

James 2:18-20

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The Objector Argues Against Adding Works to Faith

James anticipates someone will argue with him, saying that faith and works have no connection to one another. James counters this belief as foolish; to have faith but not act on it is not beneficial.

James knows that some of his readers (who are brethren and believers) will feel defensive at his exhortation that they need to put action with their words, *works* with their *faith*. So, anticipating the complaint that someone will raise, James constructs a dialogue and answers the question preemptively, so as to put it to rest. He quotes what an Objector will likely say in response to him, so that he can answer this objection. It is likely he has already heard this objection before, that there is a debate among the early believers about faith and works, which is why he has a preemptive response.

First, before we comment on verses 16-20, there is an issue of translation and punctuation which must be addressed. Different Biblical translations put the quotation marks of James' imaginary Objector in different places. The ESV and NIV end the Objector's quote after the first occurrence of *works*—"You have faith and I have works." The NASB ends the Objector's argument at the end of verse 18.

There is no consensus as to where the Objector's argument ends. Why is this? Because the book of James was written in Koine Greek, which did not use punctuation. There are no quotation marks in the original writing. It is up to us to determine where the quotation ends, when the Objector stops and James answers.

The context makes clear that James did not write this dialogue to be a mysterious puzzle. James is instructing his disciples. Therefore we should expect James to provide obvious indicators as to where his imagined Objector's arguments end and where his (James's) response begins. We believe that is the case, as we will argue.

It is TheBibleSays' contention that the Objector's argument ends after the word *shudder*. Therefore, James' imaginary Objector's full objection is found in verses 18-19:

"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."

The objection, whatever it is, does not support or match James's assertion that 'faith without works is dead' (verse 17).

We propose that James gives the reader clear markers for the beginning and ending of the Objector's objection with the words *someone*, to begin the objection, and *foolish fellow* to end it.

Someone tells the reader that James is quoting an Objector: *someone may well say*. With the use of *someone*, James signals to us that he is switching voices, and what follows will be the voice of *someone* other than James.

You foolish fellow tells us that James is now responding to the Objector, whom he considers a *foolish fellow* making a *foolish* argument.

This same form of objection is found in 1 Corinthians 15:35–36:

“But someone will say, ‘How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?’
You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies...”

- “Someone will say” starts the quotation of the Objector.
- “You fool!” begins Paul’s response. All that is in between the “someone will say” and “You fool” is the Objector’s argument.

Further supporting that the Objector’s argument ends just before *you foolish fellow* is that the illustration about demons having faith fits the objection, not James’ instruction. James is not the one using demons as an illustration. It is the *foolish fellow* using demons as an illustration to argue that James believes in God and does good things, but demons also believe in God and they don’t do good things, thus faith and works are unrelated. To attribute to James the statement *You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder* would cause James to be responding to the Objector with a senseless argument.

- James would be asserting by way of refutation that *You believe God is one. You do well*. Neither of these statements would relate to nor in any way answer the Objector’s statement *You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works*.
- James would be challenging the Objector to show him *faith without the works*, when the Objector did not assert that he had any faith. He asserted that he had works (*I have works*).
- The Objector claimed to have works, so for James to claim in response that *I will show you my faith by my works*, it would seem James is conceding the argument, since the Objector began by claiming he had works.
- If the quotation marks properly end after *You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works*, then James’s response to that assertion would be to invoke demons and faith, which fails to make sense.

It seems clear from all angles then that the Objector’s statement begins with *But someone may well say* then ends with *But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow*. Therefore, this is how the dialogue should read:

James: “*But someone may well say,*”

Objector: “*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.*”

James: “*But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?*”

Specifically, the Objector’s points are:

- *You (James) have faith*
- *I (Objector) have works*
- *James, show me your faith without the works*
- *and I (the Objector) will show you my faith by my works*
- *You (James) believe that God is one. You (James) do well.*
- *the demons also believe (the same as you, James) and shudder.*
 - [The demons, though believing in the oneness of God, do not do good. They shudder. They bristle. They freeze up.]

Explanation:

Simply put, James is asserting that faith without works is ‘dead,’ while the Objector is countering the view, asserting that faith without works is ‘alive’ because faith and works are separate, unconnected. They can be exercised independently.

