

*“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works? Can that faith save him?”*

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Some of the things that James says in his epistle, including these words from last Sunday's readings, have been a little troublesome for Christians over the years.

The heart and core of the Christian faith is salvation that is ours only through faith in what Jesus has done, apart from anything that we have done or can do to earn or deserve it.

This teaching alone gives us the assurance of salvation and eternal life, because it directs us not to our own goodness or worthiness, but only to the all-sufficient sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf, as he died on the cross to pay the price for all of our sins, and then rose from the grave in victory over sin, death and Satan—promising that his victory is now our own simply through faith in him.

But then James comes along and says things like, “...a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.” (2:24) and, “...faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (2:17) So which is it, faith or works? Because you can't have it both ways!

Well, actually you can. You have to understand where James was coming from with his comments. He most likely wrote what he did in response to a teaching called antinomianism which claimed that Christians were no longer bound by the Law—since they were saved by grace—and so they could do whatever they wanted, live however they pleased, and as long as they trusted in Jesus for their salvation, how they lived their earthly lives was inconsequential.

“That's not faith!” is what James was saying. True faith, saving faith, will show itself as such through works of faithfulness and love and obedience to our Lord.

James is not contradicting the foundational truth of Christianity, he is helping to define it against those who would distort the grace of God.

It is “faith alone” that saves; but James helps us to see that true faith is never alone, it will always be accompanied by words and actions that give evidence of our Lord's loving presence in our lives; and indeed, it is our Lord himself who works these good deeds in and through us—so that our lives might be lived to his glory alone.