



# A Faith That Works

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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## Introduction:

“So what?” Have you ever said that to someone? I’ve heard salesmen talk about the “so what” factor. Salesmen understand that their product may do some wonderful things, but if it doesn’t accomplish what you need or want, your response is going to be “So what?” Salesmen also know that they can give you all kinds of information about a product but if the information doesn’t address your bottom line, your response will be “So what?” If you are going to sell something, you have to address the “so what” factor. What every customer wants to know is will it work for me? Will it accomplish what I need or want? James asks a very similar question in **James 2:14**. Throughout the New Testament, we read about faith. We’ve defined faith. We’ve examined faith. We’ve made some lofty claims about faith. But now James asks, “So what?” “What good is it...?” he asks. He essentially asks, “Does it work?” Then he explains what it will do if it works. “Can that faith save him?” If faith can’t save, what good is it? If faith doesn’t save, “So what?” We can provide all kinds of wonderful claims about how good faith is, but if it won’t save and justify, “So what?” Then James examines three different kinds of faith, only one of which measures up to the “so what” factor. Only one of which works. Let’s examine the three kinds of faith James explores and then examine our own lives to see if we have a faith that works.

## Discussion:

- I. A clichéd faith doesn’t work.
  - A. In **James 2:15-16**, James considers a parallel example. He wants us to consider another scenario in which we might ask “So what? What good is that?” What good does it do to tell someone “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” if we aren’t going to help provide warmth and food? Sure, that person said something nice, but they were absolutely useless. I call this a “cliché faith” because it pronounces spiritual sounding clichés but doesn’t work.
  - B. “Go in peace” was a common Hebrew idiom (see **Judges 18:6**; **I Samuel 1:17**; **20:42**). It certainly meant that the person saying it was not going to cause hindrance or trouble to the person that was to go in peace. It also carried with it the request of blessing from God on the way of the person. After all, peace is a gift from God (cf. **Numbers 6:24-26**). “Be warmed and filled” stated the platitude of blessing on the person. They would only go in peace if they were warmed and filled, otherwise they would go in despair, anxiety, and want.
  - C. The speaker in this scenario is filled with spiritual platitudes and clichés, but is completely useless. James hearkens to the teaching of Jesus in **Matthew 25:31-46**. What good is a Christian who says spiritual sounding things about taking care of his or her brethren, but won’t actually help them? As **Proverbs 3:27-28** explains, if we can bless someone, don’t send them away, even if it is with a prayer for God’s blessing.
  - D. This parallel tells us something about faith. There are a whole lot of people that sound really spiritual. Their speech drips with seeming spirituality. Ask them how they are doing, “Blessed,” they reply. “God’s just blessing my socks off.” Tell them about a problem and they respond with seemingly good mantras, “Just let go and let God.” They are quick with a Bible verse to address your question or an uplifting poem to brighten your day. They smile and nod, pat you on the shoulder, give you a little side hug, and then they leave. And all of these things are good insofar as they go but if it doesn’t go any farther, what good is that? What use is that faith?
  - E. And so James explains that a really sincere-sounding, seemingly spiritual person who can quote clichés and prefer platitudes but doesn’t actually do anything is useless. That faith doesn’t work. Your faith has to do more than make claims and offer blessings. It needs to actually do something. Why? Because as James says in **James 2:17**, “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (ESV).
- II. A creedal faith doesn’t work.
  - A. Certainly a cliché faith is empty. We’ve all met those people who rest in their empty platitudes, but don’t really know their Bibles. They live in error and pursue false doctrine. But we are different. We know the truth. We have studied the great doctrines of the Bible and we are guides to the blind and lights in the darkness. We know the pattern. We know exactly what we are supposed to believe and will brook no contradiction. But is that faith useful?
  - B. James addresses this faith in **James 2:19**. “You believe God is one...” refers to what the Jews called the Shema. It came from **Deuteronomy 6:4**: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (ESV). It was a creedal statement of belief. “Creed” just means “I believe.” Every Jew was supposed to say, “I believe God is one.” It was the great doctrine of the Old Covenant. It was the doctrine they were supposed to pass from father to son.

