



James

Faith that Works

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church
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Introduction

The message of this lesson--faith without works is dead--is the heart of the letter of James. This message, repeated in five different ways (VV. 14, 17, 18, 20, 26) leaves no doubt that the Christian faith is not merely a philosophy to be discussed, but a life-transforming force that touches every aspect of life in a practical, visible way. In short, others can witness what we believe by observing what we do. Society can be transformed by the faithful actions of God's people unless there is somehow a split between the faith that we profess and our daily lives. The Catholic Church teaches that salvation is the result of God's grace, but we must respond to that grace if we have hopes of being saved. Vatican II teaches, "Even though incorporated in the Church, one who does not however persevere in charity is not saved. He remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but 'in body' not 'in heart'. All children of the 'Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results not from their own merits but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word, and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be the more severely judged'" (Vatican II, Lumen gentium, 14).

We learn in this lesson that our faith is not worked out in a vacuum. Rather, Christ continues to touch lives through our lives. This fact necessitates our full cooperation, thought, word and deed.



James 2:14-26

14 What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. 18 But some one will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe -- and shudder. 20 Do you want to be shown, you shallow man, that faith apart from works is barren? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, 23 and the scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness"; and he was called the friend of God. 24 You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 And in the same way was not also Rahab the harlot justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? **26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead.**



Questions on the Text

Have you ever...

- ☐ 1. Have you ever felt like a hypocrite after telling someone what you believe?
2. Have you ever substituted feeling deeply about something for action?
3. Have you ever felt bad as a result of telling someone you would do something but failed to?





Catholic Scripture Study



Questions on the Text (cont.)

Homework

1. Pope John Paul said, "If motives of credibility were needed, Jesus appealed to his works, to all that he did before the eyes of the disciples and the whole people" (General audience of October 21, 1987). Can you name people you know that go beyond lip service and give their faith arms and legs? What gives them credibility, what they believe or what they do?
2. The Scripture speaks frequently of "profit" or "reward". James, like Jesus, makes a frank appeal to the fact that we can hope for and should aim toward our reward. In fact, he even pins his argument for the need to combine faith with works on the statement that failure to do so will not "profit" us (James 2:14). What sorts of rewards do you look to receive from Christ?
3. Pope John Paul II said in his July 31st, 1985 general audience "the invisible God becomes in a certain sense 'visible' by means of his works." Based on your works, how would your family and friends describe the invisible God?
4. Give an example from your daily life that would illustrate the point that simply believing something without doing it would prove useless and perhaps detrimental. An example may be that you believe you should feed your children.
5. James said, "Faith was completed by works" (James 2:22). Sit down and make a list of the areas of your life that need to be completed. You believe what the Church teaches, but you now need to put it into practice.



Questions for Reflection

1. Jesus said, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe because of the works themselves" (Jn 14:9-1). What does this say about the relationship between the works we perform and our prayer life?
2. James 2:19 mentions that "even the demons believe -- and shudder." That is, it is possible to have an intellectual knowledge about God in Christ while remaining his enemy. This was exactly the case with the various unclean spirits who recognized Christ in the gospels (Mark 1:24; Mark 3:11; Luke 8:28). What are some concrete, specific ways we can move beyond merely knowing about Christ and begin to conform to Christ, particularly in those situations when conforming to him is unpleasant to us?
3. James 2:22 tells us that Abraham's "faith was active along with his works." Some Christians have gotten the muddled idea that, when it comes to salvation, God does half and we do half. In reality, however, our salvation is entirely due to the grace of God. Even our ability to respond to God is itself a gift from God. At the same time, the process of our becoming "conformed to the image of Christ" really is helped and hindered according to our willingness to cooperate with that grace. What are some specific ways you can "open yourself up" to the grace of God flowing into and through your life? In particular, what works of faith can you, like Abraham, do in response to the love of God?





Catholic Scripture Study



Questions for Reflection (cont.)

