Faith Without Works is Dead
James 2:14-26
SS Lesson for 02/04/2018

Devotional Scripture: 1 John 3:16-24

OUTLINE

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Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary
Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

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From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson examines the relationship between faith and works so that we can understand that Faith Without Works is Dead. The study’s aim is to discover that the reality of the Christians life can be recognized by the results produced. The study’s application is to assist Christians to arrive at full assurance of their relationship with Jesus Christ.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: James 2:26

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

One who is properly related to the Bible is also properly related to the body of Christ. He who stands with confidence serves with compassion. James just made it clear that true religion finds an outlet in service, a service which demands that a believer learn to accept others without prejudice and to assist others without presumption. James became increasingly specific and direct in his admonitions and instructions. He was obviously displeased with the inconsistencies among the brethren. He attacked the attitudes these believers displayed toward others and then complained of their failures to act as they should. He first condemned the attitude of favoritism and gave suggestions on how to combat this obstacle to spiritual maturity. One must learn to accept others, whatever their status or class. He must show courtesy to all, compassion for all, and consistency to all. Equity, love, and fidelity are the vital ingredients. Just as the law of love gives no excuse for respect of persons, so the possession of faith gives no license to dispense with good works. A believer must not only demonstrate his love by ready acceptance of others, but he must also demonstrate his faith by responsible aid to others. James went on in his letter to emphasize the expression of true faith, to outline the evidence of true faith, and finally to cite examples of true faith.

2:14. Another shift in the argument of the epistle can be seen by James’ use of my brothers. He introduced this paragraph with a rhetorical question, What good is it... if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? The emphasis is not on the true nature of faith but on the false claim of faith. It is the spurious boast of faith that James condemned. Such “faith” does no “good”; there is no “profit” (opheles, used in the NT only here and in v. 16; 1 Cor. 15:32). It is worthless because it is all talk with no walk. It is only a habitual empty boast (“claims” is in the pres. tense). Can such faith save him? A negative answer is anticipated in the Greek. Merely claiming to have faith is not enough. Genuine faith is evidenced by works.

2:15-16. The rhetorical question is followed by a hypothetical but realistic illustration: Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. (James frequently wrote about the poor: 1:9, 27; 2:2-6, 15.) For one in need of the basics of life, sentimental good wishes do little good, like the common Jewish farewell, Go, I wish you well (lit., “Go in peace,” cf. Jud. 18:6: 1 Sam. 1:17; 2 Sam. 15:9; Mark 5:34; Luke 7:50). If nothing is done to fill the pressing need for warm clothes and satisfying food, what good is it? The same phrase that James used to introduce this paragraph (James 2:14) is repeated for emphasis.

2:17. The vain boast, faith by itself, or faith in and of itself with no evidence of action, is dead. Workless faith is worthless faith; it is unproductive, sterile, barren, dead! Great claims may be made about a corpse that is supposed to have come to life, but if it does not move, if there are no vital signs, no heartbeat, no perceptible pulse, it is still dead. The false claims are silenced by the evidence.

2:18. This may be one of the most misunderstood sections of the entire epistle. But someone will say, You have faith; I have deeds. An imaginary respondent, “someone,” was introduced. He did not object to James’ conclusion. He agreed that faith without works is dead. But he wrongly disparaged faith while stressing works (see v. 19). What follows, Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do, may be the continuation of the respondent’s words. If so, they should be included within quotation marks. (If this were James’ response to a contender’s “I have deeds,” James would have written, “Show me your deeds without faith.”) Though recent translations do not include the second half of verse 18 in the quotation of the respondent (e.g., NEB, NIV, RSV), the NASB correctly considers this entire verse part of his remarks. The Greek, of course, does not include quotation marks, which accounts for the variations in English. It seems, however, that the respondent is throwing down the challenge, “Show me
your faith apart from (chōris, ‘without’) works, and I will show you my faith by (ek, ‘emerging from’) my works” (author’s trans.).

