

# JAMES: FAITH AND WORKS

*So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? James 2:12-14*

There are three basic theories circulating among those professing “Christianity” concerning how good “works” affect our salvation from hell. There are those who believe that we have to work, or have good “works” to get saved. Then there are those who believe we have to have good “works” to stay saved. Finally, there are those who believe we have to have good “works” to prove that we have saving faith, and indeed are saved. Interestingly enough, all of these people would quote **James 2:17** and **2:24** to biblically prove their point, but what is James really teaching? There is a fourth view, as we will see as we study God’s words to James.

In his letter, James is addressing the topic of proper behavior amongst the saints. He uses statements such as “my brethren,” and “my beloved brethren.” In **James 2:12-13** he summarizes everything previously written with a warning to the “brethren” that can only apply to true believers.

*“So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”*

What judgment will all true Christians face, concerning their speech and actions? Would this be the judgment seat of Christ? Paul states that some will “suffer loss” at this judgment, **I Cor. 3:15**. Every Christian will “be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done... good or bad,” **II Cor. 5:10**.

James also points out that this judgment will be “merciless” for some Christians. With this warning in mind, James continues to admonish the saints to action in verse 14 as follows:

*“What use is it, **my brethren**, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?”*

Faith without works is not only of no “use,” but is “merciless” as we will see in James’ following example. Can that faith save him? The answer is “no!” The question is, “save him from what?” Hell? Is the context of this verse “hell?” No. The previous two verses place us in the context of the judgment seat of Christ, with the possibility of no mercy. We can “suffer loss” at the judgment seat. **James 2:15-20** gives us an example of a “merciless brother.”

*“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? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. 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. You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?”*

This brother’s lack of mercy, his workless (worthless) faith is described with three terms. Most people only mention the term “dead.” They will then try to convince us that a “dead faith” is actually a non – existent faith, and therefore this “brother” is not saved. The two other terms for this “dead faith” show us that the faith really does exist, but it is “useless” to anyone else because it is “by itself” -- selfish. The Bible does record at least two useless dead people: The prodigal son who was “dead,” **Luke 15:24**, and a widowed sister who falls into sin, and “is dead even while she lives,” **I Tim. 5:6**. There is also the church of Sardis, a group of “dead” saints (except for a “few”) mentioned in **Rev. 3:1-2**. We will see in the remaining verses of James chapter two, that faith is “perfected,” not “proved” by works.

*“Was not Abraham our father **justified by works** when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? 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. **You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.** In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also **justified by works** when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”*

Above, James gives examples of people who “perfected” their saving faith with works. This is what all Christians “should” do. The Bible never anywhere teaches that all true Christians “will” perfect their faith with works. Some Christians will be “rewarded,” some will “suffer loss!” But all “will be saved” from hell! Consider these verses

*“***Each man’s work*** will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test ***the quality of each man’s work***. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a ***reward***. If any man’s work is burned up, he will ***suffer loss***; but he himself ***will be saved***, yet so as through fire.” (1 Corinthians 3:13 –15, Christ’s judgment seat)*

James also stated three times in verses **21-25** that we are “justified by works.” Yet in **Romans 4:2-6**, God’s word makes it clear that it is faith alone, “apart from works,” that justifies the “one who does not work!”

*“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.’ Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one **who does not work**, but believes in Him who **justifies the ungodly**, **his faith is credited as righteousness**, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom **God credits righteousness apart from works**:*

These verses definitely do not agree with James' teaching, nor do they disagree. The problem is solved when we see that James and Paul have two totally different groups of people in view. James is focusing in on the behavior of the "brethren" – salvation from the judgment seat. Paul is dealing with the salvation of the "ungodly" from hell. The "ungodly" are justified by faith alone in their position or "calling." We are "saints by calling," (**I Cor. 1:2**). **Eph. 4:1** brings James' and Paul's teachings together,

*"Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,"*

The gospel -- the "good news" about the "free gift" of eternal life -- is that God became a man to freely save us from the hell that we all deserve. Jesus died on the cross, was in the flames of Hades in agony (**Acts 2:24, 31**) for three days, and rose from the dead. He paid the hell penalty for all our sins -- past, present, and future. When a person, by faith alone, receives that "free" grace, that "unmerited favor," he is then sealed by the Holy Spirit, becoming an "adopted" child of God. Believers are now a part of God's family -- the "called," the "children" of God, and "saints." "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable," according to **Romans 11:29**. But, as in all families, the children are not always well behaved.

James' letter admonishes God's children, the "brethren," the "called," to have good works, "perfecting their faith" to be justified in their "walk," in light of the judgment seat of Christ. Paul points out that faith "alone" justifies the ungodly for salvation from hell. James and Paul both agree in keeping works separate from faith, and that faith alone saves from hell, but faith without works will be judged with severity at the judgment seat of Christ.

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