Faith and Works

Read James 2:14-26

Key verse: “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17).

“I have a lot of beliefs…. And I live by none of them. That’s just the way I am. They’re just my beliefs. I just like believing them—I like that part. They’re my little ‘believies.’ They make me feel good about who I am. But if they get in the way of a thing I want, I sure as heck just do what I want to do” (comedian Louis C.K.).

If we’re honest, most of us struggle at times to move beyond an “easy believe-ism,” that reduces faith to mere intellectual assent. James wants us to know that genuine faith is more than what we say we believe in our head. Genuine faith moves from our head to our heart and then from our head and heart to our hands and our feet! Real faith is seen by our actions.

James gives as an example of false faith the following example: “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:15-17).

James also gives two Old Testament examples of faith in action: “Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and that he was called the friend of God.

“You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead” (James 2:21-26).

James’ assertion that both Abraham and Rahab were “justified by works” seems to contradict the Apostle Paul’s teachings that we are saved not by works but by faith in Christ. But James only means that right actions are the
evidence of genuine faith. He wants to expose and confront a kind of false faith that consists of mere intellectual acceptance of certain truths without sincere trust in Jesus Christ as Savior. This kind of false faith, says James, is useless and “dead.”

It is significant that James uses death-life terminology to contrast false faith with genuine faith: “So faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead” (v. 17). For genuine faith produces new life in Christ. Taken as a whole, the New Testament gives this picture of genuine, saving faith:

When a person receives Jesus Christ by repentance and faith, God declares that person justified, that is God now looks at him or her just as if he’d never sinned. In addition, by His Spirit, Christ comes to live in that new Christian and begins a process of transformation: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

As the believer follows after Christ, this ongoing spiritual transformation is evidenced by changes in behavior. Right actions—good works—are the outward evidence of an inward transformation that begins and continues as we place our faith in Christ.

So, the truth is that we are saved by faith, not by our good works. However, genuine saving faith will produce right actions and behavior. Good works, then, are the fruit not the means of our salvation. Real faith really works!

Some final thoughts:
“Your behavior is a reflection of what you truly believe” (Hyrum Smith).
“Unused truth becomes as useless as an unused muscle” (A.W. Tozer).
“Our faith becomes practical when it is expressed in two books: the date book and the check book” (Elton Trueblood).

“Faith and works should travel side by side, step answering to step, like the legs of men walking. First faith, and then works; and then faith again, and then works again—until you can scarcely distinguish which is one and which is the other” (William Booth).

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