2:19. It may be well to include even verse 19 as part of the respondent’s argument: You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. If so, he may be a typical Gentile believer who attacked the creedal belief of monotheism accepted by all Jews. He was saying, to “believe” in one God may be good so far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. The demons do that. In fact not only do they believe (the same verb, pisteuō’; they even “shudder,” or “bristle up” (phrissousin, an onomatopoeic verb used only here in the NT). The “belief” in one God may not be “trust” in that God. Unless it is “trust,” it is not true faith and will not be evidenced in good works. In other words the respondent is saying, “Faith is not the key; what counts is works.” Thus the respondent has gone too far. James did not say that works are essential to faith, or that faith is unimportant. His argument was that works are evidence of faith. Other writers understand this passage to mean that James (v. 18b) challenged the “someone” to show his faith without deeds—the point being that it cannot be done! James, however, said that faith can be demonstrated (only) by what one does (v. 18c). The demons’ “belief” in God is inadequate. Such a so-called but unreal faith is obviously unaccompanied by deeds on their parts.

2:20. James did not launch into a lengthy refutation of the respondent. The apostle simply addressed him forcefully, You foolish man, and returned to his original argument that faith without deeds is useless (argē, “lazy, idle, negligent”). The adjective “foolish” (kene) is usually translated “vain,” “empty,” or “hollow” (cf. mataios, “worthless, fruitless, useless,” in 1:26). Flimsy faith is dead; so are empty, faithless works. James’ argument is not pro-works/anti-faith or pro-faith/anti-works. He has simply said that genuine faith is accompanied by good works. Spiritual works are the evidence, not the energizer, of sincere faith.

As a final proof of his thesis, James gave two biblical examples: Abraham, the revered patriarch, and Rahab, the redeemed prostitute. He presented each example in the form of a question, anticipating the reader’s ready agreement.

2:21. Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? This question is often held to be directly opposed to Paul’s statement that Abraham’s faith, not his works, caused God to declare him righteous (Gen. 15:6). Paul, however, was arguing for the priority of faith. James argued for the proof of faith. Paul declared that Abraham had faith, and was therefore justified, or declared righteous (Gen. 15:6; prior to circumcision (Gen. 17:11; cf. Rom. 4:9). James explained that Abraham’s faith was evident in his practice of Isaac’s sacrifice (Gen. 22:12), and he was therefore justified, or declared righteous. Works serve as the barometer of justification, while faith is the basis for justification.

2:22-24. James emphasized the joint role of faith and... actions... working together. Faith is the force behind the deed. The deed is the finality of the faith. The verb translated was made complete (eteleiōthē) means to “carry to the end.” Faith finds fulfillment in action. So it was with Abraham. James and Paul quoted the same passage—Genesis 15:6—to prove their points (cf. Rom. 4:3). Paul said that Abraham was justified by faith, and James said that Abraham was justified by faith evidenced by what he did.

2:25. In the same way (lit., “and likewise also”; homoiōs de kai) was not even Rahab declared righteous for her actions in welcoming the spies (angelous, “messengers”) and helping them escape? (Josh. 2; 6)

2:26. The conclusion is most clear. Faith and deeds are as essential to each other as the body and the spirit. Apart from (chōris) the spirit, or the “breath” (pneumatos) of life, the body is dead. Apart from (chōris) the evidence of works, faith may be deemed dead. It is not the real thing. True faith continually contributes to spiritual growth and development. Not only is a believer to stand confidently on God’s Word even in the midst of trials and temptations (chap. 1), but also he must serve his brothers and sisters in Christ (chap. 2). He is to accept all members of God’s family without favoritism (vv. 1-13) and to aid the family with a working faith (vv. 14-26). To gain spiritual maturity a believer must be what God wants him to be and do what God wants him to do.

