

*Faith Without Works Is Dead*  
*James 2:14-20*

**James 2:14-20** reads, “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?”

As we have previously noted, **James 2:14** begins a paragraph that encompasses **James 2:14-26** and that establishes the contextual setting and primary concept for the rest of the paragraph. This primary concept is to confront those believers who claim to maintain a walk of faith and fellowship with the Lord, but who lack the accompaniment of godly works in their daily living. The entire rest of the paragraph then presents three arguments in order to support the primary concept of **verse 14**; and each of these three arguments ends with the same concluding thought – that a walk of faith without works of obedience is a spiritually dead walk of faith. Now, the first two of these arguments encompass **verses 15-20** and approach the matter from the negative perspective, revealing various realities concerning such a spiritually dead walk of faith. On the other hand, the third of these arguments encompasses **verses 21-26** and approaches the matter from the positive perspective, employing two Old Testament examples in order to reveal the spiritual profit in a walk of faith that is accompanied with works of obedience. In this message let us consider the first two arguments from the negative perspective. Yea, let us consider the spiritually negative realities for a walk of faith that is not accompanied with works of obedience.

I. A Declared (Only) Faith

**James 2:14** opens the paragraph with the case of a believer who emphatically, consistently, and sincerely says that he has a daily walk of faith with the Lord, yet who does not possess any accompanying works of obedience. Indeed, the rhetorical questions are asked, “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?” Herein the focus is upon this believer’s verbal declaration concerning his daily walk of faith and upon the fact that his declaration stands alone without any accompanying works. Even so, **James 2:15-16** then presents the first argument against such a declared-only faith, saying, “If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?” This argument is an argument of illustration, wherein the focus of the illustration is upon the idea of declaration-only without any actual activity.

In **verse 15** the illustration presents the case of a desperate and immediate need. A fellow believer, a brother or sister in Christ, is observed in a condition wherein that believer utterly lacks the very basic needs for survival. This fellow believer is “naked,” not necessarily “stark

naked, but certainly not possessing adequate and sufficient clothing. Furthermore, this fellow believer is “destitute of daily food,” not possessing the daily supply of food required for healthy living. Indeed, this fellow believer is observed to be cold and hungry at the very moment; and even a small donation of clothing and food would be a significant help for such a case. Then in **verse 16** the illustration presents the response to this desperate and immediate need. A believer in good standing with the congregation responds to this fellow believer’s need with well-sounding words of compassion and comfort, saying, “Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled.” At that time the phrase, “Depart in peace,” was a common Jewish farewell, verbally expressing a spirit of kindness and friendliness toward another that things might go well for that other. Joined with the phrase, “Be warmed and filled,” the entire verbal response serves as a form of prayer that in some manner the Lord might provide for the fellow believer in need. In fact, the two elements of this implied prayer directly correspond unto the two elements of observable need – “I pray that you might be warmed with clothing and that you might be filled with food.”

Certainly, this verbal response is a good beginning; yet then the illustration of **verse 16** adds the rebuke of failure, saying, “Notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body.” Indeed, words of courtesy, concern, compassion, and comfort are of value for those in need. Yet those words are quite empty and worthless when they are not accompanied with works of helpfulness when one is quite able to help. Thus the rhetorical question is asked, “What doth it profit?” What good are such words? No matter how well-meaning the words may be, they are without any substantial profit to the needy if those words are not accompanied with any actual help. Such words of compassion are no real compassion at all, but just mere words and just a facade. Yea, words of compassion without accompanying works of compassion are simply words of hypocrisy in relation to the speaker’s character and words of mockery in relation to the other’s need. Yet the whole reason for this illustration is to illustrate a truth concerning a declared-only walk of faith without any accompanying works of obedience. Just as words of compassion when they are not accompanied with works of compassion are empty and worthless, even so a declared-only walk of faith when it is not accompanied with works of obedience is empty and worthless. Yea, just as empty words of compassion are words of hypocrisy; even so a declared-only walk of faith is hypocrisy in relation to one’s own character. Furthermore, just as empty words of compassion are words of mockery; even so a declared-only walk of faith is mockery in relation to the Lord our God. It is all just spiritual pretending.

## II. A Dead Faith

With **James 2:17** we come to the conclusion for this argument of illustration – “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.” This same thought is revealed a second time in **verse 20** at the conclusion of the second argument – “But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?” Yet again, this same thought is revealed for a third time in **verse 26** at the conclusion of the third argument – “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” Just as works of compassion are the natural fruit for a genuine heart of compassion, even so works of obedience are the natural fruit for a genuine heart of faith. In like manner, just as words of compassion, being alone without the works of compassion, reveal a dead compassion; even so a claim to a walk of faith, being alone

without the works of obedience, reveals a dead faith. Just as such compassion is counterfeit, even so such a faith is falsehood. Indeed, a living faith, by its very essence, brings forth the fruit of obedience. Therefore, any so-called walk of faith that lacks the fruit of obedience clearly reveals and proves by its own barrenness that it is a spiritually dead walk of faith. It is unproductive and unprofitable. It is worthless specifically because it is workless. Yea, it is no true walk of faith and fellowship with the Lord at all. It is just empty words, and nothing more. A so-called walk of faith without works of obedience is no more of a living faith than a corpse without the spirit is a living person. “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” Works of obedience are not an added bonus to a living faith, but are an essential and integral part of a living faith; just as the spirit is not an added bonus to a living person, but is an essential and integral part of a living person. Thus a walk of faith without the essential and integral works of obedience is not a living faith at all, but is a spiritually dead faith. It is like a corpse; it may have the form of life, but it lacks the energy of life.

### III. A Debatable Faith

With the conclusion to the first argument in **verse 17**, the second argument is introduced in **verse 18**. This second argument is an argument of confrontation, wherein the believer who claims a walk of faith with the Lord, but who does not possess the accompanying works of obedience, is confronted for the spiritual emptiness and unfaithfulness of his daily living. In **verse 18** we observe another hypothetical believer entering the scene with a direct challenge and confrontation against the believer of **verse 14** – “Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.” Herein James did not present himself or another spiritual leadership as the one who makes this challenge. Rather, James presented the one who fills this role of challenge as any general believer, even a fairly new believer, who is walking in faithful obedience and spiritual growth. The challenge and confrontation itself is for the believer who claims to have a walk of faith, but who lacks the accompanying works of obedience, to show his walk of faith without his works. Yet this is an impossible challenge to meet, for an individual’s inner faith is only able to be demonstrated before others through actual, external, observable works of obedience. Yea, a heart of faith can only be observed through the actions that it influences and motivates.

Certainly, a walk of faith without the works of obedience can be verbally and continuously asserted; but such a faith of words-only cannot be demonstrated as genuine. Even so, such a faith is a very debatable faith, and that by any member of the public, including not only other believers, but also those of the lost world. Indeed, any observer would have a legitimate case to deny that such a word-only faith was real faith at all. On the other hand, the challenger, being a believer who walks in faithful obedience and spiritual growth, is eagerly willing and is certainly able to show his walk of faith by his works. Indeed, his works of obedience are the very evidence of his living walk of faith and fellowship with the Lord; for as we have noted, it is the essential nature of a living faith to bring forth the fruit of obedience. By definition, genuine faith and godly works are inseparable. This then is a principle of truth – Inner faith cannot be demonstrated or observed without external works, and a so-called faith without works is a very debatable and deniable faith.

