TRUE FAITH

It is undeniable that one common struggle of the church—any church—is legalism. Legalism is the idea that there are requirements for salvation beyond repentance and faith, especially when those supposed requirements are merit-based. This heretical belief cuts at the heart of the gospel, implying that Jesus’ death and resurrection was somehow insufficient, or that humans are able to merit salvation (at least in part) by their own efforts. Legalism is completely unbiblical.

In an attempt to flee legalism, though, sometimes Christians have allowed the pendulum to swing too far in the other direction. The definition is broadened to, “Any outward following of a biblical standard is legalism.” And that’s just not true.

In this week’s passage, James’s focus is not to convince anyone of a life of legalism. His words are not contrary to the fact that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ. His point is simply to answer the question, “What is true faith?” Faith is neither all action nor all inaction. Instead, it is an inward change that results in an outward change. Although the outward change is not all there is, it can give evidence of whether or not there was an inward change.

Humanity is not saved by works; instead, we are saved by faith. What that faith truly is, then, is indeed a salvific issue and one worthy of close consideration.

Read This Week’s Passage:
James 2:14–26
Write out James 2:14–26 from the Bible translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out James 2:14, 21, 22. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
FAITH PROFITS

A common refrain throughout this week’s passage is the question, “What does it profit?” or, “Can it save him?” James’s line of questioning reveals his central question of, What good is this kind of faith that we’re describing? It’s a faith that notices a hungry or naked brother or sister and only offers them words without power and without action. A faith that is said to be in the heart but has no bearing, expression, or evidence in the life. What is the profit of such a “faith”?

True faith profits something. It yields meaningful communion with God (Heb. 11:6), salvation (Eph. 2:8), and good works that bless others (v. 10). Claiming to have faith is not proof that the claim is true. James bifurcates faith and works in 2:14 to show how foolish that separation is. Can someone have faith and have it not show up in their lives? Is that the kind of faith we’re told to hold? Can that kind of faith result in salvation? he seems to ask. The answer is a resounding “No.” Not because faith is insufficient, but because faith without works is no faith at all. It is “dead” and useless (James 2:17).

The jarring example of verse 19 shows what a lack of true faith can be. Even the demons believe and know that God is more powerful than them, that He is to be feared, that He is the Creator God. But they do not submit to that truth and live by it. Instead, they live in the servitude of the devil. They somehow mentally sideline it in order to continue the life that they have.

A mental assent to the existence of or even the character of God is not enough. True faith doesn’t stop at trembling with knowledge. True faith is not satisfied until surrender.

Unlike God, humans are limited to outward expressions of faith in order to see faith. It’s true that people can pretend to have faith by accruing badges of preaching, donating clothes, giving money, and even saying Christ-like things. But it is just as true that true faith cannot be hidden from humanity’s eyes—it naturally bears fruit in the life by outward expressions of love to God and to others (John 15:1–8). It is these outward expressions that lead people to glorify God (Matt. 5:16), leading them to know Him, accept His love, and walk with Him.
PAUL VERSUS JAMES (OR IS IT?)

James 2:24 seems to affirm the very definition of legalism: “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only” When read alongside Ephesians 2:8, 9, it becomes even more problematic: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast” (emphasis supplied). Looked at like that, these two verses can lead to some troubling conclusions. Do Paul and James believe in separate gospels? Is the Bible contradicting itself? For something as essential as salvation, this is not something to gloss over or ignore.

These two verses reveal the importance of understanding context instead of taking two or three sentences as standalone assertions. James’s concern here is not to add onto the requirement of faith but to explain it. As has been explored throughout this week, James is focused on giving practical details of what faith is and how it looks. Faith is not a simple mental assent. When a belief is truly held, it changes the believer. Not because they have to make it so, but because that’s what belief does.

Suppose there was a little boy in his bedroom playing with his toys. His father comes in and tells him, “Look out! There are snakes in your room!” If the little boy believes his father, what will he do? Depending on his view of snakes, he’ll either scramble to the highest point in the room for safety or get on all fours to find them. Either way, he will act on that belief. Is it because he mentally said to himself, My father said there are snakes. I believe him. To prove my belief, I will act on this belief? Not at all! Instead, his belief in what his father said will immediately lead to action simply because that’s what belief does.

Similarly, James’s point is that people saying that they have faith and not having it show up in their lives is an example of a dead or useless faith. They’re like a little boy who says, “I believe you, father,” but it becomes clear by their actions that they do not believe. It’s not faith at all. And lack of faith does have salvific ramifications.

