

# James 2:14-17

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## *Faith Without Works is Unhelpful*

*James illustrates how it is not useful to have faith but to fail to take action. If someone is suffering, and a believer merely wishes them well, rather than helping, what good is that? If we do not add action to our faith, our faith grows cold and inert.*

James asks his readers a rhetorical question:

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

The implied answer is, “No.”

Stated directly, James is saying, “It is useless to claim to have faith and not have works.”

He is speaking to brethren (Greek, “adelphos,” which occurs 15 times in his letter). He calls these brethren (brothers and sisters), “beloved” and “first fruits” of God’s creation (James 1:16-18). They are first fruits, the first yield of a harvest, of the human race being reconciled with God (Matthew 9:37). The “brethren” James is writing to are Jewish “brethren in Christ,” fellow family members already in God’s family due to their faith in Jesus. This fact is impactful because the audience addressed insists that the information applies to them directly.

When James asks *Can that faith save him?* he cannot mean *save* from hell, because he is already writing to brethren-in-Christ who are already saved from hell. Whenever we see the word *save* (Greek, “sozo”) in the Bible, we need to look at the context and ask ourselves who/what is being delivered/saved from what? An obvious example is the following verse from Mark, where translators render “sozo” as “well” because the context makes clear that the woman had been delivered/saved from a disease:

“And He [Jesus] said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well [“sozo”]; go in peace and be healed of your affliction.’”  
(Mark 5:34)

The translators could justifiably have rendered this verse from Mark as “Daughter, your faith has made you saved; go in peace and be healed of your affliction.” In that case, it would be left to the reader to ask themselves “Who/what is being delivered from what?” and conclude that the woman is being delivered from a disease. The immediate context of James is similar to this verse from Mark; James is asking whether inaction from a believer (one with faith) can deliver that person from something.

So, since the word *save* (Greek “sozo”) is not a technical term with a single meaning applied in all contexts (like ‘talent’ in Matthew 25), we must determine from the context here, “Who/what is being saved from what?” *Save* (Greek, “sozo”) carries the meaning of “deliver, preserve, or rescue.” In this context, James has already established his readers’ estate as brethren in Christ.

The question James has been raising throughout his letter to this point is not whether these Jewish believers have faith—they do. The question is whether their faith will be put into action, overcoming difficulty, so it can be made complete (James 1:2). A completed faith results in being approved at the judgment seat of Christ and receiving great rewards, such as the “crown of life” (James 1:12).

In order to have their faith approved, James has exhorted these believers to lay aside their inner wickedness, from their old nature, and replace it with the embedded word of God, which will deliver/save (“sozo”) their lives/souls from the consequences of sin (that comes from the inner wickedness of the old nature) which leads to death (James 1:15, 21).

James makes clear that this is a matter of their choice. They can either choose to act upon their faith, and be approved/rewarded, or they can choose to not act upon their faith and suffer the negative consequences of sin, which James calls death. Death is separation, separation from what is good. When we die physically we are separated from our physical body. When Adam and Eve sinned they were exiled/separated from Eden. When believers sin, we are separated from the immense blessings associated with acting upon our faith. Those blessings flow to us, as well as to others.

The preceding passage ended with the verses:

“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.”  
(James 2:12-13)

So the immediate context continues to carry the same basic message, that believers who have been delivered from the eternal penalty of sin through faith (a deliverance that can neither be earned nor lost) now have an important choice to make each day. That choice is whether to walk in obedience to God’s commands in order to also be delivered from the consequences of sin, and gain the great rewards of faith.

Even though their relationship with God as His child is secure, they will only experience the tangible benefits from that relationship if they walk in the obedience of faith. Like a royal child who chooses to leave the palace and live under a bridge—they will lose the benefits of their royal station. Jesus will judge the deeds of each believer, and reward them accordingly. In James 2:12-13 (quoted above, speaking of believers being judged by the mercy they show to others) James might have in mind the teaching of Jesus from His Sermon on the Mount:

“For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.”  
(Matthew 7:2)

Further reinforcing the point that “sozo” (save) should be applied based on context, to determine who/what is being delivered from what, James uses “sozo” later in this letter to refer to deliverance from sickness. (“Sozo” is the Greek word translated as *save* in the phrase *can that faith save him*):

“...and the prayer offered in faith will restore [“sozo”] the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.”  
(James 5:15)

Elsewhere, James uses the word “saved” (“sozo”) in his letter to refer to deliverance from physical death (a common theme in wisdom literature):

“My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save (“sozo”) his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”  
(James 5:19-20)

When James asks *Can that faith save him?* he cannot be talking about being “saved” in the from-hell-to-heaven sense, as that is not an applicable conversation for those who are already believers (brothers/sisters) who make up the audience receiving this letter. Further, the immediate context of James 2:14 (which includes the phrase *can that faith save him*) is about believers being judged by Christ for deeds done while living on the earth. And this flows together with the overall context of James 1, which speaks of refining faith through trials in order to gain rewards in the next life, as well as a greatly enhanced experience in this life (life versus death, James 1:2,12-14, 21).

