

16. Faith and Works Necessarily Go Together

*But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”
Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my
faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God.
Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.
(James 2:18-19)*

Anticipating an Objection

James has made it very clear that faith and works belong together. In the maturity of faith, we recognize and practice this. We cannot rightly claim to be Christians if we do not do the works of God, therefore we must grow in such a way that works become evident more and more.

James has warned us against a *dead* faith. Something that is dead does not act for it has no life left in it. But the true faith is a living faith, and it produces the fruit that comes from the Vine, our Lord Jesus Christ. Is our faith dead, or is it alive? Does our faith become apparent in works and do we produce much fruit?

James has been pressing this point relentlessly from the beginning of his letter. Mature faith brings forth much fruit. Faith and deeds go together. In our current text, however, James anticipates and deals with a possible objection to what he has written. This is evidence of a good teacher, one who knows his people and hears the objections coming.

When we look closer at the objection and the manner in which James responds to it, we see that James understands it at its very core and deals with it forcefully. Not every objection is of the same weight or gravity. This one, however, is very serious for it touches the heart of the Gospel. For this reason, in no uncertain terms, the Lord through James maintains that faith and works must necessarily go together. We will consider the common objection, the challenging response, and the chilling example.

A Common Objection

James has been going along at a good pace and now he seems to pause, look around him, and note, “But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’” Not only can James already imagine a response to what he has written in the previous verses, but he also anticipates the content of the response. James knows the churches and its members, and he is aware of what is probably coming.

From this, I conclude that James is responding to an objection that was quite common. This objection was more often brought against the doctrine of faith and works as taught by the apostles. As an aside, most objections brought against the apostolic doctrine are not new, also today. Many objections are common, taught by a few and perhaps held and nurtured by many. Many objections, and with them false teachings, are removed from the church, only to come back in a slightly amended form. There is nothing new under the sun, also in the field of heresy,

For this reason, I wish to deal with the objection in 2:18 as a *common* objection. What exactly is the objection that might be made against the apostolic doctrine? “But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’” It is almost as if the objector says, “It is easy to say you believe; it is much harder to *show* that you believe. Faith is not really the important thing, rather, deeds are what religion is all about.”

Perhaps the background of this common objection lies in Judaism. Remember that James is writing to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. Judaism stresses the works of the law above having faith. It is easy for someone to say that he believes, but it takes much more to show that belief, and by deeds people are saved.

Why All the Emphasis on Faith?

The matter may even go slightly deeper. In 2:18, it appears that the objector is saying, “Look, we are all different people. You have faith, whereas I have deeds. One person has this particular gift and the other has that certain gift, and nobody is exactly alike. The one may be more oriented towards the contents of the faith, while the other leans more towards the acts of faith. One is more dogmatical, the other is more practical in life. Therefore, the conclusion must be that we cannot ask the same thing of everyone.”

The objector is putting the full emphasis on deeds, essentially saying that real Christianity is that of deeds, of action. It is so easy to say that we are

Christians and to debate the many issues of faith, but what is really important is that we excel in Christian living and service. The objector may even feel that James, despite stressing deeds, still places too much importance on faith. Since James has already said that faith without works is dead, why not go one step farther and say it is not faith that matters, but deeds?

Who cares about doctrine when there is so much that needs to be done? It can therefore happen that someone always wants to be involved in activities, but cares very little for the Bible societies or discussions about doctrine and church polity. Some may say, "I would rather be involved in a Christian work than to sit around arguing about a Bible passage all evening." We are all different people in the church of Christ. Not everyone likes to be involved in faith discussions. Some people are more practical, and they want something to do, rather than to write an essay or introduction. Someone may stop attending a Bible society because the attendees are always arguing about matters of faith.

It is indeed a common objection: why all the emphasis on faith, when it really comes down to deeds and to action? While we are debating, people are dying spiritually on the streets. Why get all worked up about the confessions and the church order, when there is so much we can do together with others? Deeds are important, but faith is not such a big thing. In the end, everyone believes what he wants to anyway, and God will ask, "What have you *done*?" I have even heard once that the final measuring stick will not be what we have believed, but what we have done.

The Challenging Response

Notice how James does not step into the dilemma. Faith and deeds are inseparable. No Christian deed is acceptable to God and beneficial to others if it does not come forth from faith. Faith is the source of all good works. Our belief on the basis of Scripture is what motivates us to do things, and therefore James rebuts with a challenging response. He writes, "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do." If we say that we are believers and want to show our faith, we can only do so by deeds.

"Show me your faith without deeds." What Christian would accept the preposterous notion that faith can be without deeds? Believing is not just a mental thing that can be hidden, but it is a total thing that must and will become evident. Can a believer in Christ hide his good deeds? Can a true believer really have an inactive faith?

Faith without deeds does not exist. We may never separate the two for then we destroy them both. If we deny faith, we kill the source of deeds. If we deny

deeds, we kill the fruit of faith. “Show me,” writes James, as if that kind of faith (without deeds) really exists. Such faith is not true faith. James’ response is a challenging one. Indeed, we must challenge those who come with false dilemmas and wrong constructions, who divorce what belongs together, and say to them, “What is this nonsense you suggest? Can there be faith without deeds? We are all different people and we have different ways of doing things, but it holds true for all of us that there is no faith without deeds, for that is not true faith!”