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary
As a naturalist, I learned to identify the different types of trees. To do that, I use different parts of the tree: the leaves, the bark, and the tree's overall height and appearance. For instance, I do not expect a maple tree to have a leaf shaped like a tulip, I expect that from a poplar. One of the main sources for identifying a tree is the fruit. A good naturalist knows that you find sap in a sugar maple, not a pine tree. If I wanted acorns, I
Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

When politicians change their positions on a topic, opponents are quick to deride the change as being a flip-flop. This derogatory label is not new, being traced back to the 1880s. The issue at hand was U. S. President Grover Cleveland’s compromise with the United Kingdom on fishing rights in the waters off Canada. This signaled a change in promised policy and outraged New England states that depended on the fishing industry. A fallout of this political concession was a New York Tribune writer’s calling of President Cleveland’s action a “fisheries flip-flop.” The phrase was probably a play on words in bringing to mind the way fish flip and flop on a boat deck. The phrase caught on, and since that time the flip-flopping charge has been made against countless leaders. People know that talk is cheap and that actions speak louder than words. People are suspicious of those who say one thing today, but act in another way tomorrow. James has quite a bit to say about ensuring that our actions are consistent with our beliefs.

The author identifies himself as James, “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1). This clearly makes him a Christian leader, but which of the several men named James in the early church is he? Two of the original 12 apostles of Jesus are named James. The James who was the brother of John was murdered by Herod quite early in the history of the church, too early for him to have been the author of our book (Matthew 10:2; Acts 12:1, 2). The other James, the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3), is a possibility, but his lack of mention in the New Testament aside from lists of the 12 apostles makes him unlikely as the author of the book under consideration. Most likely is the James who was a son of Mary and Joseph, thus a half-brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3). While this James did not believe in Jesus during his ministry (John 7:5), he did become a believer after Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:14). Paul records that Jesus made a special appearance to James after the resurrection, a person carefully distinguished from the 12 apostles in description (1 Corinthians 15:5-7). James was a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church in its early days (Acts 15:13; Galatians 1:19). Based on the fact that the letter is addressed to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (James 1:1), the intended audience is Christians of Jewish background. If “scattered among the nations” refers to the scattering of Stephen’s martyrdom, then the intended recipients are in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1) as well as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Syrian Antioch (11:19). If “scattered among the nations” is not linked to that persecution, then the intended recipients may live in the farther environs of the Roman Empire (John 7:35). The first-century Jewish historian Josephus records that this James was martyred in the early AD 60s. Therefore we date the book to no later than
AD 62. The combination of addressees, date, and content reflects the mid-first-century concerns of Jewish Christians who grappled with the place of the beloved Law of Moses in their lives. James, a Jewish Christian himself, was not afraid to teach that keeping the law is a good thing in certain circumstances (see James 2:8). The tendency to try earning God’s favor through keeping the law still held much appeal to Christians from a Jewish background. But Jesus, Paul, and others had shown that salvation could not be earned. Therefore, the place of obedience to God’s commands was perplexing. Was there a place for good works that did not fall back into the Jewish system of keeping the old covenant law to please God? This is the issue that James addressed; it is an issue that resonates yet today.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

NOTE: The detail points and cross-references of this lesson came from a previous lesson dated 02/16/2014.

Evaluation of Dead Faith (James 2:14-20)

14 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?
15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food,
16 and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?
17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.
18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.
19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!
20 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?

Dead faith is non-profitable (14)

Non-profitable faith is faith that is in vain (1 Cor 15:1-2)
Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you -- unless you believed in vain.

Non-profitable faith is faith not accompanied by love (1 Cor 13:2)
2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

Non-profitable faith is when our works deny knowing God (Titus 1:16)
16 They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.

Dead faith is not providing needs (15-16)

By withholding good from those to whom it is due (Prov 3:27-28)
27 Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, When it is in the power of your hand to do so. 28 Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come back, And tomorrow I will give it," When you have it with you.

By trying to avoid or get rid of those in need (Matt 14:15-16)
15 When it was evening, His disciples came to Him, saying, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is already late. Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food." 16 But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."
By not helping the helpless when given the opportunity (Matt 25:41-46)

41 "Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; 43 I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' 44 "Then they themselves also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?' 45 "Then He will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.'