4. James 2:23 says, "Scripture was fulfilled" when Abraham offered Isaac to God in obedience. The Scripture that was fulfilled was Genesis 15:6: "Abraham believed God, and was reckoned to him as righteousness." That is, the righteousness Abraham received in faith was incarnate and visible in his obedience to God. For James then, faith is a thing "made flesh" just as the Word became flesh. It makes no more sense to James to separate faith and works than it does to try to divide Jesus into his divine and human natures. Can you think of people you know or know about whose faith is simply "part of them"?
5. Abraham was called the "friend of God." One of the effects of the sacrament of confirmation is to likewise make us "friends of God." Jesus speaks of this when he tells the apostles in John 15:13-15, "Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." We are Christ's friends if we do what he commands us, and the sacrament of confirmation is given us so that we can have the strength to do that. What is the last thing Christ commanded you to do? Have you attempted to do it as the servant or (as he calls you) his friend?
6. Paul's basic message is that works apart from faith is dead. James' basic message is that faith apart from works is dead. Both insist on the living reality of "faith expressing itself in love" (Galatians 5:6). Both insist that faith alone cannot save. This is why Paul says, "if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). It is also why James 2:26 compares faith without works to a body without a soul. Can you think of a time when you have seen faith without works or works without faith? Can you think of a time when you have seen faith and works operating together in a healthy, biblical way?
7. One of the advantages of being Catholic is that we do not have to reinvent the wheel. If you do not know how to begin doing some of the corporal or spiritual works of mercy in your local neighborhood, there are always apostolates and ministries at a nearby parish where you can become involved. What Catholic ministry to the poor, homeless, hungry, or refugees could you begin to help this week?
8. Integrity of faith is doing on the outside what you believe on the inside. In terms of developing habits and personal devotion, what can you do to help foster integrity of faith?
9. James teaches that "as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead." In other words, the spirit animates the body in the same way that works animate faith. Based on this analogy, how would you describe your relationship with those closest to you? A corpse, couch potato or Olympic athlete?
10. How have the good works of others contributed to the faith you now enjoy?





Catholic Scripture Study



Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder

Faith and Works

We cannot understand the teaching on the relationship between faith and works in James 2:14-26 without relating back to James' previous comments on law and liberty in James 1:22-25. If we really do live under a "law of liberty" as James says, then faith cannot possibly save us or set us free without empowering us to keep that law. So the relationship of faith and works must be interpreted in light of the "law of liberty." Also, the fact that the "law of liberty" is a "royal law" means that you can't claim Jesus as your Lord and King without submitting to his reign. For of course, a "royal Law" is a law that comes from a king -- and kings rule. So submitting to the king means submitting to his royal law and submitting to his royal law means performing the works that law requires out of the faith we confess in Christ as our king.

Many people assume that Paul and James are speaking of the same thing when they talk of "works". The reality is, they aren't. Both Paul and James cite Abraham as their model for the relationship of faith and works. But when Paul speaks of Abraham's "works" he has in view the ritual of circumcision performed long after Abraham was justified. James, in contrast, is not speaking of ceremonial or ritual "works" but has in mind rather those deeds of love which incarnate the faith such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, etc. In short then, Paul and James mean the same thing (and even use the same Greek words) in speaking of faith and justification. But they mean very different things when speaking of "works."