James’s point is that faith and works have such an intimate connection that if one does not add works to their faith, then the faith itself is useless. James is talking about a living and active (spiritually growing/sanctifying) faith, as seen in his original example concerning feeding and clothing another Christian (James 2:15-16). He is not speaking about justification-by-faith-apart-from-works salvation (Romans 4:5), but rather sanctification by a vibrant faith that is completed by action. Sanctification is being saved from the power and consequences of sin through daily obedience. Justification is a free gift we are given through faith in Christ.

The Objector is arguing that faith and works are separate things that have no meaningful connection. It is understandable that someone in the early church could extend faith-alone-in-Christ-alone to apply to all aspects of faith, even after one’s spiritual rebirth. James sees this as a mistake.

To prove his point, the Objector offers a couple of arguments:

1. “You, James, can’t prove your own faith without works. Faith is an internal thing—you can say you have faith, but how can anyone know? Similarly, I (the Objector) can’t prove I have faith by the works I do. I might be doing the works for selfish reasons. Just because I do something does not prove I have faith.” The Objector’s argument, then, is that faith and works are separate things that can exist apart from one another and can

prove nothing about each other. “You, James, have faith. I (the Objector) have works. They exist separately. There is nothing more to it.”

2. “You, James, believe in the oneness of God. From that belief you respond by doing good. Good for you. The demons have the exact same belief, they know God is real. But they bristle/shudder as a response. It’s the same faith, but different ‘works.’” This, the Objector claims, proves that faith and works are independent of one another.

James responds to the Objector, signaling to us that he now is speaking again by calling the Objector a *foolish fellow*. James answers the objection in verse 20, by saying, “*But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?*” In the response here James adjusts from *dead* to *useless* (idle, ineffective, etc.).

James is addressing the mistaken assumption that spiritual growth is achieved through faith-alone-apart-from-works. We can infer that there were members of James’s audience who weren’t helping anyone, while at the same time boasting about their faith in Jesus (James 2:1-6, 2:14-15).

James is not doubting that they believe in Jesus, but he is saying that their faith is *useless*. It is useless both to the people they could be helping as well as to themselves. Those not exercising their faith are not being delivered from their own internal wickedness, nor are they growing their walk of faith, that they might be approved, and win the crown of life (James 1:12).

We can further infer that these folks who maintained that they were spiritually sanctified apart from their deeds were practicing favoritism, putting rich people in good seats at church and making poor people stand or sit on the floor (James 2:1-6). Therefore, these people would have been trying to have their cake and eat it too. They were seeking approval from the world, while maintaining a position that they were spiritually complete. This flies directly in the face of Jesus’s teaching, that light and darkness cannot mix. Believers cannot have both the rewards of the world and the rewards of God’s kingdom:

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”
(Matthew 6:24)

To practice favoritism does not mean you don’t believe in Jesus, but it certainly means you are not obeying Jesus; you are mistreating/exploiting people based on worldly standards. James is getting onto his readers for being partial (James 2:9).

That is where the *faith* they hold is *useless*, because they do not have the *works* which Jesus has called us to do (John 14:15, Matthew 22:39). Earlier, James was urging his readers to practice mercy, rather than favoritism:

“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)

To have *faith* without *works* isn't somehow "not-faith," rather it causes our faith to be *dead* and *useless*. Peter uses this same word to counter the same issue when he says,

"For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."
(2 Peter 1:8)

Here Peter is concerned with the believer being useless and 'unfruitful' (fruitless). Like James, Peter is focused on challenging the already-justified-in-Christ to grow in such a way as to believe-and-do. Is it possible for a Christian to believe but not do? Of course. We have all done that (1 John 1:8).

Paul echoes the same concern about the possibility (and error) of believers being unfruitful when he says,

"Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful."
(Titus 3:14)

Fruitfulness is something to be learned, not something that just naturally occurs. Just as human children must be trained to be productive, so it is in the spiritual realm.

In the following verses, James will show to the *foolish fellow* why *faith without works is useless*.

Biblical Text

¹⁸ 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." ¹⁹ You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. ²⁰ But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?