

Faith + Works

(A Statement on James Chapter 2 and 1 John Texts)

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How should we understand the faith + works texts in James chapter 2 and the tests of justification? How should we interpret the various texts in 1 John that speak of Christians not sinning, not loving the world, living righteously, and loving others which are viewed as tests of life to prove they have experienced the new birth (1 John 3:10, 14-15; 4:7-8)?

It should be understood that James in chapter 2 and John in his first epistle are looking at things through the prism of a Christian obeying the new nature and being controlled or dominated by the Spirit. They are presenting things in black and white terms (a clearly defined fashion) to show how a Christian acts when dominated by the new life, nature, and Holy Spirit. In the end they are teaching that when a person has passed from death unto life (1 John 3:14) there will be a noticeable difference between those who are genuinely saved and those who are counterfeit (1 John 2:3-4, 17; 3:8-10, 14-15; 4:7-8; 5:18). Their faith and life will manifest some fruit and transformation of living which gives evidence of their salvation (James 2). They will not continually and habitually live in sin without manifesting some signs of regenerating life.

A person cannot be a Christian and never reflect anything of Christ and His transforming grace. James argues that authentic faith will make a difference in our living. If we have genuinely believed on Christ alone to be our Savior, some evidence should be showing up in our lives. Authentic faith will make a difference in us, somehow, somewhere, sometime. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). The changes in our lives do not bring about our salvation; they result from the salvation we already possess (John 15:16; Gal. 5:22-23). Authentic

Christianity goes from head to heart to hand and foot. It shows up in a new quality of life, new direction, new motivations. That is the bottom line.

The epistles of James and John are giving a stark contrast or dichotomy between children of God and children of the devil, as Jesus did (John 8:44), to illustrate that God's children will with varying degrees and at different times in their lives manifest a spiritual difference from the unsaved who do not possess God's life and nature. Of course, this is not to say Christians do not sin. John, James, and Paul all concluded that no Christian is without sin and perfectly righteous (1 John 1:8; 2:1; James 4:1-10; Phil. 3:13-14). James and John are not ignoring the fact that Christians can temporarily and even for an extended time lapse into sin, living on the carnal side of life instead of the spiritual (1 Cor. 3:1-3; 11:28-32; 2 Tim. 4:10; James 4:1-4; 3 John 9). David took up with Bathsheba and Peter denied the Lord. Christians can fall into sin in the race of the Christian life and sometimes not progress spiritually in their lives. But this does not mean they will remain there and never show any signs of regenerating life.

James and John are writing about Christians in an abstract or theoretical way, a black and white or clearly defined fashion ("he cannot sin" – 1 John 3:8). They are explaining what Christians should always be like as they live by the dictates of the new nature, possessing no faults and failures, without dealing with the obvious reality of sinful failures of Christians in these specific chapters. Both John and James seem to use this approach, not to prove sinless perfection, but that God's children cannot totally and forever give themselves to the devil and continually and habitually practice sin without manifesting signs of regenerating life. In essence, they must live differently because of the indwelling life of God and new nature which prompts them to a different way of life (1 John 3:8). James argues in a similar way: "Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone" (James 2:17). Genuine faith in Christ results in a new way of life (good works and transformation of living).

Simply stated, James and John drive home the point that God's children do live differently from the devil's children because they are born again and possess God's life and nature (1 John 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). Since they possess this new birth and the new nature there will be various marks and varying amounts of transforming (sanctifying) grace occurring in their lives (Titus 2:11-12; Phil. 2:13). The epistles of James and John are giving a general overview that contrasts the saved who have God's life from the unsaved who do not have God's life. Their conclusion is that

there is a marked difference between children of the devil and children of God when surveying the basic course of their lives (1 John 3:10).

In other words, all of God's children will characteristically, and in some measure, when looking at the entire snapshot (picture) of their lives, demonstrate that they possess regenerating life even though there are temporary failures, sinful departures, and spiritual standstills within their Christian lives (1 John 1:7-10). James



2:26 declares: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (*it is lifeless, inactive, useless, and not real*). A dead faith, or faith without works, without any signs of regenerating life accompanying it, is the picture or snapshot of someone who was never truly saved. Their alleged faith in Christ is sham or counterfort – they have "believed in vain" (1 Cor. 15:2). Jesus said, "Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16). A picture is worth a thousand words! What is the picture of your life?

