

# ARE YOU ROWING WITH BOTH OARS?

## THE RELATIONSHIP OF FAITH AND WORKS

*James 2:14-26*

*“True faith inevitably bears fruit.” (RC Sproul)*

In this classic section, James deals with the age-old question: “Is Christianity a religion of works, or of faith, or both?” Understanding the principle here is key to grasping what the Christian life is all about.

### What Does It Say?



*What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith*

*save him?*

*<sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.*

*<sup>16</sup> If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?*

*<sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

*“They love one another. they never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother.”*

Aristides to Emperor Hadrian  
(2nd century)

### What Does It Mean?

Does James say that the person in question in verse 1 has faith?

Note: The Greek construction of verse 14 anticipates and expects a negative answer (“*such faith can’t save him, can it?*”).

What controversy arises from verse 17? (Think about what Paul labors to convey in the book of Galatians.)

How does **1 John 3:16-18** apply to what James is talking about here?

The Reformation had a slogan: “Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone.” Paraphrase that in your own words:

*“Oh it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith; and so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question arises; it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them.”*

Martin Luther in the preface to his commentary on Romans

*<sup>18</sup> But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.*

*<sup>19</sup> You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder.*

*<sup>20</sup> You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?*

*<sup>21</sup> Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.*

*<sup>23</sup> And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend.*

*<sup>24</sup> You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.*

When James says “*You believe there is one God*”, he is reciting the “Shema”, the central verse of Judaism, found in **Deuteronomy 6:4**. What point is he making?

Why is having “faith” without works like rowing with one oar?

#### ABRAHAM

In calling Abraham as a “witness”, James is calling upon the most revered ancestor of the Jews, the ultimate “father of faith”, the man who was called a friend of God. What point is James making with Abraham? (Research **Genesis 15:6** and **Genesis 22**)

*“Millions of Christians live in a sentimental haze of vague piety, with soft organ music trembling in the lovely light from stained-glass windows. Their religion is a pleasant thing of emotional quivers, divorced from the will, divorced from the intellect and demanding little except lip service to a few harmless platitudes. I suspect that Satan has called off his attempt to convert people to agnosticism. After all, if a man travels far enough away from Christianity, he is liable to see it in perspective and decide that it is true. It is much safer, from Satan’s point of view, to vaccinate a man with a mild case of Christianity so as to protect him from the real disease.”*

Chad Walsh

**Hint:** there is a difference between the way Paul is using the word “justified” in **Galatians 2:16** and the way James is using the word “justified” here in **verse 24**. Define the way each apostle is using the word:

<sup>25</sup> *In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?*

<sup>26</sup> *As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.*

## RAHAB

Where is Rahab's story found?

When James calls upon Rahab as a witness to follow Abraham, what is the contrast?

Read **Hebrews 11** and look for Abraham and Rahab in that context. Why do they appear there?

**Summarize** the main point of this whole passage:

The "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11 - does it support what James teaches here? If so, how?

Does Jesus say that He calls us friends when we hear about his existence? When and why does he call us friends (see **John 15**)? Who else in Scripture was called a friend of God?

***Take a moment to read the enclosed sheet on "Lordship Salvation" and discuss it as a group.***

## LORDSHIP SALVATION

*SAVIOR or LORD? FAITH or WORKS? PAUL or JAMES?*

For the last few years there has been a debate in conservative evangelical circles over the idea called “Lordship Salvation”. In essence, the question is: who is a Christian – someone who just believes, or someone who believes and shows it?

We have probably all known someone who calls themselves a Christian, but whose life either directly and consistently contradicts the teachings of Christ, or else whose life has never really “born any fruit”. (It may be us!) They may be a nice person, but their niceness doesn’t distinguish them from a nice Buddhist or a nice atheist.

Now, one side of this debate would say: “Jesus says that we can tell a tree by its fruit. If you can’t see any apples, it must not be an apple tree. Just saying you believe doesn’t mean anything if there’s never enough evidence to convict you of being a Christian! As James says in James 2, even the demons believe in that sense.”

The other side of the debate would say: “That’s putting conditions on God’s free gift of grace. The whole point of the gospel is that it’s by faith, not works. That’s what Romans and Galatians and the whole Reformation was about. No one’s ever good enough to become a Christian, and once we’ve accepted Christ, we all have “dry” periods when there’s little or no fruit. What if you’d seen Peter

when he denied Christ? Would you have thought he was a pillar of the church? How can you judge what’s in a person’s heart?

Obviously both sides have a point, which should tip us off that the answer is a combination. When a person comes to Christ, it is because he or she has recognized that they are a sinner and have nothing to present to God that can remove their sins. The joy of becoming a Christian is the release of forgiveness: a clean slate because of Christ’s death.

However, many times people will say: “*I accepted Jesus as my Savior when I was 16, but I didn’t make him my Lord until I was 26.*” The problem with this thinking is that the Bible never says: “Accept Jesus as *Savior*, and then sometime later you might want to consider giving Him control of your life!” Now, our sanctification (growth as a believer) is progressive – it is a process it is not instant, nor is it complete until heaven. But, when Christ comes into our lives, He comes as Savior and Lord, because that’s who He is. Doubting Thomas exclaimed when he saw Jesus’ scars and believed: “My Lord and My God!” We don’t “make Jesus Lord”; He already is. Maybe the best way to put it is: spiritual growth is progressively allowing Jesus to exert His lordship over more and more areas of our lives.

Perhaps the best summary comes from R.C. Sproul, who says:

“This is what is meant by the Reformation slogan justification is by faith alone, and not by a faith that is alone.” The difference between Rome and the Reformation can be seen in these simple formulas:

**Roman** view: faith + works = justification

**Protestant** view: faith = justification + works

Neither view eliminates works. The Protestant view eliminates human merit. It recognizes that though works are the evidence or fruit of true faith, they add or contribute nothing to the meritorious basis of our redemption on. The current debate over “Lordship salvation” must be careful to protect two borders. On the one hand it is important to stress that true faith yields true fruit; on the other hand it is vital to stress that the only merit that saves us is the merit of Christ received by faith alone.”

The Bible consistently tells us to examine our hearts, not to make us insecure, but to be sure about where we stand on the most important question in our lives. For the person who had a vague, fuzzy religious experience at one time and nothing much ever came of it, the Biblical counsel would be: “*If you’re not sure, make sure! Receive the gospel offer of forgiveness through Jesus’ death right now by personally opening your heart and trusting Christ.*” For the sensitive person who knows they became a believer at a certain point, but is discouraged by their current lifestyle, Biblical counsel would be: “*Don’t think Jesus has left you! If you received Him, He’s there. Ask Him, through His Spirit, to renew and strengthen and encourage you to live a life that glorifies God.*”