Faith looks like Abraham: he believed God, which led to the natural expression of these beliefs in his actions. Actions, then, are not to be added. They’re simply to be unhindered as they happen from a natural result of belief and trust in Jesus.
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What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Ephesians 2:8–10
Hebrews 11
Philippians 3:7–11
Matthew 5:16
Galatians 5:22

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with James 2:14–26?

THE EVIDENCE OF FRUIT

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned His listeners about false prophets who “come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves”—people who look good, innocent, or helpful but actually mean to do harm (Matt. 7:15). Jesus did not offer to lend the God-held ability to read hearts and minds. Instead, He gave a reliable test that anyone can do: evaluate the fruit, the long-term expressions of their lives. He knew that people could sound good, if only temporarily, and deceive. But fruit is impossible to fake. Just as good trees bear good fruit and bad trees bear bad fruit, the condition of an individual’s heart cannot be hidden by its own expressions (Matt. 7:16–18). “Therefore,” Jesus concluded, “by their fruits you shall know them” (Matt. 7:20).

If this test can be used on others, why not on believers themselves? Sometimes people will say, “Just accept Jesus; that’s all we need.” That’s actually true. Accepting Jesus, though, is more than words spoken. It is a supernatural experience. Still, it bears repeating ad nauseam that these expressions of faith are not fruit that are stapled to the leaves of the tree of one’s heart. It is not human strength, grit, or determination that produces this fruit. It only comes through truly believing in, trusting, and loving Jesus. As always, Jesus is a perfect example of how this walk with God happens day to day.

When overwhelmed by something like the death of His cousin or the rigors of ministry, Jesus withdrew into a deserted place alone or with His close friends to commune with God, knowing His deep need of strength from His Father. He told His disciples to pray for God’s will to be done, and then prayed that same prayer in the throes of despair in the Garden of Gethsemane. He commissioned His followers to share God’s love and the news of His kingdom with everyone, and He shared with multitudes, outcasts, and religious leaders alike. He showed how to fulfill His commandment to love others by loving them in action. Jesus’ life is a vivid and practical example of all that He said and all that He believed. Because that’s how belief works.

Jesus is a perfect picture of living faith, and He gives the power and grace for it to be mirrored in the life of His children.
THE FAITH THAT WORKS

“Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.... For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (James 2:24–26). It is essential to have faith in Jesus, and to believe you are saved through Him; but there is danger in taking the position that many do take in saying, “I am saved.” Many have said: “You must do good works, and you will live”; but apart from Christ no one can do good works. Many at the present day say, “Believe, only believe, and live.” Faith and works go together, believing and doing are blended. The Lord requires no less of the soul now, than He required of Adam in Paradise before he fell—perfect obedience, unblemished righteousness. The requirement of God under the covenant of grace is just as broad as the requirement He made in Paradise—harmony with His law, which is holy, and just, and good. The gospel does not weaken the claims of the law; it exalts the law and makes it honorable. Under the New Testament, no less is required than was required under the Old Testament. Let no one take up with the delusion so pleasant to the natural heart, that God will accept of sincerity, no matter what may be the faith, no matter how imperfect may be the life. God requires of His child perfect obedience.

In order to meet the requirements of the law, our faith must grasp the righteousness of Christ, accepting it as our righteousness. Through union with Christ, through acceptance of His righteousness by faith, we may be qualified to work the works of God, to be colaborers with Christ. If you are willing to drift along with the current of evil, and do not cooperate with the heavenly agencies in restraining transgression in your family, and in the church, in order that everlasting righteousness may be brought in, you do not have faith. Faith works by love and purifies the soul. Through faith the Holy Spirit works in the heart to create holiness therein; but this cannot be done unless the human agent will work with Christ. We can be fitted for heaven only through the work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart; for we must have Christ’s righteousness as our credentials if we would find access to the Father. In order that we may have the righteousness of Christ, we need daily to be transformed by the influence of the Spirit, to be a partaker of the divine nature. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to elevate the taste, to sanctify the heart, to ennoble the whole man. (Ellen G. White, Selected Messages, bk. 1, 373, 374.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Do you naturally lean toward legalism or cheap grace? How can we guard against either one?

In your own words, what is faith?

How can we remember the importance of works but keep it in the context of faith?

Share a time your faith was expressed in works. How was it still “of faith”?

Why do you think people say Jesus doesn’t care about how we act? Does He? In what way?

What sentences stuck out to you in this week’s inSight? Explain why.

Share another Scripture that is explained by its context. How can we learn to be balanced students of the Bible?