Both James and John are teaching the principle that life begets life and death begets death (1 John 3:14-15; James 2:17, 20, 26). A general or panoramic overview of a person's life provides a secondary assurance that one is saved (2 Pet. 1:10). The primary assurance is a person's faith in Christ (John 3:16; 6:47; 1 John 5:11-13). Both James and John are teaching that if a person claims to be a Christian but gives no evidence of this by the way he lives, then he is not saved.

Edmond Hiebert states:

"James insists that an inoperative faith is useless (vv. 14–17) and that even an orthodox faith if it produces no works is barren of saving power (vv. 18–20)."

James 2:24 is the conclusion of the whole matter of faith + works:

"Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only."

Because of this passage, Luther, to whom the doctrine of justification by faith alone was a precious truth, discarded the whole epistle of James and termed it "a right strawy epistle" and without evangelical character. But Luther misunderstood the purpose for this statement. James is insisting that any profession of being justified

by faith alone (James 2:23) must be proven by the works of the one making the profession. Abraham's faith alone in God's revelation (Gen. 15:8; Rom. 4:3) was verified when he obeyed God, when he gave proof of his justification before God based on his works - the offering of his son Isaac (Genesis 22:9-12).

It should be noted that Genesis 12 comes before Genesis 22. This means that Abraham's faith alone in God's revelation occurred in Chapter 12 (Genesis 15:6 is looking back to Genesis 12:1-7) but the verification and proof of the genuineness of his faith and salvation occurred in Genesis 22. The works were not part of his faith but they followed his faith and became ample proof of his justification before God. Rahab also gave evidence that her faith and justification was genuine by her obedience (James 2:25). So when the Bible says Abraham and Rahab were "justified by works" (James 2:21, 25) it does not mean that our legal justification before God's throne is based upon our good works or deeds (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16).

In the context of what James is teaching being "justified by works" means God validated and confirmed their justification as being genuine through their obedience and works. Good works or deeds do not *make* us righteous, but they *show* us to be righteous before God. Paul said that Abraham was justified by faith alone (Rom. 4:3), and James said that Abraham was justified by faith alone (James 2:23) which was then evidenced by what he did (James 2:21, 26). Once again, people are justified before God by faith (Rom. 1:17) but they are "justified by works" in the sense that their justified position before God and faith in God is confirmed as being genuine through their outward acts of obedience. Works are the *confirmation* of a person's justification – not the *way* of justification before God. Abraham sacrificed his son, Rahab helped the spies, and Noah built an ark.

All these Old Testament figures confirmed their justification before God through their outward acts of obedience. At the same time, they gave proof of the genuine nature of their faith which is what James is emphasizing in chapter 2. *A viable faith always becomes a visible faith.* The test that a person possesses faith alone in Christ alone is their acts of obedience, good works, or transformation of living. The justified person has a changed life and obeys God's will. Therefore, his faith is demonstrated by his works. There is a family resemblance or likeness among Christians – good works! Where there is a *profession* of faith there should be *progress*, even though all Christians are at different points of progress spiritually. Works do follow faith.

Theodore Epp notes:

“Faith is first, but works must follow in order to demonstrate that faith is real. Although works will not bring one into right relationship with God, they are to be the natural result of salvation.”



Here is the point. The “tests of justification” and “tests of life” in the epistles of James and John are designed to show that Christians cannot deny God and live like the devil their entire lives and never show signs of the new birth (2 Cor. 13:5) for they possess God’s “seed” or new nature and life within them (1 John 3:9; Phil. 2:13; 2 Cor. 5:17). Like the

demons, people can believe in God but not be saved, and their life of rebellion against God demonstrates this (James 2:19). “They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate” (Titus 1:16). In other words, their *practice* does not match their *profession*. Both James and John argue for birthmarks within the Christian life. Essentially, faith results in varying amounts of good works – “which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (Matt. 13:8). Faith works!

