

“SO FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD...”

We have all heard and read this passage of scripture found in James 2:17 and 32. We have heard countless explanations concerning this scripture. However, it has also been a confusing one to many, as well as one that has been misunderstood by others. The problem that we as believers have many times, is that we have a tendency to take a passage of scripture and make it, what I call, a "stand alone topic." This, many times, can lead to missing the full concept of what the author of the letter, book of the Bible or Gospel, was actually trying to present.

The author of this letter is a person by the name of James. This James was not one of the Apostles. He was actually the "half-brother" of Jesus (Matthew 13:35, Mark 6:3, Galatians 1:19). He was also the brother of Jude who wrote another letter found in the New Testament. (Jude1:1) We know that Jesus' natural brothers and sisters did not believe in who He was during His lifetime (John 7:3-5). It would seem that Jesus appeared to James after His resurrection. It is not clear if it was at that time or it may have been just previous to this that James became a believer (Acts 1:14, 1Corinthians 15:7). This James ultimately became the "leader" of the Jerusalem Church in which all the believers there, including the Apostles, yielded to his leadership (Acts 15:13, Galatians 2:9).

In his letter, James is writing to Jewish believers throughout the region and elsewhere. He was writing to those who left Jerusalem, as well as Israel, at the time of great persecution from both the Jews and the Romans. Apparently, the Jewish believers were going through some rough times. They were being persecuted by other Jews because of their belief in Jesus as the Messiah, as well as being taunted because this "so called Messiah" has not returned as He said He would. The Jewish believers were starting to get weary of it all as we can see by James' encouragement to "... *count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.*" (James 1:2-4) It would also seem that the believers were also getting away from the lifestyle expressed to them by the Apostles and others who had led them to their faith in Jesus. They were getting away from the precepts that Jesus expressed, lived and role modeled of what the actions and moral behavior of the lifestyle of a true disciple of Jesus was to be. To this point, James wrote his letter.

As we review this letter we read what seems to be many "familiar" passages of scripture. However, as I mentioned previously, many of these have been taken out of their context from within this letter and discussed as "stand alone" topics as if they were "just a bunch of one liners" that were spoken by these mighty men of God. The actual fact of the matter is that the letter that James wrote had a very important thread that flows throughout the letter. As mentioned previously, James is encouraging the believers in their faith and in living the lifestyle of a disciple of Jesus regardless of what came against them.

He is encouraging them to realize that it is not God who is the bad guy and trying to tempt and test their faith as we read in James 1:13-16. "*Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. Do not err, my beloved brethren.*" Notice what he encourages the believers to do - "*Do not err...*" in this kind of thinking.

James continues with another well-known scripture - "*But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.*"(James 1:22) The question that needs to be addressed here is: What "word" is James encouraging the believers to be doers of? As of this point, the "New Testament" as we know it, was not put together yet, nor were most of what has become the New Testament even written yet. The "word" that James is referring to were the Jewish scriptures which were the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. James **was not** telling them to be "a doer" of the sacrificial system of the Jewish scriptures. That was totally fulfilled and done away with by what Jesus did on the cross and His resurrection. What James was referring

to was the moral aspect of the scriptures as found in the Ten Commandments, etc. This was the message that Jesus taught. This is what Jesus expressed and role modeled for His disciples (which includes us today) through His life on the earth. James tells us that if we are not a doer of, and living the lifestyle of the moral aspect of the scriptures, that we are "deceiving" ourselves. The Amplified Bible puts it this way, "*But be doers of the Word [obey the message], and not merely listeners to it, **betraying yourselves** [into deception by reasoning contrary to the Truth].*"

Notice that James tells us that if we are not "doers of the Word," we end up "betraying" ourselves. In the scriptures that follow, James lays out to us that the heart of true believer in Christ needs to be receptive to God's Word, His precepts, His moral commandments and then live it out as a lifestyle. It is a heart that desires to listen and hear God's Word. It is a heart that desires and chooses to control their tongue. It is a heart that chooses to not get angry or resentful when the Word confronts it with its faults and sinful ways but rather will receive, with true humility, correction from God's Word. It is a heart that truly desires to "put away" sin. It is a heart that sees no difference or does not have any partiality towards others regardless of their social strata. It is this kind of desire and attitude that truly represents a changed heart expressed in and through living this type of Christ like lifestyle.