- C. Some Christians are able to do the same. They can recite the creeds of Christianity. Please understand that I'm not referring to the handbooks and manuals of men and denominations. I'm talking about the doctrinal statements that accurately represent the teaching of the Bible. For instance, the New Testament has similar types of doctrinal statements. Consider **I Corinthians 15:3-4** and **Colossians 1:15-20**. These are both passages that contain formulated statements that encapsulate what we Christians are supposed to believe about Jesus Christ and His gospel. But then there are our own unwritten formulas. When we talk about the five steps of salvation, the five acts of worship, the three works of the local church, the three means of New Testament authority, we are rehearsing the doctrines we have all but creedalized.
- D. Some Christians can answer all the doctrinal questions. They can quote Scripture and answer arguments. They can debate doctrine. They can defend truth and defeat error. The problem is that is all they do. They know what they are supposed to believe, but it doesn't change their lives. When that is the case, James says they are no better than the demons who can also state the formulas. All it does for them is make them shudder because they know it is true but they refuse to follow it. James repeats his earlier assessment in **James 2:26**, "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead" (ESV). Correct doctrine without a changed life is dead. Creed faith doesn't work.

### III. Only a completed faith works.

- A. What good is it then? I can seem spiritual and profess seemingly meaningful platitudes, and it won't help me a bit. I can even know all the doctrines and be able to debate and defend them, and it won't help me a bit. What kind of faith will help? Is there any faith that is any good? James says there is. He calls it a complete faith. James essentially says that only a faith that works is a faith that works.
- B. Consider his explanation in **James 2:21-25**. Abraham was justified by faith when he offered Isaac up on the altar in **Genesis 22**. Rahab was justified when she received the spies in Jericho in **Joshua 2**. In **James 2:22**, he spells it out by saying, "You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works" (ESV). Faith is incomplete unless it changes our lives, unless it works. Unless and until it produces action, faith falls short on the "so what" factor.
- C. There are some interesting plays on words in this text. The word translated "useless" in **James 2:20** translates "arge," which is the combination of the terms "ergon," meaning "work," and "a," the negative particle, which when connected to a word negates it. Thus "arge" means "not working," and the verse says that a faith apart from works doesn't work. By contrast, the word translated "active" in **James 2:22** is "sunergei" which combines the terms "ergon," meaning "work," and "syn," meaning "with." Thus, a faith that works alongside works actually works. Another wordplay is seen when the text says "faith was completed" in **vs. 22** and "the Scripture was fulfilled" in **vs. 23**. It is two different Greek words, but the meanings are close to synonymous. Just as Abraham's faith was completed and fulfilled by his working, so was God's statement that his faith was counted as righteousness (**Genesis 15:6**) completed and fulfilled when Abraham offered up Isaac. In other words, God's statement that Abraham's faith was accounted to him as righteousness was not completed until Abraham's faith was completed by his working surrender to the faith. This passage is not simply a defense of baptism for the remission of sins. Notice **vs. 14** says this passage is addressed to "brothers." James was trying to convince baptized believers that their faith needed to do so much more in their lives or their faith wouldn't work.
- D. In **James 2:18**, James addresses a potential objection. Someone might suggest that "You have faith and I have works." That is, someone might suggest that we're all different. We have different gifts. Someone might appeal to the kind of principle demonstrated in **I Corinthians 12:4-11**. One person's gift is faith, another's is works. But James explains that is not how faith works, offering his potential opponent the following challenge: "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (ESV). Real faith, justifying faith, saving faith is a faith that can be seen in action. It is a faith that can be seen changing your life. In fact, what it says is if you want to know what kind of faith you have, look at your actions.
- E. This takes us right back to what we have already learned from **Hebrews 11:4-40**. By faith Abel offered a good sacrifice. By faith, Noah built an ark. By faith, Abraham travelled to a distant land, leaving his family behind. By faith Moses led the people out of Egypt. By faith, Joshua and the Jews walked around the walls of Jericho and the walls fell down. These men and women didn't just spout seeming spiritual clichés, they didn't just know the right answers to the right questions; they acted. They surrendered to God. Certainly this will start with baptism for the remission of sins (**Acts 2:38**), but if that is the only change, we have a useless faith.

### Conclusion:

As odd as it sounds, James teaches that the only faith that works is a faith that works. This leaves us with a question. Is your faith working?