

Taking James 2:14 as threatening salvation is pastorally useless

• Preaching should change lives

• The thread of James' argument - necessary action to show them our faith in a practical manner

The idle believer

• Inactive faith is like a dead body

• Lazy believers like to defend themselves for their laziness.

One reason why we should not take James 2:14 as threatening salvation is that anyone who preaches it that way will find it is pastorally useless. Any pastor knows that, unless he knows how to deal with it, he will have in front of him people whose salvation he has no reason to doubt and yet who have become quite lazy in the things of God. It has no value to say 'If you are like that you are not saved!' Try it! It does not achieve anything except depressed believers who become more lazy than ever! I know there are churches that grow (very slowly!) under that kind of message, with incredibly lazy believers who say they like expository preaching! But we must be careful not to turn the church into a kind of university with people who love popular lecturing (you can hardly call it preaching; it produces no changed lives). James' way of handling the lazy Christian is entirely different and his style succeeds. He does not cancel out the gospel and he quotes the exact same verse as Paul (in James 2:23) but he focuses on what the gospel leads to. The gospel leads to a 'fulfilment' (as James calls it). James wants his people to know about it.

Let us follow the thread of his argument. He is arguing against lazy self-righteous Christians who want only rich people to come to their church-meetings. He has rebuked their snobbishness^{□1} and he has asked them to keep the royal law of love^{□2}. Faith on its own does not bring any kind of rescue to other people^{□3}. Works of mercy towards the poor are necessary to save them and to fulfil one's own faith. James assures his friends of their own salvation, calling them his 'brothers and sisters'. But when we are surrounded by people in need, as we all are, there is no value to anyone else of speaking of one's faith without taking action to show them our faith in a practical manner^{□4}.

Verses 14–17 are a small unit which considers the pleasant but totally idle believer. His faith is like a corpse. Life has gone out of it. James lays down a basic statement. Inactive faith is useless to do good to anyone^{□1}. Then he gives an example, citing the case of the pleasant-and-friendly but totally idle believer^{□2}. Then he comes to a conclusion in verse 17.

Inactive faith is like a dead body. James's conclusion is: 'So also faith, if it does not have works is dead in itself'^{□1}. James is writing to Christians, people that he has just called his brothers and sisters. He does not deny that they have faith, but he says their faith has become like a dead corpse. They were alive once. This is typical of what I could call the 'respectable backslider'. There was a time when he or she came to faith. At one time they would have taken action if they saw a needy person. But now the respectable backslider no longer seems to have a lively faith. It is still in existence – for true saving faith is never lost – but it is corpse-like. Like a dead body, the respectable backslider is cold and lifeless.

Lazy believers like to defend themselves for their laziness. Some of these lazy believers want to defend themselves against the charge of laziness by talking about different gifts. They are having a conversation. 'But someone will say, "You have faith but I have works" ' ^{□1}. It is not exactly a reply to James (for then it would have read 'You have works but I have faith'). It is more a conversation in which people are claiming that different people have different gifts. Someone is saying 'Well we all have different gifts. I have the gift of **doing** things, but you have the gift of faith and are not very good at **doing** anything. Your idleness is simply a matter of lack of appropriate gifts.' James jumps into the conversation! 'Show me

□1 2:1-7
□2 2:8-13
□3 2:14

□4 2:14-16

□1 2:14
□2 2:15-16

□1 2:17

□1 2:18a

□2 2:18b

your faith apart from any works! And by works I will show you my faith^{☞2}. 'This faith of yours is remarkably invisible!' says James. Why don't you **show** you trust God by venturing to do something for Him in serving the needy? As for me, says James, I have faith and I want to show you I have faith by serving God visibly and obviously.

Lazy believers are no more useful to God than the demons!

• The lazy Christian delights in orthodoxy but will not do much to reach the poor person for the Lord Jesus Christ.

• A shocking message to make his readers change their ways

Lazy believers are no more useful to God than the demons! To have inactive faith is to be like a believing demon. James is going back over verses 14–17, coming at the same point from a different angle. He considers the idle believer again^{☞1} but this time compares him to a believing and trembling demon^{☞2}. Demons really exist. For James they are so real, he can use them in a piece of argumentation with an idle Christian.

'You believe that God is one. You do well. The demons also believe and they tremble^{☞1}. James is not denying that the lazy believers have faith, but when faith dies it becomes like the faith of the demons! What is faith? It is the gripping conviction that what God says is true, a conviction so powerful that it drives us to respond to the conviction we have in our heart. All Christians know something of this. One cannot be a Christian without faith having gripped the heart. But Christian faith may die and become dead faith. It still is a conviction but it becomes largely a detached matter. We develop an 'evil heart of unbelief' and cease to do much for God. We still go to church. We still intellectually know the gospel is true. Lazy Christians are proud of their orthodoxy. For Jews 'God is one' was the great slogan of orthodox belief. Lazy Christians can denounce false teaching with great energy! They come to life when someone disagrees with their sound doctrine! We might even like lively music in church-meetings but 'dead faith' is faith that has become so inactive it has ceased to drive us to doing anything for the needy. The lazy Christian delights in orthodoxy but will not do much to reach the poor person for the Lord Jesus Christ.

The shocking thing is: even the demons have this sort of faith. It touches their mind. They know the gospel is true. It touches their emotions. They tremble at what they know. But their knowledge does not lead them to repent and it does not lead them to do anything for God. Despite all that they know and feel they are useless in the kingdom of God. James is shocking his friends into changing their ways. He says to them: 'You are no more useful to God than the devil!'

☞1 2:18

☞2 2:19

☞1 2:19



Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His *Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)* books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.



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