James then proceeds to express, "*...so faith without works is dead...*" The "works" that James is referring to is not such things as: going to church five times a week; going out and evangelizing; going to prayer meeting; painting the church; etc. These are all good things and there is nothing wrong with them. However, the "works" that James is referring to are the actions within the lifestyle of a born again, disciple of Jesus. They are the actions expressed in the believer's character involving their integrity in the things of God and towards others. It is expressed in their manner of behavior, as well as a person's "moral excellence." These are the "works," that express the believer's total faith and trust in Jesus as their Messiah, their Savior and their Lord. In other words they are the actions that express our faith. In ordinary language, James is telling the believers, as well as believers today, that it is one thing to say I believe and have faith in who Jesus is and what He has done for me, but unless it is expressed through the individual's lifestyle and manner of behavior, their faith is not alive but it is dead - there is no real life to it. A true disciple's faith is expressed in what they do and in the actions they take - it is expressed through the believer's lifestyle. That is what "living" faith is. If our lifestyle does not portray, or we do not even desire to portray, the lifestyle of "moral excellence" that Jesus role modeled, than James is telling us that our faith is a "dead faith" and in essence we are deceived and betraying (being a traitor to) ourselves.

Again, James continues with more examples of the "works" that are expressions of "living faith" in Jesus. In chapter three, he gives us the dissertation concerning the tongue. Again, we have all heard much on this topic as a "stand alone" topic taken out of its context. Again, this is not necessarily incorrect. However, within the context of the letter, these passages of scripture reflect a deeper meaning. The words we speak should always be an expression of our faith and who we are in Christ. Our speech will show what is really on the inside. The words we speak in any and all situations are the "works" or actions that will truly express the faith that is within us. That is what Jesus meant when He said, "*...for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh...*" (Matthew 12:34) Therefore, "faith" must be expressed and revealed in and through every word we speak. Our words should be an expression of that which we believe in and whose we are. You can hear the emphatic plea from the heart of James as he declares in James 3:10, "*... Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things **ought not** so to be.*"

As James continues, he tell us in James 3:13, "*Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.*" The term "good conversation" literally means manner of behavior. James is telling us that if you think you are truly wise in the things of God or if you truly think you are a disciple of Jesus than it will be expressed in your "manner of behavior," your lifestyle. He gives an example of a "work" that **does not** express a Christlike manner of

behavior - envy and strife among believers. In James 3:17, we see that a truly wise person in the things of God will express a "work" that is. *"... first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy."* He goes on to tell us that the fruit of that "work" will be the fruits of righteousness which includes being peaceable, bringing unity, oneness and harmony among believers. This "oneness" will ultimately breed a harvest of God's Kingdom upon the earth.

James then gets to the crux of his message in James 4:4. He gets a little tough with the believers that are not living out their faith. He calls them "adulterers and adulteresses" which means that some of them have been "unfaithful" to their so-called faith in Jesus. The Amplified Version tells us, *"You [are like] unfaithful wives [having illicit love affairs with the world and breaking your marriage vow to God]! Do you not know that being the world's friend is being God's enemy? So whoever chooses to be a friend of the world takes his stand as an enemy of God."* Wow!!! That is pretty serious stuff. James actually calls those who are not living the lifestyle of their faith, "enemies of God." He tells us this because he wants us to know how much God loves His children and yearns for His children with a "jealous love." God does not want His children's love for Him to be shared with anything in this world. He truly must be the believer's first, and only true love.

James 4:6 is another familiar scripture, *"But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble."* So what really is God's grace? The grace of God is two-fold. First, it is God's divine favor towards His creation. In His vast love for His creation, He saw all of us destined for eternal separation from Him in Hell. His perfect love for us led to His grace being given to us. He chose to bestow upon us His divine favor even though we did not deserve it. That "favor" allowed for His mercy to be expressed. He saw our desperate need for a Savior, thereby sending Jesus to save us from our sinful ways. Thank you Father and thank you Jesus!!! That is truly a tremendous aspect of the grace of God. The other aspect of God's grace is that, through His grace, He gives every believer the ability to live and walk in His will for each of our lives. He gave us His Holy Spirit to dwell within each of us so that each of us could now walk in the lifestyle and manner of behavior of moral excellence that was role modeled for us by Jesus. That is the ultimate will of the Father for us - that we walk and live in the lifestyle that Jesus role modeled. In doing so, the believer would receive the fullness of God's blessings and promises.

This "grace" that James tells us God gives to those who choose to walk in humility towards Him and thereby resisting the tendencies to walk in their own prideful ways, is the ability given to the true believer to be that "doer of the Word." It is the ability to live out your faith by the "works" that reflect the attitude of your heart through your manner of behavior, your lifestyle. James, in James 4:7-10, presents to us, I believe, the most important aspects of the "works" that exemplify a faith that is "living faith" and not dead.

