his claim that James is really talking about temporal salvation—the saving of one’s life, not his eternal soul. Pointing to James 5:19–20 and 1:21 as the context by which to understand the word “save,” Hodges makes this astonishing declaration:

The Greek expression *sozein ten psuche* (“to save the soul”) is a standard and normal way of saying “to save the life.” Furthermore there is no text in the Greek Bible where it can be shown to have the meaning “to save the soul” from hell. First century readers, therefore, are not likely to have read the phrase in that sense.

Thus the word “saved” in James 2:14 is most naturally construed in the same basic sense as that found in James 1:21 and 5:19, 20. It has nothing to do with the issue of eternal destiny at all, but deals instead with the life-preserving benefits obedience brings to the Christian and which cannot be expressed by mere hearing or by faith alone. . . . Once this point is perceived, a whole new perspective is opened up on James 2:14–26. To understand this famous passage one must forget the issue of eternal salvation. It simply is not the point under discussion. James is writing about the temporal life and the preserving of it.

That conclusion cannot be substantiated; it misconstrues Scripture to support a false presupposition. Matthew 10:28 leaves no doubt as to what first-century readers would have understood when someone spoke of the saving of the soul. There Jesus said, “And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” In Mark 8:37 Jesus asked, “For what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” The context, which speaks of that climactic day “when [the Son of Man] comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38), makes it clear that our Lord was not talking in temporal terms. And 1 Peter 1:9 speaks of believers “obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.” Could that mean temporal salvation? The next verse removes any doubt. Eternal salvation is the topic here: “As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry” (1 Peter 1:10).

James’ context indicates that he is speaking of the soul as the immaterial part of man. If James 1:21 meant bodily salvation, James would need to be clearer. Nor does anything in all of chap. 2 hint that James is talking about the saving of one’s life. No objective exegete would naturally understand James 2 to be referring to the salvation of the earthly life.

Contrast Hodges’ claims with Johnstone’s view that the word “souls” in James 1:21 is used explicitly “to bring out prominently the radical and therefore gloriously complete nature of the deliverance. It was no mere amelioration or adornment of the outward life, but reaches that inmost and noblest part of our nature, out of which are ‘the issues of life,’ and by the condition of which, accordingly, is determined the condition of the whole man; for the body follows the state of the soul, to destruction or to salvation.”

3. Does James mean that true faith can die?

Hodges also argues, on the basis of the analogy in James 2:26, that works energize faith, not the other way around. Pointing to the order of the analogy “body . . . spirit”/ “faith . . . works,” Hodges writes: . . . One immediately notices here that James draws an analogy between dead faith and a dead body. But this transparent fact has not been properly treated by expositors. . . . James is comparing faith to the body, while comparing works to the spirit. Who would not be tempted to reverse this comparison? After all, we feel inclined to ask, is not faith the animating principle, or spirit, which leads to the outward manifestation of good works?

The answer is “No”! At least it is “No” within the framework of this passage. The point James is making is that works are actually the key to the vitality of faith. His point is not that a vital faith is the key to works!

Yet this latter view is held by many readers of the passage. They have concluded—without help from the passage itself—that James must be talking about the necessity of having a living faith if we are going to produce good works! But on the contrary, as James’s analogy shows, he is writing about the necessity of having works if our faith is to stay alive!

In other words, a body dies when it loses the spirit which keeps it alive. In the same way, a person’s faith dies when it loses the animating factor of good works!

This argument, though punctuated with so many exclamation points, turns out on examination to be as groundless as Hodges’ claim that “to save the soul” means something temporal. There is no question that James 2:26 pictures works as the invigorating force and faith as the body. But the works spoken of here are not works an individual generates on his own. These works represent an animating principle that is divinely imparted, like the spirit of Adam breathed into him by God.

James is not arguing that believers must keep their faith alive by doing works. The faith that God imparts to the elect is one of those “perfect gift[s]” James speaks of (James 1:17): It comes complete with the divinely infused life-force and is not dependent on the believer’s energy either to activate or to preserve it (cf. Ephesians 2:8–9). “Works are... the natural consequence of faith. Faith lives out of God and brings God’s nature to expression.” The good works that express a believer’s faith are divinely ordained and empowered by God: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). Without the works, faith is “not merely outwardly inoperative but inwardly dead.”

Lenski fittingly writes:

James by no means makes works help to constitute faith as if works were the life of faith, so that when works are added, we have *fides formata*, while without works *fides* would be *informata* (the Catholic conception of faith, which is rather plain work-righteousness). True gospel works are the native and the necessary product of faith. This faith, which saves before it ever does a single work, saves by embracing Christ and reveals itself by producing love and works of love, which, wherever they appear, show that real, saving faith is present.

If the works that distinguish living faith are divinely energized, there is no danger that real faith could ever die. James is not issuing a warning in v. 26. He is making a clear statement: Workless faith is dead faith, and dead faith is no faith at all. Real faith cannot die, but if you have a so-called faith that is devoid of works, it is not living faith, and it cannot save.

The terminology “dead faith” would in fact invoke a clear image in James’ Jewish readers’ minds. It is the impression of a rotting corpse that is defiled, filthy, not to be touched or approached. “The readers of the epistle know that they ought not to touch a dead body but avoid it whenever possible. By implication they need to avoid faith that is dead because it is like a corpse.”

III. Conclusion

James could not be more explicit. He is confronting the concept of a passive, false “faith,” which is devoid of the fruits of salvation. “He is not advocating works apart from faith, but he is vitally concerned to show that a living faith must demonstrate its dynamic character by its deeds.” “He is fighting against a dead orthodoxy, against a self-satisfied attitude towards grace.”

The error James assails closely parallels the teaching of many twen-tieth-century proponents of “no-lordship salvation.” That movement’s strong emphasis on faith-sans-repentance-sans-obedience-sans-works has brought about an alarming state of affairs in the contemporary Church.

Evangelical theology is being decimated by this teaching that seems so zealous “to discover how sparse the faith that justifies can be.”

The careful discipline that has marked so much of our post-Reformation theological tradition must be carefully guarded. Defenders of “no-lordship salvation” lean too heavily on the assumptions of a predetermined theological system. They often draw their support from presupposed dispensationalist distinctions (salvation/discipleship, carnal/spiritual believers, gospel of the kingdom/gospel of grace, faith/repentance). They depend too much on hypothetical paradigms and illustrations versus didactic material. They frequently employ logical rather than Biblical arguments. Curiously, they may acknowledge the truth of a passage like James 2 and yet fail to follow through with its implications in their systematic soteriology.

A reminder of this simple axiom is in order: Our theology must be Biblical before it can be systematic. We must start with Scripture and build our theology from there, not read into God’s Word unwarranted presuppositions. Scripture is the only appropriate gauge by which we may ultimately measure the correctness of our doctrine.

Jesus insisted on a theology of lordship that involved obedience, not lip service. He chided the disobedient ones who had attached themselves to him in name only: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). Verbal allegiance, he said, will get no one to heaven: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Paul agreed: “Not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law will be justified.” Both are in perfect harmony with James: “Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22); for “faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself” (James 2:17).

I find it impossible to read James 2 and conclude, as Hodges does, that “those who must look at their works to be sure that their faith is real, have not yet clearly understood the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” On the contrary, the entire Church should heed the Biblical calls to self-examination. “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?” (2 Corinthians 13:5). “By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. The one who says, ‘I have come to know him,’ and does not keep his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:3–4). “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2017 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).