

JAMES: What is the relationship between salvation and works?

Thomas L. Constable writes:¹

His point here was that faith is no substitute for obedience. Orthodox faith without good works cannot protect the Christian from sin's deadly consequences in this life (i.e., a deadening of fellowship with God at least, and at most ultimately physical death; cf. 5:20; 1 John 5:16). That faith cannot save him from God's discipline of him as a believer. Good works in addition to faith are necessary for that kind of deliverance (salvation).

(Many commentators believe that James was referring to eschatological salvation (i.e., salvation from eternal damnation). This interpretation obviously involves bringing works in as some type of condition for that aspect of salvation, which seems to contradict the clear revelation that salvation from hell is by grace alone.)

It would be difficult to find a concept which is richer and more varied in meaning than the biblical concept of salvation. The breadth of salvation is so sweeping and its intended aim so magnificent that in many contexts the words used defy precise definition.

"Yet these difficulties have not thwarted numerous interpreters from assuming, often without any contextual justification, that the words used invariably mean 'deliverance from hell' or 'go to heaven when you die.' It may come as a surprise to many that this usage of 'salvation' (Gk. *soteria*) would have been the least likely meaning to come to the mind of a reader of the Bible in the first century. Indeed, in 812 usages of the various Hebrew words translated 'to save' or 'salvation' in the Old Testament, only 58 (7.1 percent) refer to eternal salvation."²

We can make statements in all sincerity of mind and emotion: 'I feel sorry for the poor; I don't condone racism.' But James will say, 'What good is that if you aren't doing something to help the poor or to heal the distrust and injustice between races?' Some Christians attempt a stance of personal belief without personal action, saying, for example, 'I personally disagree with abortion, but I won't try to change others' minds.'

James persists in asking us: What are you doing to protect the victims—both the victimized baby and the victimized mother?"

"Dead" does not mean non-existent but inactive, no longer vital, dormant, useless (cf. v. 14). This is a very important point.

It has not usually been considered too deeply why James chose the term 'dead' to describe a faith that is not working. But the moment we relate this to the controlling theme of 'saving the life,' everything becomes plain. The issue that concerns James is an issue of life or death. (He is not discussing salvation from hell!) The truth which he has in mind is that of Proverbs: '*Righteousness tendeth to life . . . he that pursueth evil pursueth it to his own death.*' [Prov. 11:19; cf. Prov. 10:27; 12:28; 13:14; 19:16] Can a dead faith save the Christian from death? The question answers itself. The choice of the adjective 'dead' is perfectly suited to James' argument.

¹ The discussion below was taken from Thomas L. Constable, *Study Notes on James*, pp. 30-37. Other sources quoted therein are noted as well.

² Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Miami Springs, Fla.: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992), p. 112.

Hodges comments:

"When a man is justified by faith he finds an unqualified acceptance before God . . . (Rom. 4:6). But only God can see this spiritual transaction. When, however, a man is justified by works he achieves an intimacy with God that is manifest to men. He can then be called 'the friend of God,' even as Jesus said, 'You are my friends if you do whatever I command you' (John 15:14)."³

To summarize, I believe what James wrote in verses 14-26 means this: Good works are not necessary to keep us from going to hell. However they are necessary to keep us from falling under God's disciplinary punishment that may even result in premature physical death. It is possible for a Christian not to use his or her faith, to stop "walking by faith."

In such a case his or her faith is of no practical use here and now. Therefore we who are Christians should be careful to continue to keep trusting and obeying God day by day. It is possible for a Christian to exercise "saving faith" and then to stop "walking by faith." That is what James is warning us to avoid. He is dealing with sanctification primarily, not justification, here and throughout this epistle. This is Christian life teaching, not teaching on how to become a Christian.

Stulac summarizes:

"James' emphasis on faith alone shows that he affirms the necessity of faith; what he is opposing is a faith that denies the obligation to obey Christ as Lord."⁴

³ Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1981), p. 31.

⁴ George M. Stulac, *James* (Downers Grove, Ill. and Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 116.