

R12.2 November 2023 Blog

The Wisdom of James: Profession to Action

"You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder."
(James 2:19)¹

These words from James come to us right in the middle of the section where James is instructing his readers concerning saving faith. James is writing to a largely Jewish audience supposedly around the mid-40's AD. Many of the Jewish Christians were scattered in various regions as far "as *Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch*" shortly after the stoning of Stephen (Acts CH 7; Acts 11:19). These who were identifying with Jesus found themselves in hostile environments, leaving their homes behind, new lives, doubting, discouraged, and losing their spiritual way. Two other important backdrops are that James' letter supposedly comes ahead of the Jerusalem Council (Acts CH 15) where the Apostles were determining what to do with the influx of Gentiles into the church and how Paul's teaching concerning justification before God by grace and faith alone was being perverted.

James, being the "show-me" Pastor (his letter having more imperative verbs or commands per word than any other New Testament book), sends a letter filled with specific rebukes and commands for his readers. This section demonstrates this point. "*What use is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?*" (James 2:14) James makes it clear that a faith that does not work, does not work ("*is dead*" 2:17), pointing out the spiritual poverty of a verbal profession by itself. James is not contrasting faith and works (deeds) as if they were two alternative options in one's approach to God, he is describing a genuine faith that is active with works to an empty faith without works. For James, faith and works are not mutually exclusive, they are inseparable. In other words, transformation (Christ being formed in us, godly attitudes and behaviors) is not optional, but the evidence of, or assurance that one *is* destined for the Kingdom of God (Gal. 5:21).

¹ All scripture references in this blog are NASB unless otherwise noted.

To further make his point, James sets up an objector (strawman) in 2:18. He compares the objector's faith to that of the demons. To the one who would say "*you have faith and I have works,*" James would say "*I will show you my faith by my works.*" In the same way today, how many loudly proclaim the Deity of Christ and follow this with no good works (deeds) coming from this profession. The demons do the same (Luke 4:34). James drives his point home by concluding that one relying on an empty profession alone is foolish, and that a person is "*justified by works and not by faith alone*" (James 2:24).

James' admonishments are toward those born again, "*...of His will He gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures,*" (James 1:18), but not yet receiving salvation. "*Therefore, ridding yourselves of all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls,*" (James 1:21). James sees those of us who proclaim Jesus as Lord on a journey in this life progressing toward Christian maturity (wholeness), submitting our lives to Christ, with a desire toward single-minded devotion to God, in Christ, hoping to be welcomed into the Kingdom in the end. To deviate from this path is to risk not entering the Kingdom of God.

What does path-deviation look like according to James? James warns against selfish ambition, envy, critical and uncontrolled speech, becoming compromised, "*stained*" by the world's ways, no concern for the helpless, constant quarreling, riches aimed toward worldly pursuits, being oblivious to God in earthly planning. James emphasizes these issues (and really sums them up) by describing one as being "*double-minded*" or "*double-souled,*" compromised and unstable by yielding to the temptations and lures of this world. James would say "*this ought not to be so,*" God will not tolerate one foot in the Kingdom and one foot in the world.

Application: What counsel does James provide? How am I doing in these areas?

- **Our assurance that we will enter the Kingdom of God depends on a faithful journey in this life.**
 - Are you cultivating godly attitudes? Resisting friendship with the world (James 4:4).
 - Nurturing patient-fortitude in suffering and trials, and a long-suffering attitude toward people (James 5:7-11).
 - Generosity, and using your resources toward heavenly treasures, opposite of self-hoarding (James 5:1-3).
 - Recognizing God’s providential ordering of events (James 4:15).
 - Sharing a deep concern for others to be on a faithful journey toward the Kingdom (James 5:19-20).

- **If sin and pride has us on a path toward destruction, repent!**
 - Submit yourself, put yourself under Jesus as Lord (James 4:7).
 - Repent of external, sinful behaviors (James 4:8).
 - Repent of internal (heart) attitudes that lead to such behaviors (James 4:8).

To move toward spiritual wholeness, James requires action, not being a “*hearer only, but a doer of the word, lest you deceive yourself.*” (James 1:22)