William MacDonald remarked:

“True faith and works are inseparable. The first produces the second, and the second evidences the first.”

Where there is no *fruit* there is no *root* (Matt. 7:16-20; 13:3-7). Where there is *root* there is *fruit* (Matt. 13:8) or signs of regenerating life. Without any confirming signs that God’s life and nature indwell a person, their repentance, faith in Christ, and salvation is counterfeit. “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead (*lifeless, barren, not real or genuine*), being alone” (James 2:17). James is not concerned that works should be added to faith alone in Christ alone, but that one possesses the right kind of faith – saving faith in Christ.



The old adage is true: **“Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone.”**

Works follow faith. There will be signs that a person's life and faith are genuine when viewing the panoramic snapshot or picture of their lives. Remember that both James and John are painting a very broad and panoramic picture of a person's life. They are looking at the big or overall picture of how a person lives. There will be fruit. There will be change. Good works might be dormant and waiting to bloom. But there will eventually be signs of life and transformation.

Although we can be fruit inspectors (Matt. 7:16, 20) and witness a viable or unviable faith in others we must remember that sometimes a Christian's faith and works might be in a dormant state and not blossoming or bringing forth fruit at the present time (2 Tim. 4:10; Luke 22:54-60; 2 Pet. 1:8-9; Rev. 3:17-20). But eventually, somewhere, sometime, and somehow, in varying degrees and ways, there will be evidences of fruitfulness and life. So, in the end we must simply agree with the scriptural conclusion of 2 Timothy 2:19: "Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity."

Nevertheless, the texts in both James and John and what Jesus taught (Matt. 13:18-23; John 15:1-3) conclude that there will always be some fruit or evidence that a person is a genuine Christian. Without fruit there can be no root – the root of genuine repentance, faith, and salvation.

Don Anderson said:

"Faith without life-evidence is like an apple tree without apples, a car without wheels, a watch that doesn't run. True faith, like a living tree, will reveal its life by the kind of fruit that it produces."

It's important to realize that works FOLLOW faith (Eph. 2:10) but they are not PART of faith, when a person trusts in Christ to be his Savior (Eph. 2:8-9). However, if we have been justified before God by faith (James 2:23), then our justification before God will be confirmed by good works or transformation of living (James 2:24). Our belief in Christ will eventually translate in behavior that is like Christ.

Anderson summarizes:

"Salvation does bring change, maybe slowly, maybe imperceptibly at times, but authentic trust will somehow manifest itself in good works and a different lifestyle. ... Good works are the proof in the pudding."

James 2:17 once again concludes:

“Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.”



James 2:14

“What *doth it* profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?”

The answer to this question is no for the kind of faith James is talking about is a *demonic* (James 2:19) and *dead* (James 2:17, 26) faith which means a person has not genuinely placed faith in Christ alone for his justification. This is proven by the absence of fruit and works which follows faith. Faith is not barren; it works and gives evidence of its reality and its existence. *The proof that someone has placed faith alone in Christ alone is that their faith has roots and brings forth fruit.*

Think of it this way. Faith in Christ is invisible. It's an internal choice that people make when placing their confidence in Christ alone to save them (Rom. 10:9). But James is teaching that we should be able look at the effects of that faith upon a person's life. So, the point is that our faith in Christ will manifest itself in how we live. Matthew 25:34-40 illustrates that genuine faith in Christ will result in works which confirm a person's salvation and right to enter the earthly Millennium and even Heaven itself (Rev. 22:14). Jesus is not teaching salvation by works any more than James was in his epistle. He was teaching a judgment on a person's works and

lifestyle to prove the authenticity of their faith and salvation in Christ. That which is invisible will eventually be made visible.

Someone said:

“Everything that is visible hides something that is invisible.”

