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SAVING FAITH: GENUINE OR FALSE?

James 2:14-19

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James Lesson 10

Saving Faith: Genuine or False? James 2:14-19

James 2:14-26 is famous for theological controversy. At first glance, it seems that James is contradicting Paul, or vice versa, if James wrote first. Paul taught that we are saved by grace through faith, apart from works. James seems to say that we must have faith plus works to be saved. The major issue that spawned the Reformation was, are we justified by faith alone, or by faith plus works? It still divides evangelical Protestants from the Roman Catholic Church. (We will look more at this issue in our next study.)

Within the evangelical camp, there is a battle over whether or not saving faith requires accepting Jesus as Lord of your life. Those who deny "lordship" salvation accuse those who teach it of adding works to faith alone. They say that submitting to Jesus as Lord of your life should happen *after* salvation, but it is not necessary for salvation. Salvation is simply by faith alone. Those who contend for "lordship" salvation accuse the non-lordship side of "easy-believism." They argue (correctly, I think) that genuine saving faith necessarily trusts in Jesus *both* as Savior *and* Lord.

At the heart of this dispute is the question, "What is genuine saving faith?" This is not just an academic debate! The correct answer to that question concerns your eternal destiny! It relates to the eternal destiny of your family and friends. If my faith or the faith of my loved ones is not genuine, saving faith, I could be deceiving myself in the worst possible way. I might think that Jesus is my Lord and Savior, and even be active in serving Him, but be sadly mistaken. Jesus spoke some of the most frightening words in the Bible when He said (Matt. 7:21-23),

"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 will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"

So it is vital—both for our own salvation and for those with whom we share the gospel—to be clear on this crucial matter, “what is genuine saving faith?” And, “what is false faith that does not save?”

We must approach a controversial or difficult text, such as James 2:14-26, in the proper way. First, we must assume that *the Holy Spirit does not contradict Himself* in Scripture. If we believe that “all Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16), then James and Paul are *not* at odds, even though it may be difficult to harmonize them. We must not pit one author or doctrine against another. For example, if Scripture plainly teaches that God is sovereign *and* that people are responsible, we must teach both.

Second, we must seek to *understand the particular problem* that each author was addressing. Paul wrote Galatians to deal with the error of adding some outward work, such as circumcision, to faith alone for salvation. James wrote this text to confront the problem of those who profess to believe in Christ, but do not have any fruit to show for it. If we lose sight of this, we will err.

Third, we must be careful *not to read Paul's use of words into James or vice versa*. Each author may use the same word or term, but with different nuances or understanding of the meaning. We will especially deal with this next week when we look at the word *justified*. We must seek to understand James' point in its context, and Paul's point in its context before we seek to harmonize them.

Finally, we must seek to *synthesize all that the Bible teaches* on a particular topic into one harmonized, unified whole. This is the work of systematic theology, to seek to understand what the whole Bible teaches on a subject. And, we must put the *same emphasis* on a subject that the Bible puts on it. To take a minor doctrine and blow it up into the central teaching of the Christian life is to fall into error, even if the doctrine is true. To dodge or neglect a major doctrine because you do not like it is to go astray from the truth.

So when we come to a difficult text, we must have teachable hearts that seek the Lord for understanding. And, our bottom line must always be to apply the truth personally. Our prayer should always be, “Lord, teach me Your truth and enable me to obey it.” To understand our text, we need to explore four propositions:

1. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

James is not disputing that we are saved by faith alone. Rather, he is dealing with the question, *what is true saving faith?* If you have a King James or New King James Bible, the translation in verse 14 is misleading. It reads (implying a negative answer), "Can faith save him?" For some reason, the translators omitted the Greek definite article before "faith." It should read, "Can the faith save him?" in Greek grammar, this is called the "article of previous reference." It should be translated, "Can *that* [or, *such*] faith save him?" It refers to the faith that James has just mentioned: a faith that someone professes to have, but it has no works.

James has already stated (1:17), "Every good thing given and every perfect gift" comes from God. This surely includes His gift of salvation! James continues (1:18), "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth" Those words show that the new birth (or, salvation), was not due to anything in us (thus it's *by grace*). Rather, it comes to us by the exercise of *God's* will. James also referred to (2:1), "your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." He would line up with other New Testament texts that show that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

For example, Ephesians 2:8-9 states plainly: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." Many forget that Ephesians 2:10 follows 2:9: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." So James and Paul both teach that salvation is by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And both James and Paul teach that genuine faith results in good works. But,

2. There is such a thing as false faith, which does not save.

C. E. B. Cranfield (cited by John MacArthur, *Faith Works* [Word], p. 148) correctly observes, "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." Satan is the master deceiver. Since salvation is through faith, it is not surprising that he works overtime to lead

people astray on the matter of saving faith. If Satan can get someone to think that he will get into heaven because of his many good deeds, apart from faith in Christ, he is perfectly content to watch that person devote his entire life to good deeds. Or, if a person who was born and raised in the church thinks, "I'm going to heaven because I believe in Jesus as my Savior"—but, his faith is merely intellectual and it doesn't affect his daily life—Satan is happy with such false "faith."

A key word in James 2:14 is *says*. This person *says* that he has faith, but talk is cheap. James contends that such a claim must be tested. He uses the illustration of a brother or sister in Christ coming to church. It's cold outside and this person does not have adequate clothing to stay warm. He (or she) is hungry and has no food. Someone in the church shakes their hand and says, "Have a nice day! Stay warm and eat a good dinner!" But, he sends the person out the door with no help for his needs. James asks, "What use is that?" He calls such "faith" *dead faith* (2:17). He drills this home by calling it *useless* and again referring to it as *dead* (2:20, 26).

Someone may argue that this really isn't faith at all, and James would readily grant this. But, James does call it *faith*, because the one who professes it *thinks* that he has faith. But, James' point is that it is *counterfeit* or *false* faith.

Paul spoke of false faith when he wrote (1 Cor. 15:1-2), "Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain." It is possible to believe in vain. He refers to the same thing with regard to certain false teachers (Titus 1:16): "They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed." Their profession of faith is false. Such false faith does not save.

3. The faith that does not save is a mere profession of faith that does not result in a life of good deeds.

A key word in James 2:14 is *says*. James does not refer to someone who has *genuine* faith, but no works, because genuine faith *necessarily* results in a life of good works. Just as a seed that you

plant will necessarily, because of the life that is in it, grow into a tree that bears fruit according to its kind, so genuine saving faith will produce good works.

Necessarily does not mean *automatically*. Just as the seed must be watered and cultivated to bear fruit, so saving faith must be nurtured to bear the fruit of good deeds. But those good deeds are not tacked onto saving faith. Rather, they are inherent in such saving faith. They stem from its very nature.

When God imparts salvation to a sinner, He changes the heart. In Ezekiel (36:26-27), God promised, "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." That promise came to fruition in the new covenant that Jesus inaugurated. Thus the apostle Paul wrote (2 Cor. 5:17), "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."

Thus genuine faith *necessarily* results in a changed heart because of the new birth (John 3:1-8). When God imparts new life to us, we are changed from within. In John 5:24, Jesus said, "Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life." There is a fundamental change from death to life that is associated with genuine faith. Because of its very nature, this new life will result in good works.

Thus Jesus did not contradict Himself just a few verses later, when He said (John 5:28-29), "Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment." He meant that those who have passed out of death into life (John 5:24) will live in accordance with that new life. Their lives are marked by good deeds.

Those who merely *say* that they have saving faith, but who live for themselves, are deceived. Such false "faith" does not save anyone. The apostle John deals with this kind of false profession

throughout First John. For example, 1 John 1:6 states, "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth." Or, (1 John 2:4), "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." Again (1 John 2:5b-6), "By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked." The point is the same throughout Scripture: Saving faith results in a changed life of good deeds. False faith is empty profession, lacking good deeds.

This is, I think, the point of verse 18. James brings up a hypothetical comment that someone may make: "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." This is a difficult verse to interpret, because whatever view you take has problems that cannot be resolved! Part of the problem stems from the fact that the original Greek did not have punctuation, and so we do not know where the quotation ends. It may end after, "You have faith and I have works." The remainder of the verse would then be James' reply.

The hypothetical person would then be raising an objection that James answers. The problem is, the objection doesn't fit the problem that James is addressing, that of the person who says, "I have faith," but he has no works. In other words, the pronouns are not consistent with the context. So we have to assume that the objector is saying something else, namely, that it is possible to have faith without works or works without faith. James retorts that it is impossible to verify faith apart from works, since faith is a hidden attitude of the heart. The only way that we can see true faith is by the person's works.

Because of the awkwardness of this view, others say that the hypothetical person is not objecting to James' view, but rather agreeing with him. This makes the pronouns consistent, but it requires translating the strong adversative ("but") as an emphatic, "yes, indeed." While grammatically possible, that is linguistically improbable, because as Peter Davids explains, "no one has yet been able to find a case where this common stylistic introduction did not introduce an opposing or disagreeing voice" (*New International Greek Testament Commentary on James* [Eerdmans], p. 124).

If I lost you in this discussion, James' point is probably that you cannot separate true faith from good deeds. If someone claims to have faith but has no good deeds, his claim proves nothing. Just as seeing fruit on a tree tells you that the tree is alive, so seeing good deeds is one sign that the person has new life in Christ.