By closing our hearts to those in need (1 John 3:17)

17 But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

Dead faith cannot produce godly results (16-17)

Because results come from unproductive lives (Titus 3:14)

14 Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives.

Because results come from walking in darkness (1 John 1:6)

6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

Because results bear bad fruit (Matt 7:17-20)

18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

Because results have been choked by the cares of this world (Matt 13:22)

22 Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.

Because results causes us to be ashamed (Rom 6:21)

21 What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.

Because results don't come from a faith that has matured (2 Peter 1:5-8)

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge,6 to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness,7 to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. 8 For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dead faith can't produce actions God desires (18-20)

Actions that don't respond to daily opportunities (Matt 25:41-43)

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in. I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

Actions that don't put God's word into practice (Luke 6:47-49)

47 I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. 48 He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. 49 But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete."
Actions that hear the word, but doesn’t do it (Ezek 33:30-32)
30 "As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the Lord.' 31 My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. 32 Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.

Actions that do not result in being obedient (Matt 21:28-31)
28 "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 29 ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. 30 Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. 31 "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.

Illustrating Genuine Faith (James 2:21-26)
21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? 23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. 24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Genuine faith results in being justified (21,24)

Justified apart from the Law (Rom 3:28)
28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Justified resulting in peace with God (Rom 5:1)
5 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

Justified by faith in Jesus (Gal 2:16)
16 know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

Justified by being led to Christ (Gal 3:24)
24 So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.

Justified by being counted as obeying the Law (Rom 2:13)
13 For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.

Genuine faith is saving faith (22-23)

We are saved by grace through faith in Christ (Eph 2:8)
8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God
There is such a thing as false faith, which does not save (Matt 7:21)

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

The faith that does not save is a mere profession of faith that does not result in a life of good deeds (Matt 15:7-9)

7 You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 8 "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 9 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."

The faith that does not save may be doctrinally correct, but there is no change of heart or behavior (Matt 23:27-28)

27 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Genuine saving faith results in a life of good works, whereas false faith does not (Matt 5:14-16)

14 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Genuine faith is doing good works (25-26)

God created us to do good works (Eph 2:10)

10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Good works are obvious (1 Tim 5:25)

25 In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not cannot be hidden.

Good works include being generous and willing to share (1 Tim 6:18)

18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.

We should encourage each other to do good works (Heb 10:24)

24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

Good works come from living a life full of honorable conduct (1 Peter 2:12)

12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Concluding Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

In James 1, James defined “true religion” in terms of one’s response to their own adversity. Now, in chapter 2, James is defining “true religion” in terms of one’s response to adversity in the life of a neighbor. In verses 1-13, James has described willful and blatant discrimination, which occurs even within the church. Now, in verses 14-26, James speaks of a much more subtle form of the sin of partiality. Our Lord simply called it hypocrisy (see Matthew 23). Hypocrisy is saying one thing, but doing another (see Matthew 23:1-3, 14, etc.). This is precisely what James speaks of in verses 14-26 of chapter 2.
**The principle is stated in verse 14 and might be paraphrased this way:** “Faith that is professed, but not practiced, is of no practical value to us or to others. It does not serve, and it does not save. Unused faith is useless faith.”

**James gives us an example of what he means in verses 15-16.** Notice that James has set the rich man aside and has returned to the poor fellow, who is in need. We come upon a brother or a sister who is in great need. He does not have proper clothing, and he is hungry. Instead of providing this individual with the things he needs, we speak words which appear to be compassionate and caring, but which are not accompanied by any truly helpful actions. We send the needy person away, wishing them well. We even mention their very needs: “Keep warm and eat well.” It’s almost like sending them out with the words, “Don’t forget your lunch, and wear a warm sweater.” That’s what a mother would say to her child. But she would also hand them their lunch and their sweater. In this case, the one living “from hand to mouth” finds that we bless with our mouth but have nothing in our hand. This is especially cruel and deeply hypocritical. In some ways it is even more wicked than the blatant discrimination of verses 2 and 3. The wickedness of verses 15-17 is couched in caring terms. I don’t know whether or not the lack of action and the hypocrisy was willful. From the vantage point of the one in need, it matters little. When these empty words have been spoken, he still lacks both food and clothing. The words do not warm his body nor do they fill his stomach. These pious-sounding words are worthless.

In verse 17, James escalates this matter to a much more serious and troubling level. We would probably like to think of the sin of verses 15 and 16 as a kind of misdemeanor offense, one that might merit a mere “slap on the wrist.” Not so with James. He upgrades the offense to a felony. He says that worthless words are a most serious matter, and with this Jesus agrees:

33 “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is known by its fruit. 34 Offspring of vipers! How are you able to say anything good, since you are evil? For the mouth speaks from what fills the heart. 35 The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. 36 I tell you that on the day of judgment, people will give an account for every worthless word they speak. 37 For by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:33-37).

What we say with our mouths is a sampling of what is in our hearts. If our words are empty, so is our faith, James says. Are we inclined to minimize vain words and empty promises? James will not allow us to do so. He tells us that a false promise is akin to a false profession of faith. If our profession is merely empty words, without any corresponding works, our profession can hardly carry any weight.

As mentioned earlier, I am well aware of the fact that some think that the word “save” (verse 14; also 1:21) does not refer to one’s eternal salvation, but to the saving of one’s life. The Greek word certainly does cover a broad spectrum of meanings, including spiritual salvation. Whether or not this argument can be successfully made, no one I know of within evangelical circles would claim that James is arguing that faith plus works is required for salvation. All would agree that a man is saved by faith alone, apart from works (Romans 3:28; 4:6). Paul and James do not disagree on this, and I don’t believe that Christians should spend a lot of time arguing this matter when we all agree that it is faith alone that saves, not faith plus works. The real issue is this: is our faith genuine? A mere profession of faith does not guarantee possession of faith.

Verse 18 conveys the words of an objector, who points out the folly of thinking that mere profession of faith is sufficient evidence of the possession of a saving faith. I believe the argument goes something like this. The hypocrite insists that he is saved, based solely on his profession of belief. This is like me insisting that I am the President of the United States simply because I say so. The objector comes along and says, “That’s easy for you to say, but mere words are not compelling proof of anything, especially faith.”

I understand what the objector says in the light of what our Lord said in Mark 2:

3 Some people came bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. 4 When they were not able to bring him in because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Jesus. Then, after tearing it out, they lowered the stretcher the paralytic was lying on. 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” 6 Now some of the experts in the law were sitting there, turning these things over in their minds: 7 “Why does this man speak this way? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” 8 Now immediately, when Jesus realized in his spirit that they were contemplating such thoughts, he said to them, “Why are you thinking such things in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up, take your stretcher, and walk’? 10 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,”—he said to the paralytic— 11 “I tell you, stand up, take your
stretcher, and go home.” 12 And immediately the man stood up, took his stretcher, and went out in front of them all. They were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!” (Mark 2:3-12)

There was such a great crowd gathered to see and hear Jesus that the friends of the paralyzed man could not even get into the house where Jesus was speaking. They managed to lower their friend through the roof to where Jesus was. When Jesus saw their faith, He told the paralyzed that his sins were forgiven. It didn’t take a Harvard graduate to know what these words implied: Only God can forgive sins; therefore Jesus was claiming to be God. Jesus was God, and as such, He knew the thoughts of His opponents. They were thinking to themselves, “He is not God; His words are empty words.” Jesus puts the challenge to Himself by saying to His critics, “Is it easier for me to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Arise, take up your mattress and walk’?”

It was hardly possible to verify the words, “Your sins are forgiven,” but one could readily validate the authority of Jesus when He spoke the words, “Arise, take up your mattress and walk.” And so Jesus told this man to get up and walk, and he did. By curing this man’s malady, Jesus proved that He had the power to heal. This certainly gave some credence to our Lord’s claim to have the authority to forgive sins. Jesus’ words were not empty words. His works accompanied his words. This is what set Jesus apart from the Pharisees. No wonder Matthew can tell us,

28 When Jesus finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed by his teaching. 29 because he taught them like one who had authority, not like their experts in the law (Matthew 7:28-29).

