

Does “Genuine” Faith in Christ Automatically Result in a Godly Life?

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I. Introduction

Is it true that if you “truly” believed in Jesus, then you will live a life of continual obedience to God? What if your life isn’t one of continual obedience? Does that mean that you’re not really saved, that you’re not really a Christian and therefore headed for hell? Is that what James 2:14-26 says?

II. Doesn’t One’s Ongoing Sinful Behavior Prove that They’re Not Really a Christian?

Isn’t a “genuine” Christian a godly person? I’m not saying you can lose your salvation. I’m saying that if you’re a REAL Christian, then your life will be characterized by continuous good works just as James 2:14-26 says.

Some see James 2:14-26 as a passage that proves who the real Christians are: if your life is characterized by ongoing good works, then you’re a real Christian. If you continuously lack good works, then you’re not a Christian at all. After all, “faith without works is dead” (2:26). They think that “true” faith in Jesus necessarily results in a transformed life which is evidenced by one’s good works. Therefore, they conclude that our behavior reveals whether or not we possess what some call “saving” or “living” faith. If we claim to be a Christian but live in willful disobedience to Christ, then we have a false or dead faith. Thus, obedience to God is the mark of true saving faith. That’s why James uses the examples of Abraham and Rahab: he’s illustrating that obedience necessarily accompanies salvation. Simply saying, “I believe in Jesus,” is not enough. What saves us is the Holy Spirit’s regeneration of our hearts but that regeneration invariably results in a life which features ongoing obedience to God. To back this they even point to Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:16-23, “You will know them by their fruits.” But who is Jesus’ audience and perhaps more importantly, “who” will you know by their fruits, Christians or false prophets?

They say there’s a danger in telling people that all they have to do is simply believe in Jesus and they’re saved. This kind of “easy believism” encourages people to live a life of sin instead of a life of godliness. Because after all, heaven is guaranteed so living like the Devil doesn’t matter.

They also recognize the tension between the apostle Paul and James. In Romans 3-4 and Ephesians 2, Paul clearly says that good works have NOTHING to do with saving faith. But James says, “Faith without works is dead.” They explain the tension this way, “It’s true; we’re justified by grace through faith apart from works. But the natural result of saving faith is good works. God’s Holy Spirit causes the saved person to walk in obedience to His Word and produce the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22. Christians belong to Christ and as His sheep we hear His voice and follow Him, John 10:26-30. This is because all who belong to Christ are new creations; we’re no longer our old selves, 2 Corinthians 5:17. And if you simply profess faith but lack good works, then Jesus will say to you, “I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers!” Matthew 7:23. If it’s true that God’s Spirit will cause a saved person to produce the fruit of the Spirit, then why does Paul, six verses earlier, need to warn the Galatians to make sure to walk by the Spirit otherwise they’ll produce the lust of the flesh? Or if it’s true that Christians are now new creations who will continue in good works, then why does Paul, two verses earlier, have to mention to the Corinthians not to live for themselves but for Christ and a chapter later not to be unequally yoked with non-Christians? And who are the evildoers of Matthew 7:23 and why are they not allowed to enter the Kingdom? They didn’t fail to do good works, they failed to do the will of the Father (John 6:40).

Who's the audience of James 2:14-26? James is not talking to people who are unconverted, or who profess a false faith, or who are lacking saving faith. James' audience possesses the faith of Christ (2:1). They are God's children. James and they have the same Father, God (James 1:2, 17; 3:9). In fact, they're all born-again Christians because God Himself gave birth to them (James 1:18). And precisely because God is their Father, He has many things to say about how they behave and what will happen if they persist in sin: death (1:15, 21; 5:20). In other words, nothing James says (nor his audience does) can undo their spiritual birth just like nothing a child does can reverse the fact that he/she was born to their parents. The topic of eternal salvation—the new birth—is not the subject of James' letter. However, the conduct of God's children is.

What's the context of James as a whole?

James 1 and 2, James is encouraging his audience to persevere under trials. If they endure temptation, then the Lord will reward them. But if they respond sinfully to their trials, then the Lord will take their life. And they must not blame God for tempting them. God cannot be tempted nor does He tempt anyone. They are tempted and enticed by their own desires. If they pursue their desires, it will give birth to sin and when their sin is fully-grown, it will bring about their death. Instead of tempting them, God's gifts are good and perfect. In fact, He gave birth to them by the Word of truth so that they would live accordingly as His children. Therefore, they must be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath. How and why are they to be swift to hear? Being a true hearer of God's Word requires doing His Word not simply hearing it. If they do God's Word, it will save their lives. Thus, the salvation James talks about from the beginning of his letter is not from hell, but from physical death. So, if they believe what God says about controlling one's tongue and helping orphans and widows, then they should do those things, i.e., they must put their faith into practice, otherwise, their religion is dead/useless.

Likewise, if they believe what God says about loving their neighbor as themselves, then they should stop discriminating against the poor in favor of the rich. Because faith without works is dead, i.e., believing something and not applying it is useless; this can't save anyone. For example, if all you do is say to your naked and hungry brother, "Be warmed and be filled," this won't save him. Then James introduces an objector who says, "James, there's no connection between faith and works. It's impossible to reveal your faith by your works. I'll prove it to you: look at the demons. They believe that God is one, but they don't do good works, all they do is tremble." James refutes this logic as foolish. Of course faith without works is dead. Look at Abraham. Wasn't his original faith in God justified before men when he offered Isaac on the altar? That's why they called him a friend of God. Therefore there is a justification that is by works—which happens before men, who will call you God's friend when they see you apply what you believe—as well as a justification by faith apart from works—which happens before God. Don't you recall Rahab? She too was justified before men when she added to her original faith in God the good works of protecting Israel's spies. As the human body without a spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead too.