Let's quickly review these.

- *"Submit yourself therefore to God."* - Unfortunately, the word "submit" has become somewhat of a "curse word" to many in our generation - even to some born again believers. What is being presented by James, is that choosing to totally submit and subject yourself to God and His precepts is primary to "faith that is living and not dead." To submit totally to God is an acknowledgement of my need for Him to be the absolute, supreme and final authority of my life. It is recognizing my need for Him. It is a reference to the very first precept Jesus taught in His very first teaching to His very first disciples - *"Blessed are the poor in spirit..."* (Matthew 5:3). Unless and until this total yielding, surrender and submission to God occurs in a person's heart, any thing else is really just "dead faith." It is just going through the motions. That person deceives themselves into thinking they are a true disciple of Jesus. We must submit ourselves to God, totally. This is the first "work" or action in expressing a person's true faith in Jesus, and who He is.
- *"Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."* We must take note that James tells us that before we can resist the devil we must submit to God. The "resistance" that James is referring to, is to resist the world's ways, as well as our own prideful tendencies that may be "lurking" within. It is not always the devil who is our worst enemy. It is his wicked ways that have permeated this world and whether we

admit it or not, has affected our ways of thinking and acting - yes, even born again children of God. James touched on this in James 1:14,15 which we discussed previously, *"But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death."* Notice James is telling us that this becomes the believer's responsibility, not God's. God gives us His "grace," the ability to overcome these tendencies but we must be the ones who use that ability to resist those temptations that may still be "lurking" within. This is a "work" that reflects the attitude of heart that desires a faith that is living and not dead.

- *"Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you."* - As we submit to God, He gives us the ability to resist those devilish desires. This will allow us to draw nearer to God and He to us. Our relationship grows and intimacy occurs. Notice that James puts the responsibility again on the true believer. We must first desire to draw near to God. He is always there. It is our responsibility to "turn towards Him." We draw near to His glory, His beauty, His purity and holiness. We all love this expression or "work" of a faith that is alive. Uh- oh!! Look out!!! When we draw near to His beauty, purity and holiness we begin to realize something. Our own frailties and areas of darkness become exposed under His glorious light. This leads us to the next action of a faith that is living and not dead.
- *"Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness."* - When we are with a loving Heavenly Father, who draws near to us, we love Him and desire to be even closer with Him. However, as mentioned, we begin to see those areas in our life that "lurk" within our heart that actually hinder us in experiencing the fullness of what that relationship could be. James is simply stating that one of the "works" of a faith that is alive and not dead is that of the action of true repentance. We recognize any sinful ways and love God so much that we desire and choose to repent and turn away from those things that are not part of the lifestyle or manner of behavior of a true disciple of Jesus. Yes, repentance is a good thing. Contrary to what some are teaching in this day, it is not a sin to repent!!! According to James, repentance is an expression of a faith that is alive!!!
- *"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up."* - I love how the Amplified Version puts this scripture, so I will let it explain this aspect of the "works" of a faith that is alive. *"Humble yourselves [feeling very insignificant] in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you [He will lift you up and make your lives significant]."* Did you hear what you just read? James is saying that as we recognize our need for God and choose to look at ourselves as being insignificant and humble ourselves, God will then not only "lift us up" but He will make our lives **significant**. WOW!!!

Through all the things we just discussed - Submitting to God, resisting the devil, drawing near to God, repenting and turning from those evil tendencies that may be lurking within us and realizing that in and of ourselves we are very insignificant - God will make our lives **significant**. These are the expressions and actions of a lifestyle and manner of behavior that are truly the "works of a living faith." It expresses a faith in our God that is alive and not dead. Without these expressions and actions, according to James, the leader of the Jerusalem Church, a pillar and father of the Body of Christ, than your faith is DEAD!!!

"So faith without works is dead..." As we have discussed, this scripture takes on a whole different look as we keep it within its context. James is exhorting the believers both in His time, as well as us today, to be doers of the Word of God. Not just going to church and doing wonderful Godly things but rather He is speaking of living a lifestyle of a true disciple of Jesus. It is the believer's manner of behavior of moral excellence, integrity and character that was role modeled to us by Jesus that truly is the expression and witness of a faith that is alive. These "works" are the true expression of a faith that is on fire for God!!! This lifestyle will give every believer the wonderful gift of knowing that they are living a life that is significant, valuable and gives a tremendous sense of self worth, not just in their own eyes but in the eyes and heart of a loving God. *"So faith without works is dead..."*