I believe the objector is employing the same kind of logic. He says, “Sure, you claim to have faith, but you have no accompanying deeds to verify that you really possess true faith. I, on the other hand, have works. Is it not right to assume that my profession of faith carries much more weight if works accompany it?” The objector then drives home his point with a powerful example. “You profess to believe that there is one God. That’s good. That’s orthodox. But it doesn’t prove you have saving faith. Why even the demons believe what you believe, and you would have to admit that they certainly do not possess genuine faith.” Faith and works are something like love and marriage (at least, something like love and marriage used to be). In the words of the songwriter of a bygone day, “You can’t have one without the other.”

In verses 20-24, James moves on to Abraham, the “father of the faith” to the Jews, to prove that a profession concerning one’s faith is justified in the sight of men when it is validated by works:

20 But would you like evidence, you empty person, that faith without works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 You see that his faith was working together with his works and his faith was perfected by works. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Now Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

The first question we must ask ourselves here is, “Who is the ‘empty person’ whom James rebukes in verse 20?” Is this the objector of verses 18 and 19, or is it the one to whom the objector is speaking, the one who thinks a mere profession of faith is enough? The thrust of verses 20-26, along with the entire context, would seem to force us to conclude that James is once again rebuking the one who seeks to justify the hypocrisy of professing faith without practicing it.

I really like the way James has attacked this problem. He first gives a forceful illustration of how our words can be useless and of no practical value without accompanying works. He then extends this from a general principle to one that specifically applies to one’s profession of faith and their salvation. He then critiques the error by means of an “objector,” who first finds the argument lacking in logic, and next turns to a more theological objection (“the demons believe, too, but are not saved”). Finally, James himself re-enters with his objections. These are directly rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures. He first turns to Abraham, the father of the faith to the Jews, and then to Rahab, a Gentile woman of faith. James thereby makes a “clean sweep” of this error.

Jacob was the black sheep of the family to the Jews, as he is to almost any reader of the Old Testament. But Abraham was revered as the father of the faith (see Matthew 4:8-9; John 8: 38-39; Romans 4:16). In verse 20, James takes up where the objector left off. Is it necessary to further prove that faith without works is dead? Then James will turn to Abraham, the “father of the faith.” Abraham was justified by faith before God when he believed God’s promise of a son:

1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.” 2 Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 And Abram said, “Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.” 4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.” 5
And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:1-6, NASB).

In Romans 4, Paul makes a great deal of Genesis 15:6 to show that Abraham was saved by faith, and not by works:

1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh, has discovered regarding this matter? 2 For if Abraham was declared righteous by the works of the law, he has something to boast about (but not before God). 3 For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” 4 Now to the one who works, his pay is not credited due to grace but due to obligation. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in the one who declares the ungodly righteous, his faith is credited as righteousness. 6 So even David himself speaks regarding the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

7 “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;
8 blessed is the one against whom the Lord will never count sin.”

9 Is this blessedness then for the circumcision or also for the uncircumcision? For we say, “faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.” 10 How then was it credited to him? Was he circumcised at the time, or not? No, he was not circumcised but uncircumcised! 11 And he received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised, so that he would become the father of all those who believe but have never been circumcised, that they too could have righteousness credited to them. 12 And he is also the father of the circumcision, who are not only circumcised, but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham possessed when he was still uncircumcised” (Romans 4:1-12 emphasis mine).

Paul says that Abraham was justified by faith when he believed God’s promise that he would have a child, in spite of all appearances to the contrary. Abraham believed God and was called a believer before he did any works. Paul uses Genesis 15:6 to prove that salvation has always been by faith, apart from works. In our text, James writes that Abraham was justified by his works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar (verse 21; see also Hebrews 11:17-19). Are James and Paul at odds with each other? Far from it! The justification that James speaks of here is not the “justification” of salvation by faith, but rather the justification or validation of his profession of faith before men. Men do not know the hearts of other men, as God does, and so the only evidence – the only justification – of true faith is a manifestation of the fruit of that professed faith.

