

# “Actions Speak Louder than Words”

*Faith and Works, James 2:14-26*

## *Introduction*

James’s primary concern so far is to show that our beliefs yield some kind of fruit. Every action is grounded in a belief. Put differently, our actions are the public expression of what we really believe. For instance, James speaks about a right attitude in trials that yields maturity, endurance, and the crown of life (1:2-4, 12); material poverty/gain that yields humility/humiliation (1:9-11); temptation that gives birth to sin (1:13-15); slowness in speech and anger that produces the righteous life God requires (1:19-21); merely listening to the word but failing to do it results in spiritual indifference (1:22-25); a “pure and undefiled religion” that manifests in active concern for the helpless (1:26-27); showing equal concern for every person demonstrates our obedience to the command to love your neighbor as yourself (2:1-13). The main theme of 2:14-26 is that genuine belief will produce a certain kind of behavior. God wants us to know that “actions speak louder than words.”

Consider this paraphrase: “What good is it if someone says they have fire but no heat? Can that fire warm him? Just as a broken light bulb is useless because it does not give off light, so too fire, if it yields no heat, is worthless.”

For James it is unimaginable to claim a faith that saves but have no tangible evidence to support the claim. The claim becomes empty without substantiation. Authentic faith is a faith that works.

## *Paul vs. James*

Both are saying the same thing but have different vantage points. Paul’s perspective speaks to where justification *begins*, whereas James’s perspective speaks to where justification *ends*.

When Paul claims that we are “justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28) he is arguing against those (Jews) who claim they do not have to have faith because their works are sufficient. James, on the other hand, argues that we are “justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24) because works are the product of faith or the end result of faith. We are brought into a relationship with Jesus by faith alone (Paul) and our faith demonstrates its authenticity by our works (James). Therefore, Paul and James compliment rather than contradict one another.

Inactive faith cannot save nor can it justify (v. 14, 24). “Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is never alone” or “We are justified not without, and yet not by works” (John Calvin).

## *Jesus vs. James*

Whereas Jesus focuses on the interior life in the Sermon on the Mount, James focuses on the exterior life in his epistle. Yet, both address the same/similar content; only their vantage points are different. Compare James 2:14-26 with Matthew 7:21-23.

Read 2:14-17: After asking a series of rhetorical questions and offering an illustration, James states his thesis: “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” Consider this way of speaking.

“What good is it, my son, if you say you’ll clean your room, but fail to do so? After all, saying something to be so does not make it so. Imagine your friend saying they’ll pick

## “Actions Speak Louder than Words”

*Faith and Works, James 2:14-26*

you up for the party this weekend but they never show up! What good is it if your friend says something but does not do it? So too, saying you’ll clean your room but not doing it is meaningless.”

### *Separating Faith from Works (2:18-26)*

(Read v. 19) What is the significance of “shuddering demons who believe in God?” Three things: First, James is trying to get us to see that beliefs have implications. Second, a mere verbal profession of faith is insufficient and shamefully demonic. [Incidentally, demons are ahead of most in society today since demons at least accept the fact that there is one God and that Jesus is His Son (cf., Mark 5:6-10).] Third, a passive profession yields death.

### Sidebar: A Spurious Faith?

Read John 2:23-25, 6:60-66, and 8:31-59. What kind of belief/faith is John demonstrating? Read Acts 8:13-24. Based upon Peter’s response to Simon, is there any reason to conclude that Simon believed unto salvation?

(Read v. 22) James is not saying that we are saved by faith *or* by works. Nor is James saying we are justified by faith *and* by works. Rather James is saying that we are justified by faith that manifests, or results in, or produces works. Works are the fulfillment of faith, just as follow-through is the fulfillment of a promise. Many are promise makers but how many are promise keepers?

(Read v. 26) Body – spirit = death. Beliefs cannot be separated from behavior. All behavior is grounded in belief. For example, if I show up on time to a meeting, it is because I believe that being on time is important. If you remain in school and finish your degree, then you’re saying something about what you believe. In the same way that it’s unimaginable to have a painting without the paint, so too a person cannot have faith without works. Faith is to the paint as works are to the painting. The one gives rise to the other.

### *In Conclusion*

At the end of the day the logical connection between faith and works is, for James, the connection between heaven and hell. “Many will say to be on that day...” *Actions really do speak louder than words!*