

Faith, as a topic, has been present throughout the first two chapters. Now James focuses on the question, how we should view a person who claims that they have faith, but there is no evidence of it. It is important to remember what James already wrote in 1:13-18. He does not change his thinking in chapter 2. (1) God gives the new birth. It is a gift and is not earned. (2) Every good gift, including our salvation, comes from God. Our salvation is not from us.

I. *The question of faith without works (2:14)*

1. James is not suggesting that someone is trying to fake faith. The person truly thinks that he or she believes.
2. James is using the word “works” in a broad sense. It includes good deeds done for people but also any visible action which is a product of faith.
3. James is not asking if faith can save, but if that sort of faith can save, which produces nothing is a person’s life. And James expects “no” as an answer.

Consider the parable of the soils. Some people’s faith wither when persecution comes and they do not produce fruit, as did the fourth soil (Luke 8:13, 15). Faith that does not produce fruit is not the faith that will save.

II. *Two principles concerning faith and works to prove that a “fruitless” faith does not save (2:15-22)*

1. *The first principle: words alone are powerless (2:15-17).*

The illustration in verses 15-16 is both an example of faith without works and a picture to help explain what faith without works means. Well-meant words, like “keep warm and well fed,” without any action, help no one. So also faith that is just words is powerless.

To be saved we must “confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead” (Romans 10:9). But it is possible to say the words, yet not believe. Such words alone do not save. We should be careful that our hearts do not deceive us (*Jeremiah 17:9*) and check that our faith is real (*2 Corinthians 13:5*).

2. *The second principle: words alone prove nothing (2:18-25).*

- a. Introduction of the principle (2:18): Someone might suggest that faith and deeds are not connected. James challenges that person to show such “fruitless” faith. He can demonstrate his faith by what he does. Faith is necessary, but just claiming to have faith proves nothing.
- b. The “faith” of demons (2:19): Demons believe that there is a God and a future judgment (*Matthew 8:29*). Though they shudder, such belief did not change them and thus does not save them.
- c. The faith of Abraham (2:20-24): James offers a positive example, Abraham, to show that faith will result in action. Both Paul (in Romans 4) and James quote Genesis 15:6, that, when God promised Abraham a son, “Abram believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness.” That son, Isaac, was born about 30 years later. Another 20 years after that, by faith Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac at the command of God, believing that God would raise him from the dead (*Hebrews 11:19*).

The apostle Paul taught that salvation was a gift of God. Salvation is given by grace and received by faith. We get saved and remain saved, not because we earn it, but because we have placed our trust in God. James accepts at the start of his letter that salvation is a gift of God. Salvation is not earned. But he then asks if a man can claim to have faith and yet have nothing to show that that faith is active in his life. Only when there is a visible outworking of it, can we know that faith is truly present.

Paul agreed with James. (See *2 Corinthians 13:5*; *Romans 8:5*; *Galatians 5:6*.) The one who is truly saved by faith, will also live by faith. They will live differently.

James would have known well the story of Abraham and that faith was counted to Abraham for righteousness in Genesis 15:6. Isaac had not yet even be born! James is not referring to the justification of Genesis 15. Instead, as he explains, faith becomes active with deeds. Deeds are a demonstration of faith. Faith becomes all that it should be through its actions.

Deeds do not bring about salvation. Deeds demonstrate a living faith.

- d. The faith of Rahab (2:25): Rahab was a Canaanite in Jericho while Israel wandered in the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan. She believed the reports of the miraculous things which God did for Israel and that He was the most high God. She put her belief into action when she hid and protected Israelite spies. Otherwise, her belief about God would have been no different than that of the demons.

James has shown that a belief in the existence of God is not enough. Belief that saves is present when the word has taken root in our hearts and produces action like it did in Abraham and Rahab.

III. *A concluding analogy (2:26)*

The word translated “spirit” (in verse 26) also means “breath” and makes better sense here. We see that a body is dead, when there is no breath. So also works show that faith is alive.

God intends for His children to bear fruit. If we are truly trusting in Christ, we will be fruitful. We need to encourage one another to have a faith that produces good works. *Cf.* Hebrews 10:24. Is our faith alive in every area of our lives? True faith that saves goes beyond what we profess with our mouths. Those who are saved by faith have new hearts. Out of those hearts comes spiritual fruit to the glory of God (*John 15:8*).