D. L. Moody was once accosted on a Chicago Street by a drunk who exclaimed, “Aren’t you Mr. Moody? Why, I’m one of your converts.” Said Moody in reply, “That must be true, for you surely aren’t one of the Lord’s!” Moody’s point and the point of James and John is that every Christian has *birthmarks* that will eventually be seen or witnessed, and which give evidence that he possesses God’s new nature and indwelling life (1 John 3:17; 4:15-16).

All Christians will manifest some evidence that they are a new creation in Christ that is no longer part of the old fallen position in Adam (2 Cor. 5:17). We are not saved by good works (Eph. 2:9) but all believers do manifest good works in their lives since Jesus taught that “Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away (to judgment – “they are burned” – vs. 6): and every *branch* that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit” (John 15:2). New life inevitably and in some measure flows out of our new union with Christ for we are “created in Christ Jesus unto good works” (Eph. 2:10).



“New Life in Christ! Abundant and free!
What glories shine, what joys are mine,
What wondrous blessings I see!
My past with its sin,
The searching and strife,
Forever gone, there's a bright new dawn!
For in Christ I have found New Life!”

The writer of Hebrews states: “But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation ...” (Heb. 6:9). If we are really trusting Jesus to save us, then some of our Christianity ought to be making its way into our behavior patterns. So, if your life has never changed since you have expressed faith in Christ, make sure that you are really trusting in Christ alone to be your Savior. Be sure you are not placing your trust or confidence in Christ and good works, but

Christ alone. You are saved by *grace* alone through *faith* alone in *Christ* alone (Eph. 2:8-9). Faith + nothing = salvation. Ask yourself, whom or what am I trusting right now for my eternal destiny? It should only be Christ. Jesus Christ is the only way to Heaven (John 14:6) – not good works.

If you are worried about doing enough to earn favor with God, do a spiritual checkup. Always remember that saving faith involves trust in Christ alone, nothing else (John 3:15-16; 6:47). *The Gospel does not ask us to do something but believe something*. Do not trust in a ceremony (your baptism, taking communion) or anything else (Gal. 5:3; 6:15). Just trust in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ to save you (1 Cor. 15:1-3). Make it personal (John 1:12).

Also, you might be wondering how many good works you must do and view in your life to prove that your faith and Christianity is genuine (James 2:21-26; 1 John 3:9-10; 2 Cor. 13:5). Don't go there! Don't panic! Neither James, John, nor Paul taught that we must be *obsessed* with looking at our personal lives to prove the authenticity of our faith and salvation. They all taught that assurance stems from faith in Christ alone (John 6:47; Rom. 3:28; James 2:23; 1 John 5:11-13). Therefore, one's examination is a general, natural, and non-legalistic observation that occurs throughout the Christian life that gives added confirmation of what the believer should already know.



Christ saves believers by His grace “on whom they believed” (Acts 14:23) and “when they believed” (Acts 8:12). We are not saved by *what* we do, but by *whom* we know. 2 Timothy 1:12 declares: “for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.” Our trust must be in Christ alone, not in Christ and works, or in works alone.

Anderson again comments:

“Our faith in Jesus Christ guarantees our passage to Heaven; the good we do as Christians glorifies God and tells others we are going there.”

Self-evaluation does not replace faith alone in Christ (the ground of assurance) but complements it and adds to the glorious transaction that occurred in one's life when they were saved. Self-evaluation should not be misconstrued as a legalistic exercise, but a blessing that attends the Christian life as one sees the grace of God at work in his or her life. Once again, self-observation is not the primary way to gain assurance (John 3:16; Isaiah 45:22), nor should it become a daily focus of our assurance. Self-examination is simply a *secondary confirmation* of our salvation which is something we already are confident that we possess through faith in Christ. Transformation of living reminds us that God has come into our life to stay and is slowly reshaping us into Christlikeness (2 Cor. 3:18).

Every Christian can honestly evaluate themselves and come to the conclusion that God is at work in their lives and will continue to do a work of gradual sanctification in them as they live out their days on earth. The old children's song reflects the Christian attitude.

"He's still working on me,
To make me what I ought to be.
It took him just a week to make the moon and stars
The sun and the earth and Jupiter and Mars.
How loving and patient He must be
'Cause He's still workin' on me."