



DIGGING DEEPER

James 2:14-26 – Faith and works

PLEASE READ – James w14-26

GETTING STARTED

Make a quick list of all the things you could say that you “love”. You’ll probably be able to think of at least a dozen very different things.

This passage tackles a big puzzle in the book of James. It *seems* that he here contradicts what Paul says elsewhere in the NT. Read and Ephesians 2:8-9 and then James 2:24, and you can’t miss it. What’s happening here?

One way to answer is simply to consider that Paul and James are not using the word “faith” in precisely the same way. Just as we routinely do with many words (such as “love”, just for example), the precise nuance depends on the context. So *Paul*, we might argue, is talking about an all-embracing, life-changing “faith”, whereas *James* uses the word in a more restricted sense, “belief” without necessarily anything else following on. In which case, no wonder that James has some very scathing things to say about this *so-called* faith!

A more complex answer, but upon similar lines, is that Paul and James also use the word “justified” in different senses, too. Paul uses it in the “made right before God” sense, whereas James’ usage leans towards “lives uprightly in the sight of others” – so Abraham was “*considered* righteous” (v21) because “you see ...” (v22).

But this is quite heavy stuff – which you might prefer to initially skim over until you’ve looked through the passage itself in more detail.

James’ questioner (v18) could simply be puzzled. Couldn’t it be, they might be asking, that “faith” and “works” are just something like two different spiritual gifts? One person might much prefer the theology to the hard practicalities of serving – but that’s *their* gift – whereas another might have very little time for fussing over theology, but would rather claim to be following Jesus just by caring about other people ... and that’s *their* gift. Have you ever heard the argument against serious Bible study that “I’m just a Martha” (Luke 10:38-42)?

But this just won’t work. James gives us five arguments to show that real faith must give rise to “works” – not so much caring for the poor, etc., but the risky, adventurous living of Abraham and Rahab, clearly evidencing *faith* that is not merely mental assent, but deep trust in the Living God.

What do you make of this quote?

“Faith is not believing in spite of evidence; faith is believing in spite of consequences.”

1) Not real *love* (vv15-16)

How is *love* lacking in the situation James describes here?

So if this is an example of “so-called *love*”, what is missing in “so-called *faith*”?

2) Just knowing facts (v19)

What is the value of getting your theology right?

And what’s the *danger* in getting your theology right?

What should *true* “knowledge of God” look like in a person’s life?

3) The life of Abraham (vv21-23)

What *two* incidents in Abraham’s life is James referring to here?

Check out Genesis 15:1-6 and 22:1-18, and summarise them briefly.

Notice several quotes of the former in the NT: Romans 4:-12, Galatians 3:1-9 – are these relevant here too?

So what was Abraham’s “work” that James points us to?

4) The life of Rahab (vv21-23)

Could you have found two more contrasting examples than Abraham and Rahab?

Why might James have deliberately chosen such wildly different examples?

- perhaps to show that faith is the basis of getting right with God for *everyone*?

So what faith-revealing “work” does James point us to now in her life?

And what features do the “works” of those two OT characters have in common?

5) A dead body (vv26)

Just saying “I believe” is pretty useless. So have a look through “the gallery of the faithful” in Hebrews 11. What characterises the lifestyles of those people?

So how *faith*-full (“believing in spite of consequences”) are *our own* lifestyles nowadays? Can we really claim to have clear “works” that testify to a God worthy of *everyone’s* faith?