Faith of Abraham

James 2:21-24, like Paul in Romans 4:1-12, refers us to the example of the faith of Abraham. In particular, both authors make note of Genesis 15:6 which tells us, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." James gives us a different and complementary perspective to that of Paul by linking Genesis 15:6 with another text from the Abraham narrative: namely, Genesis 22:9. Does James ask if Abraham was justified by works when he was circumcised? No. He says he was "justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar." Genesis 22 illustrates the completion of James' faith through obedience. Abraham's faith, according to James, is an inherently obedient faith. Paul, in contrast, links Genesis 15:6, not to Genesis 22, but to Genesis 17, where Abraham received circumcision as a sign and seal of righteousness. Paul's point in making that connection is to show that Abraham could be justified before and apart from this ritual and symbolic act, and that uncircumcised Gentiles may therefore be justified by faith and did not need to keep the ceremonial and ritual aspects of the law. Paul's aims to drive a wedge between Abraham's justifying faith in Genesis 15 and his subsequent submission to ritual circumcision in Genesis 17 so as to show that Gentiles too may be justified by faith apart from circumcision. James aims to build a bridge between Genesis 15 and Genesis 22 and to insist that faith cannot be divorced from obedience to God. And, of course, James and Paul agree here, which is why Paul elsewhere insists (in his great letter to the Galatians on the relationship between faith and works) that "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). Here, as always, Paul never speaks of "justification by faith alone". (In fact, the phrase "faith alone" appears only once in the New Testament: it is in James, who tells us, "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.") Rather, like James, Paul sees faith as incarnate and love incarnate in deeds. That is why Paul says to the Corinthians, "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2).





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)

Catholic Scripture Study

Justification

Many people assume that James 2:14-26 is James' "rebuttal" of St. Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. James goes out of his way to declare, "a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" and this appears to some to flatly contradict Paul. In reality however, James contradicts not Paul, but those who misread Paul. For Paul himself never says that we are justified by faith alone. He says we are justified by "faith apart from works of law" (Romans 3:28). But by "works of law" Paul is referring to the ceremonial or ritual aspects of law (such as circumcision). He by no means intends to say we can be justified by faith that is not incarnate in love. This is precisely why Paul himself tells the Galatians that, "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love" (Galatians 5: 6). Likewise, he says, "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). In other words, for Paul, like James, faith is not an abstraction existing in chemical purity and separable from acts of love. For Paul, as for James, to speak of "faith alone" and try to isolate it from deeds of love for God and neighbor is like trying to figure out which blade on the scissors does the cutting or like trying to arrive at "pure" water by splitting apart H₂O into hydrogen and oxygen atoms. It is a nonsense proposition. For both Paul and James therefore, we are not justified by grace through "faith alone". Rather, we are justified by grace through faith expressing itself in love. Faith and works of love are in union for Paul, not in opposition. That is why he tells Timothy, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith" (1 Timothy 1: 5). And James emphasizes this unity of faith and love exactly the same way by declaring, "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26).

Catechism Connection

Referenced from the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

No. 198 "creation is the beginning and the foundation of all God's works."

No. 1993 "Justification establishes cooperation between God's grace and man's freedom."

No. 1815 "...faith does not fully unite the believer to Christ and does not make him a living member of his Body."

No. 2005 "We cannot therefore rely on our feelings or our works to conclude that we are justified and saved."

Family Devotions

During the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we ask the Lord to forgive us for what we have done and for what we have failed to do. Next time you attend mass, ask the Holy Spirit to remind you of those areas of your life that you have failed to do what you believe. During the following week, make it a point to correct the problem. St. Francis said, "Most high, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me, Lord, a correct faith, a certain hope, a perfect charity, sense, and knowledge, so that I may carry out your holy and true command."

Rome to Home

A papal quote relating to the lesson:

"Whoever has received from the divine bounty a large share of temporal blessings whether they be external or material, or gifts of the mind, has received them for the perfecting of his own nature, and, at the same time, that he may employ them, as the steward of God's providence, for the benefit of others" (Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum*, 24).





In this lesson, we observed that:

It has been said that what we do when no one is looking reveals who we really are and underscores what we really believe. Philippians 2:12-13 says, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Paul taught that God is dwelling in us, giving us both the will and power to work for his good pleasure. Ask God to make you sensitive to his inner prompting throughout the day. Cultivate your prayer life and hunger to know the voice of God. Knowing the will of God starts by making a conscious effort to not be conformed to this world, rather "be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). Adopt the attitude that what you believe must find its end in the doing of it. Every time you are struck by a truth, whether it is in mass, reading the Bible or listening to a tape, look for opportunities to put it into practice. Allow God to use your life as the stage on which He expresses his faithfulness to the world.

A Message from the Authors

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God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle

