

# FUNCTIONAL FAITH

James 2:14-26

Our passage today deals with functional faith. Faith has a purpose. The purpose of faith is to deliver us from both the penalty and practice of sin on the one hand and to enable us to serve God. Faith is meant to accomplish these things in our lives. Functional faith is belief in action.

## **FUNCTIONAL FAITH IS BELIEF IN ACTION.**

If we believe we are to accept all people and we act on that belief by initiating a conversation with someone of a different race our faith is functional, it is saving us from the sin of partiality. Both the belief and the action are necessary for our faith to be functional and for our faith to accomplish its purpose of transformation. If you separate belief from action, faith is no longer functional. In the words of James, faith without works is dead. Its nonfunctional. It cannot accomplish its purpose of transforming our lives.

So we can see how important this issue is and why James was concerned to correct those who insisted that believing without action, was sufficient for the Christian life (James 2:14).

What is the purpose of faith according to verse 14? It is to save us. The function of faith is to deliver us. The point of verse 14 is that faith that is limited to only a belief without action cannot accomplish its purpose to save us. To whom did James write this letter? To Jewish Christians; they possessed justification salvation. Throughout the letter he addresses them as his brothers and his beloved brothers. *Save* in this context does not refer to "going to heaven when you die". *Save* means to deliver or rescue. Looking at 1:1 to 2:13, are there things from which believers need to be delivered? Believers then and now need to be delivered from double-mindedness when asking for wisdom (1:5-8). Believers need to be delivered from temptations to sin associated with trials (1:13-15). Believers need to be delivered from the practice of sin (filthiness and wickedness) and receive the Word (1:19-21). Christians need to be delivered from the deception that hearing the Word is enough when, in fact, they need to be doers as well (1:22-25). Christians need to be delivered from an out-of-control tongue (1:26). Believers need to be delivered from the sin of partiality (2:1-13).

Belief without action is powerless to deliver us from any of these things. It is dead. It is nonfunctional. It really is not faith at all. James next gives an illustration of how useless belief without action really is (James 2:15-16).

What is the purpose of speaking a blessing over the needy? To bless them! But what is needed in addition to the blessing? A gift basket full of clothes and food. Otherwise, the blessing is useless - actually its worse than useless, its cruel.

In verse 17 James reiterates the point that belief without action is dead. Belief alone cannot save. Belief alone can't do anything. It is dead. Nonfunctional.

James anticipates pushback. In 2:18-26 he gives a thought problem and two illustrations to further drive home the truth that functional faith is belief in action.

"You can have it both ways." seems to be the idea James is confronting. The idea is that for some people just believing is capable of transforming their lives and for others believing and doing is what transform them. James exposes the fallacy that belief alone transforms. First, without works of some kind it is impossible to demonstrate that you are really convinced of and confident in a belief and that your life is in alignment with what you say you believe. If you say you believe you ought to honor God as your Provider, but do give to Him of your firstfruits, how does God or any of us know what you really believe? It's all words. That's all you have. Second, the enemies of God, the demons, have correct beliefs about God, but do those beliefs transform them?

You can't have it both ways. The purpose of faith is to save us. It is to deliver us from sin and deliver us to a rich life of service for Christ. Faith requires belief in action to accomplish its purposes in us.

Again, verse 20 emphasizes that faith has a purpose. Without works it is useless; it is not capable of accomplishing its purpose. Faith with works is useful. Useful for what? For delivering us from sin to righteousness. For transforming us to be more like Christ.

James next gives two illustrations to prove his point. The first is the faith of Abraham, the father of the Jewish people and the father of faith (James 2:21-24). Genesis 15:1-6 records God's promise to Abraham that he would have a son who would be heir to the covenant. Verse 6 says Abraham believed the Lord, but what was the ultimate proof, the ultimate demonstration that Abraham really believed God? It was years later when Abraham obeyed God's command to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:9-12).

By his action of sacrificing Isaac, Abraham proved, demonstrated, gave evidence that he truly feared God and trusted God. That is what James means when he says Abraham was justified by works. His "work" of sacrificing Isaac made it clear to God and to all that Abraham genuinely believed God's promise of an heir. Abraham believed God would resurrect Isaac because Isaac was the heir of the Abrahamic Covenant (Heb. 11:17-19). Through his functional faith, Abraham became father of the Jewish nation, forefather to Messiah and a friend of God.

James closes this section with a final illustration. It is an illustration of the functional faith of Rahab, a gentile prostitute in the days of Israel's conquest of the Promised Land James 2:25; Josh. 2:6-15).

Did Rahab really believe in the God of the Israelites? How could they know for certain? In what way did Rahab's functional faith save her? It delivered her and her family from physical death and it delivered Rahab to a living relationship with the one true God.

James concludes by comparing functional faith to a functional human being (James 2:26). Just as a functional human being is the union of a body and spirit so also functional faith is the union of belief and action. If you separate soul from body you render a person nonfunctional; they are dead, unable to accomplish their purpose. Separating action from belief renders one's faith nonfunctional; it is dead, unable to accomplish its purpose of saving us.

We all need to live by faith because it is by faith that we are transformed and continue to grow to become more like Christ. Believing without doing will not accomplish God's work in our lives. We need to believe and do. Functional faith is faith and works. Functional faith has the power to deliver us from sin and deliver us to a rich life of service for Christ.

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