James 3, how and why should James' audience be slow to speak? Because although a little thing, the tongue can cause an incredible amount of damage. If you want to use your tongue to display your wisdom, you must do so in a godly manner, not in a wicked manner.

James 4 and 5, how and why should James' audience be slow to wrath? Because wrath is born from their sinful and worldly desires. In order to get rid of their wrath, they need to be humble before God. Humility will guard them against mistreating their brethren and boasting. Finally, they must persevere in their trials, looking for the coming of the Lord who will reward them for their perseverance. Finally, if any of their brethren wanders from God's truth, then one of them should turn them back from the error of their way. If they do this, then they will save their life from death.

What is the context of James 2:14-26?

What section is James 2:14-26 part of? It's part of the *be swift to hear* section (1:21-2:26), which is connected to James' initial admonition to his audience: they must respond properly to their trials. If they endure and respond in a godly manner, then the Lord will reward them. But if they respond with sin, then the Lord will punish them with death (1:2-15). This is what the whole letter is about: will they respond in a godly manner or sinfully? Thus, this is what "faith without works is dead" has to do with. That is, God's Word can save them, but unless they apply what they believe (faith), it will not save them. Just like your belief that swimming can save your life won't save you if you're in the middle of the ocean but you refuse to swim.

What is James' focus in 2:14-17, faith or works? Instead of James telling his audience to make sure they possess the right kind of faith, what some call "living faith" or "saving faith," by looking at their good works, James is not focused on faith at all. His audience possesses faith (2:1); what's missing is works. That's why he uses the example of a hungry and naked brother. His audience *believes* (faith) that they should care for the naked and hungry, but if they don't act on that belief, then it will not save their hungry and naked brother.

What salvation is James talking about in 2:14-17? The same one he's been talking about from the beginning of the letter: the salvation of physical life. He warned them that God will punish them with death if they don't respond well to their trials (1:15). But if they apply (do) what they believe of God's Word, then it will save their souls, i.e., their lives (1:21). In fact, this is how James closes the letter: if one of them is responding sinfully to their trials, then James encourages the audience to turn their sinful brother from the error of their ways. If they do, then they will save their "soul," i.e., their life from death (5:20). Thus, if they add good works to their belief that they should love their neighbor as themselves (2:8), then feeding and clothing their hungry and naked brother will save their physical life.

When does the objector in 2:18-20 begin and end speaking? James introduces an imaginary objector with the words, "But someone will say" in 2:18. And James signals the end of the objector's speech with the words, "But do you want to know, O foolish man" in 2:20. Another clue as to when the objector begins and ends speaking is what the objector says in 2:19, "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe -- and tremble!" Many think that these are James' words. But they can't be because they argue against James' main point that there's an indisputable connection between one's faith and one's good works. The bit about the demons, in the objector's mind, conclusively proves that there's no connection between faith and works: after all, the demons have faith, but they don't produce good works, all they do is tremble. Thus, 2:19 is not a warning to Christians to check their faith by looking at their works to see if it's "saving faith" or not.

Why does James use Abraham as his #1 example? Because it proves his case decisively that our good works are connected to our faith, but not as a proof that we're Christians. Our good works prove whether or not we're walking/living with the Lord who saved us, i.e., whether or not we're living godly, obedient lives or sinful lives, i.e., whether or not we're going to apply what we believe. When Abraham offered Isaac on the altar, he was justified by this good work, but not before God. That justification had nothing to do with good works (Romans 4:2-3). In fact, Abraham offered Isaac on the altar long after he was already justified and a child of God (Genesis 15:6). But when Abraham did offer Isaac, he was justified in the eyes of men who called him a friend of God. In this way, when Abraham added this good work to his original justifying faith, it perfected his faith (2:22). And isn't this James' desire for his audience, that they apply their faith so that they will "be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (1:4).

Why does James use Rahab as his #2 example? Because it vividly supports James' central point to his audience: if you add good works to your faith, if you apply what you believe, it will save your life. Like Abraham, Rahab was justified before God long before she protected Israel's spies (Joshua 2:8-11). Thus, by the time Israel's spies came to her house, she was already a child of God. However, if she refused to apply her belief that the Lord, her God had given Israel the land of Canaan (Joshua 2:9), then Israel would kill her and her family along with the rest of the Canaanites. But instead, she did add good works to her faith by protecting Israel's spies and her life and the lives of her family were saved. Thus, Rahab justified herself before Israel by the good work of protecting the spies and thereby saved her life.

James 2:26, which keeps which alive: does faith keep works alive or do works keep faith alive? This one verse contains James' conclusion about everything he's said in 2:14-25. And what's his main point? Is James focused on "saving faith" or "living faith" as some believe? Not in the least. His audience has faith just like every human being has a body. What's missing is the animating force of good works (spirit). His audience needs good works to keep their faith alive, just like a body needs a spirit to keep it alive.

Therefore, James is saying that one's faith can die. In fact, if it lacks good works, it will die. But this necessarily implies that this dead faith was once alive, i.e., his audience does possess or at least at one time possessed a living faith—which is abundantly clear from 2:1.

Those who believe that James is talking about "saving/living faith" say that we must make sure that our faith is alive if we're to produce good works. But James is actually saying the opposite! It's good works that keep the faith live, not the other way around.

III. Conclusion

Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.....Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.