4. The faith that does not save may be doctrinally correct, but there is no change of heart or behavior.

James' words in verse 19 would have shocked his readers. He states the core of the Jewish Shema (Deut. 6:4): "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!" Every Jew and Christian believes that truth. The doctrine of the Trinity does not contradict it. God is one God, and yet He is three persons. James commends the professing believer for holding to this truth: "You do well." Then he sticks in the knife: "The demons also believe, and shudder." The demons are doctrinally orthodox!

Not only that, they even experience an emotional response to the truth: they shudder in fear! They're more responsive than the one who has a mere intellectual faith! But the problem is, the demons cannot repent. They have no change of mind, where they turn from their rebellion to submission to God. They have no change of heart, where they turn from hating God to loving Him. They have no change of will or behavior, where they turn from disobedience to obedience. Faith that does not result in a change from self-centered rebellion to God-centered obedience is no better than the faith of demons!

James is not implying that sound doctrine is unimportant or irrelevant. There is a strong emphasis throughout the entire Bible on the truth, with many warnings against false teachers. Saving faith must rest on Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture. To believe in a Christ of your own imagination is to believe in an idol. To trust in someone or something for eternal life other than Jesus Christ and His death on the cross is to be deceived on the most important issue in life.

There are many people who have trusted in their good works to get them into heaven. From a human standpoint, they were good people who spent their lives serving others. But if they never turned from their sin and trusted in Christ and His shed blood,

their good works did not get them into heaven. Mother Teresa, for example, was a very good person. But if she trusted in her good works, rather than in Christ, or if she trusted in the virgin Mary to get her into heaven, she went to hell! Albert Schweitzer spent his life as a medical missionary in Africa. He was a good man, but he denied the historical Jesus. His good deeds did not get him into heaven. Good deeds will not get anyone into heaven.

So, James' point (in 2:19) is *not* that believing in sound doctrine is unimportant. Rather, his point is that believing sound doctrine alone is insufficient for salvation. Genuine saving faith is always connected with the new birth. New life in Christ necessarily results in a life of good deeds. To sum up, James is saying,

Genuine saving faith necessarily results in a life
of good works, whereas false faith does not.

Conclusion

Those who hold to the non-lordship salvation view (they prefer to call it the "free grace" view) will raise an objection. If genuine saving faith is proved by good works, then *how many* good works does it take to prove it? Is one good deed enough? Does it take 100 or 1,000? If it takes even one, they argue, then salvation is not by faith *alone*, but rather by faith *plus works*.

But that is to miss James' point. He is not saying that we must add works to our faith to make it genuine. He is saying that *genuine faith, by its very nature, accompanies the new birth*. When God changes a person's heart, when He raises that dead sinner to new life, He imparts saving faith. That new life and genuine faith will result in a new direction in life. Just as a seed when planted grows into a fruit tree, so the seed of new life in Christ produces the fruit of godly character and good deeds.

Picture it this way: Suppose that I am in Phoenix, which for sake of illustration represents Satan's kingdom (the temperature is comparable!). I decide to walk to beautiful, cool Flagstaff (representing heaven!), where it has never reached 100 degrees. So I begin walking north. A few miles into the journey, I am hot and there is a roadside lemonade stand. I stop for a glass of cold lemonade.

Just then, you come by and see me sipping lemonade in the shade. You might think, "He isn't walking to Flagstaff, he's just

sitting there sipping lemonade!" At that precise moment, you're correct. Or, if I were building a house by the lemonade stand, and settling in there, you'd be right. But, to get the true picture, you'd need to observe the overall direction of my life. If you saw me get up and continue toward Flagstaff, you could rightly conclude, by the direction of my life, that I was walking to Flagstaff.

A true Christian may fall into sin. He may temporarily be seduced by the world and its pleasures. But if he has genuine saving faith, the overall direction of his life will be toward holiness and good deeds. As 1 John 3:9 states, "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God." He's not living in Phoenix. He isn't building a house by the lemonade stand. He will move on to grow in godliness and good deeds. Genuine saving faith necessarily results in a life of good works. False faith does not. As Paul told the Corinthians (2 Cor. 13:5a), "Test yourself to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!"

Application Questions

1. A new believer tells you, "I think that my heart is changed, but I still am drawn toward old sins." Your counsel?
2. A person makes a profession of faith, gets involved in serving the Lord, but then falls away. How can we know if his faith was genuine or false?
3. Someone may say, "Doctrine is based on personal opinion and is divisive. It doesn't matter what a person believes as long as they live a good life." What Scriptures refute this view?
4. Someone may object, "It is not fair of God to condemn to hell a good person who spent his life serving others." Your reply?

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