We must take this very seriously. We believe that we have the true and complete doctrine of salvation, but do we realize that this obligates us all the more to live it and show it? It must become apparent in how we act, what we say, and how we speak.

The Challenge Extended

James extends the challenge. To paraphrase his words, he says, “Okay, you show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do! You go around with a dead faith, thinking that it is alive, yet doing nothing to glorify God and help the neighbor; I will show you my faith by my deeds. I will do the things that faith prescribes and that God wants me to do, for the glory of his Name and the benefit of my neighbor. I will show you a living faith!”

James is not trying to get bragging rights here. He knows very well that we may not boast before the Lord. He is simply saying that if we are true believers, it will show in what we do. It must show, for that is the character of faith. Others must see that we really believe by the things they see us doing. What good is it if we say that we believe, but nobody ever sees an act of faith coming from us?

Some people say that the Reformed churches are too heavy on doctrine and too lax in lifestyle. We stress faith, not deeds. These people then sometimes go in the opposite direction, seeking a church community where there are many activities in which to participate, and where doctrine is of much lesser importance. “You have faith -Reformed- but I have deeds -charismatic, Baptist, or whatever.” If that is the case, we are all —Reformed or otherwise— dreadfully wrong.

The challenging response of James is that we keep everything together, where it belongs. Let there be a good emphasis on faith, on the act of believing and the content of believing. Let us not devalue our creeds or confession and join the crowd that does not care about doctrine and polity. We must keep the

faith once for all delivered to the saints, but at the same time make sure that there is a good and proper emphasis on Christian deeds. We must not criticize brothers and sisters who want to be actively involved in the lives of others and perhaps make a difference. Actually, we should all consider becoming involved in passing on a comforting word or extending a helping hand to those in need, for there is no faith without deeds.

The Chilling Example

As James writes these words, he seems to suddenly realize that there are those who believe but have no deeds of faith. It is a chilling example, for he refers to the demons who believe certain things but do not act in obedience and humility.

We can argue that the example does not fit, for demons do not have true faith. That is precisely the point, for neither do those who say they believe and yet do nothing. Notice how carefully James phrases his words here. He does not say that demons are “believers”, rather, he starts with us and with what we believe: “You believe that there is one God” (2:19). This is not a minor point, but a key issue. Remember that this was the reason many Christians in James’ day were persecuted and killed. They would not worship any other god, nor would they even burn incense to the emperor. There is only one God, the LORD: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut 6:4). There is only one true God, and the rest are imposters and demons.

James writes, “You believe that there is one God.” This belief is the foundation of the Christian faith. But then he follows with, “Even the demons believe that.” Demons are evil spirits, fallen angels who know that there is only one God. They have even seen him, and they are well aware of his power, majesty, and glory. The devil also believes that there is a God, for he has seen this God, opposed this God, and been cast out of heaven. If we would say to a demon, “Do not worry, there is no God,” or, “God is dead,” the demon would consider us crazy for he knows better. He would shake his head in disbelief. How foolish can people be to deny the existence of the one true and eternal God?

Does this knowledge that demons have, which James calls “believing”, lead to deeds? He means here Christian deeds. Would not a demon try to get back into God’s good graces, knowing how great and powerful he is? No, for a demon cannot repent. When the angels fell, they fell individually, without

the possibility of redemption. James therefore writes, “Even the demons believe that - and shudder.”

Shudder

I am not sure about the translation of the word “shudder”. The NKJV translates it as “tremble”. The element of shuddering and trembling certainly has its place here. The demons are doomed, and they know it. They will receive the punishment of hell, a frightful prospect. Such is their life, however, and they can only tremble. They live in the face of eternal death, always.

By our sinfulness, we can sometimes put so much on the line. We do wrong while we know we should not. By his Spirit, the Lord may still bring us to repentance and obedience, but for demons there is not even the hope of escape. It is a chilling example. Some other translations replace the word “shudder” with “bristle”, meaning that the demons shake with hopeless anger and extreme fear, ready to strike back. They are like cats driven into a corner, with their backs arched and their fur standing on end. Such bristling, however, is about all the demons can do. Their fate is sealed and their lives are doomed. They hate God even more. They do all kinds of evil deeds, seeking to destroy the church and turn away the believers. These are the only believers who do not do good works. Their “faith” leads them to ferocious fear and anger. Their hate knows no bounds.

Why does James mention this example? He wants to forcefully emphasize that true faith is needed. This is not the faith that demons have, for theirs is the knowledge that leads to hate. Demons believe and do not repent. They only know how to do works of destruction, and they do so because that is all they know. They do them with fear and trembling, driven by the inner compulsion of sin, acting according to their nature.

We also believe that God exists and that he is One. This faith should not lead us to helpless anger that makes us shudder, but to Christian action and a life where faith and works are blended together to the glory of God’s Name. True faith is based on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, believes the forgiveness of sins, and rejoices in the life everlasting.

Faith and deeds together: we really see this in the life of the Lord Jesus. He held to the true confession. He lived the confession. Christ did not bristle and retaliate, but he gave his life. James remembers it very well and he relays it to us. Let us give our lives into the service of the Lord and show our faith

through deeds, to the benefit of all who share in it and to the glory of God who redeemed us.