

Introduction: Faith Without Deeds is Dead

In Dostoyevsky's *The Brother's Karamazov*, a wealthy woman comes to an orthodox elder for help with her doubt. She doubts whether there is life after death. The elder responds that you cannot prove life after death, but you can become certain of it. How?

“By the experience of active love. Strive to love your neighbor actively and indefatigably. In as far as you advance in love you will grow surer of the reality of God and of the immortality of your soul. If you attain to perfect self-forgetfulness in the love of your neighbor, then you will believe without doubt, and no doubt can possibly enter your soul. This has been tried. This is certain.”¹

According to what we learn in James 2:14-26, the elder gave the woman an appropriate response - because faith without deeds is dead.

I. Against Dis-integration

Throughout history there has been a tendency to pit James and Paul against each other. Paul preaches salvation through faith alone, James through faith and works.

However, Paul's salvific theory is best represented in Ephesians 2:8-10:

⁸ *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—*

⁹ *not by works, so that no one can boast.*

¹⁰ *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Ephesians 2:8-10

One scholar comments,

*“Paul is dealing with obstetrics, with how new life begins; James, however, is dealing with pediatrics and geriatrics, with how Christian life grows and matures and ages.”*²

Paul's comments on 'works' generally refer to 'works of the law' as in the Jewish Law. However, as we see in Ephesians 2, Paul expects that Christian faith will be worked out in good works, participating with God. We enter into God's grace through faith and that faith demonstrates itself in action.

This conversation represents how thin our understanding of 'faith' is. We generally use it in terms of 'belief,' but James rightly points out that faith cannot just be belief when he writes:

¹ Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by David McDuff, Penguin Classics, 2003, Book 2, Chapter IV.

² Blomberg, C.L. & Kamell, M.J. (06 Oct 2009). James. In Clinton E. Arnold (Ed.) *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Book 16, p. 139). Zondervan. Quote of Frances Gench.

*“You believe that there is one God. Good!
Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”*

James 2:19

Faith is not just belief; faith is living in alignment with what you know to be true. Faith is the *integration* of belief and action, and the opposite, *dis-integration*, is deadly. Much of modern ‘deconstruction’—the questioning and jettisoning of orthodox faith by young people—is not intellectual, but moral. It is the result of not being able to take the cognitive dissonance of being with a church that says one thing and does another.

Dis-integration hurts us as well. Take the tragic example of Judas who could not live with what he did to Jesus. Dis-integration hurts us mentally, emotionally and sometimes even manifests physically.

James is calling us to reintegrate our faith. He gives us three examples of areas we can begin that process.

II. Reintegrate Your Faith: Peace to the Least of These

James 2:14-17 gives an example that we could modernize in the following way:

Imagine poor Suzy Lou comes to LifeGroup at your house with ratty clothes and smelling bad. During prayer requests she says she’s got nothing in the pantry. So, what do you do?

You pray for her and then kick her out of your house.

James seems to be pulling on Jesus’ teachings about final judgment, especially Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus tells those who ‘inherit the kingdom’ that they inherited it because of their care for ‘the least of these.’ Which means if you want to see Jesus, the most reliable place you can do it is among the ones kicked to the edges of society.

If we desire to live an integrated faith, a living faith, we are called to promote peace for ‘the least of these.’

III. Reintegrate your Faith: Declare Your Allegiance with Your Deeds

In James 2:25-26 the example of Rahab demonstrates how faith leads to situations where our allegiances compete with one another. In Joshua 2, Rahab—a Caananite—hides the spies of Israel from her leaders. As a result, the Israelites destroy her home city but spare her life. She becomes part of the lineage of David as a result.

James’ original audience would resonate with this as they also were seen as traitors to their nation for their allegiance to Jesus.

Jesus once said He came not to bring peace but a sword (Matthew 10:34-39). He also said that anyone who does not hate their mother and father and wife and children and even their own life can’t be His disciple (Luke 14:26).

Jesus demands our ultimate allegiance; and James is saying that our deeds declare our allegiance.

Matthew Bates has written an extended argument that the word translated ‘faith’ in the New Testament might be best understood as *allegiance*.³

Faith, for us late modern westerners, tends to be seen as intellectual. It’s part of why we’ve thought you could relegate faith to something you do and privately believe that has no bearing on public life.

However, the Scriptures show us that our lives are sermons. Our lives show our faith or lack thereof.

Caring for the least of these, not responding with anger, listening before we speak and continuing in the faith under pressure, these things all proclaim that Jesus is Lord.

Reintegrate your faith: Declare your allegiance with your deeds.

IV. Reintegrate Your Faith: Believe God

Finally, in James 2:20-24 we are given the example of Abraham as an encouragement towards reintegrating our faith. Abraham was a seventy-five-year-old man who was promised a child who would become a nation. Repeatedly, God promises that Abraham’s child Isaac will be the one this is fulfilled through (see Genesis 15:4-5, 17:3-6, 18:10, 21:12). But then in Genesis 22:1-2 God calls Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering.

This is called a test; and, ironically, it seems to be more of a test about what kind of God this was than a test of Abraham. Abraham passes because he believes that God is one who keeps His promises, and subtle hints are dropped throughout the story that Abraham believes God will provide a sacrifice (see Genesis 22:5-8).

James is speaking to a community that has sacrificed for their faith—homes, families and their national identity. Abraham’s story demonstrates that the God who asks for these sacrifices is not flippant or choleric - sacrifice is giving something good now to get something better later. It is an act of faith. It is an act we can engage in because God has given for us. We sacrifice because He first sacrificed for us (1 John 4:19).

The text uses James’ keyword ‘teleios’ (τέλειος) (teh-LEH-os) when it says:

“...his faith was made complete [teleios] by what he did.” - James 2:22b -

The mature faith Abraham had was he believed God would not take without giving.

Some of us need James’ words to awaken us. Some of us need a reminder that faith is costly but worth it, and we need to make whatever sacrifices God is calling us to make.

³ Bates, Matthew W. (14 March 2017). *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King*. Baker Academic.

Some of us, however, need to ‘believe God.’ We need to believe God is better than the other gods and has our best in mind. Jesus promised:

“And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”

Matthew 10:42

God keeps track of what we give and promises to reward us for it. Faith without deeds is dead, but faith with deeds is alive. Faith with deeds brings life. Faith with deeds is mature, complete and whole.

Reintegrate your faith: Believe God.

Discussion Questions

Open Up:

- How have you approached doubt or a lack of faith in previous seasons of life?

Dig In:

- How have you seen ‘dis-integration’—beliefs and actions not lining up—affect people? How has it affected you?
- What examples do you have of a truly ‘integrated’ faith? What stands out about those people who are your examples?
- How does being close to the ‘least of these’ bring us closer to Jesus?
- When faith is costly, how do you keep motivated to stay faithful?

Prayer:

Pray for a strengthening of faith—the integration of belief and action—in our church, city and world. Share obstacles to your faith deepening with each other and pray that those obstacles be removed.