#### IV. A Doctrinal Faith

Therefore, a walk of faith that is only declared, but that lacks the accompanying works of obedience has been classified as a spiritually dead faith and a very debatable faith. Yet James anticipates that the believer who makes the claim to a walk of faith, but who does not possess the works of obedience, will defend his case. Yea, James anticipates that he will defend his case by stating that his full conviction of faith in sound doctrine is sufficient evidence that his walk of faith is genuine. Even so, with the opening line of **James 2:18**, James reasserted himself in the scene and acknowledged this point of defense, saying, “Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well.” Herein James acknowledged without hesitation that this believer held to fundamental and sound doctrine. The doctrine that is acknowledged, “that there is one God,” is not presented here as the only doctrine that this believer held. Rather, it is presented as the most basic and foundational of sound doctrine; and as such it represented the whole of sound doctrine. Furthermore, James acknowledged that this believer’s doctrinal faith was a good thing, at least as far as it went. Yet with the closing line of **verse 18**, James revealed that such a doctrinal faith, if it is by itself, is not enough, saying, “The devils also believe, and tremble.” Certainly, a full conviction of faith in sound doctrine is good; but it is still not good enough if it goes no farther in motivating a heart-pursuit after faithful obedience. Such a doctrinal faith is good, but it is not a sufficient defense against the accusation of a spiritually dead faith, if it is not accompanied with the works of obedience.

#### V. A Demonic Faith

Thus in **James 2:18** a doctrinal faith that is alone without the accompanying works of obedience is compared to demonic faith. Yea, the demons themselves also believe in the sound doctrine of God’s eternal existence, almighty power, sovereign authority, righteous perfection, and fierce judgment. Many times throughout the earthly ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, He encountered those who were demon possessed; and in such cases the demons recognized Jesus’ deity and responded in fear before Him. (See Matthew 8:29; Mark 1:24; 3:11; 5:7; Luke 4:34, 41; 8:28; also consider Acts 16:17) Indeed, the demons believe; and that belief even moves them to tremble with fear and terror before the God against whom they have rebelled. Yet that belief does not move the demons to draw near unto God in fellowship or to serve Him with faithful obedience. Even so, although a faith in sound doctrine is a good thing, if it is alone without the accompanying works of obedience, it is not any better than demonic faith. In fact, such a doctrinal faith that is without the works of obedience could even be viewed as a step below demonic faith, since it does not motivate unto any action at all; whereas the doctrinal belief of the demons at least moves them to tremble in fear of God’s judgment.

#### VI. A (Self) Deceiving Faith

Certainly then, doctrinal faith alone is not sufficient to defend a walk of faith that lacks any works of obedience. Such a so-called walk of faith is indeed a spiritually dead walk of faith. Thus James concluded his second argument, the argument of confrontation, with an emphatically confrontational and condemning question – “But wilt thou know, O vain man, that

faith without works is dead?” With the closing line of this question, James again reiterated the principle “that faith without works is dead,” that a so-called walk of faith that lacks any accompanying works of obedience is a spiritually dead walk of faith, and thus no walk of faith at all. Yet with the opening line of this question, James did something more than simply express the certainty of this truth. Indeed, James also expressed a confrontation and condemnation. He confronted the believer who would declare and defend a walk of faith without the works of obedience, asking if this believer was even truly interested in a genuinely Biblical and spiritual understanding of the matter. Furthermore, he condemned the spiritual character of this believer, calling him a spiritually “vain man.” This confrontation and condemnation indicates that this believer had become willfully ignorant and rebelliously foolish concerning the Biblical and spiritual truth of this matter. Yea, it reveals how utterly self-deceived this believer had become in relation to his daily walk of faith with the Lord. Although he genuinely considered himself to be right with the Lord, he was actually empty-headed and hard-hearted in his spiritual character. He was not walking in a godly and righteous fellowship with the Lord at all, for then he would have faithfully practiced the works of obedience. Rather, the self-deception of his own sinful flesh had overcome him; and he was walking apart from a daily fellowship with the Lord in the ways of unrighteousness. Yet James did present his proclamation in the form of a question – “But wilt thou know, O vain man?” This he did, not simply to present a confrontation and condemnation, but also to present a corrective plea – “O vain man, please, be willing to recognize the truth of this matter; and please, be willing to repent of your own self-deception and waywardness.” Even so, any believer who would claim a walk of faith with the Lord, but who possesses no works of obedience, is confronted with the same condemnation and is called by the same corrective – ““But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?”