The phrase rendered here as *that faith* in the phrase *Can that faith save him?* (speaking of *faith that has no works*) is better rendered simply as *faith* (as it is in the KJV, NKJV, RSV). It is out of context here to add a qualifier that shifts the issue from *faith* in general to a particular kind of *faith*, a category of *faith*, rather than *faith* itself. James is saying that *faith is faith*, but when it is divorced from works, it has no result of deliverance; in this context deliverance from the negative consequences that come from choosing sin. When believers choose to walk in obedience, the same faith would then have works. Accordingly then faith in action would have a positive result. Walking in obedience delivers believers from the consequence of following our inner wickedness (death) and leads us instead to gain the great reward of life (in this life) and the crown of life (in the next life, James 1:12).

Therefore in this verse here in Chapter 2, where James asks his *brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works*, whether *faith* will *save him*, the discussion is about believers being delivered from the negative consequences of sin. Romans 1 says when anyone chooses to walk in sin, apart from God’s design, God turns them over to the natural adverse consequence of sin, which leads to what we might call in modern times addiction and loss of mental health (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). Thus, James’s intent is, appropriately, to equip his followers by helping them adopt a perspective that leads them to make choices that are actually in their best interest.

If we ignore context and interpret the word *save* to mean “saved from Hell” in James’s question *Can that faith save him?* that would mean that eternal life must be earned through good deeds. It further would mean that James has shifted completely from Chapter 1, which speaks of setting aside sinful desires, replacing it with the word of God, and refining our faith. Further, this approach contradicts many passages that assert that faith alone in Christ is what saves us from eternal separation from God (John 3:14-16, Ephesians 2:8).

The gift of eternal life is a gift that is given without condition. Once we have received it, we cannot lose it, nor can anything take it away from us (John 10:28-29, Romans 8:38-39, Jude 24). However, becoming God’s child bestows upon us an immense responsibility, with enormous consequences. The *faith* James is discussing here has to do with our spiritual effectiveness, as stewards of the grace bestowed upon us. It is up to us to decide whether to pursue a path of growth. It is God’s will that we make choices that lead to our sanctification, right now on this earth in our life as believers (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8). Just as with physical birth, spiritual birth is given as a gift. Also, just as with our physical life, our experience of life is greatly influenced by our choices.

James follows his question as to whether faith without deeds can deliver any believer from the adverse consequence of sin with an example. He gives an example of how faith without works is useless and does not benefit anyone:

*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?*

The example here is directed to fellow believers who are lacking some of the basics of life’s necessities (*clothing, daily food*). James is shining a light on the problem of saying one thing (*Go in peace, be warmed and be filled*), while failing to act on the very words (*yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body*, you do not help their need for *clothing* or *daily food*). You are all talk, and no action. Your talk is kind, you hope the best for the person in need, but what does it matter how kind your words are when you won’t actually help the person?

When believers do not exercise their faith, it becomes inactive. Therefore, the great benefits of faith set forth in Chapter 1 are not experienced. We cannot benefit from faith if we do not act. It is the obedience of faith that saves us from temptation (James 1:12) and our inner wickedness (James 1:14) which leads to death (James 1:15). Thus, exercising faith, walking by the word (James 1:21) rather than by our own passions (James 1:14) allows us to be delivered/saved from the resulting adverse consequences of sin (death). By inference then, if we do not exercise our faith, if we do not add deeds to our faith (James 1:12, 15), the adverse consequences of sin will be our lot. James asserts:

*Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.*

Here James emphasizes the conclusion outright. Faith without matching works, without a corresponding outlet, is simply *dead*. It is a sanctification or spiritual growth concern for a

believer that is in James's mind and words. He is dealing with the practical faith of the believer, not the saving faith required for the lost (John 3:16, John 5:24, Romans 5:1).

In order to be *dead*, something must first be alive. In this way, James is not saying the faith is not real or good or true, but that the faith has no opportunity to be alive (or stay alive) without matching actions or *works*. Death is separation. A body dies when it separates from the indwelling spirit. The physical body still exists. But it is dead because it has no spirit animating it. As we will see in James 2:26, just as the spirit animates a physical body, making it alive, so deeds animate faith. A physical body can exist without a spirit, but it is not useful to anyone, because it lacks energy to animate. In the same way, faith can exist without deeds, but it is not useful to anyone, because it lacks energy to animate.

James is saying that both having *faith* and putting *faith* into action are the responsibility of the individual believer on a daily basis. The spiritual new birth is something Jesus does for us (John 3:14-16; 2 Corinthians 5:17). The gift of eternal life is a gift. But God delegates to each believer the responsibility to make choices to live in the reality of their new birth.

Each person controls three things: 1) who or what they trust, 2) their perspective, and 3) their actions. James addresses each of these things systematically, exhorting believers to 1) trust God, and His rewards, rather than the passing pleasures of the world, 2) choose a perspective that exercising faith in the midst of difficulty is a privilege, because it allows us to grow our faith to maturity, which gains for us the greatest possible reward, and 3) choose to take actions that follow God's direction for us, because we trust God, and choose a perspective that is true.

### **Biblical Text**

<sup>14</sup> What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, <sup>16</sup> 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? <sup>17</sup> Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.