

James 2:14-26 Faith that works

Read James 2:14-26; Matthew 25:31-36; Romans 4:1-5; 9-15

1. Are we saved by faith? Or are we saved by works? This passage from James is one of the most controversial passages in all of scripture. It may seem the each of these passages give us a slightly different answer. What has been your understanding of this controversy coming into the study of this passage from James?

This question is simply getting on the table the starting point of everyone in the room. There are no right or wrong answers here. The point is simply to bring what people believe in this controversy out into the open and allow scripture and your Spirit-led discussion to move that perspective more in line with scripture.

Suggestions. 1. If there are a few that have never entered into this controversy before you may want to move the conversation along so as to not exclude them from the conversation. 2. The conversation may move quickly into trying to resolve the controversy – when that happens you will know it is time to move into the next questions.

Note: In the sermon Tim noted that many commentators suggest that Paul and James are using the word justify in slightly different ways. Paul is saying how are we justified, declared right before God? It is not by anything we do, but our trust, our faith in what Jesus has done for us. James is using the word justify to say how do we justify, prove, give evidence that we have saving faith? Our faith will be evidenced by our works.

In the passage James will give two evidences of saving faith, a vertical one, and a horizontal one. A vertical one in our relationship with God, and a horizontal one in our relationship with one another. We will look at each in turn.

Vertical Evidence

2. To bring greater clarity to each evidence James will give a negative example first. Look at James 2:19. How is right belief, good theology, not an evidence of saving faith?

The demons have right theology. Having the right theology doesn't change them.

It may be helpful in the discussion to recognize that good theology is a good thing, a necessary thing in James' mind. If however that theology doesn't move us to action and it is simply intellectual assent it is useless and we have no business saying that we believe it if we don't put that belief into action.

Their response to their right theology is to shudder in fear. If it is brought up there may be some great discussion had to explore the kind of life of faith that is motivated by fear. We act only based on the fear of consequences. Actions brought about by fear are not evidence of saving faith. If this portion is brought up you may want to in the next part of the discussion reflect on what motivates Abraham's action as he is called "friend of God".

3. The positive example of saving faith in relationship with God is given through the life of Abraham (James 4:21-22). Read Genesis 15:1-6, Genesis 22: 1-18 and Hebrews 11:17-19 for background. How are Abraham's actions and words evidence of his trust in the promise that God would make him a great nation through Isaac?

Some of the details to bring out are that he says to his servants "We will be back", he tells his son "God will provide", Hebrews gives us insight into his belief that if he went through with it God would bring Isaac back to life. These are all actions that are consistent with his belief that God would make him a great nation through Isaac. His belief in the promise was evidenced in his actions.

4. What would be the attending actions in our lives if we trusted the character and promises of God? (Hint: Explore some of the core truths of the gospel – you are loved – you are forgiven – you are accepted – he is coming again to make all things new – and explore what attending actions are evidence of faith in these aspects of the gospel)

There are no right or wrong answers here – simply a discussion about how true trust in these gospel realities will be evidenced by your actions.

Horizontal Evidence

5. Again James gives a negative example first in James 4:15-17. What response is he picturing to the fellow Christian in need, and how is this deficient?

In the sermon I brought to the fore that this person sees their need, is empathetic and speaks into the need. The Greek in the text is in the passive meaning that it is in the form of a prayer.

It is deficient in that the person presumably had the ability to meet the persons need but did nothing.

6. The positive example of saving faith in relationship with one another is given in the life of Rahab (James 2:25). Read Joshua 2:1-16. How is Rahab's treatment of the spies evidence of her faith?

It would be helpful to pay attention to some of the details of her story in Joshua 2. She references having heard about God's treatment of his people – his power and care for them. She references knowing that God had given them the land. She is responding to them out of that trust in God and that his promises are sure.

7. Given the example of Rahab's treatment of the spies in comparison to his negative example in vs. 15-16, what does James see as the horizontal evidence of saving faith?

It would be helpful to bring out the details of the barriers of race, gender, class that she crosses to help the spies. It would be helpful to bring out the reality that she helps them at risk to herself. These are the elements that tie this passage to the work of Jesus who disadvantages himself for the sake of the other, us. "God shows his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" Romans 5:8.