

## Faith Alive

There are two kinds of faith - living and dead. The former is genuine; the latter is a counterfeit, the mere assent to Christian doctrine. Living faith saves; dead faith is useless and powerless.

How can we distinguish between the two?

James (chapter 2:14-26) argues that good works are the proof of living faith, whereas dead 'faith' is exposed by their absence. He puts forward this challenge: "Show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works." True faith is verified by good works. Otherwise, if it is alone, it is exposed as a dead and useless imitation. Three times he repeats: "Faith without works is dead."

While he does not dispute that salvation is by grace through faith, James is concerned about the man who professes to have faith when in fact he does not. He asks, "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?" When this man who calls himself a believer meets a brother in need, all he has to offer are a few hypocritical words of comfort but he does not lift a finger to help. This man may claim to have faith as much as he likes, but since his life is devoid of good works, his so-called faith is dead and will not save him.

Take Abraham as an example. He believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness (Genesis 15). He was not accepted as righteous because of his faith plus the merits of some works he had done or would do (Romans 4). Yet the reality of his faith was not manifested until some 30 years later when God put him to the test. Abraham offered his son Isaac, proving without a shadow of a doubt that he really believed God's promise. His faith was genuine (Genesis 22; Hebrews 11:17-19). In this sense Abraham was justified by works, i.e. his faith was shown to be right because it was accompanied by obedience (James 2:21-24).

The same is true for each one of us. We may profess to believe in the Lord Jesus (and Protestants express this by the slogan 'faith alone' by which we mean that our trust is in Jesus Christ alone, and in nobody and nothing else). Now what if our claim to faith is not substantiated by works? We would be fooling ourselves because faith alone (in the sense James uses this phrase, that is, a profession of faith without the evidence of good works) does not save. Words are cheap; we who claim to believe in Jesus can only be justified (demonstrated to be right) by our works.

James' teaching is altogether different from the doctrine of the Roman Church on justification. The Council of Trent teaches that good works are *not* merely the fruit and signs of justification received by faith, as James teaches. The Roman church goes way beyond that: the Catholic performs good works to maintain and increase personal righteousness by which he is ultimately accounted to have fully satisfied the Law of God and allowed into heaven (Trent, session 6, chapter 16 and canon 24). Instead of demonstrating faith, his religious works done with the intent to gain merit only goes to show that he does not really trust Jesus for salvation.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ for salvation? And do you have works to justify your claim? I pray that every one of us would answer both questions with a bold and sincere yes!