This is completely consistent with the teaching of our Lord:

15 “Watch out for false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are voracious wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruit. Grapes are not gathered from thorns or figs from thistles, are they? 17 In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree is not able to bear bad fruit, nor a bad tree to bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 So then, you will recognize them by their fruit.” 21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the kingdom of heaven, only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22 On that day, many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons and do many powerful deeds?’ 23 Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Go away from me, you lawbreakers!’ 24 “Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them is like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the flood came, and the winds beat against that house, but it did not collapse because it had been founded on rock. 26 Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, the flood came, and the winds beat against that house, and it collapsed; it was utterly destroyed!” (Matthew 7:15-27, emphasis mine).

Finally, James turns to Rahab, the harlot, to show how this Gentile was justified before men by her works. Rahab was a Gentile and a harlot who lived in the city of Jericho. The nation Israel was coming to possess the Promised Land, and the people of Jericho knew it. The Israelites were the enemy, and anyone who aided or protected them would be considered a traitor. Rahab knew that God was with His people, and that the Israelites would defeat the people of Jericho. When the two spies came to her house, the king of Jericho heard of it and sent word for Rahab to turn the men over to him. She told the king that the men had already left, but that they could be caught if they were quickly pursued. She hid the two spies under piles of flax on her roof. She told them she knew about the exodus and the way God had given Israel victory over all her enemies. She confessed, “For the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on earth below!” (Joshua 2:11). She then made these men pledge that they would spare her and her family when they attacked Jericho if she would spare their lives. Her profession of faith was justified (validated) when she followed through with her promise by letting the men...
down the wall of the city with a rope, sending the soldiers of Jericho after the men by the wrong route. Her profession was proven to be genuine by her practice.

James sums up his argument in verse 26: “Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.” Words without works are worthless; a mere profession of faith is useless without that faith being put into practice.

(Adapted from URL: https://bible.org/seriespage/words-and-works-practical-piety-james-21-26)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Much unfortunate confusion has surrounded the alleged conflict between Paul’s denunciation of the value of works and James’s insistence on the essential role of works in the life of the Christian. As James sees it, it is never a matter of either faith or works, but faith that results in works. James attacks the common self-deception that what you do can be separated from what you believe. Careful study shows that Paul and James are not in conflict, but are talking about works in different frames of reference. Paul’s battle is against those who believe keeping the Jewish law is the ticket to salvation (see Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16). He, an expert in the law, rails against dependence on keeping the law (“works of the law”) without the step of faith in Jesus Christ. Paul’s contention is that this is futile, for no one can ever keep the law perfectly and earn salvation. James, on the other hand, is fighting for the proper place of works in the life of the believer. Claims of faith need to be proven by the evidence of one’s life. Compassionate actions should be evident after we come to faith in Christ. Even so, works of the law and works of faith can look remarkably similar, so it might be helpful to visualize the difference. If we understand faith in Christ as the doorway to salvation, then we see the value of works in the contexts of both Paul and James. Before we walk through the doorway of faith in Christ, works will not save (Paul’s argument); after we walk through the doorway of faith in Christ, then works are the evidence of commitment to God and his ways (James’s argument). The difference is in the purpose: we can never be saved by good works, but we cannot be saved without them.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

1. Saving faith is life-changing faith (James 2:14)
2. Saving faith is visible to others and has an impact on those we encounter (vss. 15-16)
3. Our actions show the difference between true faith in God and mere knowledge about Him (vss. 17-19)
4. True faith moves believers to obey God and commit to Him (vss. 20-21)
5. True faith takes God at His word and acts on what He has said (vss. 22-24)
6. God can work through anyone who will trust Him (vs. 25)
7. Dead faith, will not reach this world for Christ (vs. 26)